

# JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Protest Demonstrators Take to the Streets in *Kino-Nedilia* 35 — the initial newsreel norms of *Kino-Nedilia*, the series born of the pre-revolution production structures in 1919.

Malitsky's take on propaganda is to turn to the concept of the "social imaginary" as a key. As described by Charles Taylor this is, in essence, "the ways people imagine their social existence" which collectively determine "the repertory of collective action." These understandings are made virtual through representations — and, so, the cinema comes to be a key facilitator of them.



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Dedicating a monument to Danton, *Kino-Nedilia* 34: In the first moments of revolution Vertov found work in the newsreel, learning his trade in the *Kino-Nedilia* offices. "None of the distinctions now familiar to producers and viewers of documentaries were in place at the time Vertov began to make films." So, without prejudice to the fact that these "familiar" "distinctions" scarce hold up, Malitsky more specifically rejects that received opinion which sees the newsreel work of Vertov and Alvarez as being merely a preparation for their documentaries.



## "The revolutionary founding moments of a contra-Grierson tradition"

review by [Brian Winston](#)

Joshua Malitsky, *Post-Revolution Nonfiction Film: Building the Soviet and Cuban Nations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). 274 pages.

### Post-Revolution

The parallels between Soviet and Cuban non-fiction cinemas in the immediate post-revolution period have been noted before but seldom with such comprehensiveness and insight as Josh Malitsky deploys in *Post-Revolution Nonfiction Film*. He is concerned with the period from 1917-1928 in Russia and from 1959-1974 in Cuba. Usually the epithet "revolutionary" is used of all the films made under the auspices of the newly-installed governments of 1917 and 1959. Malitsky, however, makes a distinction by isolating the titles, by no means all of them, that were revolutionary not only in ideology and intention but also in form. Hence *Post-Revolution* rather than *Revolutionary* film.

In fact, Malitsky makes a useful tripartite division of output during these years to see "revolutionary" film *qua* film as dominating only the middle phase. It is the meat (as it were) in the sandwich of "post-revolutionary" film — the immediate realist phase — and the post-revolutionary phase of governments and filmmakers throughout was to transform the citizen's understanding of their individual roles as productive workers in the service of the revolution, but the filmmaking strategies deployed changed through time. In both countries, the films he discusses as being revolutionary in both form and content are the product of what might be called a middle, experimental, "revolutionary aesthetic phase" (1922-1927, 1965-1971). These sought a film-form that, as Malitsky sums it up, "manifested new non-fiction cinematic languages." [1] [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) This productive search followed an initial post-revolutionary "immediate realist phase" that used, for the most part, established newsreel techniques (1917-1921, 1959-1965). And it preceded a "revived realist phase" (1927-1928, 1972-1974)—in effect, a reaction to the failures of the revolutionary aesthetic as effective communication.

Although these divisions, as Malitsky admits, are somewhat "permeable," nevertheless they do powerfully unpin the case for Soviet/Cuban parallelism. The Russian developments were echoed across the world forty-years later in Cuba. In both countries the pre-existing newsreel production capacity was harnessed to the revolution. In Cuba this involved total immediate nationalization, with the founding of ICAIC as the first cultural act of the new government. Lenin took longer: production facilities were taken over immediately, but full nationalization of distribution and exhibition waited until the foundation of Goskino in 1922. The importance of film to the state's revolutionary agenda, however, was the same in



Lenin, "The Brain of Soviet Russia": As that series ran down in 1919, Vertov emerged as a skilled newsreel director. This film was the first step away from the newsreel done when Vertov started re-editing the Kino-Nedelia Archive — for instance into a short called "Brain of Russia."



Family reunited with a returning *brigadista* in *Historia de una batalla*: In effect the Cuban filmmakers were attempting to prefigure Anderson's modernist concept of the nation as an "imagined political community," one that is both stable but promotes change. Nonfiction film's further post-revolution task was also to facilitate the coming of "ideology to consciousness." The ambition of governments and filmmakers throughout was to transform the citizen's understanding of their individual roles as productive workers in the service of the revolution.



