



# CHALLENGE TO IMPERIALISM

**PART  
TWO.**

PRICES:  
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ALL FILMS ARE  
FRIDAYS 7.30



**NOTTINGHAM  
FILM THEATRE**

**20 Jan QUEIMADA**  
**27 Jan STRIKE**  
**3 Feb EARTH**  
**10 Feb TWO OR THREE**  
**THINGS I KNOW**  
**ABOUT HER**  
**17 Feb FILMS BY JEAN-**

**MARIE STRAUB.**  
**24 Feb MAN WITH A**  
**MOVIE CAMERA**  
**3 Mar BLOW FOR BLOW**  
**10 Mar NIGHT CLEANERS (1)**  
**17 Mar LE GAI SAVOIR**

NAVIE BRICK



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**NOTTINGHAM  
FILM THEATRE**  
CO-OP EDUCATIONAL CENTRE, BROAD ST, NOTTINGHAM



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### FRIDAY FILMS AT NOTTINGHAM FILM THEATRE 'CHALLENGE TO IMPERIALISM' PART 2

Jan/March 1978. Film programme and programme notes selected by John Clark,  
Alan Fountain, Laurie Hayward, Brian Lee and Tom Wilson. Introduction by  
Laurie Hayward, Poster by John Clark, Booklet put together by Tom Wilson.  
Many thanks for support from the British Film Institute, East Midlands  
Arts, Nottingham Film Theatre administration and every one who came to pt1.  
The views expressed in the introduction and in the booklet as a whole do  
not necessarily represent the views of Nottingham Film Theatre management.

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# INTRODUCTION

This introduction makes little pretence to be anything more than a few notes setting out the ideas behind the continuing programme of films "Challenge to Imperialism", and an attempt to raise several questions which are relevant to the relations between imperialism and film. Together with the selected articles, reviews and interviews which follow it is intended to continue to open out a process of interrogation. Many contradictory views are expressed in these pages and a real working through of these contradictions both at the level of film making and theory remains to be done.

Q Is there anything about film production that you would call reactionary or imperialistic?

A It's a way of telling people: this is the right way to make a movie and if you don't do it this way, you won't be able to exhibit it. If there is an imperialism in production, it is an aesthetic imperialism.

JEAN LUC GODARD

KINOPRAXIS

This second series of films in the "Challenge to Imperialism" programme attempts to shift the emphasis from cinema concerned with specific instances of imperialism to a consideration of the aesthetic and formal strategies employed by film makers to raise political issues.



The films of Pontecorvo, Karmitz, Straub-Huillet, Godard and the Berwick St Collective represent different levels of contemporary political film making. All have content which is explicitly political whether presented as fiction or documentary. However they differ in the degree to which they are, at the level of form, determined by the conventions of commercial cinema. Two poles in this series are perhaps represented by Pontecorvo's "Queimada", which tells of the struggle of a British imperialist agent to control the Caribbean island of Queimada, and the Berwick St Collective's "The Nightcleaners", originally conceived as an agit-prop film to be used to campaign for the Nightcleaners unionisation. "Queimada" was released through United Artists and starred Marlon Brando. It's level of finance, reliance on the star system and conventional film language and imagery place the film clearly in the commercial cinema, along with such films as "Z" and the "Ballad of Joe Hill". (for a detailed account of Queimada see Queimada (BURN) by CALVIN GREEN; also see the opening paragraphs of Political Formations in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub by Martin Walsh)

"The Nightcleaners" is an independently produced film which during the process of production became radically transformed through a critical analysis and interrogation of the means of depicting the nightcleaner's unionisation struggle. This interrogation included the events as they took place such as the intervention of the women's movement, union officials and the employers and also the activity of film making itself.

The question of radically transforming the means of depiction, that is changing the way the film looks, the way we 'read' it and understand it, in support of its radical political content is the central question to which this film series and accompanying booklet addresses itself.

Independence from the demands of 'commercial' cinema has allowed film makers to challenge the codes and formulaes of commercial production and consumption. This oppositional role has been important in providing a context within which independent political film makers define their work both in form and content. The context of opposition has focused critical analysis on the cultural struggle which attempts to isolate or define the ideological status of commercial cinema.

To give voice to film makers involved in this struggle a complex infrastructure of film culture has emerged in this country. Instrumental in sustaining Independent film production have been the Production Board of the British Film Institute, journals of film theory and criticism, 'Screen' magazine and 'Afterimage', from which a number of the articles reproduced in this booklet have been taken.



The Other Cinema also plays a vital role in distribution and until recently, exhibition.

For the Berwick St Collective, film work together rules out the notion of authorship as four members exert an influence over the film, no individual can be credited with the "creative act". Within their film "The Nightcleaners" the unifying presence of conventional narrative structure is absent, various process transformations, such as, image repetition, slow motion refilming and the inclusion of "blank" footage, changes the connotations of repeated images, drawing the viewer into a questioning relationship with the film. For an indepth analysis of "The Nightcleaners" see Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film by C. Johnston and P. Willemen.

Theorising by film makers necessarily plays a key role in defining the work of such groups as Berwick St. This series attempts to place the radical political film within a historical perspective.

Two epicentres of social upheaval have provided the background for much theoretical work in film. Firstly the Russian Revolution and secondly the events leading up to and including May 1968 in France. Although conceived within a narrative framework Eisenstein's first "Strike" (1924) film is based on his evolving principle of montage, "Maximum intensification of aggressive reflexes of social protest is seen in "Strike", in mounting reflexes without any opportunity for release of struggle, and heightening of the potential expression of class struggle".

Montage was invented by Lev Kuleshov in experiments carried out around 1917. These were experiments in "Creative Geography", for instance, placing the American White House in Moscow using films spacial and temporal continuity. However Eisenstein's theory had its origins in the theatre of the period and was called 'montage of attractions'. For a detailed view of Eisenstein see the Eisenstein Chapter extracted from Signs and Meaning in the Cinema by Peter Wollen, reproduced in this booklet. Eisenstein's later conception of montage was dialectical collision of ideas, creating a "directed image concept". Typage and caricature specify content, angle and lighting create an emotional dynamic within the shot, the cut and shot duration elevate the narrative progression to an almost material level, confronting the viewer with a series of shocks.

Dziga Vertov, however, worked outside of fiction, committed to the kino-eye we now call cinema-verite. Vertov established a 'school' of documentary film makers who called themselves Kinoki - kino-eyes. Together they vigorously worked to establish a revolutionary cinema of everyday drama,



city life, work and leisure. The Kinoki were eager to attack romantic fiction films; "Film drama and religion are deadly weapons at the hands of capitalists. Only by showing our revolutionary daily life do we strike the weapon from the enemy's hands". By 1925 Vertov was acknowledging his own artistic sensibility, titling his works "symphony" or "cine poem". His experimental ideas of montage incorporated all the technical devices available at that time.

"Kino-eye avails itself of all the current means of recording, ultra-rapid motion, micro cinematography reverse motion, multiple-exposure, foreshortening etc. and does not consider these as tricks, but as normal procedures of which wide use must be made". By these means Vertov attempted to create a fresh perception of the world, "breaking if necessary with the laws and customs of construction of the cine-thing" 1929.

"The Man with the Movie Camera" is Vertov's fullest demonstration of the camera's ability to transform reality. Vertov's continual reference to the production of film itself through images of the camera filming, the editing process and final projection of the film providing a built in "auto of film making. The man with the movie camera remains a landmark for Avant-Garde and political film making. See the articles on Dziga Vertov by M. Enzenberger and David Borduea, both reproduced in the booklet.

