

*Ernest Ženko*  
**SYMPHONY  
OF THE CITY:  
A FORGOTTEN  
GENRE?**

*29-41*

UNIVERZA NA PRIMORSKEM  
FAKULTETA ZA HUMANISTIČNE ŠTUDIJE  
ODDELEK ZA MEDIJSKE ŠTUDIJE  
ERNEST.ZENKO@FHS.UPR.SI

**::ABSTRACT**

THE PERIOD BETWEEN 1920 and 1940 saw the rise and development of more than 80 films that were labeled “city poems,” “city films,” or, more frequently, “city symphonies”. The more known examples include Paul Strand’s and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta* (1921), Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927), Jean Vigo’s *À propos de Nice* (1930), and Alberto Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures* (1926). Developed at a time when avant-garde cinema was just starting to shape, and documentary film had not yet come into existence, city symphony was a hybrid entity, a kind of experimental documentary, with elements from narrative cinema, focused on “the dynamic of the metropolis” (László Moholy-Nagy). The city was the main, and usually also the only protagonist of the film, which recognized the city as the ultimate emblem of modernity. Due to its complex identity, a city symphony is not easy to define, and one of the open issues regarding this cluster of films, is related to the question of genre: do the films, grouped under the label “city symphonies,” constitute a genre? City symphonies were, as a group of films, very important, and after World War Two they influenced several films, e.g. Jean-Luc Godard’s *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (1967), and Woody Allen’s *Manhattan*, (1979). These examples not only show that city symphony as a concept is still alive, but that it also open several significant questions about this important, but often neglected genre, and above all, the question about the existence of such a genre.

Keywords: avant-garde, city symphony, film, genre criticism, montage

**POVZETEK***SIMFONIJA (VELE)MESTA: POZABLJENI ŽANR?*

Za obdobje od 1920 do 1940 je značilen nastanek več kot osemdesetih filmov, včasih imenovanih »mestne pesnitve« ali »mestni filmi«, najpogosteje pa jih poznamo kot »simfonije (vele)mesta«. Med najbolj znane primere sodijo *Manhatta* (1921) Paula Stranda in Charlesa Sheelerja, *Berlin: simfonija velemesta* (1927) Waltherja Ruttmanna, *O Nici* (1930) Jeana Vigoja in *Nič drugega kot čas* (1926) Alberta Cavalcantija. Oblikovane in razvite v času, ko se je filmska avantgarda šele oblikovala, dokumentarni film pa še ni ugledal luči sveta, so simfonije mesta predstavljale hibridno tvorbo, vrsto eksperimentalnega dokumentarca z elementi pripovednega filma, osredotočenega na »dinamiko metropole« (László Moholy-Nagy). Mesto je bilo glavni, običajno pa tudi edini protagonist v filmu, ki je mesto dojemal kot ultimativni simbol modernosti. Glede

na njeno kompleksno identiteto in značaj, simfonije mesta ni preprosto definirati. Eden izmed temeljnih odprtih problemov, ki se pojavljajo v zvezi s tem filmi, pa se nanaša na vprašanje žanra: ali filmi, ki se uvrščajo pod oznako »simfonije mesta«, oblikujejo svoj lastni žanr? Kot skupina filmov so bile simfonije mesta zelo pomembne, njihov vpliv pa se kaže v številnih filmih, ki so nastali po drugi svetovni vojni, kot sta npr. Dve ali tri reči, ki jih vem o njej (1967) Jeana-Luca Godarda ali Manhattan (1979) Woodyja Allena. Takšni primeri ne dokazujejo zgolj, da je koncept simfonije mesta še vedno živ, temveč odpirajo tudi številna vprašanja o tem pomembnem, a velikokrat zanemarjenem žanru, predusem pa vprašanje o obstoju tekešnega žanra.

*Ključne besede: avantgarda, simfonija mesta, film, žanrska kritika, montaža*

## ::INTRODUCTION

The motivation for the paper came from a film, released and seen a couple of years ago, titled *London Symphony: A Poetic Journey Through the Life of a City*. It was a black and white silent film, resembling to a large degree the films from the 1920s and 1930s, known under the label “city symphonies”. Yet, the new film had obviously been shot with a digital camera, addressing a variety of urban themes “with knife-sharp monochrome cinematography,” as one of the critics put it (Brook 2017). *London Symphony* was a result of a successful crowdfunding campaign, initiated by London based filmmaker Alex Barrett in 2014. The film itself, finished in 2017, is therefore a hybrid achievement; on the one hand, a digital journey through contemporary London, and on the other, a return to the phenomenon of city symphony, which was born about a century ago.

