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Esther Shub: Cinema is My Life

VLADA PETRIC

It is amazing how many unexpected solutions come up when you hold film stock in your hands. Just like letters: they are born on the top of the pen.

Shub

Esther (Esfir) Shub was the most outstanding Russian woman-filmmaker of the silent era, along with Olga Preobrazhenskaya. While Preobrazhenskaya was involved in narrative and staged cinema—her films include *The Woman From Ryazan* (1927) and *The Quiet Don* (1930)—Shub dedicated her entire life to documentary cinema. Most importantly, Shub established a specific cinematic genre, the so-called compilation film, movies made exclusively from existing documents, mainly newsreel footage taken by many, often unknown, cameramen. Working with newsreel material, Shub discovered some crucial principles of editing and intertitling, which were further developed by Eisenstein, Vertov, and Pudovkin.

Shub was born to a family of landowners in a remote Russian village in the Chernigovsky district in Ukraine, on March 3, 1894. She attended elementary school in a nearby provincial town and studied literature in Moscow a few years before the October Revolution. Most of her time in Moscow was spent with the family of the then-famous writer Alexander Ertel whose home was regularly visited by important literary and theater people, including Mayakovsky and Hlebnikov, the great poets, Byely, the writer, and Burlyuk, the painter. After the revolution Shub dropped her study of comparative literature so that she could attend the seminar of The Institute for Women's Higher Education given by the progressive scholars and social workers of Moscow. While studying at the Institute, she applied for a job in government, feeling that she had to contribute something to the culture of the new regime, and became one of the officers in the Theater Department of Narkompros.¹ In the beginning, she became involved in theater and collaborated with Meyerhold and Mayakovsky, but

later, in 1922, she joined the staff film company, *Goskino*, and began to learn about cinema. Soon, she became an expert in reediting films imported for Soviet distribution, and produced, herself, both compilation and documentary films. Shub remained in *Goskino* until 1942 when she became the chief editor of *Novosti Dnya* (*The News of the Day*) in the Central Studio for Documentary Film in Moscow. In 1933-35 Shub supervised the montage workshop in Eisenstein's class in VGIK.² During the war she edited newsreels and continued to teach montage in VGIK when the school moved to Alma Ata on the Black Sea. Her closest friends in the film world were Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Dziga Vertov, and Viktor Shklovsky. She wrote two books, *In Close Up*, 1959, and *My Life—Cinema*, 1972.³ Shub died in Moscow, September 21, 1959, leaving to the history of cinema the following films:

Padenie dinastii romanovykh (*The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*) 1927

Veliky put' (*The Great Road*) 1927

Rossiia Nikolaya II i Lev Tolstoi (*The Russia of Nicholas II and Lev Tolstoi*) 1928

Segodnya (*Today*) 1930

K-SH-E (*Komsomol—Leader of Electrification*) 1932

Moskva stroit metro (*Moscow Builds the Subway*) 1934

Strana Sovietov (*The Country of the Soviets*) 1937

Ispaniya (*Spain*) 1939

20 let sovetskogo kino (*Twenty Years of Soviet Cinema*) 1940

Fashizm budet razbit (*Fascism Will Be Destroyed*) 1941

Strana rodnya (*The Native Country*) 1942

Sud v Smolenske (*The Trial in Smolensk*) 1946

Po tu storonu Araksa (*On the Other Side of Araks*) 1946

In addition to these films, Shub edited many documentaries for the younger filmmakers, and conceived scores of newsreels dedicated to various political, public, and cultural events of the country. One of the most successful was her two-hour newsreel about the International Congress of the Democratic Federation of Women, held in Moscow in 1946.

Undoubtedly, Shub's most significant works are her three compilation films that cover Russian history in the following ways: *Russia*: 1897-1912; *The Fall*: 1912-1917; and *The Road*: 1917-1927. Prior to producing these films, she viewed close to one million meters (about 3 million feet) of newsreel footage, from these she selected shots to be included in the final versions of her three films, making altogether 6,000 meters (about 18,000 feet) of eight hours' duration. These three films are, in fact, the visual his-

tory of Russia from the end of the last century, through the October days, and ending with the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution.

The greatest problem for Shub was to dig up all the necessary film material, which, after the Revolution, had been largely taken out of the country and sold to foreign producers or destroyed by the bad conditions in the film archives and production companies in Russia. She began at the very last moment the search for all the footage related to Russian history, visiting many archives and storage places of the prerevolutionary newsreel companies, "Kino-Moskva," "Pathé," and "Gaumont" in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev as well as in The Moscow Museum of the Revolution. She persuaded the government to buy the important 2,000 feet of negative about the February Revolution of 1917, including rare shots of the Tsarist time, sold in the United States immediately after the Revolution. Then, she began long research into the historical background and the selection of relevant material that could support her point of view.

The crucial problem in this type of filmmaking is to present the visual data in such a manner that the author's ideological standpoint comes through without distorting the documents themselves. Shub emphasized this issue by saying: "The intention was, not so much to provide the facts, but to evaluate them from the vantage point of the revolutionary class. This is what made my films revolutionary and agitational—although they were composed of counter revolutionary material" (251).