The exposure of "craft" in Vertov's Film is later focused for Jean Luc Godard by Bertolt Brecht writing on theatre, art and politics. Brecht, critical of arts capacity to 'conceal reality' from its audience wrote "The modern theatre mustn't be judged by its success in satisfying the audience habits, but by its success in transforming them". Certainly Brecht intended that the transformation should be the result of revealing the workings of capitalist society.

In "Two or Three things I know About Her" (1966), reflecting the reorganisation and rebuilding of PARIS, (the Her of the title), Godard equates capitalist society with the brothel. The narrative of "Two or Three Things" concerns the part-time prostitution of a woman living in a new high rise apartment building with her husband and child. Unable to "make ends meet" she spends one day a week in Paris prostituting herself. The narrative exists in a tension between fiction and documentary and represents a stage of Godard's retreat from fiction, which reaches zero in "Le Gai Savoir". This retreat is characterised by Godard breaking the audience's identification with the characterise of the film through the use of direct address, interruptions, quoting from literary texts and above all the constant whispering narration of Godard himself. An instant which combines these techniques is found in the opening scene of the film. Godard whispering, whilst we look at Marina Vlady



says "This woman is Marina Vlady. She is an actress. She's wearing a midnight blue sweater with yellow stripes. She is of Russian origin and her hair is dark chestnut or light brown, I'm not sure which. Then Marina Vlady speaks "Yes to speak as if one were quoting truth. It was old Brecht who said that actors should seem to be quoting".

Godard continues "This woman is Juliette Janson. She lives here. She is wearing a midnight blue sweater ..... In an article by Godard entitled 'One or Two Things' he asks "Is the character played by Marina Vlady representative of women on housing estates? I keep asking myself these questions. I watch myself filming and you hear me thinking aloud. Two or Three things, in fact, is not a film but an essay at film, presented as such and really forming part of my own personal research". (Sight and Sound 1966).

The 'research' Godard speaks of reaches a new level in "Le Gai Savoir" (The Joy of Learning 1968). Started prior to the events of May 1968 the project was offered to Godard by the French State Television Network - O.R.T.F. The film was later rejected by them for broadcasting.

Judging his work prior to "Le Gai Savoir" as having been on the level of "scientific experiment", Godard now sees his role as engaging in the "struggle for production and the class struggle". It is at this time that Godard and others, later to include Jean Pierre Gorin, form the Dziga Vertov Group (see Kent E. Carrol Interview with Dziga Vertov Group and What is to be done? by Jean Luc Godard).

The events of May 1968 in Paris were recorded in newsreels called Cinetracts "completely silent, stills and lettering on a 100 ft. roll of 16 mm film. These makers remain as anonymous as their various styles permit. Resnais, Godard, Marker" (Simon Hatog). Cinetracts will accompany "Two or Three Things I Know About Her" as a short.

The action of "Le Gai Savoir" takes the form of seven late night meetings in a television studio between Emile, great great grandson of Jean Jaques Rousseau (Jean Pierre Leaud) and the daughter of Lumumba and the Cultural Revolution, delegate from the Third World and dismissed factory worker (Juliette Berto). They undergo a course of education. Peter Wollen in his article "The Two Avant Gardes" (Studio International) traces the course. "Godard tries programmatically to return to zero, to decompose and then recompose sounds and images. For Godard conflict becomes not simply collision



through juxtaposition, as in Eisenstein's model, but an act of negativity, a splitting apart of an apparent natural unity a disjunction; Godard's view of bourgeois communications is one of a discourse which gains its power from its apparent naturalness, the impression of necessity which binds, a sound to an image, in order to provide a convincing representation of the world. He wants, not simply to represent an alternative 'world view', but to investigate the whole process of signification out of which a world view or ideology is constructed. "Le Gai Savoir" ends with the following. 'This film has not wished to, could not wish to explain the cinema or even constitute its object, but more modestly, to offer a few means of arriving there. This is not the film which must be made, but it shows how, if one is to make a film, one must necessarily follow some of the paths travelled here'.

Towards the end of "Le Gai Savoir" Juliette Berto remarks that half the shots are missing from the film. Leaud replies that they will be taken by other film makers: Bertolucci, Straub, Glarba Rocha. It is perhaps Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet who are closest to Godard's radical cinema.

"Not Reconciled" 1965 opens with a quote from Brecht "Instead of wanting to create the impression that he is improvising, the actor should rather show what the truth is: he is quoting". Consistent with this statement Straub's actors deliver their dialogue in a flat expressionless tone refusing the audience any emotional involvement with the characters. Direct sound recording and an austere image composition contrive Straub's reductionism.

"Not Reconciled" concerns facism in Germany as experienced by three generations of a middle class family "which acquires political consciousness although to a limited extent" ..... The film is stripped of all devices that might indicate flash backs and flash forwards "time, as it were, has been flattened out, and distant past, recent past, present and even future all co-exist". Straub refers to it as a "pure cinematographic, moral and political reflection on the last fifty years of German Life".

"The Bridegroom, the comedienne and the Pimp" 1968 is Straub's "film film". Noted by Martin Walsh, in his article Political formations in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub, for its self-reflexive quality, the film raises questions about itself, its material and processes. Martin Walsh views the film as a "meditation on the stylistic possibilities of the cinema and in their sequential organization they constitute the history of cinema". Straub refers to this film as being his most political, even though it does not have an explicit political content. However, formally it is his most "politicised" film to date.



Straub's film poses a number of the questions and contradictions raised by this series of films. To what extent should politically radical content be supported by radical film form? Does radical film form, in itself, constitute a political act, subversive of the dominant conventions of cinema: Where does this cinema stand in relation to its audience? Is it content with an elitist minority or does it aspire to a mass audience - Is this cinema another innovation of modernist art?

"Agitation, Propaganda and Theory"

"..... regarding the state of political film, I think you have to distinguish between three levels of political film, which is a classical distinction: films of agitation, propaganda and theory. All have different purposes and different audiences. Agitation is for a specific conjuncture and for a limited specific audience. Propaganda is aimed at a mass and presents a general kind of political line and broad ideas, and the theoretical film again is for a limited audience and a specific conjuncture but a theoretical conjuncture rather than an immediately political one. Theoretical films are for, so to speak, a 'cadre' audience. Obviously, most political films are either agitational or propagandist. To my mind all three levels are necessary although the problem of political film is often posed in terms of one as against the other". (Peter Wollen, Screen, Autumn, 1974).



**Fri. Jan 20th at 7.30 p.m.**  
**QUEIMADA**

★ **¡ Queimada !**

Italy/France, 1968

Director: **Gillo Pontecorvo**

*Cert—AA. dist—United Artists. p.c—P.E.A. (Rome)/Les Productions Artistes Associés (Paris). p—Alberto Grimaldi. p. sup—Mario del Papa. asst. d—Rinaldo Ricci. sc—Franco Solinas, Giorgio Arlorio. story—Gillo Pontecorvo, Franco Solinas, Giorgio Arlorio. ph—Marcello Gatti, Giuseppe Bruzzolini. col—DeLuxe. Print by Technicolor. ed—Mario Morra. sup. ed—Enzo Ocone. p. designer—Piero Gherardi. a.d—Sergio Canevari. set dec—Francesco Bronzi. sp. effects—Aldo Gasparri. m—Ennio Morricone. cost—Piero Gherardi. sd. rec—Eugenio Rondani. armaments consultant—Alessandro Sozzi. percussion adviser—Franco Giordano. l.p—Marlon Brando (Sir William Walker), Evaristo Marquez (José Dolores), Renato Salvatori (Teddy Sanchez), Norman Hill (Shelton), Tom Lysors (General Prada), Wanani (Guarina), Joseph Persuad (Juanito), Gianpiero Albertini (Henry), Carlo Palmucci (Jack), Cecily Browne (Lady Bella), Dana Ghia (Francesca), Mauricio Rodriguez (Ramon), Alejandro Obregon (English Major). 10,080 ft. 112 mins. Original running time—132 mins. (approx.). Dubbed.*

