2. **A documentary fable**

Chris Marker’s *The Last Bolshevik* (*Le tombeau d’Alexandre*, France 1993) is a documentary film about the late Soviet filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin and his century. Marker’s film discusses an era through the portrait of one man, and it fashions Medvedkin’s portrait with photographs, film stills, and film fragments that belong to the Soviet century. Archival documents from Medvedkin’s epoch intertwine with six letters that Marker directs at Medvedkin on the soundtrack.

*The Last Bolshevik* aligns in style with Jean-Luc Godard’s exploration of the twentieth century in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (France 1988–1998). Both explore the history of cinema through its images, and simultaneously formulate critical arguments about the conditions and effects of those images. Whereas Godard is ultimately interested in the concept of cinema, Marker’s work is a political homage to his long-time colleague and friend. Both, however, are deeply intrigued by the dissonances of what is seen and said in the images of the twentieth century.

Indeed, the relationship between visual form, written text, and speech is crucial to Marker’s documentary. *The Last Bolshevik* approaches still images and film clips from Medvedkin’s lifetime with the aim of cracking open their formulaic meanings and interpretations. What remains are image-fragments suspended from their original contexts; documents that speak with a new voice in the frame of the documentary. This connects *The Last Bolshevik* to the notion of the fable. Jacques Rancière argues that film is a “thwarted fable” established on the conflict between the visible and the discursive, a dissensus that grants film political agency. In speaking of Godard’s *La Chinoise* (France 1967), Rancière states: “The task of art is to separate, to transform the continuum of image-meaning into a series of fragments, postcards, lessons.”

Marker’s film intervenes in the continua of narrative meaning and historical descriptions, yet the image-fragments at the heart of *The Last Bolshevik* are not completely detached from these dimensions. It is rather that the gestures of suspension allow a multiplicity of expressions to emerge and entangle with the narrative and historical articulations. In Rancière’s language, “imageness” comprises the interplay between mechanically recorded visibility and intentional discursive acts (such as artistic operations), and once the dissonance in this interplay intervenes in vectors of meaning, images can become pensive. The image-fragments in *The Last Bolshevik* are pensive in Rancière’s sense of the term because
they foreground the dissonant relationality between the seen and the said. Moreover, they formulate the documentary’s political agency in explicit lessons with which the viewer is guided through the century of the Soviets and the cinema.\(^5\)

**Remembering Medvedkin, rewriting history**

The starting point to *The Last Bolshevik* is that Alexander Ivanovich Medvedkin’s career has barely been mentioned in histories of Russian film, with a notable exception in Jay Leyda’s work. Nor have his films been seen widely. Medvedkin’s feature films did not get extensive distribution and therefore they have become available in the West only gradually – and are still not well known. However, *The Last Bolshevik* does not repair the unfamiliarity by simply accounting for Medvedkin’s films and deeds, but goes back to the images of his century and focuses on what can be seen in them. The documentary, in other words, does not content itself with writing the omitted chapter and representing information to be remembered about the Soviet filmmaker. Instead, it looks at images from the twentieth century and works with them to imagine the life of Alexander Medvedkin.

*The Last Bolshevik* makes particular use of images and scenes from Soviet cinema and the scenes are complemented with numerous interviews with Medvedkin’s contemporaries, family, colleagues, later filmmakers and film enthusiasts. The interviewees give varying and sometimes conflicting accounts of what Medvedkin was like, what kinds of obstacles he faced during his career, and how he negotiated his filmmaking with his ideological commitment. The topics of the interviews vary from his love of animals to detailed descriptions of his horse theatre productions in the Red Cavalry and how the film-trains Medvedkin worked on were equipped. Some interviews do not deal with Medvedkin at all, but give accounts of his contemporaries, such as the Jewish author Isaac Babel or Dziga Vertov. Through Medvedkin, *The Last Bolshevik* creates a portrait of the whole generation; there is a continuous movement between the particular and the general in the documentary.

This movement coincides with Rancière’s idea of the fable. Film fables are written with fragments from other fables in the irrevocable movement between narrative “lessons” and image-fragments. Fragments extracted from other fables are, in a sense, silenced in order to make them “speak again” in a new manner in other fables.\(^6\) In this way, image-fragments may halt or suspend narrative logic “in favour of an indeterminate expressive
logic. Film is a thwarted fable because it works in-between narration and expression.