When she began editing her first film, its working title was *February* due to the fact that Shub wanted to concentrate on the February Revolution of 1917. But as her concept developed in the course of editing, she expanded the film into a three-hour movie, with the new title, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. Although she worked simultaneously on the second film *The Great Road* (also called *Ten Years*) she completed *The Fall* earlier, in the same year (1927). Paradoxically, she had greater difficulty in collecting material for this second film, although it covered the first decade following the October Revolution. Not only did she have to order some of the crucial material for this film from the United States (including the famous shots of Lenin in his private home with his wife Krupskaya), but she also found the Soviet newsreel produced after the Revolution less interesting. In a 1927 interview, she stated frankly: "After the Civil War, Soviet newsreel concentrated on parades, meetings, arrivals, departures, delegates and the like, while there was almost no record of how we transformed the country to a new political economy and carried out the consequent construction."⁴ Therefore, she had to shoot the old documents, letters, photographs, objects and newspapers, herself, to compensate for the lack of material. Inevitably, the additional shooting was necessary for

The Fall: Shub filmed 1,000 feet of the total 6,000 feet. Her first film, *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* was conceived as a visual chronicle with three themes: a) Tsarist Russia in the years of the "black reaction" and the situation in Europe during the same period; b) World War I; and c) The February Revolution and the period 1912-1917.

As already noted, Shub was an expert in editing and subtitling foreign films prepared for Soviet movie theaters. The import of foreign films was increased during the period of the economic crisis, that is, in the years of NEP⁵ when thousands of pure entertainment films were widely shown in the Soviet Union. Shub reedited more than 200 foreign films and 10 domestic feature films, thus acquiring great skill in montage. Most of these films were serials, with continuing action divided into episodes, and designed for the European theaters where films were still shown in two or three evenings. In order to keep the audience informed about the plot, each episode had a short "montage summary" of the preceding episode. Shub's job was to make one full feature film out of several episodes. To achieve this she had to cut the introduction, then shorten and rearrange the sequences according to the new titles that did not need to repeat already known facts as they often did in a three-part movie. In the course of time, Shub collected many shots from various films and played with them making new montage units on the editing table, thus experimenting with the method known as the "Kuleshov Effect."⁶

Eisenstein used to watch Shub while she was doing these exercises. He even participated in reediting Fritz Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* (1922). Shub collects this fact in her memoirs: "Eisenstein re-edited with me the German adventure-detective film which dealt with speculators on the stock exchange, swindlers, mistresses and aristocracy. The title of the film was *Dr. Mabuse*. We re-edited it several times, so that instead of several series, it became a feature with normal duration. We changed the narrative structure of the film as well as the intertitles. Even the film's title was changed: it became *Gilded Gold* (*Pozolochennaya gn'il*). As the introduction to the film we included a long title which read: 'The international war brought imperialist Germany to division and the capitalist crash.' At the same time, when the working class makes incredible efforts to maintain its existence and fight against the foreign and domestic bastards, the men who did not participate in the war avoided experiencing its horrors, and lead, during the war, empty lives, full of speculation and adventures. They still continue this type of life after the war, a life of debauchery and manipulation" (75).

The above quotation is interesting as a document of the NEP period in

Russia, and the way intellectuals tried to justify the sudden shift of concept in Soviet culture after the first revolutionary radicalism. The economy was at the edge of total collapse, so that Lenin was forced to permit, to a certain degree, the revitalization of private enterprise both in villages and cities, which, consequently, brought some loosening of the ideological restraints in art. Overnight, profit became the most important goal for all the public activities, and the old type of show business began to flourish in Moscow and Leningrad. All the true revolutionaries and artists who dreamt of the new society, including Mayakovsky, Vertov, Brik, as well as Shub, faced this new trend toward cheap entertainment with great pain, yet tried to justify the new trend as an "inevitable step" in the evolution of Socialism.

This is how Shub described those odd days of NEP in the Soviet Union: "In the beginning I did not understand the meaning of the New Economic Policy, but when I realized what it really was, I lost my inner peace. Moscow suddenly turned strange to me. The shadows of the past unexpectedly spread over my dear city. Again, marquees, advertising signs, trivial magazines, fancy restaurants, cabarets, casinos, night-clubs, 'Nep-projects,' and 'Nep-men.' It was the resurrection of the old days which we thought had gone forever." Then Shub gives the names of night-clubs, restaurants, luxury stores and popular magazines—even elegant apartments where one could entertain young ladies. No wonder that a woman like Shub, a true artist and an honest revolutionary, was disappointed with the new situation. Mayakovsky, Vertov, and many other revolutionaries had the same reaction. After all, they were giving their energies and talent to creating a new art, and contributing to workers' emancipation, when all of a sudden, the ghost of the old bourgeois "mesmerizing art" spread over the Soviet Union like the plague.

Shub remembers how once, as she worked intensively on editing newsreels as well as studying at the "Institute for Women's Higher Education," her friends invited her to dinner in one of the secluded Moscow apartments where they met an elegant lady, covered with diamonds and gold, who acted as the hostess at a party where meals were served in china dishes and crystal glasses (68). This was the same time when Vertov and his group known as "kinoks"⁷ cruised along the Volga region filming thousands of children practically dying of hunger. But, concludes Shub in her memoirs, "that was only one aspect of life, an inevitable stage resulting from the NEP" (68). She never came back to that fancy Moscow apartment to spend, as she put it, her entire month's salary on a single dinner. She returned to her editing room and stayed there until the end of her life. The result of her work and her devotion to cinema is obvious.

Before I go into a closer analysis of Shub's major films, let me mention her relationship to other Soviet revolutionary filmmakers of the twenties. Most of all, she was influenced by Eisenstein and Vertov, each in a different way. From Eisenstein she learned about complex montage structures and a method of shooting staged events so as to reveal life's authenticity; this she believed was more important than anything else in cinema. In 1927, Shub visited Leningrad and lived in the same hotel ("Europe") where Eisenstein's crew stayed while working on *October*. She spent all her free time with Eisenstein in the Winter Palace, observing the shooting and discussing the montage of specific sequences with Eisenstein and Alexandrov. "That was, for me, the best school of learning the mastery of filmmaking" (114), she wrote later. In addition, Shub kept a long correspondence with Eisenstein (while he worked in Mexico, during 1931), discussing various problems of montage and the necessity "of developing one's concept of reality in the process of shooting, and only then subordinating the material to the director's vision."

