

Revolution: New Art for a New World—A careless, unserious treatment of Russian Revolutionary art

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It is the fate of every truly significant social overturn, every great revolution, to be misunderstood, slandered, lied about and distorted. That is the specific and ignoble task of the intellectual defenders of the old order. Sometimes that process occurs in spectacular ways, sometimes in petty and paltry ones.

Margy Kinmonth's documentary, *Revolution: New Art for a New World*, falls into the latter category. The director, more than anything else, is entirely out of her depth.

Inevitably, 2017 is witnessing the publication of various articles and books, the mounting of art exhibitions and the release of films devoted to the centenary of the October Revolution. Most are weak or worse, revealing the poor understanding of or intense hostility toward this titanic event among the so-called intellectuals—and also taking advantage of the generally low level of popular historical knowledge.

The purported focus of Kinmonth's film is the Russian and Soviet avant-garde artists, including Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Gustav Klutssis, Nikolai Suetin, Pavel Filonov, Marc Chagall, and Wassily Kandinsky. One of the documentary's few strengths is its interviews with descendants of a number of these artists. Some of those moments are fascinating.

Trying to describe the structure of *Revolution: New Art for a New World* is difficult, because the work lacks a coherent organization. It jumps from event to event, personality to personality, with almost no discernible logic.

In any case, the film opens with the International Woman's Day protests of February (March) 1917, which sparked the movement that led to the overthrow of the tsar. Along with footage of the protests, the director has staged a re-enactment of women painting banners with revolutionary slogans. As narrator, she then provides a very potted and superficial history of Russian society up to 1917.

The film then briefly points to Viktor Bulla's iconic photo of the July Days massacre, and Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928), as a means of chronicling the revolutionary events. Kinmonth then goes on her meandering course.

The interviewees eventually include Suetin's daughter Nina Suetin, Rodchenko's grandson Alexander Lavrentiev and

Klutssis's granddaughter Maria Kulagina, along with filmmaker Andrei Konchalovsky, the grandson of painter Pyotr Konchalovsky, and Zinaida Barzilovich, the granddaughter of painter Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin. In general, the artists' descendants expressed pride and sympathy for the work of their famous relatives, without saying much about the political and social history.

Kinmonth also speaks to various art experts, enlightening or otherwise—among them, the academic and author of various books on the Russian avant garde, Christina Lodder; the director of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Zelfira Tregulova; head of Contemporary Art at the Hermitage, Dmitri Ozerkov; and Semyon Mikhailovsky, the Rector of the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts.

However, other commentators have more of an obvious ideological ax to grind, including journalist and professional anti-communist Anne Applebaum and Natalia Murray, the co-curator of the Royal Academy's current "Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932" exhibition. Konchalovsky, who went from working as Soviet director Andrei Tarkovsky's collaborator to making a number of second-rate Hollywood films, also indicates his hostility to the October Revolution.

Kinmonth spends some time discussing Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) and his Suprematist movement, the trajectory of Chagall and Kandinsky, and pro-Bolshevik theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold's *Biomechanics* (with actors demonstrating his techniques), to no particular effect. The film goes on to detail the Stalinist clampdown on the arts in the 1930s, suggesting, inevitably, that the dictatorial regime emerged organically from the 1917 revolution. Trotsky's name comes up only once, in connection with his being edited out of Eisenstein's *October*.

In regard to the latter film, it is impossible to ignore Kinmonth's intellectual dishonesty or ignorance, or both. She asserts, in a director's statement, that her "starting point" for *Revolution: New Art for a New World* was *October*, "a story which I discovered to be a lie and a propaganda exercise, which immortalised the political events through the lens of a great artist."

To substantiate her bald assertion that Eisenstein's masterpiece is simply a "lie," the narrator-director points to the fact that *October's* concluding section, depicting the storming of the Winter Palace, was an exaggeration, that there was no fierce fighting, or mass invasion of the palace as presented in the film and that the Provisional Government members "were willing to surrender. ... Compared to the intensity of the later battles of the civil war, this 'storming' was unspectacular."

This is absurd. There is an element of artistic license in the scene, without question. As Trotsky notes in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: "The final act of the revolution seems, after all this, too brief, too dry, too businesslike—somehow out of correspondence with the historic scope of the events. ... Where is the insurrection? There is no picture of the insurrection. The events do not form themselves into a picture." Eisenstein tried to overcome that problem through heightening and concentrating the drama.

Were there other difficulties? Certainly. *October* was affected by the growth of Stalinism. We recently discussed the film's difficult history.

As Kinmonth notes, Stalin intervened personally to insist on the removal of Trotsky from Eisenstein's work. Moreover, there is an element of Lenin idolatry in *October*, which the Bolshevik leader would have found distasteful, and perhaps as well an early hint of Soviet patriotism or messianism.

Nonetheless, *October* provides a vivid and sweeping presentation, through the use of thousands of images, of the complex events of 1917. What Kinmonth and her ilk truly despise is the film's indelible portrait of working class mass action, its exposure of the rottenness of the liberal bourgeoisie and its hangers-on and its treatment of the role of revolutionary leadership. Eisenstein cannot be forgiven for those elements.

But this is only one of the falsifications or distortions Kinmonth's documentary offers. Another involves the attempt to make Lenin a crude advocate of art as a means of socialist propaganda. Kinmonth seems to be borrowing this idea from Natalia Murray's book, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin*. In that book, without citing a source, Murray claims that Lenin "believed that monumental art provides the most powerful means of political propaganda."

Kinmonth and Murray are referring to the immediately post-revolutionary plans of the Bolsheviks to remove (and store) monuments erected in honor of "the tsars and their minions" (Lenin) that had no artistic or historic value. The Bolshevik leader proposed in April 1918 to replace such works with monuments to significant revolutionaries, artists, scientists and composers, including (wonderfully!) Gracchus, Brutus, Babeuf, of course Marx and Engels and other socialists, Marat, Robespierre, Bakunin, Plekhanov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Pushkin, Mendeleyev, Mussorgsky, Scriabin and Chopin.

The film claims that Lenin and the Bolsheviks were allocating funds to their monument project while millions were

starving. This, of course, is another lie. The terrible famine took place in 1921-1922, as the result of vast imperialist intervention and White counter-revolution, long after Lenin made his proposal. If the Great Powers had accepted the existence of revolutionary Russia, there would have been no starvation!

Another indication of Kinmonth's slovenliness is the narration's reference to an assassination attempt against Lenin in 1922. In fact, that event took place in August 1918, a mere four years earlier.

Lesser problems include paintings not identified, important dates not given, figures in the "honor roll" at the end of the film who have not been discussed, etc., etc.

However, the great unresolved issue that hangs over the entire shoddy effort, and fatally damages it, is this:

On the one hand, the filmmaker and her "experts" cannot avoid describing the artwork inspired by the October Revolution as earth-shaking. Kinmonth herself argues that the "tumultuous political period of the Russian Revolution" produced "some of the most inventive and brilliant works of art the world has ever known."

On the other, *Revolution: New Art for a New World* would have us believe that the Russian Revolution was a failure, a disaster, a meaningless blip or a historical detour. How is it possible that such a non-event or catastrophe should have generated brilliant and enduring artwork? Where is there a parallel in history? The various dictatorships and authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century have left nothing but ruins and human misery in their wake.

Virtually all of Kinmonth's scholars and curators seem pleased that the "tumultuous...period" is over and done with. Such wishful thinking has absolutely no impact on the historical process. Those who look at and take the Russian Revolutionary art seriously will not be stopped by the philistine commentators and prognosticators. They will inevitably be drawn to and inspired by the revolutionary events themselves.



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