In *The Last Bolshevik*, photographs of Medvedkin, scenes of his films, and film footage of him speak about an era instead of simply referring to one man. The blurring of referential relations is obviously a more general feature in Marker’s œuvre – from such early political films as *Statues Also Die* (1953) and *Le Joli Mai* (1962) to the widely discussed works *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sunless* (1982) – and it often ties in with the question of memory, the theme through which Marker approaches cinema and the theme with which he has been written into film history. In *The Last Bolshevik*, the centrality of memory is exemplified with an epigraph borrowed from the author George Steiner: “It is not the past that rules us, it is images of the past.” Marker’s approach to Medvedkin is tinted with the idea that we remember the twentieth century and, in this case, the Soviet century, through its images. As images of the past affect how we can remember in the present, they need to be “scrubbed” in order for new ways of thinking to arise.

*The Last Bolshevik*, then, uses scenes from early Soviet avant-garde, agitprop film-train material, musicals, environmental films, and feature films that promoted Stalin’s personality cult and gives the viewer an idea of what it took to make these films and what they were meant to do in the
society. However, by reframing these extracts the documentary isolates them from both the historical fable of the role of cinema in the Soviet state and from the alternative fable on the role of the state in cinema, and makes them speak again – this time about Alexander Medvedkin. Whereas images of Medvedkin speak of an era, images of the Soviet era speak about an adamant Bolshevik constantly in trouble with Bolshevism.

According to Rancière, “the point, then, isn’t to preserve Medvedkin’s memory, but to create it.” The Last Bolshevik puts into practice the famous assertion from Sunless: “We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten.” The repetition of iconic images from Medvedkin’s century – such as the scene of the Odessa steps in Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin (1925) – foregrounds the position these images have in our thoughts about the past. Their repetition and reframing enables rewriting memory, in the sense that history can be rewritten if we look at images of the past in their “silence.” The documentary rewrites Alexander Medvedkin’s memory by looking at images from his century. Simultaneously, it rewrites the story of a generation through the images of one man. Marker repeats in order to write again.

Cinema and the Soviets

The documentary insists upon the fact that it could not have been made during Medvedkin’s lifetime. “There were too many things to hush up then, now, there are too many to say,” the narrator notes. Installed itself at a distance from its main character, The Last Bolshevik looks at the life of Alexander Medvedkin in the major upheavals of the Soviet century. Medvedkin was born in 1900 and died just before the Soviet era came to an end. The narrator ties Medvedkin to his century: “He was five and Lenin wrote What is to be Done?; seventeen – and he knew; twenty – the Civil War; thirty-six – the Moscow trials; forty-one – World War Two; fifty-three – Stalin’s death; and when he himself dies in 1989 it is on the crest of Perestroika.” The chronology establishes Medvedkin in relation to a specific period of history, but, as is typical of Marker’s films more generally, the events of the period conjugate with one another in a more complex manner.

The narrator presents the list of events in relation to an interview Pascal Aubier did with Medvedkin in 1984. At first, the list of events is spoken over the Soviet filmmaker who sits in an armchair and talks. Then, the narrator changes his mode of address and takes hold of Medvedkin’s monologue. He begins to translate his words instead of speaking over them and tells
the viewer that Medvedkin is reproaching him for not writing: “You lazy bastard, why don’t you ever write – just a few lines, like this?” The last words of the translation – “like this?” – are synchronized with a freeze-frame of Medvedkin looking at the camera, holding up his hand and indicating the space between his thumb and forefinger. This is followed by an image in which a hand holds a pen and writes on a roll of paper. Simultaneously to the image, the narrator states that he will try to write even though Medvedkin is no longer there to listen. The camera zooms closer to Medvedkin’s fingers, as if it wanted to access his life and his century through the space between his fingers.

The letter is a frequent trope in Marker’s films and it has often been interpreted as evoking the epistolary form and particularly Michel de Montaigne’s dialogic mode of conversing about social and philosophical issues with friends who are no longer there to listen. The Last Bolshevik is structurally divided into six letters, but I would argue that the hand holding the pen and the idea of rewriting is more important in the documentary than the letterform as such.