Sir William Walker is sent by the British Government to the Caribbean island of Queimada to break the sugar trade monopoly of the Portuguese colonial government there. The island derives its name from the fact that its European colonists razed it by fire in the sixteenth century in order to quell a native rebellion, and Walker calculates that the only way to open up its trade is to provoke a revolt of the African slaves with which it was repopulated. His arrival coincides with the execution of the island's only known rebel leader, Santiago; but Walker's investigations convince him that José Dolores, a dockside porter, has the necessary spirit, and he accordingly sets about making a revolutionary of him, first involving him in a bullion robbery, then placing him in a position where he is obliged to massacre Portuguese troops. When José Dolores' revolt has attracted most of the native population, Walker persuades the liberal-minded Teddy Sanchez to lead the colonists in a fight for independence: he helps Teddy assassinate the Portuguese governor, and Dolores—painfully forced to acknowledge that he lacks the economic understanding needed to rule the country—agrees to disband his army and send the now freed slaves back to their menial work on the plantations. Ten years later, Walker—now a drunken derelict in London—is summoned back to Queimada to protect the interests of the British Sugar Company, threatened by a native revolt led by Dolores, who is still practising the precepts Walker taught him. Walker recognises the need to eliminate José Dolores; but after innumerable battles between Dolores' guerrillas and Walker's British forces, Teddy Sanchez realises that he and his country are being used by Britain. The realisation costs him his life: Walker has him arrested and shot by a military junta, then ruthlessly leads Sanchez's black soldiers in pursuit of Dolores' dwindling army, burning down most of the island in the process. When he eventually captures him, Dolores refuses Walker's offers of friendship and escape: knowing that only his death can serve his cause, he chooses to be executed. The trouble quelled, Walker prepares to depart, but is stabbed by the porter who carries his bags, as José Dolores had carried them ten years before.

After *Battle of Algiers*, *¡ Queimada !* confirms that Pontecorvo's strength lies in his unique ability to demonstrate in passionate, dramatic terms the inevitability of economic and historical processes. He has stated in interviews that he was attempting in *¡ Queimada !* to bring together two kinds of film: "We wanted to join the romantic adventure and the film of ideas". Yet this intention never appears simply as an attempt to gild the pill or to lull his audience into a false romantic security, the better to drive home his hard, political facts of life; rather it serves to demonstrate both the difficulty and the necessity of perceiving life in analytic, abstract terms. From the first sequence, both levels of film-making are present: the opening shots—the three-masted brigantine cruising into the Caribbean port, the handsome 'hero' peering through his telescope at the mist-shrouded palm trees and bleached-out rocks of the headland—may evoke the schoolboy adventure-land of some uncharted Treasure Island, but the words that accompany them are startlingly mismatched. As Brando inscrutably surveys his destination, the captain standing at his shoulder delivers, like some killjoy schoolmaster, a brief historcio-economic outline of the island's troubled past—the first of countless intimations that things are seldom what they seem. Once the ship has docked, the good captain disappears, but his didactic function is miraculously incorporated into the character of Sir William Walker. A pragmatic foreign agent protecting the economic interests of the country he represents by successively assuming the roles of revolutionary *agent provocateur* and counter-revolutionary repressor, he is at once involved in and detached from the central events. His briefings—of the first guerrilla forces, of the colonial businessmen, of the reactionary army—are characterised by the same deterministic logic that marked the speeches of Colonel Mathieu in *Battle of Algiers*. His remarks provide a lucid commentary on the cause-and-effect relationships which govern the confusing struggle between the island's exploited blacks and exploiting whites; yet, like Mathieu, Walker is not just a dispassionate observer, since he puts his implacable logic at the service of the powers which pay him (first the British government, then a commercial company) and attempts to control the events he analyses. José Dolores ultimately learns as much from Walker's treacherous actions as from his theoretical teachings; and it is precisely the duality of Walker's role—the fact that in Pontecorvo's world there are no real villains, only people trapped within the logic of unjust systems—that makes the character so effective. And an extraordinary idiosyncratic performance from Marlon Brando manages to convince us simultaneously of Walker's blamelessness and of his guile, in other words of his credibility. (In a curious way, the fact that the island has been burned once before both justifies the man and indicts the system he serves). Opposite Brando, in the role of José Dolores (who passes in the course of the narrative from slavery through paternalism to revolutionary martyrdom), Pontecorvo cast Evaristo Marquez, an illiterate cane cutter who had never seen a film; and the contrast in acting styles, of subtlety and strength, further reinforces his argument. But despite the conviction of the central performances, Pontecorvo's interest lies in mass movements rather than individuals; and in dramatic terms, his principal characters might be said to serve as chorus to the vast crowds whose destinies they not so much shape as express. The victorious black army galloping along the beach; the rum riots in the native villages that will provide cover for the first illegal enterprise; the wild carnival that provides cover for the Governor's assassination; the final manhunt at the heart of a circle of mountains: all these are filmed with the same epic urgency as the crowd scenes in *Battle of Algiers* and similarly accompanied by percussion and a form of Gregorian chant, though this time the claustrophobic Casbah is replaced by sweeping hills and semi-tropical foliage, with the camera moving horizontally rather than vertically. Once again, violence, bloodshed and atrocity are present but played down, with the emphasis on cause rather than effect. The extent to which Pontecorvo successfully combines epic drama with Marxist theory can be gauged by the analogies his film suggests: it has its application to independence movements and guerrilla struggles everywhere, not least Vietnam (when Walker first leaves Queimada, his destination is Indo-China). In the original scenario the island was a Spanish colony; but the protests of the Spanish government, their refusal to let Pontecorvo, who had done most of his shooting in Colombia, use locations on the Iberian peninsula, and their economic pressure—a threat to boycott the film—led to the inclusion of an "I" in the title; and the Spanish, who had historically dominated the Antilles, were replaced by the Portuguese.

JAN DAWSON



## **Fri. Jan. 27th at 7.30 p.m. STRIKE**

PLUS

### **Train en Marche, Le (The Train Rolls On)**

France, 1971

Director: SLON [Chris Marker]

Dist—The Other Cinema. p.c—SLON. sc—SLON, Alexander Medvedkin. No further credits issued. 1,188 ft. 33 mins. (16 mm.). English commentary.

At the end of 1931 an order was issued by the Soviet People's Commissariat of Transportation concerning the implementation of a Central Committee decision to set up a film-train on the model of the agit-train which had crossed Russia during the Civil War period. In charge of the film-train, which was fully equipped and self-sufficient, was Alexander Medvedkin, who had established something of a reputation with his short film farces for Soyuzkino. Forty years later Chris Marker and the SLON group brought Medvedkin to Paris and filmed him in a railway depot as he described the story of the train. Medvedkin is introduced via a montage of newsreel footage, shots from Dziga-Vertov's *Kino-pravda*, a *Kino-eye* poster, to the accompaniment of a characteristic Marker commentary ("Everywhere the engineers of dreams assembled... By train the blood of the revolution circulated"). Walking along a platform, occasionally turning to face the camera, Medvedkin describes the composition of his pioneer team and the conditions in which they worked. The train, he recalls, was made up of three carriages, with living quarters for thirty-two people (one square metre per person), a film studio, an animation section, a tiny projection room. "We were young romantics", Medvedkin says; and they did everything themselves, even printing a train newspaper. The train was seen as part of the propaganda machinery for building the revolution: taking the dream from the cities and turning it into a reality for the peasants of the Ukraine and the workers in a steel furnace a thousand miles from Moscow. Medvedkin recalls showing instructional films to peasants on the Ukrainian collective farms (this was the period of the first Five Year Plan), and using the evidence of film to demonstrate an improvement in the construction of wagon wheels. Approximately seventy films were made by the film-train team. None of them survives, but some idea of the methods they used can be deduced from Medvedkin's 1934 silent feature *Happiness*, recently revived by SLON. Marker's film ends with Medvedkin introducing *Happiness*, and describing how some of its ideas—in particular its use of satire cloaked in slapstick—derived directly from the films made on the train. In the absence of any visual evidence of the work of the film-train, this oral account from one of the few survivors of the team is a valuable record—and an imaginative film in its own right, despite misgivings about whether filming Medvedkin against the background of a Paris railway yard is anything more than whimsical.