With all her admiration for Eisenstein's intellect and genius, Shub never rejected her own concept of cinema, that is, her great concern for *ontological authenticity*⁸ which was, to her, the most important feature of the film shot; it is where she was closest to Vertov's method of "Film-Eye," and his strategy of shooting life "unawares." Shub admitted that frankly: "My study of cinema was not in a school. My university was the editing table, my friends, cameramen, several directors of feature films and Dziga Vertov. Although we often argued with him—I could not accept his total disavowal of the films based on scripts—I admired his great talent . . . Vertov was an innovator, a creator, a searcher of new ways in documentary film . . . Nobody understood, the way he did, that the right material does not come to the filmmaker out of a clear blue sky, but that it is always the result of the filmmakers' and cameramen's mutual action on the spot. . . . In 1925, Vertov made *Lenin's Film-Truth* discovering a new type of film journalism (newsreel) as a substitution for the so-called cultural film propagated and encouraged by Rapp"⁹ (85, 206, 305).

Shubb was one of the most objective critics of both Vertov's and Eisenstein's work, never going to extremes while pointing to their faults and/or values. She remained outside the existant antagonistic groups which—for strategic reasons—often undermined the significance of one artist over another. Contrary to this, Shub judged films according to their own values regardless of what group the filmmaker belonged to. Even, as the wife of Osip Brik, one of the *Lef's* editors, who attacked Eisenstein's theory of "Pypage" (nonprofessional actors) and his concept of the staged mise-en-scene, Shub never changed her admiration of Eisenstein, which did not diminish, on the other hand, her respect for Vertov.

In return, Shub had an equal influence on both Eisenstein and Vertov. I already quoted her recollection of the period when Eisenstein attended and participated in Shub's reediting of the imported commercial movies. But her greatest influence on Eisenstein was during her viewing and selecting of the newsreel footage for *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. "He used to come to my editing room, not once, but many times, particularly when I looked over the old footage about the February events in Leningrad and Moscow, and I think that he reconstructed the July revolt in Leningrad (in *October*) directly under the impression of what he saw viewing the old footage with me" (74). Obviously it was not merely the viewing of old footage that Eisenstein got from Shub; they continuously discussed the material and experimented by putting together different shots. Her memoirs are full of interesting conversations with Eisenstein for whom she had great admiration. Shub's relationship to Vertov, however, was less intimate, but more dynamic and controversial. Although she admitted that "through all our arguments, I was *his* pupil in the final instance," she did not blindly follow Vertov's method, and never stopped criticizing his irreconcilable antagonism to any kind of narrative cinema. As one can assume, the influence was mutual, as Vertov himself admitted by describing in his own way their discussions in his journal and by considering Shub one of the most significant figures in the Soviet documentary film of the silent era.¹⁰

Above everything, Shub and Vertov were ardent advocates of factualism (i.e., authentic facts) in cinema and, specifically fought for the ontological authenticity of the film image. They felt that onto-authenticity was the most proper way to separate cinema from literature and theater as well as from traditional aesthetics. They rejected the claim that an image was bad if it candidly depicted the outside world because such an attitude was inherited from fine arts and imposed on cinema. In painting, this concept has its own justification for reasons thoroughly explained by art historians. In cinema, however, this principle has no validity because the representational aspect of motion pictures goes beyond mere truthfulness of the image to its prototype. Onto-authenticity is not the ultimate goal of the film image, as it is in naturalistic painting or naturalistic literature. Rather, the strong representational nature of the motion-picture image is only a means by which this medium is capable of revealing some of the intrinsic features of reality, those features that cannot be perceived by the naked eye, nor brought out in a dynamic way by any other medium. With such a radical concept of the relationship between film and reality, Shub and Vertov had to negate all basic aesthetic laws established by traditional documentary cinema. It is no surprise that they often had to go to extremes in denying actors, decor, and script in cinema. While Vertov was

absolutely unyielding and aggressive due to his explosive temperament, Shub always found the necessary balance between the documentary and narrative film. Therefore, she was accepted by the theorists of both unstaged and staged cinema. *Lef* and its Futurist editors continuously took her work as the example of the "cinema of fact," because her concept of the newsreel as "visual documentation of history" was in harmony with the Futurist and Constructivist idea of "factual art" in general. Mayakovsky, Brik, Tretyakov and Chuzhak, as the editors of *Lef*, often quoted Shub's films in their attacks on "imaginative art," such as novels and plays based on invented stories and dramatized events. Most of the discussions of film in *Lef* dealt with Shub's, Vertov's, and Eisenstein's works. Later, when Eisenstein fully opted for the staged cinema, and after he decided to cast a worker (Nikandrov) to play Lenin in *October*, Mayakovsky, Brik and Tretyakov attacked him and praised only Shub and Vertov.¹¹ Mayakovsky especially was fond of Shub's film *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. In his speech delivered at the meeting in honor of the Tenth Anniversary of the Soviet Cinema (in 1927), Mayakovsky raved about the "extraordinary films created by Esther Shub," while at the same time he ridiculed Eisenstein's decision to "stage [instsenirovka] Lenin in *October*."¹²

Viktor Shklovsky wrote a lot about Shub in his book, *For Forty Years*, emphasizing her great sense in selecting the right image out of thousands, and giving it proper meaning through its relation to other images.¹³ In his memoirs, Shklovsky also recalls how Shub was effective in reediting foreign films. The modern film theorists in the Soviet Union increasingly refer to Shub's writings on documentary film. Two of the most sophisticated among them, Tatyana Selezneva¹⁴ and Sergei Drobashenko¹⁵ in their books on the evolution of the theory and practice of the Soviet documentary tradition, often quote Shub and compare her concept with Vertov's. Selezneva and Drobashenko particularly emphasize the problem of ontological authenticity in the works and writings of Shub and Vertov.

