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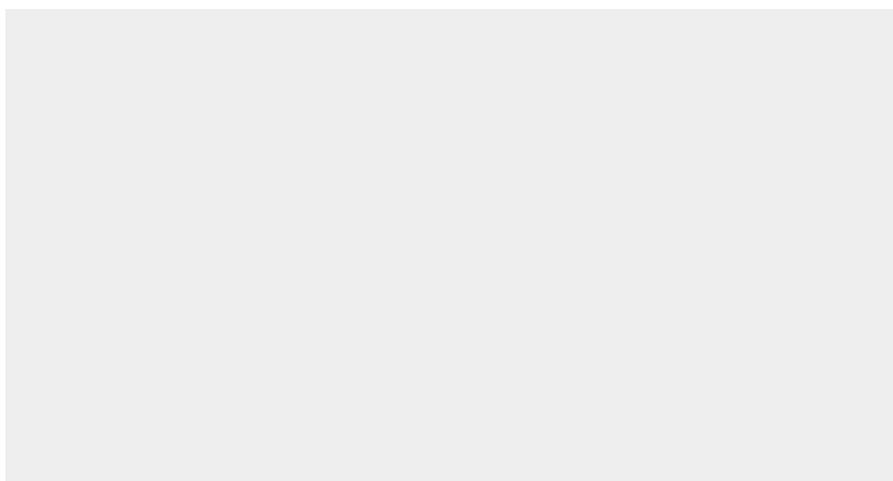
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Hasta la Victoria Siempre

Travis Wilkerson

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Hasta la Victoria Siempre (1967 Cuba 19mins)

Source: NLA/CAC **Prod Co:** Instituto Cubano del Artes e Industria Cinematogra **Dir, Scr:** Santiago Alvarez **Ed:** Norman Torrado **Mus:** Heitor Villa-Lobos

For a 'selective' Santiago Alvarez filmography, click [here](#).

* * *

"I don't believe in films for posterity. I make an urgent cinema." (1)

– Santiago Alvarez

Though it is among neither his best nor his most consequential works, *Hasta la Victoria Siempre* is nonetheless one of the most exemplary films of Santiago Alvarez's prolific career. The brief film, completed in October of 1967, concerns the circumstances that led to Che Guevara's death at the conclusion of his failed Bolivian guerrilla campaign. It is a pure distillation of the highly unusual conditions of production that shaped Alvarez's filmmaking practice. As such, three aspects of the film's production are particularly noteworthy.

First, *the film had to be made under nearly unbelievable time constraints*. Alvarez was accustomed to working on a very tight schedule. As director of the famed Noticiero ICAIC (the Cuban film institute's supremely innovative newsreel division), Alvarez was often charged with producing short films on breaking news in under a week. In the case of *Hasta...*, the ante was raised by Fidel himself who requested Alvarez produce the film in *under 48 hours*. The founder of 'urgent cinema' was thus confronted with an altogether new measure of urgency.

Second, *the film had to be constructed out of a paucity of relevant material*. News had only just broken of Che's death in Bolivia, so images of his capture and execution had not yet surfaced. There was a scarcity of material on Bolivia in the archives. There was also, surprisingly, very little live footage of Guevara himself. It seems that Latin America's most famous guerilla was camera shy. As a result, the film is constructed chiefly out of four sources of



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visual information: documentary photographs of rural Bolivia and its native inhabitants, images and headlines culled from newspapers on the presence in Bolivia of Che's band of guerrillas, three televised speeches by Guevara, and various other images of Che, including a mere handful of moving images.

Ironically, it was Alvarez himself who had thrown down the gauntlet on this matter when he made his famous proclamation: "Give me two photographs, a moviola, and a piece of music; I'll give you a movie." Indeed, in the case of the celebrated *Now* (1965), he'd used this approach to his advantage. The film, a searing indictment of racism in America, was made with less than sixty seconds worth of live footage. The remaining images came from still photographs found in *Life* magazine.

Finally, *the film had to be suitable for mass exhibition*. In the case of distribution alone, Alvarez occupies a peculiar place in the history of the medium. For more than thirty years, the newsreels were shown in advance of features in movie theatres throughout Cuba. (2) As such, nearly every filmgoer in the country knew the name of this particular maker of personal political documentaries. And in a country as movie-crazy as Cuba, that's nearly every citizen. But in the case of *Hasta...* the notion of mass exhibition was made literal. Castro had requested that the film be made quickly in order that it be shown at the memorial rally scheduled to take place in two day's time in the Plaza of the Revolution. Before an audience of more than half a million, the film was to serve as opening act for El Jefe's militant eulogy.

Years later, Alvarez would reflect upon the film: "If you look at it now, you can see many defects in it, but I didn't want to smarten it up, and we got it out in 48 hours, just with the elements we had at hand, photos of Bolivia, archive material of el Che which came out badly when we blew it up but there was nothing else." (3) Yet, upon examining the film almost 35 years later, one is struck less by the film's obvious limitations than by its considerable achievements.

The opening sequences of photo-stills are animated in a highly dynamic style which is the signature of Alvarez's work: rapid zooms, pans, and dissolves invigorate what could be quite mundane imagery. Wordless and concise, these sequences link disparate elements into a cohesive whole: poverty is connected to American capital, and that capital itself is then connected to the presence of U.S. military 'advisors' in Bolivia.