What makes *London Symphony* a very different film, comparing to its predecessors, however, is not the use of digital technique, or crowdfunding, which was undoubtedly difficult to imagine a century ago. The key difference lies in the fact that its creators knew very well what counts as a city symphony, and which examples they can follow. This is the reason that in this film one finds all key ingredients and properties (or, at least, almost all of them), typically found in city symphonies.

Films under this label typically focus on the life of a modern city, which “[i]nstead of serving as a mere backdrop for a story, [...] is the protagonist of the film – it is its primary focus, its impetus, the very material of which the film is fashioned” (Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher 2019, 3). Often the name of the city is also in the title of the film, so that there is no doubt, which city film is about (even though there are some notable exceptions to be mentioned, such as Dziga Vertov’s *Man with the Movie Camera*, which successfully hides the identity of the city). The idea was to capture the city as an uncanny living organism, or probably better, to cinematically represent what László Moholy-Nagy named the “dynamic of the metropolis” (Moholy-Nagy 1969, 124). The city, in the context of “classical” city sympho-

ny, is often seen as the symbol of modernity, which brings to the fore the results of modernization, from technology (electricity, means of transportation, assembly line production), urban way of living (mass housing, window shopping) to urban culture (cinema, night clubs).

“The Machine,” writes Robert Hughes, “by uprooting rural populations and re-planting them where power – water or coal – was plentiful, had created a new class [...], the very form of whose life was dictated by its mechanical master from the age of five or six onwards” (Hughes 1991, 166). Various modernist artists were trying to capture this process and its results, but it seems that mostly they lacked the proper means of expression – the automobile entered the world of art as a stone sculpture, designed by Camille Lefevre in 1907, Robert Delaunay made thirty paintings of the Eiffel Tower, another image of modernity, and the Futurists used oil painting technique to represent concepts of speed and acceleration, etc. (Hughes 1991). But only a film camera, as another machine, could grasp the essence of the modern life. Vertov probably understood this more thoroughly than anyone else (Vertov 1978, 4–5):

I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see.

I free myself from today and forever from human immobility, I am in constant movement, I approach and draw away from objects, I crawl under them, I move alongside the mouth of a running horse, I cut into a crowd at full speed, I run in front of running soldiers, I turn on my back, I rise with an airplane, I fall and soar together with falling and rising bodies. [...]

My road is toward the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus, I decipher in a new way the world unknown to you.

City symphonies tried to show life in a modern city in new ways that became possible with the development of film medium and its techniques, but they would not be possible without the awareness of the modern life itself.

It could be claimed that city symphonies grow from the experience of modern life, but *London Symphony*, on the other hand, does not. Contemporary London is very different from cities one finds in “classical” city symphonies, its life is post-modern rather modern, too shiny, aestheticized and designed. Barrett’s *London* is a beautiful film, but probably too beautiful. It would be harsh to claim that it is bordering on detachment and sterility, nevertheless, these words come to mind in relation to it; maybe “the vaning of affect” (Jameson 1991, 9) would be the right expression.

Another element that defines a city symphony is the relation between editing and musical structure. Even though they do not follow the structure of a classical symphony (Burrows 2005, 128), which usually consists of four movements (e.g., allegro, andante, minuet or scherzo, and rondo), city symphonies frequently used editing in a way that suggested a musical structure: “Shots were treated like musical notes, sequences were organized as if they were chords or melodies, scenes were

built up into movements or acts, and issues of rhythm, tempo, and polyphony figured prominently.” (Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher 2019, 4) *London Symphony* is no exception here, but on the contrary, it tries to resemble the formal structure of musical symphony – it is organized into three movements (also titled “Movements”), where the first one is fast (allegro), the second is slower (andante), and the third reminds of an elegant minuet.

Barrett puts all movements together so that they form a larger whole, understood as one-day-in-the-life of the city, which again is a formula well known from classical examples, even though sometimes it might have taken months or even years to shoot and finish them. This temporal structure helped viewers to make sense of the flow of visual material that could otherwise become overly chaotic, abstract, or too experimental due to rapid and rhythmic montage, unusual perspectives, skewed angles, and special effects. But even though city symphonies undoubtedly were a group of experimental and avant-garde films, they also avoided pure nonfiction form.