In some of her articles, Shub was as militant as Vertov, which was necessary because of the tough conditions surrounding documentary filmmaking in the Soviet Union. In her 1929 article, "The Unstaged Cinema," Shub discussed the traditional division between the so-called film, and the educational film. She found that such a division was useless, because "the idea of 'artistic movies' includes also such 'examples' of the past as *The Crippled Master*" (262). She chose intentionally the title of a trivial melodrama to characterize the style of conventional entertainment movies. What bothered her the most was the fact that the official Soviet production film companies of the 1920s continued to make films of that kind.

"This is the type of film encouraged by our film companies, and made by directors, best cameramen, entire army of actors, script-writers, artists, architects, propmen and other professionals. An enormous amount of money is spent on films like these. To imitate life, to enact and show the arranged reality on the screen is the method we call the 'staged cinema.' Then, there are 'cultural films' which, in fact, do not exist. The term is invented by the people who do not know or do not want to recognize that there exists a new trend in documentary cinema. As a result of all this, the reality of today's Soviet cinema means *staged films*, in spite of the fact that most of them are artistically insignificant. . . . We, filmmakers of the unstaged films, have a different idea of what cinema should be. We do not need studios, nor actors, we do not need decorators, painters and scripts. There is nothing we can learn from narrative literature or from beautifully composed paintings. The real world of this planet, the real environment and technological ambience in which we live, the real things around us, ordinary people in action, events of the day occurring by chance or by necessity, the men equipped with scientific knowledge, the men capable of pushing science forward, men fighting heroically to gain control over the natural elements—all this is *the* material of our films. We want to collect these facts and organize them into film-things related to science, technology, pedagogy and the vital tasks of today's life. We want to make films which will propagate the war against our class enemy, films which will courageously disclose both the failures and successes of a unique endeavor in the world, the endeavor of building socialism, which is our ultimate objective" (263-264). This quotation is obviously reminiscent of Vertov's early proclamations not only in its emphasis of factualism as the main feature of documentary film, but also in the style of writing, a vocabulary full of revolutionary zeal, the same language which characterized Vertov's "We" manifesto of 1922 or the proclamation "Kinoks Revolution" of 1923, in which staged cinema was denounced as the "opium of the masses," and films with actors and scripts, the "poisoning bourgeois psychodramas."¹⁶

Shub's concept of the documentary film was similar to Vertov's on both the theoretical and the ideological levels. Ontological authenticity was the center of their theorizing about the unstaged cinema. Vertov called it "life-as-it-is," while Shub referred to it as "authentic material." According to her: "Authentic material [podlinnii material] is something that gives life to a documentary film, regardless of the fact that it might be composed of archival footage or shot by the filmmaker" (263). But, unlike Vertov, Shub considered it possible to apply the idea of ontological authenticity to staged films, believing that a documentary film can be

authentic even if the filmmaker shoots the material following a preconceived script. She even invented a term for this hybrid genre calling it an "artistic documentary film" [khudozhestvennyi dokumental'nyi fil'm], which "insists to show on the screen all the dramatic events of everyday life, real people in action and conflict, without staging the events, but by recording segments of real life" (296).

Shub's concept of montage was not schematic, but rather intuitive and associative. She had a marvelous feeling for rhythm and movement, a true sense for selecting and putting the right shots together. Her ultimate goal was to comment upon events by the new juxtaposition of the shots which preserve their own authenticity. Sergei Yutkevich recalls how he tried to obtain theoretical advice about editing from Shub. He asked her: "Please, Edi [that is how close friends used to call her], tell me why I have to place this shot here and not there? How much must I cut off from this long shot? One meter or two? And why just so much? Tell me the secret of how you decide about all this?" The answer was simple: "There is no secret. There exists no rules whatsoever. One only needs to master *the sense of the part within the whole*."¹⁷

Like Vertov, Shub developed a "montage way of thinking," and she considered that "the true filmmaker possess a capacity to find the most vivid and most emotional way of revealing all that is hidden in the filmed material." As for the final order of the shots, she could not give any rule as how to achieve the correct montage tempo and how to bring forth the meaning of each separate shot. Hence, she repeatedly states that one can learn only through practice. "I began by simply watching films in the auditorium, then analyzing them on the editing table, which is essential for every director. This helped me to learn how to judge correctly the technical execution and composition of the shot. Slowly, I developed the capacity of memorizing each shot, particularly its inner content, rhythm, movement and tempo in general. Then, there always arrived a moment when I began to feel sure at what point it was necessary and imperative to cut from a long to a medium shot, or from a medium to close-up, and vice versa. Finally, I became fully aware of the magic power of the scissors in the hands of a man who uses montage to express himself visually as he uses the alphabet to express himself verbally" (76).