The space between Medvedkin’s fingers is the point of entry to the joint history of cinema and the Soviet system. It leads into a reframed scene from Yakov Protazanov’s Aelita: Queen of Mars (USSR 1924). In the scene, Aelita looks at the pages of a book she has in her arms. A cut to a scene from Medvedkin’s Happiness (USSR 1934) ensues, suggesting that Aelita sees Happiness in her book. The solitary protagonist Khmyr dances on the page of the book. Another cut takes the viewer back to Aelita, who peeks a little closer and now sees a blurry scene of officials in white uniforms enjoying their time at a dance. Aelita sees two dance scenes – the first with a solitary peasant and the other with jubilant officials – that express the dualism of individual existence and the general line that marks both Medvedkin and his century.

The Last Bolshevik also proposes a view of the relationship between the history of cinema and that of the Soviets in its structure. The documentary is divided into two parts: The Kingdom of Shadows and The Shadows of a Kingdom. The titles of the two parts bring forth the inherent paradox of the relationship: on the one hand, the cinema contributed to the constitution of the new Soviet state; on the other hand, it contributed to its ideological demise at the hands of Stalin.

The title of the first part – The Kingdom of Shadows – is borrowed from Maxim Gorky’s account of the first cinema screening he saw in Moscow in 1896. It covers Medvedkin’s early years and his enthusiasm for the Soviet project. Medvedkin participated in the Civil War and speaks of his time in
the Red Cavalry with fondness. He planned and organized the *kino-poezd* system – a kino-train equipped with full production facilities – and traveled across the country to educate kolkhoz workers. *The Kingdom of Shadows* discusses cinema as one of the primary means in building the Soviet state. Cinema’s capacity to show and tell – to make sense – are told in relation to Medvedkin’s own excitement as well as that of his contemporaries.

Fragments of Medvedkin’s satirical comedy *Happiness* run throughout *The Last Bolshevik* and they are interlaced with both Medvedkin’s enthusiasm for cinema, changes in the Soviet society, and the transformations Medvedkin himself went through over his career. Fragments of *Happiness* are used to mirror the paradox of cinema and the Soviet system: In the kingdom of shadows, cinema is equipped with methods that enable the production of happiness in the Soviet state; in the shadows of a kingdom it produces appearances that simply maintain the status quo of the kingdom. In *The Shadows of a Kingdom*, cinema produces appearances that edify the Stalinist regime in power. What initially worked in the service of happiness turns into the lackey of a kingdom already in place.

In addition to the connection between the history of cinema and the history of Soviet communism, *The Last Bolshevik* suggests that the characters that act in the films from that era and the historical figures of the twentieth century are all connected through “an age of history.” The age of history is like a connective tissue that holds them together. In this sense, the history of the Soviet era is a fable just like its cinema. In Rancière’s view, characters and historical figures, historical fables and cinematic fables are of the same ontological tenor, of the same age, which makes them equal. The age of history abolishes discrimination between whose story is told and who gets to make history. In the documentary context, this enables considering fragments of fiction as documents on a par with fragments recorded from reality. *The Last Bolshevik* proposes a non-hierarchical “flat ontology” between Medvedkin and cinematic characters, between cinematic fables and the history of the twentieth century. This allows the documentary to rewrite the memories of Alexander Medvedkin and his era in film.

The documentary parallels Medvedkin with a number of historical figures. At the start of the film, a photograph of Medvedkin is placed next to a photograph of Prince Youssoupoff taken in 1900, the year of Medvedkin’s birth. “Why not the day of your birth?”, the narrator equivocates. “One day, you will direct films. One day, he will shoot Rasputin,” the narrator continues, placing Medvedkin’s birth amidst the power struggles in Czar Nicolas II’s court. Then, Medvedkin’s enthusiasm for the Russian Civil War is mirrored against Isaac Babel’s criticism of the army and its anti-Semitic
unofficials. Babel was a Ukrainian Jewish author who served in the Civil War – Medvedkin lived to be eighty-nine, but Babel was executed in Stalin’s purges. Marker positions a photograph of Babel next to one of Medvedkin creating an angled double-composition in the frame. The narrator points out that “both [are] necessary to receive the tragedy in stereo.”

