

A Companion to Documentary
Film History

Edited by

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A Skillful Isis

Esfir Shub and the Documentarian as Caretaker

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Introduction

When early film critics in the Soviet Union debated between the filmmaking approaches of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, the name of Esfir Shub often appeared as a third mediating figure. Shub, a pioneer of the documentary mode that Jay Leyda (1964) would call the "compilation film" or "compilation documentary" (9), became a favorite example of a self-effacing artist dedicating herself to locating fragments of anonymous or forgotten footage and piecing together the national history they revealed. Unlike her friend Sergei Eisenstein, whose early films also strived to capture the postrevolutionary Soviet spirit, Esfir Shub's work was grounded in archival material, without taking dramatic liberties or relying on controlled staging. And unlike her colleague Dziga Vertov, the most vocal promoter of a cinema grounded in factual reality, Shub avoided formally bold and stylistically inventive filmmaking techniques in favor of simple editing structures with longer takes and clearly delineated thematic arcs.¹ Her contemporaries rhetorically framed her as the exemplar of ideal authorship in a socialist state: dedicated to accurately portraying her society; modest and diligent; meticulously attentive to the archival reels and newsreel sequences that formed her raw material; austere and unobtrusive in her formal approach. According to Martin Stollery, Shub's "authorial invisibility" in assembling other cinematographers' footage into new politically charged compositions embodied the socialist value of the author as producer, "thinking and working collectively, rather than just as an individual concerned with making her own films" (2002: 93–94). In other words, Shub's achievements as a documentary filmmaker were praised more for *avoiding* intervention than for *intervening*. That such praise

was typically bestowed by critics and artists, who themselves took great pains to promote and assert their own authorial contributions, is an irony not lost on film historians who have written about Shub's work (e.g., Atwood 1993, Stollery 2002, Osipova 2011, Malitsky 2013, Kostina and Dyhlyuk 2016). While Shub wrote little about her experiences as a filmmaker, and even less about being one of the few women directors of her generation, subsequent scholars have noted the gender dynamics implicit in her legacy as the consummate team player of early Soviet cinema.

What remains largely neglected in discussions of Shub's work, however, is her wider career as a film editor that preceded and then defined her independent work. Esfir Shub may have been exceptional in achieving her status as an early female documentary auteur, but she was also exemplary of a much broader trend of authorial invisibility attributed to women working in the editing room. These women included not only notable editor Elizaveta Svilova (Dziga Vertov's collaborator and wife), but Shub's colleague Tatiana Kuvshinchikova, Sergei Eisenstein's editing assistant Esfir Tobak, and numerous editing assistants, who worked anonymously, or whose work was not credited as a creative contribution. As Esther Leslie writes in her recent profile of Shub, whose compilation documentaries Leslie places in the tradition of the essay film:

It is hard to see Esfir Shub because of her authorial anonymity, her use of found footage, grainy, second-hand materials, gathered strips made by nameless filmers. Shub was an editor of films. Or perhaps someone whose labor on film did not even have a name, for she was not simply an editor in the way that many other women were, in terms of their job description, engaged in sorting shots, cutting the negative, but not making even a rough cut of the film. In her work, she did something else. (2015: 10)

Leslie goes on to define this "something else," like other scholars have done before her, as something other than the craft of film editing, yet still outside the traditional parameters of directorial authorship, running into the inevitable challenge of trying to articulate the distinction.

Rather than continuing to focus on establishing Shub as a director, I want to resituate her work in the context of that anonymous editing collective, from which she supposedly elevated herself. What can early writings by and about Shub tell us about the undocumented history of those editors and editing assistants, who assembled a significant amount of early Soviet cinema, particularly documentary films? Where was the line between editing as mere cutting and assembling and editing as creative generative montage, and what kind of model of authorship may have shaped that difference? Focusing on Esfir Shub as a case study for approaching these larger questions, this chapter locates the different and sometimes incompatible roles that editing played in early cinema discourse, particularly editing (noun) as a formal property of film and editing (verb) as a stage in film production. In the course of pursuing the first meaning, I consider the stakes of Shub's relative restraint in cutting her footage at a time when her contemporaries called for more

transformative, more rapid, and more radical editing forms. In pursuing the second, I highlight the gendered tenor that framed the actual process of editing as the work of a collective female apparatus endowed with invaluable dexterity but lacking its own creative intentionality. The widely circulated portrait of the ideal editing assistant (*монтажница/montazhnitsa*, or *montagess*), which Shub continued to embody even as a director, depicted her as a faithful, observant, and selfless caretaker of film – a gifted preservationist rather than a maker. This portrayal of the editor as a caretaker implicitly influenced the diminished authorial status of film editing more broadly and the compilation documentary of the type that Shub pioneered more specifically.

Editing as Re-editing: Revision and Preservation

The major challenge in discussing Shub's work stems from her biographical connection to numerous more famous contemporaries, which inevitably begs comparative evaluations. Shub's name may be well known to scholars of early documentary cinema and Soviet film, but it is a name that never appears alone. All writing on Shub's life and work positions her within a larger network of figures, many of whom were more prolific and more influential on the trajectory of film theory. After graduating from university with a degree in literature, Shub worked in various administrative roles in the newly established Theater Department of the People's Commissariat of Education (TEO). Her duties included serving as personal assistant to theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, and in this capacity she became closely acquainted with Moscow's inner circle of avant-garde playwrights and poets. Her second husband was pioneering constructivist artist and theorist Alexei Gan, who died under suspicious circumstances that suggested he was a victim of Stalinist repression.² When Shub left the theater world for the film industry in 1922, her understanding of the importance of editing in shaping the meaning of individual shots was influenced by time spent in the studio of Lev Kuleshov, whose work formed the foundation of what would become known as Soviet montage.³ In addition to Kuleshov, filmmaker Dziga Vertov and his collective (the "kinoks") inspired Shub with their commitment to making films based on captured fragments of reality, rather than staged fictional scenarios (Shub 1972). Vertov even served as Shub's mentor and intellectual sparring partner until deteriorating studio politics strained their relationship. Finally, Sergei Eisenstein, the third major figure of early Soviet montage, credited Shub with introducing him to the inner workings of the editing studio and handing him his very first piece of celluloid. The two maintained a lifelong friendship, and Shub claims that Eisenstein continued to seek her advice on film scripts and ideas, although publicly he kept at a distance.⁴