Shub's concern for ontological authenticity was reconfirmed in her attitude toward sound films. In her 1929 article "The Arrival of Sound in Cinema," she wrote that "for us, documentarists, it is crucial to learn how to record the authentic sound: noise, voices, etc. with the same degree of expressiveness as we learned how to photograph the authentic, non-staged reality. Therefore, we have little interest in what presently goes on in the

film studios, in those hermetically insulated theatrical chambers dotted with microphones, sound intensifiers, and other techniques. We are interested in the experimental laboratories of the scientists and true creators who can function as our sound operators" (270). She strongly opposed the postsynchronization and dubbing of feature films in the studio, and discarded any imitation of the real sound. After her visit to the German sound film studios in Berlin, she concluded that the postsynchronization of films, after they have been completed as silent movies, kills their ontological authenticity, because they have "no connection with the film's essence in general: the sound becomes dead, metallic, unnatural, and stifled" (271). Among the examples she gave was von Stroheim's *The Wedding March* (1928), "which was synchronized in German *post factum*, and thus entirely killed by the sound. The exaggerated, rough, and inadequate sound destroyed the subtle irony of this film" (271). Evidently, at that time the technical facilities of sound recording were not sophisticated enough to permit a truthful auditory recording of reality, as it was possible, indeed, to capture the visual aspect of life by the camera. Yet, it is important to note that Shub, together with Vertov, immediately sensed the necessity for direct sound recording and thus anticipated modern sync-sound cinema. With such a feeling of continuous concern for authentic facts in the documentary film, particularly in the sound era, both Shub and Vertov urged technicians to construct microphones and portable sound recording systems capable of capturing all sorts of wild sound simultaneously with the shooting of the image on actual location.

Shub's compiled film trilogy is, in essence, a long newsreel put together on the basis of an ideological concept and following a historical course of events. Her talent was to express her viewpoint without distorting the authentic impact of the selected footage. It was a difficult task due to the fact that there was not enough material to begin with. For example, she found only 80 meters of the footage shot about Tolstoi, his wife Sophia Andreyevna, and their daughter Sukhotina, about 100 meters of Yasnaya Polyana, 100 meters of Astapov and something over 300 meters of Tolstoi's funeral. Yet Shub decided to make a film about Tolstoi as "the center of the historical change," by relating to his religious and philosophic theories as well as the social circumstances in which he lived and worked. In order to document the social background of the period, Shub turned to the newsreels shot by various foreign cameramen visiting Russia at the turn of the century and, especially, the footage which belonged to the Tsarist photoarchive. In addition to this, she photographed many historical objects and the landscape of Yasnaya Polyana. After seeing the

material many times, she did not start with the selection of shots right away. She undertook considerable research about the period, interviewed many personalities involved in the events, and discussed the subject with her friends and collaborators. Then she wrote an impressionistic but extremely visual script in the style Eisenstein used to notate the order of images to be shot the next day in Odessa for his *Battleship Potemkin*. Here is the synopsis of the film's beginning, as found in her notebook written in 1928:

Russia at the dawn of the decline of a feudal-landowner society, and the rise of capitalism.

Enormous space—without roads,

Manors of the noblemen and landlords.

Endless fields, forests and rivers.

Millions of peasants, mostly illiterate, and "liberated."

Living in ruins . . .

In the cold . . .

In hunger . . .

Death.

Homeless life . . .

Full of squabbles,

Of superstition,

Of a desperate appeal to God, . . .

Of seeking oblivion in vodka.

The railways, factories, and warehouses under construction.

The big commercial establishment developed by the exploitation of the cheap labor of the peasants escaping the rural areas.

Cities controlled by the merchants and industrialists.

Poverty and suffering of the working class.

The coronation of Nikolas II.

The family estate of the Counts Volkonsky—Yasnaya Polyana.

Tolstoi's ancestors—tsar's servants—serfs.

Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi—the repentant nobleman . . .

Outward humbleness . . .

Rejection of luxury . . .

Working by himself (without making use of someone else's work).

The continuation of the typical life led at the court and enjoyed by the landlords.

Yasnaya Polyana—like any other village.

Documents of the actions S. A. Tolstoi performed as a landlord.

In these conditions appears the protest of Lev Tolstoi against the autocracy, the violence of the government, exploitation (documents).

The protest against social hypocrisy, lies, misery and oppression of the working mass (documents).¹⁸

Tearing off the mask from the Orthodox church and priests (documents).

As one can see, this is a typical shooting script (decoupage) composed of the specific shots which Shub already had in mind, plus the ideas.

concepts, and statements that she planned to subsequently develop and visualize. The very structure of the script is chronological, with strong emphasis on the ideological aspect of the historical process. Obviously, after viewing the archival footage, Shub was inspired by the specific visual facts; but in the course of structuring the material in written form, she developed her own vision of the historical events and included in it her personal ideological view of history. Her goal was to reanimate, for the contemporary viewer, the time when the Revolution of 1905 was defeated, when in the first few months of 1906, about a thousand men were executed without trial, when the wildest oppression hit peasants and workers; while at the same time Tolstoi preached that "Evil must be opposed by non-resistance, instead of violence" so that his death became a symbol of the beginning of the decay of the monarchy.

The result of this project turned out to be one of the most authentic cinematic documents of the silent era, and contains the many authentic data about the historical events and, at the same time, reveals a personal attitude toward the objective facts. As Shub put it, "each of my compilation films was also an agitation for the new concept of the documentary cinema, a statement about the unstaged film as the most important cinematic form of the present day" (262).

In many of her articles, Shub expresses her contention that the compilation film as well as the true documentary newsreel has to be conceived and realized on absolutely different principles from those used in narrative and staged films. "The failure of most films made without a literary script, actors, decor, and other properties of the staged cinema results from the fact that they are, in essence, conceived as fictional, dramatic and entertainment films" (246). This means that Shub structured her compilation films as "cinematic essays," by which her work radically differs from other compilation films of the period; the film chronicles were composed of newsreel footage merely illustrating various historical events without any deeper ideological attitude or structural concept.