In this sense, the creative outcome of city symphonies was “hybrid,” positioned somewhere between an avant-garde artwork (experimental and inventive) on the one hand, and documentary on the other. Betsy A. McLane in *A New History of Documentary Film*, for instance, claims that city symphonies consist of a group of “films that strongly link avant-garde with documentary”. (McLane 2013, 60) She focuses on three examples, but mostly she is interested in city symphonies as documents, as it can be seen in the case of Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*: “The exclusively aesthetic concentration of Ruttmann represented a severe limitation [...]. Yet, *Berlin* may have more value as a *document* than do those *documentary* films made with more explicit social biases and programmes. Though composed according to artistic insights and intuitions and the requirements of form, what it offers essentially is a visual description. From this film we can learn a great deal about the appearance of life in Berlin in 1927.” (McLane 2013, 66)

It is well-known that Ruttmann was much influenced by Vertov, who used the term “жизнь врасплох” to designate “his films’ pretensions to ‘ontological authenticity” (Hicks 2007, 23), and which is usually translated as “life caught unawares”. It turns out, however, that this influence can be found on the side of interpretation as well. Thus, writing about *Berlin*, McLane claims that “mostly life is caught unawares” (McLane 2013, 65), giving documentary approach a priority over avant-garde expression. This view was accepted by many film scholars, who classified city symphonies as (early) documentary films; in their *Film History*, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell call them “lyrical documentaries” (Thompson and Bordwell 2019, 160), while others understand them as a form of documentary (Kracauer 1997; Grierson 2016; Kavčič and Vrdlovec 1999). There are also film scholars who write about city symphonies, but do not discuss their status – these are just films named “city symphonies” (Brockmann 2010; Barnouw 1993).

*London Symphony*, nevertheless, creates an impression that there exists a well-defined and stable city symphony genre, which has been shaped a hundred years ago,

and which it only effectively follows. Even though in the past, but also nowadays, city symphonies are often perceived as documentaries, and not as members of a particular genre of its own, many contemporary commentators and critics claim that the circle of these films was so important and influential within the history of cinema that it deserves to be treated as a genre of its own. Therefore, the most important question, opened by *London Symphony* seems to be the question of genre.

## ::HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

Not many things are certain or definite when it comes to a phenomenon, known as city symphony, and commentators still do not agree on the origins of the genre, or to be more precise, they do not even agree on the existence of this genre, or the number of films that belong to it. For some or—maybe even most—commentators, the list consists of around twenty titles (Dimendberg 2003, 109), whereas for some others this number can go well over 80, with the remark that all of them may not be true city symphonies, but only city “sinfoniettas” (Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher 2019, 9), or “city sonatas” (McLane 2013, 66).

## ::Notable Precursors

Generally, Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler’s *Manhatta*, an abstract study of the New York City from 1921, is considered the first example of a city symphony. This film applies the aforementioned “dawn-till-dusk” format, which later on became the standard for city symphonies, and focuses on the city, which turns out to be the true protagonist of the film, and not only a backdrop for a story. What Strand and Sheeler’s *Manhatta* is still lacking, is a “significant interest in rhythmic or associative editing typical of the city symphonies that followed” (Graf 2007, 78). Since the editing became a key component in defining the city symphony, or even a signature of city symphonies (Polito 2011), *Manhatta* is customarily seen as (only) a precursor of “true” city symphonies.

The next example, *Paris qui dort* (translated as *The Crazy Ray*) seems to be equally problematic, but for another reason. It was released in 1923 and directed by René Clair. It uses rhythmic editing patterns and documentary style, but retains strong plot elements and conventional narrative, which is, again, not typical of the city symphonies. For some critics, *Paris qui dort* represents, above all, an early example of science-fiction, for others it was one of the first examples of surrealist cinema (Sklar 1993, 137). Again, as we can see, we are dealing with a film that only partially meets the conditions of the city symphony genre.

