

Interview: Michael Nyman

“There’s no scripts, no rehearsals, no actors...”

The composer explains the thinking behind his latest film, and reminisces about the parties held by a Frieze founder’s dad

Michael Nyman is a composer of minimalist music as well as a film-maker and photographer. His work includes the score for Jane Campion’s film “The Piano”, Peter Greenaway’s films “The Draughtsman’s Contract” and “The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, And Her Lover”, and the operas “The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat” and “Facing Goya”. He formed the Michael Nyman Band in 1976. **The Art Newspaper: You are going to be performing the score to your film “NYman With a Movie Camera” at the Barbican. Why did you take Soviet film-maker Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film “Man with a Movie Camera” as your starting point?**

Michael Nyman: I make films which are observational. I go into the street with a camera in my pocket, and if I see something that interests me I film it. So there’s no preparation, no scripts, no rehearsals, no actors, so unconsciously I am fulfilling a kind of Vertov principle of life caught unawares. I like focusing on an activity that someone else is focusing on: it’s a film-making approach of a minimalist composer but it’s very different in the sense of the subject matter, and the material in front of me that I capture. When I write a piece of music I have to piece together that narrative, but the effects are similar in the sense of an unflinching gaze.

TAN: When did you start shooting in this way?

MN: I started doing it in the 1990s. I didn’t discover

Vertov’s “Man With a Movie Camera” until 2003, when the BFI [British Film Institute] suggested I write a score for it. I looked at the film while I compiled the score and I carried on my own filming. At that time I was a collector of images—I had a video camera and just shot what I saw. Over the last two or three years we’ve edited 50 independent films, lasting from two minutes to an hour. Some simple, some involving more editing or post production working with [film-makers] Marc Silver and Max Pugh. I then thought: “OK, will I ever make another film? Will every film I make just be an archive?”

What I do with “NYman With a Movie Camera” is entirely different because we are scrupulously and meticulously replacing a Vertov image with a Nyman image of the same kind, something related, parallel, or triggered. So my films exist in a complete state but they are still dismantle-able, as a piece of music is dismantle-able, and the raw footage can be based in the appropriate position in the Vertov. We stuck to rules like montage, the editing rhythm, the tricks of split screen and superimposition. It’s a fascinating process to find how I can get equivalents but it’s also a frustrating experience; the editing rhythm is very unnatural because my films are not heavily edited. Basically, it’s an observation of people at work. What Vertov doesn’t allow me to do is to have a sequence of anything longer than 30 seconds. I’ve done this “[John] Cage” random thing of



Framed: Nyman has made some 50 films over the past two or three years

totally exploding the unity of Vertov’s narrative so the film has multiple levels of density. The nearest I have got to this in a score was with Greenaway’s “The Draughtsman’s Contract” where I [took] music by Purcell and recomposed it to my vision in a post-modern way.

TAN: There are other differences—black and white versus colour, for example.

MN: His is black and white, mine is colour, and mine is shot in 200 different locations. There are certain things I don’t have; I think he cheated,

I think he filmed actresses or maybe his wife dressing and undressing and I was tempted to find an actress to reproduce those scenes, but I wouldn’t. I used my granddaughter’s Barbie dolls, which she leaves in my house. For example, the beach scene in Vertov is just one of the most beautiful, sensual things and I had nothing, so I decided to put some shots of Martin Parr demonstrating his photography. Or the final sequence of the film, when I’m at the Venice film festival,

“I go into the street with a camera and if I see something that interests me, I film it”

they are giving a prize to Sylvester Stallone; he was very tiny on stage and absolutely huge on the screen... there’s wit and there’s accident. I think the most interesting sequence—

and it’s kind of a paradigm for what’s happening in the film—is in the opening sequence. There’s an orchestra waiting to play [and] first of all you see them frozen in activity. Because I’m a musician I’m always in situations when I can film scenarios like this.

TAN: When Vertov made “Man With a Movie Camera”, it was at a very particular point (the early days of the Soviet Union) in history.

MN: Obviously I don’t have a political philosophy behind my film in the same way. I am still searching for the meanings of what I did.

On another note I have always wanted to do a music event around Frieze because in the late 1960s [classical musicians’ agent] Robert Slotover gave amazing parties. There was one famous one in 1968—I had written about [composer Karlheinz] Stockhausen’s work in a review and just as I was leaving the party Stockhausen said to me: “You are the person who has been putting out false information. I have not been influenced by [composer] La Monte Young, he was my pupil.” Robert Slotover [is] Matthew Slotover’s father... the Frieze connection. I feel I am coming home. ■

Interview by Jean Wainwright

□ The Michael Nyman Band perform the live score at the UK premiere of “NYman with a Movie Camera” on Sunday (17 October) at London’s Barbican Centre at 7.30pm. The band will also perform Nyman’s song cycle “The Glare”, featuring singer David McAlmont. www.barbican.co.uk



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Graham Sutherland, *Hanging form (detail)*, 1956, oil on canvas, 110 x 85 cm, € 90,000 – 150,000, auction 24 November 2010