The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty (covering the footage before 1912 and including all the available material) is less dynamic than *The Russia of Nicholas II and Lev Tolstoi* (which goes up to 1917). But the authenticity of the rare old shots in *The Fall* (many of which were photographed by Alexander Drankov, one of the first Russian cameramen) gives them invaluable significance as documents. Shub elaborates extensively on the problem of structuring this material. To include all of the unique footage arranged in such a relationship that her message would come through clearly and expressively was one of her difficulties. In her article, "Yasnaya Polyana," Shub discusses the structure of the sequence involving

Tolstoi. She quotes the list of 64 shots (including those showing objects she photographed), which present Tolstoi in his *milieu*, from the earliest footage showing Tolstoi and his wife Sophia Andreyevna sitting on the bench in their garden, to the end, when masses of people, on their knees, pay the last tribute to the genius while his coffin is laid in the grave. The real cinematic impact of this sequence comes from the intricate relationship between the original newsreel footage and objects, documents, and places, photographed by Shub and related to the intertitles.

The problem of intertitles was one of the most discussed aspects in *Lef's* articles dealing with cinema, and was often illustrated by examples from Shub's films. While Shklovsky, Tretyakov, and Brik criticized Vertov's intertitles (particularly in his films, *A Six Part of the World* [1926] and *The Eleventh Year* [1928]), as being redundant and too grandiloquent, they found Shub's intertitles functional and complementary to the image. This does not mean that Shub avoided the use of political slogans as intertitles; but she used them with greater economy and with the right sense of where to include them. For example, in *The Fall*, the idea of the decline of monarchy is shown by the montage of various details of Tsarist symbols—golden armour, court paraphernalia, and the monument of Alexander II—with the intertitle "Down With Tsar, Bourgeoisie, Capitalists and the Temporary Government!"

Shub used other montage devices with an obvious intention to convey her own comment upon the documentary facts. For example, in *The Fall*, she cuts directly from the shot of the landlord walking idly over the field to the shot of the ragged peasant exhausted from work. She uses even more blatant ideological parallel editing in *The Eleventh Year*, based on the alternation of the Rockefeller close-up with the long shot of the crowded stock market, implying that Rockefeller is the king of the financial world.

This type of montage was criticized by some Soviet theorists of the period as a method strange to the very nature of the documentary film, because it mutilated the authenticity of the documentary fact. It was considered a forceful link between facts which did not actually happen in reality. However, the critics of *Lef* magazine defended Shub by claiming that she established an ideological reality through her method of montage. Among them was V. Pertsov, who in his famous article, "The 'Play' and Demonstration," stated: "What Shub and Vertov did is pure oratorical journalism expressed by cinematic language. Montage is an active method of analysis and synthesis. If material is correctly analyzed regarding the place, time and content of the shots, if the hidden meaning of the footage is revealed not merely by the geography of its actual occurrence, but also

by the possibility of juxtaposing the shots within the given theme, then the editor can add his personal voice to the chosen facts. Then, although the objective meaning of the specific shot may be in discord with the life circumstances in which the shot was photographed, the ideological link between them creates another ideological level of authenticity. For, to edit facts means to analyze and synthesize, not to catalogize them."¹⁹

Since Shub had more material for *The Fall* than for *The Russia*, she could select the shots with dynamic composition executed by the moving camera often hand-held, and sometimes photographed from the plane. The editing pace in *The Fall* changes throughout the film. In the beginning, shots are rather chronologically organized and intercut by informative titles conveying just facts. Later, when the mobilization begins (in World War I), the editing becomes more dynamic, with many details included; the intertitles are more emphatic and emotional. As she explains in her 1928 article, "My First Work," the basic problem of *The Fall* was structural. Her main concern was to achieve a balance between the material showing the Tsar, his family and Russian politicians of the period, on the one hand, and the people, peasants, workers, and ordinary citizens on the other. With this in mind, she had to sacrifice many fascinating shots, in order to give the audience the right historical perspective. She emphasized mass movement as the symbolic forecast of the events to come. She used many long shots of demonstrations in Petrograd and Moscow during 1917. Some of these shots have been used many times in various compilation films made later by other directors. Eisenstein and Pudovkin, as already mentioned, reconstructed some of these images in *October* (the street demonstrations), *Battleship Potemkin* (long views of the Russian fleet), and *The End of St. Petersburg* (the famous high angle shot of the citizens in top hats standing in front of the stock exchange, and the wounded soldiers dying in water-filled trenches).

Like other Soviet revolutionary filmmakers, Shub wanted to make films for the people, but never by compromising or by lowering her artistic standards. Her goal was to educate the workers and to help them understand real art and complex cinematic structures. Eisenstein, Vertov and Dovzhenko had similar attitudes toward, so-called, difficult films. Some of their most avant garde films, such as *October*, *The Man With the Movie Camera*, and *Zvenigora*, were severely criticized for being too complicated and difficult to understand. They answered this criticism by using Mayakovsky's strategy in handling such attacks launched against him when he read his poems to a popular audience. He used to say: "If you do not understand a poem, you cannot immediately claim that it is the writer who is the fool."²⁰ Shub was particularly resolute in defending serious and

complex films. When Shklovsky wrote that Dovzhenko's *Ivan* (1932) was a failure because it was not accepted by the mass audience, Shub responded in the most emancipated manner: "Not long ago Mayakovsky was also criticized for not being comprehensible to the large audience. Therefore today's critics have no right to say: 'This is an important work of art, but it is a failure.' That is incomprehensible. The task of a true critic is to create the climate for such 'difficult' works. When an important achievement in the arts takes place, the critic's duty is to help it with their pen so that a temporarily incomprehensible work soon becomes comprehensible to everybody" (280-281). Shub's book of memoirs is loaded with similar statements which prove that she was a woman of great personal integrity, considerable courage, and innate cinematic consciousness. Her recollection of the past events and personalities who created the Soviet cinema of the 1920s is emotional and nostalgic, but never sentimental or conceited.