For some commentators (German writer and renowned film critic Siegfried Kracauer would probably be the most prominent), those two films do not count, and the city symphony genre begins only in 1926. In his *Theory of Film* Kracauer wrote that it was at that time that Brazilian film director “[Alberto] Cavalcanti with his

*Rien que les heures* [*Nothing but Time*] initiated the series of city ‘symphonies’” (Kracauer 1997, 180-81). But even though Kracauer seemed to be quite clear in his statement, it does not mean, however, that this way the city symphony genre really was born. Cavalcanti himself described his film as a “clumsy social document” (Graf 2007, 78) and Kracauer lists it as an avant-garde documentary, together with other important city symphonies, such as Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin, die Symphonie einer Grossstadt* (*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, 1927), Jean Vigo and Boris Kaufman’s *À propos de Nice* (*About Nice*, 1930), or Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

As pointed out by Steven Jacobs, Anthony Kinik, and Eva Hielscher, the city symphonies of the 1920s and 1930s, “for the most part (...) are not story films, and similarly, for the most part, (...) are not romances,” which means that Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures* poses a problem, because it “is narratively organized around the encounters of a streetwalker, a woman selling newspapers, a sailor, a landlady, a shopkeeper, and a thug, and the highly allegorical image of an old woman stumbling and crawling down Parisian back alleys before appearing to succumb to fatigue” (Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher 2019, 9). Even though it has frequently been cited as being a canonical example of the city symphony, Cavalcanti’s film features actors and scripted drama, and “it would be a stretch to characterize it as a work of nonfiction” (Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher 2019, 12). Moreover, claim Jacobs *et al.*, what is harder to understand is, “why early critics and theorists such as John Grierson, Paul Rotha, Siegfried Kracauer, and others, were so insistent that *Rien que les heures* was a documentary, when it is quite clear that it is primarily a work of fiction.” (Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher 2019, 12) This characteristic is shared by another exemplary city symphony, Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer, and Billy Wilder’s *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, 1930). The film is subtitled “a film without actors,” however only because the interpreters were non-professionals, and even though it is closely related to the city symphonies genre, it also, in certain ways, pre-figures Neorealism (Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher 2019, 13).

## :::Prototype

In his earlier book on Weimar period cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Kracauer is more specific and situates city symphonies under the labels of montage and realism. When writing about these films (since this is a book about German film, he focuses on German film examples), he claims here that “the German film-makers cultivated a species of films presenting a cross section of some sphere of reality. [...] They were the purest expression of New Objectivity on the screen.” (Kracauer 2004, 181)

For Kracauer, the most important film and actually “the prototype of all true German cross-section films” is Ruttmann’s *Berlin* (Kracauer 2004, 182). This film was devised by Carl Mayer, a screenplay writer (with Hans Janowitz he co-wrote the

screenplay to Robert Wiene's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligary*, which counts as the quintessential work of German Expressionist cinema), who lost interest in fictional invention and wanted his stories to grow from reality. Paul Rotha, a British documentary film-maker and writer, but also Mayer's close friend, wrote about this change that eventually led to the city symphony: "In 1925, standing amid the whirling traffic of the Ufa Palast am Zoo, he conceived the idea of a City Symphony. He saw 'a melody of pictures' and began to write the treatment of *Berlin*." (Rotha in Kracauer 2004, 182) The fact that Cavalcanti's film on Paris was released a few months before *Berlin*, according to Kracauer, does not lessen Mayer's profound originality.

Mayer's idea was embraced by the cinematographer Karl Freund (who is best known for photographing Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, another outstanding example of German Expressionist cinema), who, in Kracauer's words, "set out to shoot Berlin scenes with the voracious appetite of a man starved for reality" (Kracauer 2004, 183). Freund relied heavily on candid camera work and invented means to hide the camera while shooting; no one suspected that he was taking pictures. For him, this was the only type of photography that was really art, because it was able to portray life itself. Mayer and Freund strongly supported realism and it seems somehow natural that not only Kracauer but also many other commentators listed *Berlin* (and to be precise, also other city symphonies) among documentaries. This film, however, is not known (only) because of Mayer and Freund, but above all, because of Walther Ruttmann, who edited the assembled material and directed the film.

Ruttmann, who had been producing abstract films since 1919, had, according to Kracauer, a particular gift, or a "sense of optical music," which made him the right man to produce "a melody of pictures" (Kracauer 2004, 183). However, Ruttmann did not share Mayer's conception (or Freund's photographic realism), which resulted in Mayer's early withdrawal from the production. Mayer, above all, wanted to show *life*, and Freund, in the same sense, wanted to photograph it. Ruttmann, on the other hand, had his own ideas and preoccupations. He edited the material and turned the real movement into almost abstract patterns, introducing the "music," and symbolizing the "tempo" of *Berlin*. Mayer criticized Ruttmann's *Berlin* for something that he called "surface approach," but what he had meant was probably the method of editing, which "relies on the formal qualities of the objects rather on their meanings" (Kracauer 2004, 184). The Documentary character of the photographed material was thus transformed into an avant-garde form; contrasts that were shown were not so much social distinctions as they were formal juxtapositions. They may have had a strong structural function, but their relation to life or reality was not pronounced.