Moving between these roles of assistant, student, partner, mentor, friend, and collaborator, Shub's legacy takes on as much of a compilational character as her films. Even her contemporaries routinely defined her achievements by relating them to other figures in her orbit, while at the same time using her work as a favorite

springboard to launch accusations against rivals. This relational matrix was not a straightforward case of a filmmaker consigned to playing supporting roles by others; it was a role that Shub herself seemed to fully embrace. In her own memoir *Krupnym Planom/Close-Up* (1959), Shub devotes most of the book to profiles of peers and co-workers, as well as defending those colleagues whose reputations were under attack at the time of publication.⁵ Chapters are structured around the names of her mentors and friends, whom she describes in careful and elaborate detail. Conversely, any comments on the methods and considerations underpinning her own films are terse, vague, and peppered with repetitive slogans likely crafted to prove her allegiance to the state's ideological program.

It is telling that Shub always reflects on her career indirectly through the choices she makes to detail or gloss over the qualities of others, often creating a pattern of linked recollections rather than assertive claims.⁶ This compilational quality of her autobiography echoes the kind of filmmaking approach she cultivated during her early training as an editor at the Goskino film studio. In addition to participating in the production of newsreel shorts, Shub got her big break in a department responsible for re-editing [*перемонтаж/peremontazh*] foreign films to comply with post-revolutionary ideological standards. Imported film reels had to pass through censors and be reworked in the editing suite, so that they could be screened for the Soviet public without compromising the viewers' ideological re-education.⁷ For example, historian Yuri Tsivian notes that happy endings (colloquially called "American endings") would be removed, in order to prevent spectators from believing that Western capitalism could have a positive outcome (1996: 333). Soviet film critics of the period frequently derided, with some justification, the disjointed and absurd results of such re-editing exercises. However, Tsivian argues that the re-editing mandate also made room for innovative and clever approaches to reassembling existing footage into new configurations; this, in turn, influenced the central role that montage would come to play in Soviet film theory. According to Shub, during her time as a film re-editor she reworked some 200 foreign fiction films, primarily of German and American origin (1972: 73, 250). Her favorite projects consisted of writing new narratives for puzzling film reels that arrived without any guiding intertitles, or that were cut up and chaotically abandoned in the process of someone else's re-editing work (Shub 1972: 50–52). Such messy beginnings posed the greatest challenges for an editor, but they also offered the most opportunity for flights of imagination. By re-editing hundreds of films, Shub mastered an approach to filmmaking that Esther Leslie describes as essayistic, defined by "drawing together disparate spaces and times, chasing conceptual elements suggestively, by dislocating images from their allotted places, establishing a thematic line out of the disparate, and asserting a directing intelligence" (2015: 10).

Shub was not the only Soviet filmmaker to get her start in re-editing foreign films. What distinguished her trajectory was the insight that one could apply the same kind of approach to previously recorded fragments of history by reorganizing archival footage. As Shub later recalled, both she and Sergei Eisenstein together stumbled upon a tangled roll of unmarked film that turned out to have a newsreel sequence of

the October revolution. Moved by the images of this abandoned sequence, Eisenstein would go on to use it for inspiration in staging scenes for his landmark film *October* (1928). Shub, however, would go on to doggedly pursue other neglected and decaying pieces of archival footage, preserving them, and weaving many of them into a project she titled *February* – a compilational portrait of the declining Russian monarchy that preceded the revolutionary tide. The film, made in collaboration with screenwriter Mark Tseitlin, was released under the title *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), and it remains Shub's best known and most widely studied work.

Watching *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, one can sense the filmmaker as re-editor straining to create a damning account of a former political regime by working with footage that was either neutral or complimentary toward its subject when it was originally recorded. In some respects, Shub's re-editing solutions are painfully blunt. Intertitles rely heavily on the use of ironic quotations to add a mocking tone to words that could have easily been printed with sincerity: the czar's navy enjoys a "peaceful" time at sea; the monarch's subjects are "very loyal." Shots of smiling political figures – clearly intended to be celebratory and commemorative – are accompanied by intertitles marking them as enemies of the people, and the dissonance is apparent.⁸ Elsewhere, however, the filmmaker is able to make subtler critical statements by suggestively juxtaposing previously disconnected reels. For example, in the first quarter of the film, shots of religious iconography are frequently accompanied by military iconography, in order to highlight and condemn the church's role in morally justifying the monarchy's violence.

More impressive are Shub's efforts to structure the entire film around the inevitable fact that much her found footage featured World War I battles, which were a catalyst for the development of newsreel cinematography across Europe. The bulk of the film's middle section, which runs with very few intertitles, consists of military marches, scenes of weapon manufacture, and trench warfare in Europe and North Africa. Shub harnesses this material for her own ends by framing Russia's entry into the Great War as a symptom of aristocratic vanity mixed with capitalist greed, blaming the war as a direct cause for the socialist revolution that followed. Instead of pursuing a more direct and well-trodden path of identifying class inequality as the central inner conflict leading to the revolution – a path that was probably challenging to sustain with archival footage left over from the previous regime – Shub uses the powerful war footage as a bypass. The film's intertitles proclaim that the monarchy enters the war for its own benefit, but that the Russian people are the ones who pay with their flesh on the battlefield. Shots of bombs, trench explosions, and fallen bodies (many of them likely unrelated to Russian forces) then serve as affective images of corporeal violence inflicted upon faceless masses. By following these scenes with footage of worker strikes and political demonstrations from February 1917, the film suggests that the war machine becomes the main breaking point that turns not only the everyday commoner, but also the trained military man, against the monarchy.