*The Last Bolshevik* also introduces other figures that coincide with Medvedkin’s life and career. Dziga Vertov is introduced as a talented communist who – like Medvedkin – did not manage to negotiate his art in relation to the will of the state. Sergei Eisenstein and Roman Karmen are introduced along with Vsevolod Meyerhold. Khmyr the hapless peasant from Medvedkin’s *Happiness*, the singing workers from Ivan Pyryev’s *Cossacks of the Kuban* (USSR 1949) as well as Mikhail Gelovani’s impersonation of Stalin in several Mikhail Chiaureli films align with the historical figures as if they were of a common age. The historical figures and the cinematic characters are equal actors in Marker’s documentary fable.

### Unintentional documents

The flat ontology of image-fragments and the connective temporal tissue of the documentary fable usher in an altered idea of the document. *The Last Bolshevik* uses past images as documents but not necessarily as documents of their initial referential contexts. For example, the scenes from Pyryev’s *Kuban* are offered as documents, but they express a completely different tenor from the one they were initially geared to pass on. Like Rancière’s pensive images, Marker’s cinematic articulation of the document foregrounds the exchange between mechanical recording and the intentional purposes in the recording.

*The Last Bolshevik* emphasizes the double bind of its documents by exposing the typical ways of watching and using images of the past. For instance, period footage from the 1913 tricentennial parade of the Romanovs is undone by pointing out certain gestures from the scene. A man walking in a crowd of dignitaries, in front of a crowd of laymen, taps his head to someone off-screen. “What does it mean?”, the narrator asks and answers right away that the man is signaling the laymen to take off their caps. He continues by saying that in our time, characterized by rewinding time to find culprits, we should remember the man who showed the people their rank in public: “I would like everyone to remember, before Stalin, before Lenin, this fat man that ordered the poor to bow to the rich.” A transparent yellow rectangle singles the man out from the procession.
As the scenes of period footage and feature films are extracted from their original contexts and reframed, they become expressive of dimensions that are beyond the intentional purposes of the image. In Rancière’s terms, they become expressive of the age that holds cinema and the Soviets together. Moving beyond structures of signification and related power struggles, unintentional documents bear witness to “life without reason.” Suspended between silence and speech, the unintentional and the intentional, the documents become monuments of the time that witnessed both “the kingdom of shadows” and “the shadows of a kingdom.”

Marker’s use of documents – film fragments, photographs, and archival footage – is reminiscent of Andrei Ujica and Harun Farocki’s *Videograms of a Revolution* (Germany 1992), a compilation of amateur and professional video footage that show the chronology of events that led to the uprising that threw Nicolae Ceausescu off his pedestal. Perhaps most interestingly, *Videograms of a Revolution* is simultaneously an unforeseen narrative of the events that lead to the uprising and a socio-political comment on the mediatized nature of the upsurge. In the documentary, the archival footage is not merely a record of the Bucharest uprisings in 1989; the video images appear as immanent to the revolution. The live television transmissions and the amateur video footage are expressed as internal to the Romanian uprising, as agents in its unfolding. Similarly to *The Last Bolshevik*, the narrated chronology of events is accompanied by another regime of the document in which image and history are inseparable.

In his recent *Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu* (Romania 2010), Ujica explores Ceausescu’s biography up to the events discussed in *Videograms*. The film covers Ceausescu’s years as the head of state (1965–1989) and tells his story with mostly official images featuring Ceausescu in different state protocols. The film, however, takes steps beyond the official rituals in the images and moves toward what the filmmaker himself has called “historical fiction.”

The source of this fiction is the enigmatic reality immanent in the official footage that unfolds in an epic manner in the film. The epic feel is achieved with the unforeseen idea the film creates of the Romanian dictator: instead of repeating the consensual view of the dictator, a softer side begins to unfold. Ceausescu, the filmmaker claims, took a more humane form during the making of the film. This is best exemplified with the choices made in editing the thousand hours of archival footage for the film. In addition to official events and Ceausescu’s sovereignty in them, the film includes a number of “lesser moments” right before or after official protocols in which the dictator’s gestures and expressions depart from those of a totalitarian dictator.
Rancière detects a similar ethos in Humphrey Jennings's *Listen to Britain* (UK 1942) – a documentary made to support England's war efforts. The film shows hardly any war-related images and instead presents soldiers singing a song in a train cabin, ballroom dancing, and participating in a village procession. The strength of Jennings's documentary is in the way it speaks about the war effort with scenes of the everyday. In *Listen to Britain*, the leisurely scenes of singing, dancing, playing, and parading imbue the war effort with everyday life beyond the war. Jennings’s documentary is a thwarted fable because it replaces images of war with quotidian moments.