### **::So Close, No Matter How Far**

It is difficult to make deductions from one example, because even in the case of the most typical and often quoted examples of city symphonies, such as Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, there remains a question – is this really a city symphony?



On the one hand, *Man with a Movie Camera* was a highly important and influential film, in which Vertov went even further than Ruttmann in *Berlin*. According to Harry Alan Potamkin, a critic, who was active during the 1920s and 1930s, the key component of a city symphony is editing, and city symphonies are to be put under the label “The Montage Film”. In Potamkin’s words, Vertov “has, in the typical Russian way, sought to make the images symbolic of the land and has endeavored to include in the film all the various contrasts of the city’s life, of human existence – work and pleasure, birth and death” (Potamkin in Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher 2019, 12).

On the other hand, *Man with a Movie Camera* has at least one important weakness in regard to city symphony genre. Even though it was named the best documentary of all times by the British Film Institute’s 2012 *Sight & Sound* poll (McManus, Bradshaw, and Stevens 2014), it does not document a life of a city in a literal sense. Contrary to city symphonies, filmed in big cities as New York, Paris, London, and Berlin, Vertov did not dedicate his film to a single city, but it was shot in three different cities, and therefore, as Alex Barret uncompromisingly put it, it is a cheat (Barrett 2014). This example also shows the contradictory nature of city symphony scholarship, as shown on different occasions, and this is only one of them. Edward Dimendberg begins his writing on one of city symphonies with the following remark: “Few episodes in cinema history appear more secure than the genre of the city symphony that emerged in the 1920s [...],” only to conclude the same paragraph arguing that “such works resist categorization as documentary, experimental, or narrative film” (Dimendberg 2003, 109).

*Man With a Movie Camera* is not the only film that in the context of city symphonies genre was important and influential, but at the same time also highly challenging. The same holds true for László Moholy-Nagy’s *Dynamic of the Metropolis* (1921-24). Contrary to other problematic examples, *Dynamic of the Metropolis* is not even a film; namely, it remained only in the form of a manuscript, and it was never filmed (Moholy-Nagy 1969). Also, Moholy-Nagy does never suggest in which city this film should be realized. In words of Dimendberg: “Breaking from the absolute films of [Hans] Richter and [Viking] Eggeling, Moholy-Nagy went beyond their animated abstractions toward the actual montage of fragments of urban reality.” However, “[r]ather than depict the unities of time and place, Moholy-Nagy pursues a mode of metacinematic exploration that takes the modalities of perceptual and cinematic responses to the metropolis as its subject matter” (Dimendberg 2003, 121).

## ::CONCLUSION

Demarcated loosely as avant-garde nonfiction film, city symphony could be defined by a dialectical tension between documentary approach, on the one hand, and avant-garde tactic on the other. Even though it might have taken months to

shoot them, these films usually show one day in the life of the city, trying to show urban fabric rather than the lives of individuals. Instead of “story”, the word “symphony” was used, because somehow paradoxically “the artists sought inspiration for their film language, a visual art, in other arts, especially music. This is where the label ‘symphony’ becomes relevant, since it denotes principles of balance and formal discipline to achieve dynamic coherence in a composition, both in music and in the graphic arts.” (Graf 2007, 80)

As some commentators pointed out, it is also important to note that “city symphonies originated at a time when the notion of the ‘documentary film’ had not yet come into existence, and that ‘experimental’ or ‘avant-garde’ cinema was just coming into its own.” (Jacobs, Kinik, and Hielscher 2019, 4) Not only documentary and avant-garde cinema, but the genre criticism was also in its infancy at that time. There has been recently a strong tendency among film scholars to reevaluate these films and give them the identity and the importance they deserve. That would also mean to acknowledge that this phenomenon amounts to a full-fledged genre.