Shub's method of repurposing existing footage in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* responded to her colleague Dziga Vertov's call for an ideal, archive-based system for

documentary filmmaking (Vertov 1926: 6). Vertov promoted the financial and artistic benefits of maintaining a well-organized studio database of footage that could be thoughtfully reused and reordered into multiple projects by subsequent filmmakers. A prudently preserved and cataloged archive would reduce so-called filmic waste by limiting the need to reshoot the same types of images and by recycling material across more than one film; it would also challenge filmmakers to retroactively reconsider shot material from more than one perspective, allowing them to rearrange the same shots into different combinations. Shub echoed this sentiment in a brief 1926 article that advocated for a dedicated state-sponsored newsreel footage library, which could be directly tied to the production of new documentary films, ultimately eroding the hegemony of fiction cinema (in 1972: 246).

Vertov himself rarely followed through on this proposed program. Like so many European modernists, his relationship to the past was primarily one of disdain, and his manifestos often called for the eradication of established traditions and institutions in favor of envisioning the future from ground zero; this implicitly meant shooting new footage, underpinned by new aesthetic principles and new formal experiments. Presumably, the film material of his *own* time was what Vertov intended to become an archival repository for others – not anything he himself inherited from his predecessors.⁹ It was Esfir Shub, not Vertov, who actively pursued the goal of actually reworking extant prerevolutionary footage into new films. In her compilational documentaries, footage is wrested from its original context and reorganized to condemn the very subjects that it was initially intended to promote. A fragment featuring the tsar's procession, likely filmed with the deliberate intent of exhibiting royal opulence and spectacle, turns into incriminating evidence of corrupt indulgence. In Shub's hands, the task of re-editing, born of a policy for revising fictional imports, becomes an act of revising national history.

Of course, when the philosophy of re-editing is applied to footage that promotes itself as a representational portrait of a national history, there is a dangerously murky line between re-evaluating the past in light of subsequent developments, and recasting the past into a direct causal chain that justifies the present. Locating a new genealogy of the present in found footage of the past implies that the old fragments of preserved reality contain within themselves a multitude of meanings – that the polysemy of the moving image may already anticipate a potential, as yet unforeseen, future. At the same time, a compilational editing method developed in the context of censorship-driven re-editing becomes an obvious aid to a cinema of erasure, promoting the current regime as an inevitable historical outcome. Dziga Vertov's appeals to reuse and reassemble factual footage creatively, so that it could express new underlying truths, held the danger of playing fast and loose with documents of history.¹⁰

Perhaps aware of the potential perils of documentary re-editing, Esfir Shub gently admonished Vertov for what she considered to be his overeager manipulation of footage.¹¹ Yet what about Shub's own efforts in this mode? What was an acceptable amount of manipulation? Film historian Aleksandr Deriabin claims that Shub

herself was guilty of recklessness with archival material. He notes that suspicious omissions in her account of how she came by the footage for *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* suggest that she received carte blanche to excise portions of original negatives and thereby compromise irreplaceable newsreels, and that she was too ashamed to admit so later. Moreover, Deriabin argues that Shub assembled her films according to simplistic political themes and clumsy ideologically laden scripts, without the attuned regard for rhythmic and compositional dynamism that characterized the montage work of her more innovative compatriots. He implies that Shub wasted the footage she found and cut apart, because she placed it in the service of an editing style that he describes as "simple, if not to say primitive" (2001).¹² In other words, Shub may have been reckless with archival reels, but she was not bold enough in how she ultimately mobilized that material. Deriabin finds Shub's films slow and dogmatic, and his dismissive description is typical of a sentiment shared more widely by Shub's critics, for whom the extended length of shots in her films is the key symptom of her lack of artistic intervention. Even Graham Roberts, in writing about Shub's work with admiration, describes her editing approach with the dubious compliment of "prosaic" (1999: 52).

Without a doubt, Shub's editing style, such as her take on the revolution in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, lacks the musically inspired arrangements and exhilarating daring experiments that mark Eisenstein's *October* or Vertov's *The Eleventh Year*, both released the following year. Shots in Shub's films tend to last long past their graphic impact or thematic clarity, often maintaining as much autonomy as single-take early cinema *actualités*. We could cynically conclude, along with Deriabin, that Shub's decisions to keep more of her footage intact stemmed from a lack of formal courage or from a desire to accumulate a longer running time. Conversely, we might try to understand her preference for the uninterrupted longer take as the deliberate choice of a maker well-versed in and comfortable with editing. Without denying existing characterizations of Shub's approach, I propose that the defining quality which separated her editing style from those of her more famous contemporaries – namely her use of extended longer takes and reluctance to cut footage into shorter rhythmic intervals – stemmed from a desire to temper her own interventions into images of (and made by) the past.

Addressing the challenges of editing nonfiction ("nonplayed") film in contrast to editing fiction ("played") film, Shub described the editor of fiction films as someone who focuses on emphasizing emotional moments and picturesque scenes. Conversely, a nonfiction editor emphasizes shot arrangements grounded in fact, which for her meant:

[A]rranging not only to show a fact, but allowing it to be examined, and having been examined – memorized, and having been memorized – comprehended; giving it a place, giving it an environment, giving it a human being in such a place and environment, and doing so with ultimate clarity, working with facts, assembling the material into semantic, associative, and broad generalizations that would clearly relay to the spectator the author's attitude toward the shown facts. (Shub 1972: 268)

Implicit in Shub's description of her approach is a commitment to duration – time not just to see, but also to examine, to memorize. In preserving more of her found fragments intact, Shub strived to maintain the internal factual richness and clarity of each shot within and against the new contingent meaning, into which she as the editor could place it.