DAVID WILSON

## **Fri. Feb. 3rd at 7.30 p.m. EARTH**

EARTH Russia 1930

Director and Scenario

ALEXANDER DOVZHENKO

Photography

DANYLO DEMUTSKY

Music

L REVUTSKY

Length 1704m

## **Stachka (Strike)**

U.S.S.R., 1924

Director: Sergei M. Eisenstein

Cert—A. dist—Contemporary. p.c—Goskino/Proletkult. asst. d—Grigori Alexandrov-Mormonenko, I. Kravchunovski, A. Levshin. sc—The Proletkult Collective [Valeri F. Pletnev, Sergei M. Eisenstein, I. Kravchunovski, Grigori Alexandrov-Mormonenko]. ph—Edouard Tissé. asst. ph—Vasili Khvatov, V. Popov. ed—Sergei M. Eisenstein. a.d—Vasili Rakhals. l.p—I. Klukvin (*Militant Worker*), Alexander Antonov (*The Organiser*), Grigori Alexandrov (*Foreman*), Mikhail Gomarov (*A Worker*), Maxim Strauch (*The Spy*), I. Ivanov (*Chief of Security Police*), Boris Yurtsev, Judith Glizer, V. Yanukova, Kuznetsova, Misha Mamin and V. Uralski (*Members of the Lumpenproletariat*), V. Poltoratski, P. Belyaev, V. Juravlev. 7,380 ft. 82 mins. Original running time—90 mins. (35 and 16 mm.). English titles, sound version.

In a factory in Tsarist Russia the workers are beginning to organise against the owners and management. Leaflets are being produced and agit-prop work is started. One day a worker is accused of stealing a micrometer from work and dismissed. Unable to face the future he hangs himself from one of the machines, leaving behind a note to his fellow workers. Spontaneously they decide to strike. The factory lies idle as the workers prepare their demands and await an answer. Initially the owners attempt to break the strike by using agents and provocateurs. When this fails, they call in the power of the State, and cavalrymen arrive who slaughter the strikers and their families.

*Strike* is a breathtaking film, an achievement that has rarely been surpassed. The occasion for its re-release is a new print, complete with added soundtrack. At least the Russians haven't done to it what they once did to *Potemkin*, which was to add dialogue, but all the same we would have been better served had they released a version nearer the original. The captions are very messy, sometimes in English, sometimes in Russian with English subtitles, sometimes just in Russian. Since Eisenstein's captions were always an integral part of his films, to replace them seems a somewhat frivolous act. The soundtrack is also unfortunate. It has a rhythm of its own which cuts across the rhythm of the montage and brings out the mimic and operatic qualities of the acting to the detriment of other elements in Eisenstein's cinematic art. Furthermore, it adds an ideological point to the film which was not present in the original. The struggle of the workers is given a stirring, neo-classical musical commentary, and the intervention of the lumpenproletarian provocateurs is accompanied by jazz. When he made *Strike*, Eisenstein was not an admirer of the passive use of music the Russians have adopted here. The effect of the soundtrack is as distracting as the piano accompaniment sometimes provided for silent Soviet films in this country. All that one can recommend is that when this version is shown, the soundtrack should be firmly turned off.

ROSALIND DELMAR

## **Fri. Mar. 3rd at 7.30 p.m. MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA**

MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

Director and Scenario

DZIGA VERTOV

Assistant Editor

YELIZAVETA SVILOVA

Photography

MIKHAIL KAUFMAN

Russia 1929 Length 1830m



**Fri. Feb. 10th at 7.30 p.m.  
TWO OR THREE THINGS I  
KNOW ABOUT HER**

## Deux ou Trois Choses que je sais d'elle (Two or Three Things I Know About Her)

France, 1966

Director: Jean-Luc Godard

Cert: X. dist: Contemporary. p.c.: Anouchka Films/Argos-Films/ Les Films du Carrosse/Paris Film. p. manager: Philippe Senné. assistant a.: Charles Bitsch, Isabelle Pons. sc: Jean-Luc Godard. Suggested by an enquiry by Catherine Vimenet published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*. ph: Raoul Coutard. Techniscope. col: Eastman Colour. ca: Françoise Collin, Chantal Delattre. m: Beethoven. sd: René Lévert, Antoine Bonfanti. narrator: Jean-Luc Godard. l.p.: Marina Vlady (Juliette Janson), Anny Duperey (Marianne), Roger Montsoire (Robert Janson), Jean Narboni (Roger), Christophe Bourseiller (Christophe), Marc Bourseiller (Solange), Raoul Lévy (John Bogus), Joseph Gehrand (Monsieur Gérard), Helena Bielkiewicz (Girl in Bath), Robert Chevassu (Electricity Meter-reader), Yves Beneyton (Long-haired Youth), Jean-Pierre Laverne (The Writer), Blandine Jeanson (The Student), Claude Miller (Bouvard), Jean-Patrick Lebel (Pécuchet), Juliet Berto (Girl who talks to Robert), Anna Manga (Woman in Basement), Benjamin Rosette (Man in Basement), Helen Scott (Woman at Pinball Machine). 7,830 ft. 87 mins. Subtitles.

August 17, 1966: a day in the life of a city and a woman. Juliette Janson lives with her children Christophe and Solange and her husband Robert in a modern apartment in a huge housing development on the outskirts of Paris. To maintain their standard of living, she works occasionally as a prostitute. This morning, after Christophe has left for school, she takes Solange with her into the city and leaves her with Monsieur Gérard, a baby-minder who also rents out rooms by the hour. She wanders round a fashionable store, tries on a fur coat, buys a dress; she sits in a café waiting for a customer; eventually she goes to a hotel room with a young métro worker. Then she goes to the hairdresser's for a shampoo and leaves with her manicurist Marianne; after having her car washed at the garage where Robert works, she goes to a luxury hotel where Marianne has arranged a remunerative *partie à trois* with an American journalist. She collects Robert from a café, and they drive home and put the children to bed. Juliette wonders whether there is any point to the kind of life they lead but continues with her nightly routine.