Shub dedicated separate chapters of *My Life—Cinema* to Mayakovsky, Gorky, Vishnevsky, Tynyanov, Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin and Joris Ivens. In her unique way, she succeeded in conveying her great emotional involvement, her critical attitude, and her personal impressions and opinions about these people as human beings and creators. Her book also includes some of her unrealized projects: a documentary about Mayakovsky; a travelogue of Turkey; and two compilation movies, the "Great Fatherland's War, 1941-45," and "Moscow in 800 Years." All these projects were conceived with the same concept which Shub formed in the silent era: no staged events, no actors, no decor, but the prewritten script—yes. She worked intensively on many scripts and wrote them so that the visual structure of the to-be-made film would be apparent. Her scripts are composed in the emotional-essayist manner, that could serve as a guideline in selecting specific facts from reality by finding actual events that would fit the filmmaker's vision of the overall film's structure.

Most fascinating for me, is Shub's script "Women" (in seven parts), written during 1933-34, and designed to show women in the historical context and through their sociopsychological evolution from 1914 to the early 1930s. The poetic, visual, and analytic style of Shub's writing is best illustrated by this script. It can be read as a poem in prose which stimulates a series of images with a distinct meaning. The reader will be able to judge for her or himself from the translated segment of "Women," printed elsewhere in this periodical, and I hope that the reader will agree that Shub was indeed a woman filmmaker with an extraordinary visual imagination, infallable sense of structure, sharp intellect, and love of poetry. She knew how to build the vision of the past by unifying scattered film footage which would have been lost forever if she had not collected it and



Three shots from *The Russia of Nicholas II and Lev Tolstoi* (1928)

1. Tolstoi walking through Yasnaya Polyana; 2. Tolstoi on his death bed; 3. Tolstoi's grave at Yasnaya Polyana.

(Stills from the Soviet Film Archive, Moscow)

organized it into a coherent as well as meaningful whole. She succeeded in achieving this by developing her own method and mastering her technique.

In her 1927 article, "We Do Not Reject the Element of Mastery," she insisted that only "with great skill it is possible to create a documentary film out of unstaged material, and make it better than a fictional film . . . everything depends on method" (249). I would say that Esther Shub was the first Cinematic Historian, in the sense of "writing history with lighting,"²¹ as President Woodrow Wilson said of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. But, while Griffith in his film "reconstructed" a moment in the American history, Shub consequently "wrote" the history of the Soviet revolution using the *authentic* images as "letters" for composing words and sentences while "typing" them on her editing table. For Esther Shub, Moviola was "le stylo," her sharp "writing pen." She used this medium as a "language," not in a strict linguistic sense, but as a system of communication; hence, her films document and explain history through motion pictures.

In conclusion, I want to quote the last paragraph of an excellent essay on Shub written by Sergei Drobashenko, the most authoritative theorist of the Soviet documentary film (and the author of a book on Vertov.) Considering Shub and Vertov the greatest documentarists of the Soviet cinema, Drobashenko concludes:

Like Vertov, Shub developed many modes of film journalism and documentary filmmaking, that are now widely used. The political method of compiling the archival footage found in the recent works of the filmmakers like A. and A. Thorndike,²² the Soviet director A. Medvedkin²³ and many others, has its roots in the historical documentaries made by Shub at the end of the 1920s. Her films *The Great Road, Country of the Soviets, On the Other Side of Aras River*, and *The Native Land*²⁴ anticipated a number of important Soviet documentaries such as *Unforgettable Years* by I. Kopalin²⁵ and other films which document the historical evolution of the Soviet Union. Shub's remarkable work, *Spain*, resolved the problem of the documentary approach to war for the first time in Soviet cinema. Her film *On the Other Side of the Arch* initiated the whole series of documentaries concerning the liberation of foreign people struggling against the national oppression and world colonialism. All of Shub's work demonstrates originality, inventiveness and great artistic sense. Therefore her practical and theoretical legacy merits rigorous scholarly research."²⁶

(Biographical note: Esfir Ilyanichna Shub died September 21, 1959 in Moscow.)

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Notes

1. *Narkompros* stands for People's Commissariat of Education in the Soviet Government founded in 1917 and headed by Anatoly Lunacharsky from 1917 to 1929, former Social-Democrat who joined Bolsheviks in 1904 and actively participated in the October Revolution.
2. VGIK stands for All-Union State Institute of Cinema, the highest film school in the Soviet Union (Moscow). Eisenstein and Kuleshov were among the first teachers of VGIK.
3. Esther (Esfir) Shub, *Zhizn moyu - kinematogra (My Life—Cinema)*, (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1972). All the quotations in this article are taken from this book which also includes Shub's first book, *Krupnyn planom (In the Close-Up)*. The number of the page is indicated in the parentheses following each quotation.
4. Jay Leyda, *Kino* (New York: Collier Books 1973), pp. 224-225.
5. NEP stands for the "New Economic Policy" initiated by Lenin's famous speech to the Tenth Convention of the Communist Party in March 1921, when he declared: "We are in a condition of such poverty, ruin and exhaustion of the productive powers of workers and peasants, that everything must be set aside to increase national production." Often referred to as "Capitalism in the Soviet Union," NEP period lasted from 1922 through 1927.
6. "Kuleshov Effect" is the name of the experiment Lev Kuleshov made with his students in his Film Workshop, in 1920. Juxtaposing different shots (the human face, a bowl of soup, a woman in a coffin, and a girl playing with a toy bear), Kuleshov demonstrated that for the viewers the expression on the actor's face radically "changes" depending on the image that follows or precedes the close-up.
7. *Kinoks* (sing. kinok) is the word constructed by Vertov to indicate his followers and collaborators who fought for a new type of documentary film, without actors and devoid of arrangement of events in reality. They used Vertov's method, "Film-Eye," to shoot "life-as-it-is" and show the people those aspects of reality that cannot be perceived by the human eye "unarmed with the camera." Vertov's brother, Mikhail Kaufman, as well as Vertov's wife, Yelizaveta Svilova, were among "kinoks."
8. Ontological authenticity, or onto-authenticity is a term which defines the illusionistic and factual denotation of motion picture photography, implying that the objects and events actually existed in front of the camera at the time when the image was exposed. By its very nature (i.e., ontology), the motion pictures projected on the screen make the viewers believe that the events occur "for real." This impression is particularly relevant for the documentary film, as well as those fictional genres which emphasize realism of the film image, like Italian Neorealism or French Cinéma-Vérité. André Bazin talks about this phenomenon in his essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *What Is Cinema?*, Vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 9-16.
9. RAPP stands for the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, a professional organization which gathered, through the 1920s, predominantly traditional writers who followed the trend and concept later defined as Socialist Realism. They strongly believed in the literary tradition, and insisted upon the centrality of Party ideology in literature and art in general. Thus, they essentially differ from the avant garde movements such as Futurism, Constructivism and Formalism, which flourished in the early days of the Soviet Republic.