This more conservative approach did not preclude Shub from conveying her attitude toward the historical fragments on display. By allowing her footage to reveal itself in more extended shot durations, Shub creates opportunities for her historical documents to condemn their subjects on their own terms (Figure 8.1). Some of the most striking moments in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* happen precisely at times when shots are allowed to run long, rather than overworked at the cutting table. The best examples take place during parts of the film dedicated to contrasting



Figure 8.1 Six still frames representing three pairs of adjacent shots in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*. Domestic servants linked to fieldworkers (top row); breaking into a sweat through leisure or labor (middle row); low-rank labor and high-rank leisure in the navy (bottom row). Source: *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927). Directed by Esfir Shub. Produced by Sovkino and Museum of Revolution. Fair use.

exploitative landowners with toiling workers. Without having the luxury of returning to the past to adequately document the plight of the workers, Shub had to make do with archival footage of wealthy families enjoying leisure pursuits and picturesque shots of peasants photographed to evoke a pastoral idyll. In one passage (announced as “The Governor of Kaluga”), the film dwells at length on shots of a wealthy landowner, his wife, and their dog touring their estate. The couple descend an outdoor staircase, stroll along a garden path, and enjoy a luncheon al fresco. This footage is briefly intercut with shots of women gathering wheat in a field, followed by cattle grazing on a riverbank pasture. An intertitle describes the women and animals as laborers struggling under the landowner's yoke, but the images chafe against the framing text, because the carefully balanced, layered compositions offer scenic portraits of country life. Much more effective is the final shot of this sequence, which stays on the landowner's luncheon table, after the wealthy couple gets up to leave the frame. In those final moments after the main subjects and their dog leave the center, but before the camera stops rolling, nameless servants emerge from the back plane and jump into the center to clear the table. Their presence beyond their function *as* servants does not interest the camera, and the reel promptly ends, but Shub follows it with another extended shot of women harvesting hay. The flickering images of the domestic servants, who were of secondary importance in the recording of the original footage, are thus linked to the field workers and made primary. In fact, the very sense that they were caught in the margins of a shot dedicated to the estate owners imbues the sequence with a greater weight of unjust inequality.

A similar technique occurs in a later sequence featuring gentry dancing on a river cruise. Shub allows the sequence to run long, to include footage that was likely irrelevant to the original camera operator. In the final frames of a wider shot, the dance is over, and laughing couples disperse and dab sweat off their faces. This was likely a cue for the operator to stop recording. Yet Shub follows those final frames with a separate shot of workers tilling soil and pausing to wipe sweat off their brow. This connection between two similar chance gestures creates a contrast between the exertion of leisure of the wealthy and the exertion of effort of the poor. The internal tensions and pressures of prerevolutionary Russian society are coaxed from the backgrounds and incidental details of found reels – from those segments that may well have been discarded on the cutting room floor of a zealous edit.

An different version of this technique appears in a passage of the film dedicated to life in the tsarist fleet (introduced as “Peaceful’ was the life of the fleet”). Shots of low-ranking seamen cleaning the ship and running drills in formation are crosscut with footage of high-ranking officers enjoying a leisurely meal and after-dinner cigars. The semantic contrast is clear even without accompanying commentary: the proletariat are toiling, while the gentry are reaping leisurely benefits. Yet there is a more interesting graphic contrast made by lingering upon (and thereby emphasizing) the difference between how the subjects are framed in the footage. The low-ranking men are framed as an orderly mass, shot from above as they stand to attention or composed in advancing rows as they scour the deck. The dining officers, in contrast, are shown at comfortable ease in more relaxed arrangements around

a table. Most memorably, the foreground in two of the three dining shots is occupied by an officer's dog: first proudly seated at the table with his own place setting, then sitting on an officer's lap as the focus of attention, his white coat with black accents matching the men's formal uniforms. While the dog might be overlooked in the first shot, the lingering duration and composition of the second shot, which is also the final shot of this passage, makes him impossible to miss. Shub didn't stage the contrast here; the anonymous framing of the seamen and the more individualized framing of the officers with their animal companion was shaped by its own time – the priorities of what and how the camera operator was invited to film each scene. Yet in the rhythm of the edited sequence, the duration and focus afforded to the dog becomes an affront; the animal enjoys better status, literally and graphically, than the men working on deck.

The extended shots in Shub's films speak to a tension between parallel impulses of editorial revision and preservation. *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* seems both a sober condemnation of the tsarist regime and, simultaneously, an effort to preserve that regime as it was seen with its own camera eyes. Dissonant points of view are inherent in any documentary that relies on archival footage generated in one political context to form a re-evaluation from a radically different perspective. The sourced material can be traitorously faithful to its original time and political spirit; it is risky to allow this footage free reign without the interjection of intertitles or critical commentary to pin it in its new place. As a pioneer of this mode of film, Shub had to face decisions on when and how to make interventions into the reels she painstakingly recovered. Aware of the semantic power of montage and relying on that power to further a socialist message, Shub was nevertheless invested in allowing the recovered footage used in her films some potential autonomy and density of meaning. This meant not only taking careful and detailed notes on each found fragment of film – both used and unused – but also allowing each chosen shot to run for a longer duration. As the examples above demonstrate, this approach often encouraged the footage to condemn its own subject on its own terms. But it also took a risk in allowing the images to have a different future beyond the era of the film's release.

Fifty years after the release of *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, the titular fallen Romanovs were canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. Today, a century after the tsar and his family were overthrown and executed, they are nostalgically remembered as tragic leaders by an increasingly conservative nationalist Russia. What is remarkable about Shub's film is that it can play successfully in the current political climate with minimal revisions. Passages from Shub's film, divorced from their intertitles, appear in more contemporary documentaries that are more favorable to the Romanovs. If this is the film's failure as a work of propaganda, it is also its unusual virtue as a work of archival compilation. By restraining formal intervention during the editing process, Shub afforded the individual parts that made up the whole of the film the chance to maintain a certain degree of independence. The film may have been assembled with a distinct political message in mind, but its structure and pacing ensure that it can double as a more ambiguous document, open toward future reconsideration.

Editing as Collective Labor: Found Footage and Women's Work

The same year she completed *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, Shub published an article that acknowledged the role of female editors and editing assistants in the making of this work and in the operation of a film studio more generally. She titled the article "Rabota Montazhnits" or "The Work of Montageses" (Shub 1927). *Montazhnitsa*, which I translate as "montages," was the widely accepted female-gendered term used to describe the position of an editing assistant throughout the 1910s to 1930s. This included a range of roles, from junior positions like joiner or polisher to senior positions like assistant to the editor or negative cutter.¹³ The timing of the article is noteworthy, because Shub herself was struggling to get proper authorial recognition on her debut film. Her compilational approach of working with already-existing footage that she neither planned nor shot was not considered to be sufficiently generative to merit a directorial credit. Only the intervention of a number of colleagues helped her eventually get the credit and better remuneration. Keeping this context in mind, we might expect Shub to publish a defensive article that would insist on her authorial role in forming a cohesive work out of fragments of found footage. Instead, "The Work of Montageses" focuses on the labor of women in editing more broadly.

