

MONTAGE OR FAKE NEWS?

AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Virtual programme accompanying the exhibition *John Heartfield – Photography plus Dynamite* at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 2 June – 23 August 2020

Now! Heartfield/Álvarez

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“Photography plus dynamite” – so fittingly summarised by his friend Adolf Behne in 1931 to describe John Heartfield’s use of political satire – brings to mind a much quoted passage from Walter Benjamin: “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly,” he wrote in his well-known essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. “Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-clung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.”¹ Benjamin was thinking of certain cinematic effects, such as extreme close-ups and slow-motion, but the “dynamite of the tenth of a second” simultaneously evokes the abrupt, highly energetic collisions of montage, with its power to disrupt the linearity of the historical continuum.

In the USSR in the 1920s, the explosive power of montage was being systematically studied and broken down into its basic components. While American cinema was primarily interested in the elegant narrative coupling between images, in the nascent Soviet Union the focus was on psycho-physical, intellectual and political effects. If we take John Heartfield as the point of departure, we could ask: What will happen to the combative, interventionist power of montage in later history? Where can we find the cinematic evolution of the photographic methods and devices the photomontage artist Heartfield created to ignite his explosive works?

Change of scenery – let’s jump to 1965, to Havana, where Santiago Álvarez, co-founder of the Cuban Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (ICAIC) and director of the post-revolutionary newsreel, is sitting at an animation editing table. With his team he assembles the short film *Now!* from hundreds of photographs, press illustrations and newsreel footage. We see violent policemen in military garb; beating African-American demonstrators, holding them aggressively in headlocks, dragging them off the streets by force (ills. 1-5).² Here and there we see the pointed hoods of the Ku Klux Klan, and Nazis marching past flags with swastikas (ills. 6-7, . The images – found footage, which Álvarez’s friends managed to smuggle out of the US – have been set in rhythm with Lena Horne’s song *Now!* (in turn set to the melody of the Hebrew folk song “Hava Nagila”), which was released on vinyl in 1963. Horne, an African-American singer, actress and activist, who had taken part in the



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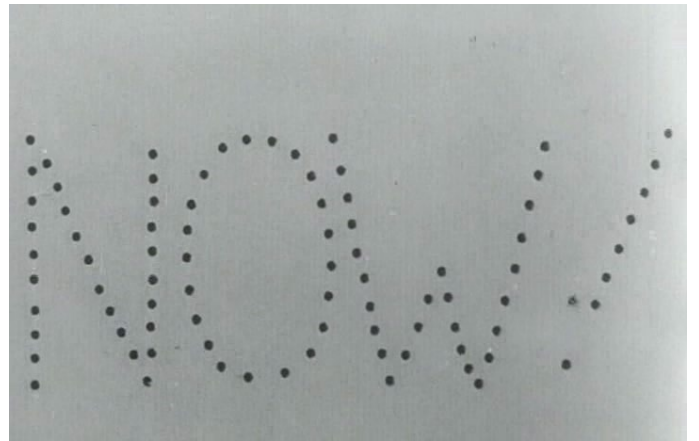
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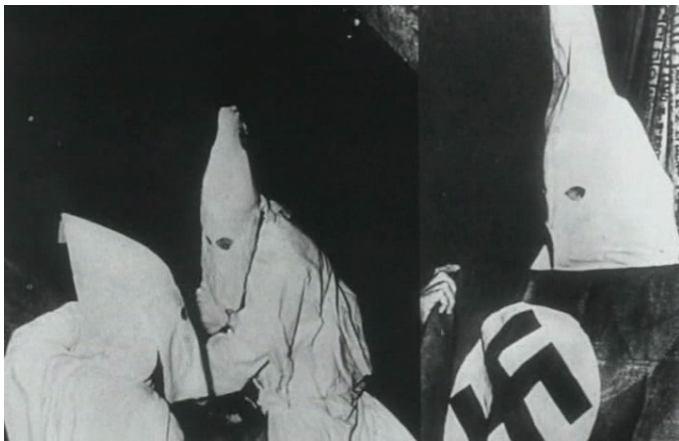
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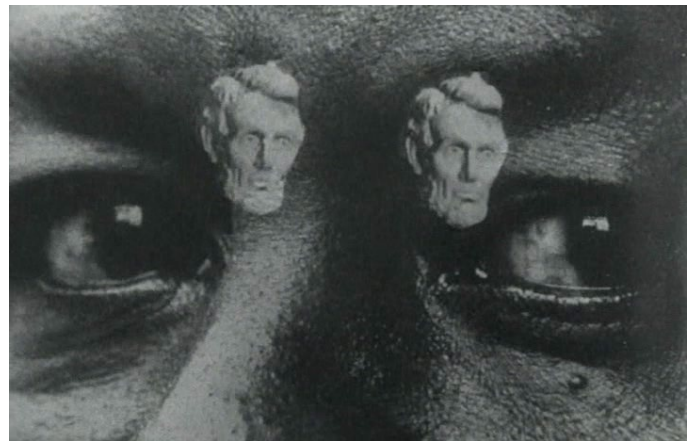
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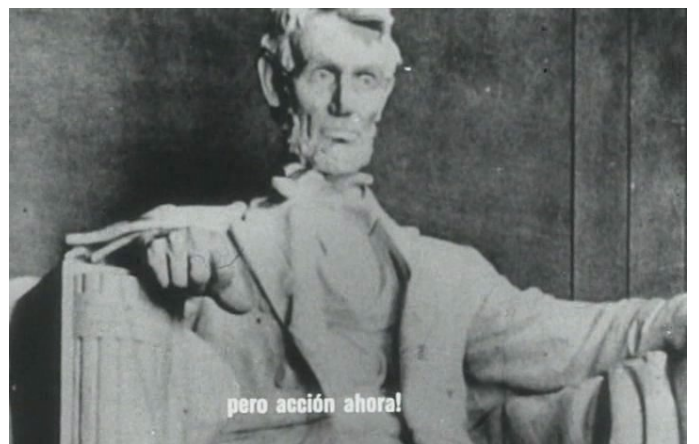
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March on Washington, takes the founding fathers of the US at their word: “If those historic gentlemen came back today / Jefferson, Washington and Lincoln” – what would they do? To which Horne answers: “I’m sure they’d say / Thanks for quoting us so much / But we don’t want to take a bow // Enough with the quoting / Put those words into action / And we mean action now!” This “now!”, no longer tolerating any delays, becomes a recurring refrain and imperative for action. *Now!* ends with a barrage of gun shots that perforate the screen with the title of the film (ill. 8).