Godard has emphasised that the 'elle' of his film's title is not the character played by Marina Vlady but the city of Paris; and the first flash title to appear on the screen ("18 Lessons on Industrial Society") indicates the episodic structure he will use to demonstrate the two or three things he knows: that industrial society, embodied in the vast, impersonal apartment blocks and concrete motorways of the reconstructed city, strengthens the class system, dehumanises its inhabitants and reduces them, not to nothingness but to "zero"; that the acquisitive drive of capitalism compels all who live within it to some form of prostitution; that the proliferation of objects (consumer goods), the fragmentation of culture (paperback books) and the habitual misuse of words (advertising) combine to make communication between people virtually impossible. Being Godard, he does not simply state what he knows, he also questions how he knows, not just what he sees but how he sees. The different levels of his film are to some extent unified by a recurrent questioning of the cognitive process that is also a questioning of the limits, and limitations, of language, including film language. As Juliette sits in the café, a woman at the next table flicks through a sex magazine; and Godard shows us a page as Juliette sees it, then the same page as the woman sees it, before asking: "Où est donc la vérité? De face ou de profil?" Shortly after, when Juliette visits Robert at the garage, Godard debates out loud whether an exquisitely lyrical shot of the adjacent trees and cloudy sky is relevant to his description of this particular moment in Juliette's life. His own doubts as a narrator are echoed in Juliette's thoughts, which provide a second commentary on much of the action: she too is tormented, both by the gap between "l'objectivité qui m'écrase et la subjectivité qui m'exile" and by the inadequacy of language to describe her state of mind. In a remarkable scene at the hairdresser's, she sustains a banal (objective) conversation with Marianne while continuing a subjective monologue about the difficulty of understanding her own sensations. Yet just as Godard, long before *Le Gai Savoir*, is already questioning the nature of images and sounds (cutting the city noises on and off to make a single shot of a construction site alternately lyrical and oppressive), so too he is already putting into practice the doctrine he formulated in *La Chinoise* of confronting abstract ideas with concrete images. A naked girl is interrupted in her bath by the meter man just before the narrator observes that modern amenities like hot water, though now viewed as necessities, are luxuries that few people can afford. The emptiness of paperback culture is brilliantly suggested in the sequence where a modern-dress Bouvard and Pécuchet (named after Flaubert's cliché-hunters) sit at a café table, digesting their dinner and frantically reading out random phrases from the books piled high in front of them; while in the film's most remarkable shot, as the narrator tries to articulate his indeterminate suspension between an objective and a subjective existence, the camera moves closer and closer in on newly stirred coffee swirling round in a cup, turning object to abstraction before our very eyes. The desire for objects that fail to satisfy desire is conveyed as Juliette wanders round the store trying on a fur coat, enquiring about sweaters yet supposedly 'wanting' a dress; the cult of the object is economically demonstrated as Juliette passes from having her hair washed to having her car washed; and the film's final shot is of temptingly packaged consumer goods spread out on the grass, a set of signs that have lost their meaning. Yet despite the abstraction of much of his thought and his emphasis on objects as both defining and obstructing human relationships, Godard also creates an extraordinarily intimate portrait of Marina Vlady's Juliette, a woman trying to define an identity that is more than the sum of her socially determined acts and possessions.

JAN DAWSON



**Fri. Feb. 17th at 7.30 p.m.**  
**MACHORKA MUFF**  
**NOT RECONCILED**  
**THE BRIDEGROOM,**  
**COMEDIAN AND THE PIMP**

**THE BRIDEGROOM,**  
**COMEDIAN AND THE PIMP**

Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der  
 Zuhälter, Der (The Bridegroom, the  
 Comedienne and the Pimp)

West Germany, 1968

Director: Jean-Marie Straub

*Dist*—The Other Cinema. *p.c*—Janus Film und Fernsehen /Straub-Huillet.  
*p*—Klaus Hellwig. *sc*—Jean-Marie Straub. Incorporating his adaptation of  
 the play *Krankheit der Jugend* by Ferdinand Bruckner, and extracts from  
 the poetry of Juan de la Cruz (*Romance 7, Romance 22, Canticum Espiritual*).  
*ph*—Klaus Schilling, Hubs Hagen. *ed*—Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie  
 Straub. *m*—Johann Sebastian Bach (from the "Ascension Oratorio").  
*sd. rec*—Peter Lutz, (theatre sequence) Klaus Eckelt. *collaborators*—  
 Herbert Linder, Herbert Meier, Heinz Pusi, Dietmar Müller, Bernhard  
 Wember, Ian Bodenham, Helmut Färber. *lp*—James Powell (*James*),  
 Lilith Ungerer (*Lilith [Marie in the play]*), Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
 (*The Pimp [Freder in the play]*), Peer Raben (*Willi [Alt in the play]*), Irm  
 Hermann (*Désirée*), Kristin Peterson (*Irene*), Hanna Schygulla (*Lucy*),  
 Rudolf Waldemar Brem (*Petrell*). 828 ft. 23 mins. (16 mm.). *Subtitles*.

The credits of the film are shown superimposed over graffiti  
 found on the wall of the Munich post office: "Stupid old Germany—  
 I hate it over here—I hope I can go soon—Patricia". What follows  
 can be broadly divided into three sections. The first comprises a  
 single shot, lasting over four minutes: a continuous dolly-shot (from  
 a moving car) of Munich's Landsbergerstrasse at night, showing  
 numerous prostitutes waiting for clients. The second is also a single  
 shot: a ten-minute take from a fixed vantage point in the audience  
 area of the entirety of Straub's production/adaptation of Bruckner's  
 play *Krankheit der Jugend* (*The Sickness of Youth*) at the Munich  
 Aktion-Theatre. The play is divided into three acts (the divisions  
 being marked by black-outs), and presents the tortuous relation-  
 ships between a number of ill-assorted young people in a Viennese  
 boarding house; it ends, after a girl called Désirée has committed  
 suicide, with the degenerate Freder proposing marriage to the  
 middle-class Marie. The third section comprises a further nine shots  
 (variously static, panning and tracking) of varying length. Although  
 full of deliberate discontinuities, these shots present a fragmentary  
 narrative: against the wishes of her pimp and his colleague Willi,  
 the ex-prostitute Lilith marries the black American James. When the  
 pimp returns to threaten the marriage, Lilith shoots him.

Straub describes *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp*  
 as "the most aleatory of my films, and the most political". The  
 element of randomness or chance in its genesis is well documented  
 in many interviews with Straub and in Richard Roud's book on the  
 director: after completing his Bach film, Straub "felt like making  
 a short thriller" but got diverted into adapting and producing the  
 Bruckner play for the Aktion-Theatre; during the play's three-week  
 run, the other elements came together in Straub's mind (the graffiti,  
 a long-standing fascination with the Landsbergerstrasse in the 'red  
 light' district of Munich, a newspaper story about a romance  
 between an ex-prostitute and a Negro), and their conjunction pro-  
 duced the film. The result is extremely intensive, and broaches an  
 extraordinary range of issues: the conventions of theatre staging,  
 the form and syntax of narrative film, 'realism' and 'melodrama' as  
 modes in both theatre and film, a specific socio-political situation in