The article begins by briefly outlining the various functions that editing encompasses within a film's production and distribution cycle: circulation editors check and repair damage to returning prints; assistant editors work with a director to review and organize thousands of meters of footage and shape the finished film; negative cutters maintain a meticulous system of storing, retrieving, and assembling original negatives to match the completed draft of a film. Shub describes the editing collective as an indispensable "organism" that embodies the spirit of socialist camaraderie and allows the studio to function. By maintaining and facilitating a system for footage classification and assembly, editors were instrumental to what Joshua Malitsky described as a shift toward a rationalized "factory-archive" logic in Soviet cinema in this period (2004). However, Shub goes on to underscore additional qualities that make the montages, or editing assistant, indispensable to the making of a film:

Nowhere, not in any other department at the film-factory would you find the same organization and planning that you would find in the department of negative editing. Eyes and scissors work with great intensity, since we still have no devices for reviewing negatives, nor machines for splicing. Industrious organization, sharpness of vision, formidable visual memory, an agility and quickness of the hands – these distinguish montageses. (1927: 4)

In other words, a film editor had to be equipped with the capacity for nimble manual work, a keen eye for detail, and a prodigious eidetic memory. Without proper equipment for previewing and splicing film, editing assistants were expected to be able to mentally screen footage just by running celluloid manually and scanning it with their



Figure 8.2 Esfir Shub (back right) reviewing film behind montages Tatiana Kuvshinchikova at the Goskino Film Factory. Photo undated. Source: Muzei Kino photo archive. Courtesy of Muzei Kino.

eyes. Additionally, with numerous reels from different cinematographers passing through the editing room, editors would exercise and develop the ability to mentally compare and recall finer nuances of specific takes and even recommend footage from different film shoots. This meant that editing assistants had to be especially attuned to the small details and differences between the content of various takes – what Shub and others would call the “internal pressures and rhythms” of each shot, which are the qualities she would insist on emphasizing in her own film editing (Figure 8.2).

This characterization of film editors was not unique to Shub and was echoed in other literature of the period. For instance, Vlad Korolevich’s short 1928 book titled *Zhenshina v Kino* (Woman in Film), most of which is devoted to actresses, nevertheless opens with an essay on the role of women in the montage suite:

Almost no one will remember the army of unnoticed female workers, who created the film. In the same manner, we remember Napoleon, while forgetting the army that created his victories and defeats. [...] Yet always – invariably and consistently, accurately and faithfully, like the bobbin drivers of gigantic machines – move the fingers of the female cutter and the montages, who are partly responsible for the force of the emotions that the spectator experiences in front of the screen. (1928: 4)

The author’s description of the editors’ manual gestures as cogs in textile machinery is telling. If shots recorded on celluloid film were viewed as building blocks or pieces that needed to be stitched together according to a director’s pattern, as Lev Kuleshov proposed, then the editing assistant was the seamstress responsible for the patient, meticulous construction.

In many ways, the gendered tenor of this characterization – what it implied about why the job was particularly suited for women, and what creative role they could play in constructing the national imaginary through film – reflected wider social discussions on how postrevolutionary collective production would reconfigure prior divisions of labor. Part of the description of the ideal editing assistant relied on models of the woman’s body as a body particularly adapted to meticulous manual tasks, capable of minute hand gestures, and having the temperament for patient, sedentary repetitive work. In the preindustrial Western household, women were trained to still their bodies and occupy their hands through handicrafts like quilting and embroidery. In the postindustrial factory, this history facilitated the employment of women in areas ranging from secretary work to textile production. And in the early film studio, across a variety of national contexts, this same history influenced the hiring of women not only for the tasks of manually editing celluloid film, but also for tasks like hand stenciling dyes onto film footage, inking and coloring animation cels, and clerical record-keeping (Ward Mahar 2006, Hill 2016, Wei Lewis 2018). The assumption behind the staffing of these various roles was that the labor of editing, like the labor of stenciling or inking, was a process of deftly (yet mindlessly) painting-by-numbers, or in this case, cutting according to a predetermined pattern.

Considering this wider context, we can understand the trap that awaited someone like Shub on her path to directorial recognition. The dismissive attitude toward women in the editing room made it difficult for her to secure studio support to direct and shoot her own film. Shub found a creative way out of her position by making films with existing scraps, eliminating the need for any further shooting. Shub’s contemporary Lilya Brik also made most of her debut film (*The Glass Eye*) with salvaged scraps of footage for the same reason. Brik’s subsequent unfinished project, *Love and Duty, or Carmen*, was based on the conceit of a single film re-edited three different times for three different imaginary audiences. Yet this method loudly advertised itself as a work grounded solely in editing; in doing so, it undermined its bid for creative authorial credit, as its claims to producing something new were not as tangible as a stack of original screenplay notes or a cabinet of shot film reels.¹⁴

Shub’s difficulty in securing credit points to a contradiction in the Soviet treatment of film editing, or montage. While montage as a formal property of film (the noun) came to play a central role in film theory and aesthetics, the actual process of montage (the verb) was paradoxically obscured, particularly in comparison with cinematography or directing. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, European and American critics came to pay increasing attention to the important role that cinematographers played in shaping the look of a film. Cinematography was increasingly professionalized as a trade in the Soviet Union, just as it was abroad, and a few distinguished camera operators even gained modest notoriety as experts in one type of approach or other (Dziga Vertov’s brother Mikhail Kaufman and Sergei Eisenstein’s long-time collaborator Eduard Tisse are two notable examples). The parallel craft of film editing, however, enjoyed no such awareness or attention. Unlike the highly visible and technologically showy craft of cinematography, editing remained largely

hidden in the depths of the studio and portrayed as technically unremarkable, simply cutting and gluing strips of celluloid. It was this portrait of montage that Shub contested in her quiet manner, understanding the unspoken gendered hierarchy that consigned much of the editing process to an invisible supporting role.