The problem of genre in this case, however, turns out to be quite challenging. In the introduction to his avant-garde film reader, P. Adams Sitney identifies “city symphony” as “specifically avant-garde genre” (Sitney 1978, ix). This is quite a bold statement, claims Alexander Graf, “because in doing so he challenges the views of theorists of the avant-garde such as Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger, who either overlook film in the construction of their argument, or else specifically eliminate film from their considerations on account of the medium’s technical characteristics” (Graf 2007, 77). In his view, the question is not whether city symphonies are a category of documentary, but whether one can find enough arguments to defend their position as avant-garde films. According to Graf, namely, city symphonies “are not documentaries in the traditional sense,” however, “what the makers of the city symphony films were interested almost without exception, was rather a documentary *attitude* to filmmaking” (Graf 2007, 89). What he tries to show, then, is how the relationship between city symphony films on the one side, and the thought and practice of avant-garde art of the 1920s on the other, provide a way to understand city symphonies as avant-garde genre. To do so, he focuses on technical aspects of the film and especially on the specific avant-gardistic character of filmic montage (mostly visual rhythmic montage and associative montage). This aspect of the film is then seen as a device, which enables a viewer to capture the essence of modern urban experience, whereby the metropolis itself is presented as one big intersection of moving images (Graf 2007, 85).

Without doubt, this approach, devised by Graf, helps us to understand the specificity of city symphonies and problems that are related to the question of genre. Yet, it also shows its limitations – it mostly focuses on technical and formal (filmic) aspects and tries to relate these films to avant-garde production, completely ignoring their documentary character. Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher, on the other side, follow a more balanced approach, developed by a film genre theorist Rick Altman (Jacobs,

Kinik and Hielscher 2019; Altman 1984; Altman 1999).

Altman started his 1980s essay by claiming that genre criticism in film studies was mostly marked by uncertainty and contradictions: “The more genre criticism I read, the more uncertainty I note in the choice or extent of essential critical terms. [...] These uncertainties reflect constitutive weaknesses of current notion of genre. These contradictions in particular seem worthy of a good scratch.” (Altman 1984, 6) He saw the solution to the problem in developing a new approach and so “a semantic/syntactic approach to film genre” was born.

Altman argued that the key was to combine the semantic approach with the syntactic approach, because they were complementary and that they provided a promising model for the analysis of film genre: “we can as a whole distinguish between generic definitions which depend on a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like – thus stressing the semantic elements which make up the genre – and definitions which play up instead certain constitutive relationships between undesigned and variable placeholders – relationships which might be called the genre’s fundamental syntax. The semantic approach thus stresses the genre’s building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged.” (Altman 1984, 10) As an example, Altman tested this approach on the western, and compared it to other approaches to the western. He concluded that most approaches in film genre criticism are partial and thus limited, because they insist on only one approach – syntactic or semantic. The added value of his approach is exactly in combining the two.

As mentioned, Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher used Altman’s approach in the context of city symphony and identified semantic and syntactic elements in more than 80 films that they recognized as city symphonies. As their analysis of semantic elements shows, city symphonies rarely focus on the “official’ face of the city,” (Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher 2019, 15), and often try to avoid tourist sites or historical monuments; instead, they frequently present city in the process of expanding by drawing attention to construction sites, but also impressive bridges, towers and factory chimneys. Other elements include industry and mechanization (as a main factor of urbanization), motorized traffic (as a symbol of urban modernity), consumption and commodity fetishism (fashion, advertising), but also leisure and entertainment (including the experience of cinema). People bring the energy to the city, and they can be represented as the crowd, but streets can also be empty and deserted, thus evoking urban loneliness and alienation.

On the side of syntax, authors point out that city symphonies are avant-garde documentaries on modern urban life, and as such they are eschewing story lines and avoiding the use of hired actors; they are primarily works of nonfiction, and they share not only similar structural organization, but also Vertov’s dictum – “life caught unawares”. As nonfiction films they use location footage and try to avoid the controlled conditions of the studio. Chronological order was simulated, and life of the city was usually presented in a single day, showing city as a living organism that

works and rests; some films use shots of clocks in order to suggest “a temporal organization of the workday as a mainspring of the urban capitalist economy” (Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher 2019, 25). The last element of the syntax is the use of sophisticated montage, a common denominator of avant-garde films and thoroughly discussed in Graf (2007).

This analysis therefore shows that the city symphony “is not only film *about* the modern metropolis; its formal and structural organization is also the perfect embodiment of metropolitan modernity” (Jacobs, Kinik and Hielscher 2019, 15). As such, this claim can also be taken as a confirmation that a circle of films, known as city symphonies, form a genre of their own. This is something that they undoubtedly deserve.

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