Santiago Álvarez’s films, such as *Now!*, *Hanoi*, *Martes 13* (1967) and *79 Primaveras* (1969), owe much to the Russian montage studies of the 1920s, but John Heartfield could very well have inspired a number of visual collisions, where official historical narratives collide with oppressions of daily life: “Two heads of the Lincoln Memorial literally emerge from the eyes of a young black boy, coming together and then returning to the statue”³ (ills. 9–11), the camera then glides to the pedestal of the monument on which suddenly, in keeping with the lyrics, the word *NOW!* appears. The range of pop-cultural sources also corresponds to Heartfield’s modus operandi: “Álvarez’s visual resources vary from the use of photographic material from *Playboy* and the whole of the North American press, to extracts from Hollywood movies, Soviet classics, scientific documentaries, archive footage and television images, newspaper headlines and animated titles, put together in counterpoint with the most eclectic range of music.”⁴

Image and sound montages in Álvarez’s films spill over. They want to impact reality beyond what they represent; they establish an internationalist bond between the audience in Cuba and African-Americans; and remind us to keep examining what we have witnessed and to compare it with the “now” of our current circumstances.⁵

Two succinct quotations by Álvarez are particularly well known. The first condenses his poetics to the lowest pragmatic denominator: “Give me two photos, music, and a moviola, and I’ll give you a movie.” The second verbalises a polemico-political aesthetic: “My style is the style of hatred for imperialism.” In 1965, *Now!* won the main prize at the 14. Internationalen Leipziger Dokumentar- und Kurzfilmwoche (14th International Documentary and Short Film Week in Leipzig). Jean-Luc Godard, another protagonist of montage in cinematic history, dedicates the second chapter of his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98) to Álvarez. In June 2020, after the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis policeman, and in the face of protests against racism and resulting police violence, the activist appeal of *Now!* is more urgent than ever before.

- 1 Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (1935), in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2. Frankfurt am Main, 1980, pp. 471–508, original quote, p. 499f; cited here from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn (trans.). New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 15.
- 2 Here Álvarez used contemporaneous footage from the riots in the Los Angeles neighbourhood of Watts, where more than 30,000 African-American citizens demonstrated against police violence in August 1965. During the protests, which lasted six days, 34 people were killed, over 1,000 injured, and almost 3,500 arrests were made.
- 3 Joshua Malitzky, *Post-Revolution Non-Fiction Film: Building the Soviet and Cuban Nations*, Bloomington (IL), 2013, p. 125
- 4 Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema*. Minneapolis, 2004, p. 228
- 5 See also the internet-magazine *NOW. A Journal of Urgent Praxis*, published by filmmaker Travis Wilkerson and others: <http://www.now-journal.com/>

Link to the video: <https://vimeo.com/33134193>