Returning the entrails to a bull in *Kino Pravda*: Certain "deployments" in Vertov's nonfiction films used techniques which Alvarez was also to use at the same post-revolution moment: "rapid montage, photographic trickery, expressive titling and complex structuration." Deconstructions — fast and slow motion,

film to the state's revolutionary agenda, however, was the same as in Cuba.

The initial newsreel norms of *Kino-Nedelia*, the series born of the pre-revolution production structures in 1919, are matched by a similar adherence to realist procedures in *Noticiero Latinoamericano* (1960-on). This gives way to the revolutionary aesthetic phase of the middle period, wherein avant-garde Soviet documentaries are echoed by the Cuban films, which consolidated the emerging international reputation of its cinema. Then reaction against this led to parallel returns in each country to realistic reportage and archival compilations. *Post-Revolution Nonfiction Film* convincingly lays out the argument to sustain this interpretation.

## Alvarez and Cuba

The book necessarily sees Santiago Alvarez as a central figure in all these phases of the Cuban post-revolution cinema. Alvarez was a television professional (on the audio-side) at the moment of revolution and he was among the founders of ICAIC. He personally benefited from the support of Joris Ivens and Chris Marker as he retooled as a filmmaker, which he did so successfully that he was given charge of the weekly *Noticiero* from its inception. Some of this work, notably the newsreel roundup *Ciclón/Hurricane* (1963), first brought him to the attention of the outside world.

His reputation was further enhanced by his experimental search for a more revolutionary aesthetic, which was exemplified in the series of internationally acclaimed shorts he made between 1965 and 1971 — *Now; Hanoi, martes 13; LBJ; 79 Spring Times of Ho Chi Minh*; etc. Alvarez stated,

"Cinema is not an extension of revolutionary action. Cinema is and must be revolutionary action in itself." [2]

But, despite the foreign accolades, the films, especially *LBJ* (1968), came to be seen in Cuba as going a little too far. As Malitsky puts it:

"too personally, too complexly, too rapidly, too kaleidoscopically." [3]

The collapse of the sugar harvest in 1971 and the controversial imprisonment of the poet Herberto Padilla, as well as this growing realization that such experimentation might not be having the desired effect on the citizenry, occasioned a thermidorian [4] reaction. The revolution was maturing, and in response to changing circumstances, Alvarez's films now came to typify a third-phase return to infinitely less experimental modes. Consider the trilogy he made on Castro's foreign visits post-1971:

- *De America so hijo...y a ella me debo/ I am the son of America... and I am indebted to it* (1972) a three and a quarter hour account of Fidel Castro's visit to Chile the year before;
- *Y el cielo fue tomado por asalto/ Heaven taken by Storm* (1973), two hours on Castro's East European and African tour in 1972; and
- *Los Cuatro Puentes/The Four Bridges* (1974), 74 minutes on the Non-Aligned Nations meeting he attended in Algeria in 1973.

Despite the zingy titles, nothing can disguise the fact that these offer only "long, static and frankly tedious reprises of Castro's speeches." [5]

## Vertov, Shub and the USSR

Alvarez is often presented, with some justice, as a figure occupying similar ground to that dominated by Vertov in the Soviet Union four decades earlier. Malitsky's tripartite division, though, highlights

super-impositions, split-screens, extreme close-ups — did indeed penetrate surface reality in the name of revolution. The work of bread-making, for example, is marvelously conveyed by simple dint of reversing the process so that the sequence concludes with the laborious replacement of the wheat-stalks in the ground. For the Lumières, reassembling a wall by reversing the film they took of its demolition was only a trick. For Vertov, such tricks meant defamiliarization—*ostranenei*—in order to explain “the bourgeois structure of the world to the workers.”



Icebreaker, *Lenin: 6th Part*: In both Cuba and Russia, the films Malitsky discusses as being revolutionary in both form and content are the product of what might be called a middle experimental “revolutionary aesthetic phase” (’22-’27, ’65-’71). These sought a film-form that, as Malitsky sums it up, “manifested new non-fiction cinematic languages.”