10. Dziga Vertov, *Stat'i, dnevniki, zamysly* [Articles, Journals, Projects], ed. Sergei Drobashenko (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), p. 153.
11. *Novyi Lef*, No. 4, 1928, p. 30.
12. Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [Complete Works], Vol. 12 (Moscow: GIKL, 1959), p. 356, p. 359.
13. Victor Shklovsky, *Za sorok let* [For Forty Years] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1965), p. 208.
14. Tatyana Selezneva, *Kinomysl' 1920-kh godov* [Film Thought of the 1920s] (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1972), p. 43.
15. Sergei Drobashenko, *Fenomen dostovernosti* [Phenomenon of Authenticity] (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), p. 45.
16. Vertov's two most important articles, explaining his revolutionary concepts of the documentary cinema are: "My. Variant manifesta" [We. A Version of the Manifesto], *Kinofot*, Nos. 1 and 2, Moscow 1922, and "Kinoki. Perevorot" [Kinoks. Revolution], *Lef*, No. 3, Moscow, 1923.
17. Sergei Yutkevich, "Volshebnitsa montazhnogo stola" [The Sorceress of the Editing Table] a preface to Shub's *My Life-Cinema*, p. 6.
18. Shub, *Zhizn moyá - kinematograf*, pp. 153-154.
19. Vladimir Pertsov, "'Igra' i demonstratsiya" [The 'Play' and Demonstration], *Novyi Lef*, No. 11-12, Moscow, 1929, p. 35.
20. Herbert Marshall, *Mayakovsky* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1965), p. 66.
21. Thomas Dixon, *Southern Horizons: An Autobiography*, ms. in the possession of Mrs. Dixon, Raleigh, North Carolina, cited in Eric Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Knopf, 1966), pp. 176-77.
22. Andrew and Annelie Thorndike are East German Filmmakers who made the four-hour long compilation movie, *The Russian Wonder* (Das Russische Wunder), 1958-63.
23. Alexander Medvedkin is the author of the famous early Soviet sound (i.e. musically accompanied) comedy, *Happiness (Shchast'e, 1933-34)*, who, after the war, made several documentaries about the African and Far East countries.
24. *The Native Land* (Rodnaya strana, 1943-45) is a long documentary film made by a group of Armenian directors, under the supervision of Alexander Dovzhenko and Esther Shub.
25. Ilya Kopalin was one of the most prominent members of Vertov's group known as *Kinoks*, i.e., persons fighting for the true documentary cinema liberated from the dominance of theater and literature.
26. Sergei Drobashenko, "Esther Shub—Segment of a Monograph," *Voprosy kino iskusstva*, No. 8, Moscow 1964, p. 266.

Esther Shub's Unrealized Project

Translated by VLADA PETRIC

Esther Shub wrote her script, *Women*, in 1933-34 with the idea of demonstrating her theory of "the artistic documentary film." She wanted to make an unstaged film, and at the same time to follow a strong narrative structure involving characters and dramatic conflicts, which means that she intended to combine the "cinema of fact" with prescribed material characteristic of feature films.

The beginning of *Women* was to be composed of shots taken from old, mainly feature films. Later, in the documentary sections, Shub planned to film additional material, using a method like Vertov's strategy of shooting events directly without disturbing the people at their work, and by showing the audience that the camera is present in the environment. In general, the script for *Women* is tightly structured, a skill Shub acquired while editing her compilation movies. Her use of sound, indeed, anticipates the technique of sync-sound, which was developed later. Shub's style of writing is reminiscent of Vertov's and Eisenstein's—impressionistic but visually extremely precise. *Women* is printed in seven chapters, and here is the translation of the First Chapter.

In her 1933 article, "I Want to Make a Film About Women," Shub provides detailed information about this project. There is one paragraph of particular interest:

Hitherto, it was considered that the non-staged film lacked the possibility of developing events dramatically and that it could not sustain a plot construction within itself. That is why the documentary film was never appreciated by large audiences. I am aware of this, and in my new documentary film I will try to construct a thematic line. This does not mean that I need to follow the established canons of the staged cinema, nor that I have to use actors to impersonate my characters. Life is so complex and contradictory in everyday situations that it continuously creates dramatic conflicts and resolves them unexpectedly in the most extraordinary way. My idea is to select and connect different episodes and facts in a manner which will create a new narrative whole as a unique dramatic event.