Ujica’s moments on the edges of the official explore recent history in a manner that does not take the presumed idea of the dictator for granted, but rather looks for ways to unfold layers immanent in his images and thus to create a new idea of the dictator. In this way, *The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu* is comparable to the documentary fable that is *The Last Bolshevik*. Whereas the former adopts an epic style to constitute its historical fiction, the latter embraces poetic lessons and earnest comedy to account for the incompatible sides of Alexander Medvedkin’s life.

**Intimate interlocution**

In *The Last Bolshevik*, the reframing of images of the past puts the emphasis on what can be seen in them and said about them. In addition to the interviewees, the first-person narrator occupies a position of looking at and talking in relation to the images. More clearly than in his other pieces, the narrator associates with Marker himself. The voice of the narrator is that of an actor, but the documentary invests in Marker’s personal connection with Medvedkin and plays on the familiar tone of a friend speaking to a friend. The letters that structure the film provide an intimate form of articulation in which the narrator converses with images from Medvedkin’s century – as if he was talking with the late filmmaker. An interview with Medvedkin’s colleague Yakov Tolchan sees the narrator avow to Medvedkin that “sometimes I would listen to you by listening to him.”

The narrator’s relationship to Medvedkin and the images of his century comes through in the narrator’s convivial phrasing. When he explains how their mutual friend Roman Karmen restaged the meeting of Soviet troops up and around Stalingrad in 1943 because he had missed the real thing, the narrator ends with: “He was like that, Roman. You were all like that.” When talking about Medvedkin’s kino-train project and his visit to France in 1971, the narrator states, “Then, you told us everything” over a photograph
of Left Bank filmmakers standing in front of a train with Medvedkin. The familiar tone of “you telling us everything” – the cordiality is enhanced with the use of the second-person singular “tu” instead of “vous” in the French original – or “him being like that” creates a sense of a community of filmmakers to which the narrator belongs.28

The intimate tone of the narrator’s voice provides a counterpoint to the overwhelming flow of footage in The Last Bolshevik. The film-fragments connect with still images and photographs at a speed that leaves the viewer perplexed about the things that just passed on the screen. For example, Roman Karmen is introduced in a scene that consists of his Stalingrad re-enactment over which Marker implements a viewfinder, followed by a close-up that singles out Karmen’s fierce eyes in a photograph. Then, a series of photographs of what is supposedly Karmen’s office follow at an intense pace. There is a photograph of a door that has a poster of a Spanish film on it, a photograph of a bookshelf with a poster of Karmen’s 1976 film Corvalan’s Heart, and a framed photograph of Marcello Mastroianni; there is a photograph of a wall with a framed photograph of Karmen and below it the street sign for the Berlin boulevard Unter den Linden; and finally another framing of the first photograph of Karmen this time from a distance – the same Unter den Linden sign hanging behind his head. The re-enactment takes a little over twenty seconds, whereas the photographs are covered in thirteen seconds – a tempo that puts the images so close to one another that it is impossible to detect their individual contours and content without “scrubbing” them.

The narrator’s account, on the other hand, tangles with the photographs on occasional points: he mentions both Spain and Berlin, thus offering points of entry to the flow of images. The narrator takes the role of an interlocutor in relation to the images.29 Instead of encompassing the flow of images, the voiceover approaches them from a distance. It is almost as if the narrator was watching and commenting on a film that rolled before his eyes. The position of the narrator has both temporal and spatial significance. First, it aligns with the early acknowledgment that The Last Bolshevik could not have been made during Medvedkin’s lifetime. The narrator’s temporal distance to the images contributes to the exploration of recent history enacted in the documentary. Second, the distance has to do with the way in which the images of the past are made to speak again.

The narrator’s intimate interlocution with the images has an effect on the position accorded to the viewer of the film. As it feels like the narrator was watching a film, the viewing position aligns quite easily with the narrator. With the narrator, The Last Bolshevik places the viewer in the position of...
watching, commenting, and reframing images from the Soviet century. The narrator’s relationship to the images creates a space in which the removed position from the flow of images enables framing familiar images again. This evokes the potential enfolded in those images of the past that have come to signify the past itself. In a way, the narrator encourages the viewer to take the images rolling on the screen again from new angles.