From the masthead *6th Part: A Sixth Part of the World* did not address the mandate to sell Russian products to the world. Moreover, the intellectuals of the LEF group were largely unimpressed. Viktor Shlovsky, for example, attacked *A Sixth Part of the World* claiming Vertov had filmed objects as a “curiosity, an

Vertov’s virtual disappearance during the third phase, after his experimentalism occasioned his dismissal from Goskino. This does not mean that, for Malitsky, the parallel breaks down. Instead, and most welcomingly, he suggests that Alvarez’s role in turning away from avant-garde excess was played in the USSR by Esfir Shub. His pattern thus holds good.

This is not to deny Vertov’s dominance during the experimental phase. Like Alvarez, in the first moments of revolution Vertov had found work in the newsreel, learning his trade in the *Kino-Nedilia* offices. As that series ran down in 1919, he emerged as a skilled newsreel director. In *Red Star* (1919), he documented the voyage of the *Red Star Literary-Instructional Steamer of the Central Committee* down the Volga. Subsequently there was parallel film-work in connection with the Agit-Train mobile cinema initiative (*Agit-Train of the Central Committee*) as well as coverage of the civil war. By 1922, Vertov was ready to take the next step into more complex revolutionary experiments.

He had formulated the concept of the “kino-eye” person, the revolutionary “kinok’:

“WE proclaim the old films based on the romance theatrical films and the like to be leprous.

Keep away from them!  
Keep your eyes off them!  
They’re mortally dangerous!  
Contagious.

WE affirm the future of cinema art by denying its present.”[6]

Vertov then used “deployments” in his nonfiction films techniques that Alvarez was also to use at the same post-revolutionary moment:

“rapid montage, photographic trickery, expressive titling and complex structuration.”

The “kino-eye” embraced the work of filmmaking itself with, for the first time, shots of Vertov’s wife, Elizaveta Svilova, at work in the cutting room. Deconstructions—fast and slow motion, super-impositions, split-screens, extreme close-ups—did indeed penetrate surface reality in the name of revolution.[7] The work of bread-making, for example, is marvelously conveyed by simple dint of reversing the process so that the sequence concludes with the laborious replacement of the wheat-stalks in the ground. For the Lumières, reassembling a wall by reversing the film they took of its demolition was only a trick. For Vertov, such tricks meant defamiliarization—*ostranenei*—in order to explain “the bourgeois structure of the world to the workers.”[8] As with Alvarez, “communicating revolution experience” could not be achieved without such experiments.[9] This, though, is not to make a “great man” point. Alvarez told Michael Chanan that he didn’t know Vertov’s work but he assumed that Vertov had adopted the same filmmaking agenda because the political situation demanded the same response.[10]

In Russia, the return to the norms of realism can be marked by Vertov’s sacking from Goskino in 1926 and the release of Esfir Shub’s pioneering historical compilation *Fall of the House of Romanov* in 1927. Vertov was in trouble by 1926: *Stride, Soviet* (aka *Forward, Soviet*) indicates why. One sequence documents an election rally in terms of machines, e.g. “attentive automobiles,”[11] which are seen apparently “listening” and responding to each other. No citizens. No politicians. The commissars were not best pleased. Nor did the exhortative mode of *A Sixth Part of the World*, made in the same year, address the brief, which was to sell Russian products to the

anecdote, and not as a fact." Vertov had no script, went over budget, and his fate as a Moscow filmmaker was sealed.