Among the writings of Shub's contemporaries, one particular text *does* address the potential of editing as a form of creative authorship that can thrive in isolation from cinematography, such as in the case of re-editing. This is a manuscript by Sergei Eisenstein that Richard Taylor has translated under the title "Laocoön." The manuscript happens to be the only time that Shub appears in Eisenstein's writing as anything more than a biographical footnote, making his remarks on her work particularly noteworthy. In the manuscript Eisenstein links Shub to a distinct genealogy of montage that derives from the ancient poetic form of the *cento* and extends to the more modern decorative art of *decoupage*, both of which rely on creative repurposing of found material.

The *cento* is a poetic form, in which new poems are created from lines of existing poems. In some cases the *cento* is made by extracting and reassembling phrases from a single longer work by another poet; in other cases the new text is a compilation of lines and quotations gathered from numerous works, which are patched together to evoke new meaning. Eisenstein mentions the *cento* as a "poetic curiosity" that is resurrected in those forms of film editing, which rely on reassembly of preexisting materials (Eisenstein, 2010: 178). As an avid lover of etymology, Eisenstein points out that the Latin word *cento* originally referred to a patchwork garment, and that its distant relative was used to describe sewn items of clothing.

Indulging in his tendency for associative historical links, Eisenstein connects the *cento* to nineteenth century *decoupage*, the decorative craft of cutting out fabric or paper figures and pasting them onto various objects, in order to create new designs. In the case of the *cento*, the maker constructs a work by metaphorically "patching" together pieces from an expanded archive of phrases and sentences. In the case of *decoupage*, the maker slowly and meticulously composes a new visual arrangement by physically cutting out and gluing together graphic figures. Eisenstein argues that the principle of taking existing fragments and assembling them into new configurations is the same in both the poetic and the decorative form, and he therefore refers to *decoupage* as the "pictorial *cento*" (2010: 179). Again, Eisenstein notes that the same principle will also occur in those approaches to montage in which film editors create new works using pieces entirely sourced from other works. It is here that he praises the work of Esfir Shub as the most creative and impressive innovator of this type of editing. He calls Shub's films "cine-centos" – part poems, part decorative works, and part poetic reconstructions of ready-made cinematographic fabric.

Though Eisenstein does not expand on this topic, it is worth noting that the craft of *decoupage* was most often framed as a social parlor activity, as well as a hobby for women that would accompany embroidery and crochet-work. Like the *cento*, a work of *decoupage* begins with ready-made pieces produced by others. However, in the latter instance the original pieces were borrowed not from works of poetry written by previous artists, but from quotidian and ephemeral sources like decorative prints,

fashion magazine pages, illustrations from cheap books and popular periodicals. The range of subjects available for excision and reassembly was thus limited and circumscribed by their humble origins in popular culture: botanical motifs, animals, angelic faces, and biblical iconography, fashionable men and women, fairy tale figures, and the occasional reproduced work of classic art. Yet, in their very repetition, these images could be aggregated to form rich visual tapestries evoking the personal or social histories, in which they emerged and were disseminated.

The decoupage craftswoman worked to build an archive of possible source images and to locate resemblances and affinities between different sources. Glued together and lacquered onto a wooden keepsake box, dresser, or partition screen (some of the more popular surfaces for decoupage), collectives of cherubic faces or ladies on horses would turn into formidable armies. The more ambitious decoupage artist would not only collect and group similar images into aggregate motifs, but might also craft a thematic arc of development across the surface of the piece. For instance, a single panel in a four-panel folding screen might be thematically devoted to the idea of romantic courtship; a second panel would trace family life and childhood; a third panel might explode into a tapestry of blooming flowers; while a fourth panel might assemble images of leisurely and domestic activities. It was also not uncommon to find surreal scenes produced by the encounter between images taken from different contexts and in different scales. A man garbed in ancient robes, cut out from some biblical scene, may extend his arms in yearning toward a blushing society woman dressed in the latest finery, creating a courtship that spans geography and time. Elsewhere, differently scaled images borrowed from three publications could stage a scene in which a gigantic bird may observe a pair of laughing children, who in turn mock a group of miniature riders that have fallen off their horses.

Picking up from Eisenstein's manuscript, we can pursue this genealogy of montage in connection to Shub's "cine-cento" work. Like the *cento* poet and the decoupage enthusiast, the editor who works with existing material repurposes words and images left behind by others, salvages material from a diverse range of sources, and develops archival methods for preserving the individual pieces while opening up potential connections between them. She then produces new works through creative juxtaposition, not only in terms of thematic links, but also the rhythm and scale of appropriated materials, including the scale of duration I discussed in the previous section.

The cine-cento's hyphenated connection between found moving images and found lines of poetry also holds particular biographical relevance for Shub. In her memoirs Shub writes that her work in film was preceded and aided by her training in literature, particularly her lifelong passion for memorizing and reciting long-form poetry. This was not an unusual hobby; it was indicative of a more widespread mnemonic literary culture in Russia. Poetry scholar Mikhail Gronas defines mnemonic literary culture as one that places the written work into "a whole chain of cultural practices, such as learning by heart in nursery and school, copying by hand and memorizing favorite poems, internal recitation to oneself, recitation in a circle of friends, public recitation, quoting and recognizing poetic quotes in conversations,

public speeches, and literary texts” (2010: 185). He argues that poetic memorization and recitation played a key cultural and educational role in Soviet life, long after it began to wane elsewhere in Europe and North America. This mnemonic culture extended not only to readers but also to writers of poetry; many Russian (and later Soviet) poets actively drew on their own memorizations of preexisting poetic phrases when composing new pieces.

We might therefore consider the cento, or the restitched poem, to be more than just an “unusual curiosity” in Soviet culture, as Eisenstein describes it. Instead, it was a likely additional influence on film re-editing in early Soviet cinema. Shub herself writes that in developing as an editor, her highly trained skills of poetic memorization transferred from the linguistic to the audiovisual registers, so that she could mentally recall minor nuances and rhythms of various shots when thinking about how to thematically combine them into a larger composition (1972: 28). The transition was made possible by the material conditions of editing itself. To recall Shub’s remarks on the montages, since the film studios had “no devices for reviewing negatives, nor machines for splicing,” the editing assistant developed not only a keen eye and agile hand, but also a “formidable visual memory.” The repetitive, menial labor of actually doing montage – the tedious process of reviewing, sorting, and cutting celluloid that Soviet film directors increasingly delegated to a collective of assistants – became an effective, if unintended, training method for spotting and remembering the nuances of different pieces of footage. This would become indispensable to the kind of filmmaking approach Shub would cultivate through her compilation films. As a student of literature, Shub was a mnemonic reader of written poetry. In the process of editing moving images, she became a mnemonic author (Figure 8.3).