A space for rewriting fables

The space created with the voiceover opens up the possibility of framing and rewinding fragments of the past. Transparent colored rectangles or circles are repeatedly positioned over film fragments and photographs; film footage is frozen to particular moments, images superimposed and several fragments of footage placed into a single frame. The documentary mimics the view of a Steenbeck layout or an AVID interface, thus constituting a position of working with the images. The direct scrutiny of the footage in both speech and in image-processing creates a space of interlocution within the film: “The Last Bolshevik is a screen for interrogating representations of the past, probing the compacted layers of truth and fiction that they contain and conceal, like the matryoshka dolls that pop up as ready-made metaphors of Soviet history.”

The space of interlocution has an interesting relation to the filmmaker’s presence in the film. Intimate interlocution with the images suggests a physical presence in the making of fables with other fables. Much like the hand holding the pen in the beginning of the film, the space of interlocution indexes the filmmaker into the film. As the narrator sides with the filmmaker and the viewer’s position sides with the narrator’s, the interlocution and the implication of rewriting equally indexes the viewer into the documentary.
fable. Put differently, the implication of rewriting construed into the audiovisual disposition of *The Last Bolshevik* indexes the viewer into the potential of rewriting and the political agency of documentary filmmaking.

The disposition of archival footage in the documentary suggests that the silenced fragments can speak again if they are viewed from new angles and if their relations are rewritten in film. Extracting fragments from fables is not, however, an issue of revealing their essence, a hidden aura, but an issue of potential. The making of fables with other fables deframes images from their previous context, but this does not imply that the process would stop there. Rather, the visual frames and the connections established between images from the Soviet century suggest that the fragments may well be silenced yet again and used in making other fables.

The disposition of writing in *The Last Bolshevik* acts as a filter between existing images and the images that will be written. It is like a valve that regulates memories of the future. The image of a hand holding a pen, the letters that structure the whole of the film, and the references to audiovisual writing in editing, form a sieve that regulates the manner in which the unintentional layers of past images arise in the documentary. These qualities that are often used to describe Marker’s works as essay films also point to the specific way in which he relates past images to future images within his documentary works.

Within the setting of rewriting in *The Last Bolshevik*, Marker uses his first film on Medvedkin, *The Train Rolls On* (France 1971), as an archival fragment. He describes *The Train Rolls On* as a trailer for a film he would make later in the far future. It was shot in France in 1971, at the Noisy-le-Sec train depot, when Medvedkin was visiting the country and organizing screenings for *Happiness*. In the film, Medvedkin walks among the trains at the depot and explains how the kino-train system works. Catherine Lupton notes that the direct style of *The Train Rolls On* is indicative of the way Medvedkin and his crew used film as an instrument of explanation in kolkhozes that did not function properly.

In *The Last Bolshevik*, fragments from *The Train Rolls On* are edited together with experimental footage made for the composer Arthur Honegger’s piece *Pacific 231*. The experimental footage is interposed with footage of a man reading a sentence that accuses Honegger of capitalist ideology. The narrator claims that Honegger’s prosecution foreshadows a time when anybody could be found guilty despite talent and ideological adamancy. This is followed by a cut back to Medvedkin at Noisy-le-Sec. His voice is no longer audible but he moves his arms to the rhythm of Honegger’s composition. With the music taking over Medvedkin’s gestures, it looks like he was
moving to the rhythm of the alleged capitalist composition. Medvedkin's orchestration of the kino-train is contradicted by the state conducting him. The gestures synchronized to the rhythm of *Pacific 231* place Medvedkin at the crossroads of him arranging the kino-train system and the state arranging him. The fragments of the composition, *The Train Rolls On* and the experimental footage speak of Medvedkin's continuous clashes with the state despite his adamant belief in communism. In this way, *The Last Bolshevik* enables considering the double bind of film-fragments as well as the potential of rewriting in the documentary.