Santiago Alvarez techniques: gun POV, 79 *Springtimes*



Split screen *Now*



Paddy planting *Hanoi, martes 13*: "Cinema," Alvarez stated, "is not an extension of revolutionary action. Cinema is and must be revolutionary action in itself." His reputation was further enhanced by the experimental search for a more revolutionary aesthetic which was exemplified in the series of internationally acclaimed shorts he made between 1965 and '71:

- *Now*
- *Hanoi, martes 13*
- *LBJ*
- *79 Spring Times of Ho Chi Minh.*

world (c.f. the British Empire Marketing Board's ambition a few years later to use film to sell colonial products in the UK). Moreover, the intellectuals of the *LEF* group were also largely unimpressed. Viktor Shlovsky, for example, was to attack *A Sixth Part of the World* claiming Vertov had filmed objects as a "curiosity, an anecdote, and not as a fact." [12] More than all this, from Goskino's point-of-view, Vertov never produced a full scenario—nor much of a plan. It was no surprise he went over budget on *A Sixth Part*... his fate as a Moscow

filmmaker was sealed.

It is much to Malitsky's credit to here bring in Esfir Shub, as the dominant figure in the short third post-revolution phase of 1927-1928. University-educated and a figure in Moscow's avant-garde circles, she had been Myerhold's private secretary. She joined Goskino in 1922 to re-edit imported foreign films for the Soviet audience. By the time of Vertov's dismissal, newsreel production had fallen by 66% [13], but Shub was already at work in the archive engineering the return of accessible realism. Instead of the previously discussed Vertov/Alvarez binary, Malitsky therefore presents us with a triad: Alvarez is balanced by Vertov and Shub. This goes beyond recognizing Shub as a species of outlier: the pioneer of the compilation film. Without prejudice to the fecundity of this innovation for the documentary cinema in general, Malitsky places her compilation trilogy of these years—*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, *The Great War* and *The Russia of Nicolas II and Lev Tolstoy*—as exemplifying the post-revolution's third-phase.

The *LEF* circle underpinned with theory the reaction against experimentation which Shub's turn to a less effervescent "more realistic" cinema hailed. This was expressed in the concept of "factography," with its idea of made—rather than the discovered—facts. Shub was deemed to produce "facts" with her planned approach to found archival footage. The result of her work was a "protokol" (report) whereas a Vertov film was a "proklamatsiia" (proclamation). Sergei Tret'iakov, in particular, held that Shub's was a far more effective procedure than Vertov's. [14] She did not, as he did, "betray the document." [15]

Malitsky does not avoid the problematics of the *LEF* attack on Vertov, but how he deals with this is perhaps the weakest spot in his argument overall. "Factography" can be seen as suggesting a somewhat insouciant view of the integrity of the photographic image, but Malitsky's response is to suggest that the Peircean concept of "indexicality" offers a key to understanding it. The concept of "indexicality," however, is itself somewhat overburdened by the simplifications and misunderstanding which have in general conditioned the reception of Peirce into cinema studies. "Indexicality" is anyway somewhat beside point in that the usual use of Peirce, as here, ignores the necessary work of interpretation that all viewers must bring to the image. What, in fact, is the status of the referent in Tret'iakov's vision of constructed film "facts"? In this sense, the *LEF* position on "made" image-facts presages, in some way, the Braudrillardian vision of the *simulacra*. Yet, as Nichols puts it, nonfiction imaging demands that

"the historical referent ... cuts through the inoculating power of signifying systems." [16]

How audiences decode what they see and how they understand the integrity of the image vis-à-vis the referent is, of course, crucial. And it is what Vertov tackles head on and *LEF* thinking sidesteps.

It is a real plus, though, that Malitsky accords Shub the attention she has long deserved; but this should not be at the expense of Vertov and the "unplayed" film. The *LEF* criticism of Vertov needs to be better

addressed. After all, Shub herself was under no illusions as to the referential integrity of the images with which she worked. In her autobiography she wrote:

“The intention was not so much to provide the facts but to evaluate them from the vantage point of the revolutionary class.”[17]

Is not this precisely Vertov’s intention in the previous phases? Be that as it may, the *LEF* circle’s critique of Vertov does not affect the validity of Maltisky’s periodization. What is perhaps more telling (but equally immaterial to Malitsky’s schema) is that, by any measure, Shub’s trilogy is superior to Alvarez’s recording of Castro’s speeches.

So, overall, Malitsky’s dissection of the Russian and Cuban post-revolution non-fiction cinema is persuasive and valuable.

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