Editing as Caretaking

What motivates that artist who chooses to make a work from already-completed pieces made by others, and whose creative endeavor rests in forging new connections? To describe the temperament of a maker who finds new patterns in the past, Eisenstein’s “Laocoön” manuscript tellingly invokes a mythical figure – the Egyptian goddess Isis, who assembles the body parts of her killed husband Osiris, so that he can be reanimated. Eisenstein writes about the dynamics of writing *centos*, assembling *decoupage* works, and other games built on similar principles:

[I]s not a girl who spends an evening solving a crossword acting just like Isis, searching out word-limbs and putting those scattered word-limbs together to constitute a “body” out of words, the letters or syllables of which were scattered among the word-limbs of the clues? (2010: 175)

Eisenstein’s cento artist is implicitly endowed with a feminine qualities, or at least a temperament of diligence and familial devotion associated with wifely duties and occupations.



Figure 8.3 Esfir Shub as captured in *Human with a Movie Camera*. Source: *Human with a Movie Camera* (1929). Directed by Dziga Vertov. Produced by VUFKU. Fair Use.

The metaphor of the editor as film’s dutiful caretaker can be interpreted quite literally, keeping in mind the materiality of film, particularly celluloid. Like all media hardware, including the latest digital storage technology, celluloid film needed preservation and continuous maintenance, as well as eventual transfer onto newer prints and formats. Even if a film negative were properly and gently handled, it continued a slow process of constant decay. It is at this stage that early editing assistants, most of them women, served not only as the film director’s proxy in the editing room, but also as the caretakers of the film’s body. Esfir Shub began her documentary project on the fall of the Russian Empire by sourcing, untangling, and preserving neglected rolls of film that she

found in the studio's storage spaces. Without this intervention it is highly likely that none of this footage would survive the following decades. She extended the search outward, locating decaying nitrate in poorly maintained archives, identifying and describing forgotten footage of the dead tsar Nikolai II or the literary figure Lev Tolstoy.

In a broader sense, however, the process of collecting and reassembling archival footage into a single portrait – taking strips of film outside of their original context and finding the links that could bind them – were themselves an act of collecting discarded fragments of a wounded body (a country dismantled by revolution) and piecing its torn limbs together into a new resurrected form. Eisenstein's analogy of Isis faithfully assembling scattered body parts of a dismembered Osiris perpetuates the image of Shub as a faithful servant to the collective cause. It also suggests that maybe Shub's interest in archival footage and in minimizing the formal visibility of her own interventions was its own form of quiet protest. Postrevolutionary Soviet artists eagerly embraced the ideological fervor of tearing down previously established traditions, inventing a new cinema language, and psychically dismembering the film spectator to reconstruct a new citizen. Perhaps in understanding the long-term implications of burning up the past or anticipating the potential ideological shifts of the future, Shub's films not only recovered, preserved, and reincorporated fragments of discarded places and people, but functioned in part as historical archives, which could reactivate history for future artists.

Shub concluded her 1927 essay "The Work of Montagesses" by emphatically stating another indispensable contribution of editing assistants:

They are all, with rare exceptions, highly discerning about the quality of the film as a whole. In the screening room, when montagesses of negatives review the director's control cut before starting the assembly of negatives, their evaluation of a picture is almost always unerring. Their reception of a picture is immediate and at the same time professional. (1927: 4)

Editing assistants watched more films than anyone else. They saw not only what was selected but what was discarded; they aggregated and compared the works of different directors and genres; and they became familiar with shot material in ways that even the directors could not appreciate. One could say that the montagess was the film's first spectator, first fan and critic, and a proxy for its prospective future audience.

In this, too, the function of film editors took on a gendered inflection both in the studio and in wider accounts of their work. Pointing out the film editor's intimate familiarity with a film and ability to appreciate its quality and preservation, the author of *Woman in Film* connects these characteristics to domestic labor and child rearing, noting that:

[The] habit and knack for carefully performing meticulous tasks gave *Woman* the ability to master film techniques. Moreover, she also brought from the family and into the cinema a loving approach to her duties. *Woman* transposed her fanaticism, which she

was previously allowed to display only to the family or to the church, into her work, having found faith in the cinema. (Korolevich 1928: 6–7)

Without opportunity for creative control and agency, the feminized editor is nevertheless portrayed as a valuable cinephile who brings a certain intimacy and dedication to her relationship with film. It is telling that the only known recorded footage of Esfir Shub can be found in Dziga Vertov's *Human with a Movie Camera*, where she is portrayed as a delighted observer. In a scene of spectators watching a soccer match, Shub is captured laughing and taking pleasure in the world around her, playing the role of an amused fan. In this role, she functions as a foil for the film's own editor Elizaveta Svilova, who is shown surveying the footage with a stern, evaluative gaze at other moments of the film. Together, the two editors, both of whom passed through the ranks as montagesses at various times in their careers, enact both the "immediate" (unfiltered) and the "professional" (critically evaluative) gaze honed in the repetition of meticulous cutting and recutting.