Making fables with other fables is occasionally ruptured by the overt directions the narrator gives the viewer. At times, the narrator takes the viewer by the hand and points out what it is we should be looking at and how. The moments of instruction fall into the film's general ethos of showing how images of the past affect our thinking and acting in the present. For instance, the narrator is eager to underline that the general knowledge we have of the 1917 Soviet Revolution actually comes from reproductions of the actual revolution. In a scene that proceeds from the Museum of Moving Images (MOMI) in London to the pages of a French edition of Leon Trotsky's *Histoire de la révolution russe*, a guide at MOMI, Rhona Campbell, asserts that she is very interested in the 1917 Revolution. On the soundtrack, the interlocutor claims that it turns out that Rhona's knowledge comes from Eisenstein. Simultaneously, scenes from Eisenstein's *October* (1927) start rolling on the screen and Rhona asserts how more people were killed in the filming of the scene for *October* than in the actual storming of the Winter Palace. From Eisenstein's film there is a cut to yet another restaging of the same event – a 1920s street theatre performance from which an image has been lifted as a document of the event itself. The narrator asserts that a freeze-frame from a scene of extras running toward the Winter Palace has been reproduced by major publishing houses. A cut from the cover of Trotsky's book to the footage of the theatrical setting is accompanied by the interlocutor-instructor's comment: “You can even spot the exact moment it was done. Here!” The scene freezes in the exact same position as the image on the book cover. Conversing with images of the past turns into giving lessons about the century.

Forging fables, creating memory

According to Rancière, making fables with other fables sides the documentary with fiction. He goes back to the Latin roots of fiction, *fingere,*
and argues that the term does not originally mean “to feign,” but rather “to forge.” Fiction is not an issue of faking, but of forging relations between image-fragments. The texture of *The Last Bolshevik* is composed of the varying signifying powers of the documents and their relations. Rancière notes that the documentary mode “seems almost to have been designed for the metamorphoses of signifying forms that make it possible to construct memory as the interlacing of uneven temporalities and of heterogeneous regimes of the image.”

Rancière argues that documentary film is actually capable of greater fictional invention than the so-called fiction film, because it is more free to work with the double resource of “the silent imprint that speaks and the montage that calculates the values of truth and the potential for producing meaning.” This is possible because the documentary is free from producing effects that ensure recognition in the social imaginary of the viewer. Hence, it is more equipped to weigh and experiment with the silent imprints. The difference between documentary and fiction – according to Rancière – is that the documentary may isolate the practice of forging from producing effects and instead use forging for the purposes of understanding a given reality.

Initially, this juxtaposition seems a little naïve, as obviously not all documentaries are as intellectually driven, nor is all fiction tied to producing a screen with recognizable effects. However, the distinction is useful in the way it foregrounds the capacity to imagine, to forge with documents. In *The Last Bolshevik*, the emphasis on the relations that emerge from the image-fragments calls out the French title of Marker’s film: *Le tombeau d’Alexandre*. Alexander’s tomb is less a symbolic tomb of the individual Alexander Medvedkin than a cavalcade of relations held together by a common age. The name Alexander is a homonym that connects Medvedkin to a number of historical figures and mythical characters.

In a scene shot after Medvedkin’s death in Moscow, the camera finds an old man who is introduced as Ivan Kozlovzki – a singer whose performance in Modest Mussorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov* is edited together with contemporary footage shot in the church. The theme of the opera is the tragedy of the Russian people as eternally subject to hunger and deceit and it is based on the work of Alexander Pushkin. With the meandering relationship between the two Alexanders, Marker juxtaposes Medvedkin’s enthusiasm for the Soviet state against the tragedy of the Revolution. Similarly, when Marker pays a visit to Medvedkin’s tomb in Moscow he is sidetracked by the crowd lingering around the tomb of yet another Alexander: Czar Alexander III. The video footage from the church and the graveyard connect
Medvedkin to a series of Alexanders that testify to the different facets of the century. Rancière suggests that Marker plays with the ambiguity of a fourth Alexander in the title of his film: “Alexander's tomb” may refer to the unknown resting place of Alexander the Great.  

Finally, rewriting memory in *The Last Bolshevik* – forging Alexander Medvedkin’s fable – is not reducible to the filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin. The documentary forges a fable that ties together the historical figures, fictional characters, historical narratives, and cinematic stories of the twentieth century. By reframing photographs, period footage, and feature film fragments from the century of the cinema and the Soviets, the documentary challenges the ways in which we have become accustomed to the century and its images. Here, deframing and reframing endows the documentary with the capacity to imagine. This imagination, to quote Rosi Braidotti, “is a sort of empowerment of all that was not programmed within the dominant memory.” Marker’s documentary fable challenges us to look again and again.