The images are then paired with a complex and playful collage of musical styles. Alvarez was a master of matching (or deliberately mismatching) music to image, and once asserted "50% of the value of a film is in the soundtrack." (4) These skills are well in evidence in *Hasta...* The film features a recurring pop-orchestral arrangement alongside interludes of dissonant jazz and patriotic marching songs. There is also one striking instance of silence, underlying the only images of an armed Che in Bolivia. The orchestral piece was arranged by Perez Prado, a defector to the United States. It was used to such profound effect that among the Cubans the song remains inextricably linked with the image of Guevara. The prankster in Alvarez must have delighted in this irony.

Eschewing voiceover altogether, the words come entirely from Guevara's

speeches. These are delivered, as is typical of Alvarez, in long, unmediated clips. Often criticized for this, Alvarez would quip that it was a small gesture on his part aimed at “countering capitalist consumption patterns.” In any event, they are masterful selections. In the space of only a few paragraphs he lays out the trajectory of Guevara’s political thought: his political roots, his subsequent embrace of Marxism, his near-fixation on Lumumba and the Congo, and finally his view on the centrality of the struggle of the Vietnamese in the global fight against American domination. Alvarez thus succeeds in rendering Guevara’s motivations more opaquely than in virtually any other film on the Bolivian campaign.

Still, there are missteps to be discovered. Alongside the technical defects, there is the unfortunate paroxysm of Kitsch found in the film’s final sequence, which features staged images of Che engaged in voluntary labor alongside the music of a patriotic march. Given its subject, the fact that the film fails to express the effervescence of films like *Cerro Pelado* (1966) or *Now* shouldn’t come as a surprise. Likewise, time constraints made it impossible to equal the innovatory rupture of a film like *79 Springtimes* (1969). These factors also rule out the descriptive poetics found in such works as *Hanoi, Tuesday the 13th* (1967) or *The Forgotten War* (1967). But what is most peculiar is the relative emotional equanimity of the film, particularly given the occasion for its making.

Six years later in 1973, under similar material and time constraints, Alvarez would produce *El Tigre* in immediate response to the American-backed coup in Chile. The resulting film was Alvarez’s most purely mournful, and one of his most devastating. Yet that film is virtually unknown while *Hasta...* remains one of Alvarez’s most familiar works. In the intervening years, the world had turned its eyes from Cuban cinema, decreeing its golden era had passed. Yet this critical lapse ought not to obscure the considerable achievements of *Hasta...* And one thing is certain; even now the film vibrates with the unflagging energy by which it was produced.

One final note. There is a chilling foreshadowing near the film’s midpoint. Guevara intones that Imperialism is a bestializing force, pressing them to destroy “every revolutionary, down to *the last image*.” Paradoxically, it is really only the image of Che, now emblazoned upon countless trinkets, which has endured, while nearly everything he believed in has been vanquished and dispatched. Excepting of course, the Cuban revolution itself, and the accidentally timeless films of Santiago Alvarez. In this newest age of barbarism, we need them more than ever.

A selective filmography of Santiago Alvarez (he directed more than 600 films)
compiled by the author

- 1961 Muerte al invasor (*Death to the Invaders*) made with T.G. Alea
- 1963 El barbaro del ritmo (*Top Man in Rhythm*), *Ciclón* (*Hurricane*)
- 1965 Now
- 1966 Cerro Pelado

- 1967 La guerra olvidado (*The Forgotten War*), *Hanoi, martes 13* (*Hanoi Tuesday 13th*), *Hasta la victoria siempre* (*Always Until Victory*)
- 1968 LBJ
- 1969 Despegue a las 18:00 (*Take-off at 18:00*), *79 primaveras* (*79 Springtimes*)
- 1970 Once por cero (*Eleven to zero*), *Piedra sobre piedra* (*Stone upon Stone*), *El sueño del pongo* (*The Servant's Dream*)
- 1971 Como, por que y para que se asesina un general? (*How, Why and What For is a General Assassinated?*), *La estampida* (*The Stampede*), *El drama de Nixon* (*The Drama of Nixon*)
- 1972 De America soy hijo...y a ella de debo (*I am a Son of America... am I am Indebted to it*)
- 1973 El tigre salto y mato, pero morira...morira (*The Tiger Leaps and Kills but It Will Die...It Will Die*)
- 1975 Abril de Vietnam en el año del gato (April in Vietnam in the Year of the Cat), *El primer delegado* (*The First Delegate*)
- 1976 Los dragones de Ha Long (*The Dragons of Ha Long*)
- 1977 Mi hermano Fidel (*My Brother Fidel*)
- 1980 La guerra necesaria (*The Necessary War*)

Endnotes

1. This statement is taken from a video interview conducted by the Brazilian journalist Amir Labaki. ↑
2. Alvarez was making relatively personal and quite experimental films for weekly mass exhibition. This practice continued into the early 1990s, substantially later than most newsreels elsewhere in the world. ↑
3. *BFI Dossier Number 2: Santiago Alvarez* (London: BFI, 1980) 19 ↑
4. "5 Frames are 5 Frames, Not 6 but 5," *Cineaste* 6.4 (197?): 20. ↑

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Travis Wilkerson

Travis Wilkerson is a Michigan-based filmmaker. His films include *Accelerated Development: In the Idiom of Santiago Alvarez* (1999), and the ongoing series, *National Archive*.

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