The montagess was the film's caregiver and cheerleader, but, as Shub points out, this role also endowed her with expertise as a discerning spectator. By attentively editing and re-editing a film at some remove from full creative ownership (since it was denied to her), the editing assistant cultivated an ability to detach herself from the intended meaning behind a shot to view it as pliable material for redeployment. In this, perhaps, the labor of the montagess offered the best training program for compilation filmmaking, which asked the filmmaker to disassemble and reimagine existing frames and sequences as neutral blocks that could be used afresh in new compositions:

The power of documentation lies not just in the filming of living facts, but also in the selection of events, in the ability to pick out that, which is especially able to capture and excite the spectator, and to shape his comprehension of the shot material. This labor is fundamentally no different from the labor of a painter or a musician, who selects from a great variety of sounds and colors specifically those and not others. (1972: 188–189)

This passage is the closest that Shub comes to asserting the potential of film editing as a distinct form of generative artistry irrespective of *mise-en-scène* or cinematography. In it, she moves beyond documentation as the filming and presentation of "living facts" and emphasizes the importance of selecting images with deliberate anticipation of spectators' reaction (making facts come alive). This is a subtle defense of the compilation documentarian as creative agent, coming from a filmmaker who otherwise eschewed loud proclamations, who avoided playing politics in the film studio, and who spent more time describing her surrounding collective than her own accomplishments. At a time when such invisibility and anonymity may have cost Esfir Shub her claim to authorship, it also guaranteed a certain level of liberty and survival in a repressive and dangerous regime. This anonymity is precisely what allowed Shub to function, like Isis, as a gatherer and compiler of historical bodies and faces that would have otherwise remained on the battleground of the artistic revolution.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the debate between a so-called “Vertovian” and a “Shubian” documentary cinemas, see Yampolsky (1991: 161).
- 2 Curiously and perhaps tellingly (since Gan’s fate may have been a politically taboo subject), there is absolutely no mention of him or his short-lived but influential film journal *Kino-fot* (1922–1923) in Shub’s personal memoirs.
- 3 Shub’s memoir notes that she actively attended Kuleshov’s film workshops and watched him experiment with editing and re-editing film sequences on the fly (1972: 78). Her remarks on some of the projects she witnessed, such as the workshop’s live performances of “film without film,” suggest that she attended as early as 1921. She even considered officially enrolling in the State Film School to study under Kuleshov, but ultimately decided to go directly to Goskino and apply to work in the editing department (67).
- 4 According to Shub’s memoir, she helped Eisenstein develop his script for *Strike* (1925) and expected to be included in the production crew (1972: 82–83). When she was not included in the production, the two had a falling-out that lasted until the release of Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) (1972: 99). The two maintained a steady correspondence until Eisenstein’s death, but this never translated into further collaborations.
- 5 The memoir was reprinted in 1972 in the expanded book *Zhizn’ Moya: Kinematograf*, which also included additional material like Shub’s published articles, private correspondence, and notes on unfinished projects.
- 6 For example, during her time at the TEO, Shub witnessed a struggle between established older artists who wanted to preserve aspects of Russia’s dramaturgical tradition and a vanguard of younger radical artists who vehemently rejected every aspect of prerevolutionary theater due to its alleged bourgeois decadence. Shub indicates her own position indirectly, by assembling sympathetic remarks on intellectuals who tried to diplomatically mediate between the two groups; unflattering brief remarks on the antisocial tendencies of dogmatic radical artists; and finally a quote by Vladimir Lenin that cautions his followers against buying into capitalism’s obsession with novelty at the expense of preserving and salvaging the best parts of tradition (1972: 50–52).
- 7 Before working as a re-editor, Shub worked in the censorship office at the film studio (1972: 244).
- 8 The screenwriter Mark Tseitlin is credited as a “research consultant” on this film, and Shub wrote that his contribution consisted of helping to identify footage and crafting the intertitles (1972: 103).
- 9 On a discussion of Vertov’s reuse of footage from his own films, see Fore (2013: 3–37).
- 10 Vertov painfully discovered as much in his later years, when he found his early formal experimentation widely condemned by a subsequent state programme invested in unobtrusive aesthetic realism.
- 11 Addressing Vertov directly by using a play on words that references Vertov’s 1926 essay “Fabrika Faktov,” Shub wrote: “We don’t want a film factory [*fabrika*], if it means the fabrication [*fabrikatsiya*] of facts” (1972: 245). All translations of Shub’s writings from Russian provided in this chapter were made by the author.
- 12 Deriabin goes so far as to say that the chief creative role in Shub’s film was Tseitlin, not Shub. Translated from Russian by author.

- 13 Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Russian in this article were made by the author. I am choosing to translate the word *montazhnitsa* as “montagess” in order to preserve the gender-typing embedded in the job title. My full English translation of this article and accompanying commentary are published in Gadassik, 2018.
- 14 Interestingly, studio reviewers flatly rejected Brik’s proposal, stating that the film’s reuse of the same dramatic footage three times was an excuse for her to repeatedly indulge in the kind of bourgeois material that she was ostensibly critiquing. However, historian Valeriy Bosenko (1998) notes that the vehement tone of the rejections points to something else at work. He argues that the film’s conceit of exposing the power of re-editing the same images for three different political messages (each of which became an equally plausible scenario) hit too close to home for a studio backed by a zealous re-editing philosophy. The reviewers recognized Brik’s film for what it was – a critique of the relationship between cinematic and political revisionism.

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9

Now and Then On the Documentary Regime, Vertov, and History¹

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1

Roughly between World War I and the mid-1930s, a handful of terms emerged to label broad tendencies in filmmaking, terms that became so strongly established that they are still commonly invoked. Three of the most important were *documentary*, *experimental* (or sometimes *avant-garde*), and *Hollywood* cinemas. Such terms designate what we might loosely call cultural-textual regimes. They are textual in that they encompassed films and filmmaking practices, of course, but in combination with theories, reviews, and other kinds of nonfilmic discourses as well as institutional arrangements and configurations. In a sense, such terms helped establish arenas for framing and fighting over the identity or self-consciousness of cinema as such and also of differing filmmaking modes. This includes assertions about the relative values of these modes, whether positive or negative. As cultural-textual regimes, then, they may be associated with aesthetic tendencies but also with social and cultural stratifications, conflicts, and compromises. Very soon after these terms emerged, it became possible to understand each such regime as having its own chronology and developmental tendency and lineage; that is, they became categories of film historiography.

It is generally accepted that notions and practices of documentary crystallized into self-conscious and recognizable practices, ambitions, and ideals during the later 1920s to the mid-1930s. This process involved claims for differentiation. Discourses working to define and promote the term posed it over and against other widespread “nonfiction” forms, which traded on the indexicality of the film images. In the English-language context, the key example was John Grierson. He appropriated the