West Germany (*vis-à-vis* what was happening elsewhere in May  
 1968), the inherited weight of the nineteenth century's social morality  
 in contemporary Europe. The fact that the film has no dominant,  
 unifying diegesis but instead proposes links between its seemingly  
 disparate fragments on various other levels means that there are  
 —deliberately—a great many possible 'ways in' to the film. One is  
 the Bruckner play, which Straub has reduced to around one-  
 twelfth of its original length; it subsists as a series of confrontations  
 between two or three people, impossible to follow as a narrative,  
 although the conversational banter yields a number of two-sided  
 themes: true love/prostitution, idealism/pragmatism, suicide/  
 survival by any means, stylisation/naturalism and so on. The way  
 that it is staged—on one tiny set, incongruously but sparsely furn-  
 ished, with the characters constantly entering and leaving through  
 the two (mis-matched) doors—suggests a parody of 'conventional'  
 theatre, as does the way that a patently theatrical text has been  
 rendered unintelligible by simple compression. The play ends with  
 its most sustained scene: Freder, the character who has been offering  
 to make the maid Lucy a prostitute and who has just furnished  
 Désirée with the veronal for her suicide, confidently proposes  
 marriage to the distraught Marie, saying their union would be  
 'exemplary' as an act of social integration. Straub's direct cut from  
 this to the 'drama' of James and Lilith is teasingly plausible on a  
 number of levels, despite the drastic change in tone, visual mode and  
 style of acting. For a start, the cut compares the stage-set with a  
 hallway in Marie's apartment block: both are seen as two walls and  
 two doors. James' not-quite-instantaneous appearance through one  
 of the doors, and prompt disappearance through the other one,  
 into a lift, evokes the mechanics of the play's staging. And his  
 tender parting kiss to Marie, an image of trouble-free miscegenation,  
 creates an uneasy resonance with Freder's sardonic proclamation  
 of social integration. This resonance is amplified by the use of  
 actors in more than one role: Lilith Ungerer plays both Marie and  
 Lilith, Rainer Werner Fassbinder both Freder and the pimp who  
 tries to stop Lilith from marrying James. If the play is taken as  
 a starting point, then Straub's handling of the Bruckner text could  
 be seen as the model for his 'de-construction' of film narrative  
 conventions in the following action. Thus the brevity and discreteness  
 of the play's scenes would find a correlative in the film's discon-  
 tinuities (arbitrary switches from night to day, cuts that preserve  
 the linearity of a plot only tangentially), establishing the act of  
 narration in both theatre and film as problematic. But at the same  
 time, the final section offers countless other links with what has  
 gone before. The beginning of the 'chase', with Willi driving off  
 after James at night, recalls the long travelling shot along the street  
 at the beginning of the film. Lilith's past as a prostitute recalls the  
 prostitutes huddled in small groups along that street. The wedding  
 scene, shot in a single static take from a slightly oblique angle,  
 recalls the whole of the play, which is shot in an identical fashion.  
 Lilith and James speak to each other in quotations from the six-  
 teenth-century Spanish poet Juan de la Cruz, recalling the theatre  
 actors 'quoting' Bruckner. While the religious poetry recalls the  
 rhetoric of the wedding ceremony, its own rhetoric (it is full of  
 images of freedom and commitment) recalls the 'profane' exchanges  
 between pimp and prostitute in both play and film. The fact that  
 James is American, and speaks German with a strong accent,  
 recalls the expatriate's graffiti at the beginning. And Lilith's final,  
 blissful soliloquy by the open window, after she has shot the pimp,  
 is linked with the Landsbergerstrasse shot by the recurrence on the  
 soundtrack of the 'glorious' Bach oratorio. Such inter-connections—  
 and there are a great many more—not only demonstrate the density  
 of Straub's assemblage, but also bear witness to his refusal to  
 confine himself to a single level of discourse: conceptual ideas  
 jostle with immediate political realities. Straub's insistence on the  
 materiality of the medium (which for him means direct sound, shots  
 that are self-defining and other strategies that counter the risk of  
 'transparency') providing the common base. Although *The Bride-  
 groom* takes its place in a group of recent political films that use the  
 figure of the prostitute as a kind of key to contemporary society  
 (Godard's *Vivre sa vie* and *Deux ou trois choses* . . . Fassbinder's  
 early gangster movies), it is finally a measure of the film's pro-  
 vocativeness that it transcends any such categorisation. It remains  
 Straub's wittiest and most daringly experimental film, issuing a  
 challenge that little modern cinema (including Straub's own sub-  
 sequent work) has yet taken up.

TONY RAYNS



## MACHORKA MUFF

### Machorka-Muff

West Germany/Monaco, 1963      Director: Jean-Marie Straub

*Dist*—The Other Cinema. *p.c*—Straub-Huillet (Munich)/Atlas Film (Duisburg) Cineropa-Film (Monaco). *p. manager*—Hans von der Heydt. *asst. d.*—Danièle Huillet. *sc*—Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on the story *Hauptstädtisches Journal* by Heinrich Böll. *ph*—Wendelin Sachtler. *ed*—Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. *m*—"Musical Offering, BWV 1079: Ricercar a 6" by Johann Sebastian Bach, "Transmutations" by François Louis. *sd*—Janosz Rozner, Jean-Marie Straub. *lp*—Erich Kuby (*Erich von Machorka-Muff*), Renate Langsdorff (*Inn*), Rolf Thiede (*Murcks-Maloché*), Günther Strupp (*Heffling*), Johannes Eckardt (*Priest*), Heiner Braun (*Minister*), Gino Cardella (*Waiter*), Julius Wikidal (*Bricklayer*). 607 ft. 17 mins. (16 mm.). Subtitles.

Germany, in the early 1950s. Colonel Machorka-Muff arrives in Bonn to see his mistress Inn and continue his efforts to clear the name of General Hurlanger-Hiss from disgrace after his retreat at Schwichi-Schwalache during World War II. At his hotel the next morning, after meeting and exchanging pleasantries with a lower rank officer he commanded, he also sees Murcks-Maloché from the Ministry, who informs the Colonel that he is to give the dedication address at the foundation-laying ceremony to inaugurate the Hurlanger-Hiss Academy of Military Memories. After the Colonel spends the morning walking through Bonn, Inn picks him up in her Porsche and they drive to her flat and make love. She wakes him a few hours later to announce the arrival of the Minister of Defence, who presents him with a general's uniform and drives him to the ceremony; there Machorka-Muff announces in his dedication that Hurlanger-Hiss made his retreat after losing 14,700 men, not "only" 8,500 as previously thought. At mass the next morning, Inn recognises the second, fifth and sixth of her seven former husbands, and Machorka-Muff announces that he will be the eighth; afterwards, the priest explains that there will be no problem in having a church wedding because all of her former marriages were Protestant ones. They drive to Petersberg to visit Inn's family. Murcks-Maloché comes to the villa to report that the Opposition has expressed dissatisfaction with the Academy; when Machorka-Muff tells this to Inn, she replies that her family has never been opposed.

Paradoxically, the above synopsis of Straub's first film—which might seem long enough to furnish the plot of a conventional feature—is in fact a drastic reduction of what is already a sharp paring down, by Straub and Huillet, of a very short story by Heinrich Böll (known as *Bonn Diary* in English, and occupying only ten short pages in Böll's collection *Absent Without Leave*). Thus to recapitulate the plot in abbreviated form raises the same central question that Straub poses; namely, what is necessary? For Karlheinz Stockhausen, who wrote Straub an enthusiastic letter after seeing the film at Oberhausen in 1963, it is a film entirely without ornamentation. On the other hand, story and film alike are motored on nothing but the accumulation of details, and it is debatable just how many of these are *absolutely* essential either to Böll or to Straub: the latter omits, for example, a performance of a concerto for seven drums given after the laying of the Academy's cornerstone, which is renamed the Hurlanger-Hiss Memorial Septet; and omitted from the above synopsis are such details as the hero's solipsistic dream of encountering several memorials inscribed with his name, experienced the night of his arrival in Bonn, and his remark in the narration that he'd like to have an affair with Heffling's wife, which is full of blatant class overtones. But how much do we need to know about Machorka-Muff's odiousness and what it entails for enlightenment to register? Straub has helpfully added a series of street placards ("To become old and remain young is the hope of everyone") and newspaper headlines ("Will We Become Hammer or Anvil?") to punctuate his walk through Bonn and thereby underline both his psychology and the historical context; here and elsewhere, pans from hero to urban or country landscapes (or texts) and vice versa imply ideological as well as visual continuities—the opening pan across a vista of Bonn at night, indeed, has a rather Mabuse-like aspect. And the concentration and mainly fast cutting serve to make each shot of the film a deadly little 'monument' to Machorka-Muff, like the row of these glimpsed in his dream—successive nails driven into the bland surface of his congested myth. But to understand Straub's precision with any clarity, a reading of the Böll story is almost obligatory; otherwise, it is difficult to assimilate the narrative details as rapidly as Straub dispenses with them. Stockhausen's very sensitive appraisal (reprinted in Richard Roud's book on Straub) treats the rhythms of the film musically, and certainly this analogy carries some application; but it is possible that the poetics of Ezra Pound, in his reduction of *The Waste Land* and some of his own poems to their final states, may be equally useful to an understanding of Straub's approach to his material. The coolness of Erich Kuby's narration, the clean economy of the images, and the marvellously abrupt ending—a sudden closing cadence with some of the effect of a slammed door—all suggest a profusion of shots, details and feelings forcibly hammered together to form a continuous, dark and extremely packed surface. It is an appropriate enough cornerstone for Straub to build his own Academy of Memories on, in his subsequent films—laid here with a clipped decorum that seems to take some of its staccato delivery (if not its ideology) from the despised Machorka-Muff himself.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM



## NOT RECONCILED

### Nicht Versöhnt oder Es hilft nur Gewalt, wo Gewalt herrscht (Not Reconciled, or Only Violence Helps Where Violence Rules)

West Germany, 1965

Director: Jean-Marie Straub

*Dist*—The Other Cinema. *p.c*—Straub-Huillet. *p*—Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub. *sc*—Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on the novel *Billard um halbzehn* by Heinrich Böll. *ph*—Wendelin Sachtler, Gerhard Ries, Christian Schwarzwald [Christian Blackwood], Jean-Marie Straub. *ed*—Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub. *a.d*—(none). *m*—excerpt from First Movement of "Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion" by Bela Bartók, Overture from "Suite No. 2 in B Minor" by Johann Sebastian Bach. *sd*—Lutz Grübner, Willi Hanspach. *lp*—Heinrich Hargesheimer (Heinrich Fäbmel at 80), Chargesheimer [Carlheinz Hargesheimer] (Heinrich Fäbmel at 35), Martha Ständer (Johanna Fäbmel at 70), Danièle Straub [Danièle Huillet] (Johanna Fäbmel as a Young Woman), Henning Harmssen (Robert Fäbmel at 40), Ulrich Hopmann (Robert Fäbmel at 18), Joachim Weiler (Joseph Fäbmel), Eva-Maria Bold (Ruth Fäbmel), Hiltraud Wegener (Marianne), Ulrich von Thüna (Schrella at about 35), Ernst Kutzinski (Schrella at 15), Heiner Braun (Nettlinger), Georg Zander (Hugo/Ferdinand "Ferd" Progulsk), Kathrin Bold (Ferd's Sister), Erika Brühl (Edith), Werner Brühl (Trischler), Helga Brühl (Frau Trischler), Lutz Grübner (1st Abbot), Martin Trieb (2nd Abbot), Karl Bodenschatz (Hotel Porter), Wendelin Sachtler (Mull), Anita Bell (Old Woman Playing Cards), Margit Borstel ("Die Meisterin" [Blonde Knitting Stockings]), Eduard von Wickenburg (M), Huguette Sellen (Robert's Secretary), Hans Schönberger, Hartmut Kirchner, Jürgen Kraeft, Achim Wurm, Max Dietrich Willutzki, Hannelore Langhoff, Johanna Odry, Günther Becker, Willy Bruno Wange, Stefan Odry, Paul Esser, Hans Zander, Walter Brenner, Karsten Peters, Jochem Grüner, Günter Göbel, Peter Berger, Eberhard Ellrich, Norbert Pritz, Bernd Wagner, Michael Krüger, Joseph Vollmert, Dieter Hornberg, Egbert Meiers, Ralf Kurth, Claudia Wurm, Dagmar von Netzer, Claudio Domberger, Jürgen Beier, Michael Holy, Engelbert Greis, Wolfgang Klück, Herbert Gammersbach, Rolf Buhl, Peter Kneip, Gerd Lenze, Erdmann Dortsch, Piero Poli, Diana Schlesinger, Karin Kraus, Frouwe van Herwynen, Rudolf Thome, Kai A. Niemeyer, Franz Menzel, Kim Sachtler, Walter Talmon-Gros, Joe Hembus, Max Zihlmann, Maurie Fischbein, Christel Meuser, Annie Lautner, Johannes Buzalski, Gottfried Beld, Victor von Halem, Beate Speith. 1,908 ft. 53 mins. (16 mm.). Subtitles.

"Far from being a puzzle film (like *Citizen Kane* or *Muriel*), *Not Reconciled* is better described as a 'lacunary film', in the same sense that Littré defines a *lacunary body*: a whole composed of agglomerated crystals with intervals among them, like the interstitial spaces between the cells of an organism". Jean-Marie Straub's description of his second film and second Heinrich Böll adaptation (after *Machorka-Muff*) helps to explain why, although it has more plot than any of his other works—containing even more characters and intrigues than *Othon*—it is virtually impossible to paraphrase in the form of a synopsis. Covering half a century of German history (roughly 1910–1960) as seen through the reflecting prism of one middle-class family—the architect Heinrich Fäbmel, his wife Joanna, and their sons Heinrich, Robert and Otto; Robert's wife Edith and their children Joseph and Ruth—the film leaps between various periods achronologically, a form of fragmentation

counteracted by Straub's decision to "eliminate as much as possible any historical aura in both costumes and sets, thus giving the images a kind of atonal character" and, in one instance, have an actor (Georg Zander) play two different characters some twenty years apart. Effectively placing all events in the same present tense, the film thus prevents the spectator from either reordering them chronologically or, in some cases, understanding whether the movement between sequences takes one forward or backward in time. That all these questions can be resolved by referring to Böll's novel *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* or the chronological summary given in Richard Roud's *Straub* may be helpful in analysing the film's material origins, but is less immediately relevant to the experience which the film affords—a procession of events of varying legibility which all bear equal weight in their depiction of Nazism through what preceded, followed and accompanied it, specifically in relation to the moral codes of the bourgeoisie. The difficulty, therefore, in describing Straub as a 'minimalist' is that this implies a reduction of his original material to its 'minimal' components, when in fact he has suppressed many of the narrative elements that are essential to the novel's continuity while highlighting other aspects which point towards an independent reading of the text. Persistence rather than continuity is what emerges from *Not Reconciled*, and it is worth considering some of the active ingredients which comprise this persistence. While *Citizen Kane* and *Muriel* tend to converge on the spectre of an inaccessible past which is viewed as a form of causality in relation to the present, the achronological episodes of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Resnais' *Je t'aime, Je t'aime* compose mosaics where the focus is more divergent, and Straub's film appears at least superficially closer to the latter two examples. Where it differs crucially is in its avoidance of either psychology or lyricism to bridge its 'lacunary' gaps, and a recourse to *materialism* that operates structurally in much the same way that romanticism functions for Faulkner and Resnais. The particular strategies behind this materialism can be found in Straub's other works: direct sound; often beginning a shot before the 'action' proper begins and concluding it afterwards, which partially serves to detach the locations from the characters; camera placement and movement which conversely serve to set off characters from their surroundings; violence suggested rather than depicted; a use of rear-projection (as in *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach*) which calls attention to its own artifice; and performances by non-professionals which are largely 'recitations' in the Brechtian manner. (Apropos of the latter, it is worth noting that Straub originally intended—somewhat paradoxically—to cast Helene Weigel, an actress and Brecht's widow, in the part of Johanna; the part of Robert Fäbmel at 40 was initially planned for Karlheinz Stockhausen, one of the few defenders of *Machorka-Muff*, who bowed out of the role because of his inability to play billiards.) More specifically, persistence figures in the reiterated phrase of Johanna's, "the fool of a Kaiser", and her subsequent decision to shoot a government dignitary—her "grandson's murderer"—in the film's closing moments, which succinctly illustrates the subtitle *Only Violence Helps Where Violence Rules* while providing a sharp contrast with the more quirky and lyrical murder (and subsequent pan to a bright window) concluding *The Bridegroom, the Comedienne and the Pimp*, which spells out a similar theme. For all its complexity and difficulty as an integral narrative, *Not Reconciled* registers more simply and conventionally than Straub's other works within its individual sequences, and is perhaps his only film to which the usual concept of *mise en scène* can comfortably be applied: the circular pan of about 300 to Schrella visiting his old house after the war immediately recalls Godard both visually and aurally, while the 'musical' uses of silence and contrasting tempi often reflect Antonioni and Bresson. And thematically as well as structurally, Johanna's murder of Minister M. ultimately brings one back to Bernard's shooting of Robert, a fellow soldier in Algeria now working for the OAS, near the end of *Muriel*. (Significantly, Straub has traced the original impulse of *Not Reconciled* back to his curiosity concerning what had become of his French friends who had fought in Algeria.) But in sharp contrast to the linear and basically chronological fragmentation of *Muriel*, Straub's "lacunary film" depicts a continuum of time and place in which nothing of consequence is elided, and where the state of being 'not reconciled'—Germany with its own history, the spectator with Straub's "agglomerated crystals"—is ultimately attributable less to what has been taken away than to what remains, implacable and inescapable, in the hard certainty of sounds and images.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM



**Fri. Feb. 24th at 7.30 p.m.**  
**BLOW FOR BLOW**

## Coup pour Coup

France/West Germany, 1972

Director: Marin Karmitz

*Dist.* The Other Cinema. *p.c.*—M.K.2 Productions/Cinema Services (Paris) W.D.R. (Cologne). *sc.*—cast and crew. *ph.*—André Dubreuil. *col.*—Eastman Colour. *m.*—Jacky Moreau. *film-makers*—Jean-Pierre Baronski, Paul Bertault, Patrick Cabouat, Jean-Noël Delamarre, Jean-Philippe Delamarre, Donatienne Fraisse, Evelyne July, Jacques Kébadian, Christine Lipinska, Frédérique Mathieu, Marie-Christine Meynard, Brigitte Sousselier, Maurice Tanant, Christian Vallée, Dominique Véry, Sébastien Veyrin-Forer. *actors*—Anne-Marie Bacquier, Danielle Chinsky, Eva Damien, Maïté Delamarre, Annick Fougère, Jean Hébert, Anne Lipinska, Christiane Rorato, André Rouyer, Jean Tervoort, André Watt. *workers*—Simone Aubin, Jacqueline Auzellaud, Elodie Avenel, Antoinette Barrois, Ginette Bellegueule, Jacques Bellegueule, Aïsha Benfatta, S. Béranger, Martine Blé, Marcel Boche, Agnès Bouloche, Sylvianne Broucker, Marie-Madeleine Carton, Lucie Chemin, Florence Cian, Jeannine Clouet, Nelly Debert, Annie Demarest, Thérèse Desperrois, Jacqueline Dugard, Sylvianne Dumont, Mme. Franqueville, M. Franqueville, Denise Garnier, Nadège Hogie, Françoise Knobelpiess, Michèle Lamett, Simone Langlois, Martine Langlois, Nadia Langlois, Roland Leguern, Renée Lemoine-Higou, Luciane Maati, Paulette Marize, Véronique Masselin, Dominique Maulien, Alice Marcier, Monique Petit, Bernard Picard, Alfrédine Pillu-Allais, Géraldine Pinchon, Marie-Claire Pinchon, Liliane Podfer, Marie-France Quessandier, Eugénie Rioult, Augustine Schmitt, Yves Thirard, Jean Touzard, Lucienne Yvon, Sylvie Zélasco. *students*—Martine Delaunay, Marie-José Dubost, Laure Dupuy, Maryse Frontin, Monique Gruyer, Gilles Malka, Bernadette Parmentier, Marie-Christine Poilpré. *schoolgirls*—Martine Berthelin, Patricia Berthon, Martine Cailly, Evelyne Cailly, Jocelyne Poulard, Catherine Sulpice. *teachers*—Armelle Lebuais, Jean-François Marguerin, Françoise Prédinès. *peasants*—Claude Lebourg, Albert Legris. *artist*—Merri Jolivet. *lawyer*—Michèle Lamy. 3,240 ft. 90 mins. (16 mm.). *Subtitles.*

The seamstresses in a textile factory are increasingly indignant about their working conditions: the no-talking rule, the constant pressure for higher productivity, the supervisor's vindictive surveillance, the low wages. They improvise a few minor acts of sabotage and protest—short-circuiting a sewing-machine, emptying a bucket of flour over the supervisor's head, distributing leaflets at the factory gates. When two of their number—one of whom has recently broken down in hysterics during her work—are summarily dismissed, the women decide to stop work and lock the factory boss, Boursac, in his office. Boursac is released by a union representative who hastily negotiates some paltry wage increases. But the seamstresses are not satisfied with these concessions and, joined by women from the weaving section, decide to occupy the factory. With food (and also children with whom husbands cannot cope) brought in from the outside, the occupation holds firm. After three weeks, Boursac inexplicably returns to his office, and is again sequestered. Meanwhile, the town's metal workers stage a massive sympathy strike. The authorities deem it impolitic to send in the riot squad and advise Boursac to agree to all the women's demands, including the reinstatement of the two workers. After five days' confinement he capitulates. The women rejoice, less in their material gains than in their new-found sense of solidarity and power.

According to Karmitz, he only supervised the script for *Coup pour Coup* which, like the film itself (everyone paid a basic rate; everything discussed and revised in talks between crew and actors), was a truly collective effort. Starting as an outline by a building worker, it was elaborated on the basis of discussions and interviews with women strikers from factories at Troyes and Saint-Omer, and only finalised after the worker-actors, using videotape, had discussed with the crew the best way to shoot what they had to say. The film itself was shot in a disused factory at Elbeuf, with a cast composed partly of the women with strike experience from Saint-Omer and other factories, and partly of unemployed women from the local labour exchange. All the workers are genuine, but the 'heavies' (boss, supervisor, etc.) are played by professionals. The collaboration of these female workers provides Karmitz not only with physically convincing performances but also with convincing plot details drawn from their own experiences of industrial action. Yet although often emotionally compelling, *Coup pour Coup* (Karmitz' third feature: *Sept Jours Ailleurs* and *Camarades* have yet to be shown in Britain) emerges as an uneasy and somewhat ingenuous amalgam of art and authenticity. Its fictional story attempts to synthesise a number of real-life incidents, but this is one case where the whole proves less persuasive than several of its component parts. The film is most effective when it relies on unadorned description to state the workers' case: the primitive conveyor-belt; the endless succession of seams whose stitching is timed by a supervisory stop-watch; the machinist who goes home—via the supermarket—to cook and iron for a husband and three children. Travelling along the barred windows of the factory's facade or held in the doorway of the wife's cramped kitchen, the camera more than adequately conveys the fact that life for these female workers is a mere commuting between prisons. But as soon as the women start to articulate the oppression implicit in the factory's rhythms and routines—the girl breaking down at her bench with a cry of "Je veux voir le soleil", or the young striker confiding in voice-over to her diary that she has at last discovered a sense of her own worth—one becomes awkwardly conscious of a controlling presence behind the rough, *cinéma-vérité* surfaces. *Coup pour Coup* is a clarion call to solidarity, among workers in general and women workers in particular; but its propagandist zeal results in some jarring simplifications, omissions and distortions. (One wonders, for instance, why the police make no attempt to stop the influx of provisions into the building.) The film's strength lies in its depiction of group activity and the escalating determination which grows out of collective struggle; but it achieves this by resorting to easy caricatures of those individuals who lie outside the group (for the most part played by professional actors). The men on the sympathy march have an irresistible dignity, but the one husband to be shown in isolation is a lame duck incapable of changing his baby's nappies. Boursac is almost a cartoon character, seen sunning himself on the terrace of his luxury villa or primly seated behind an antique desk in a glistening white office. Even the shop stewardess holds herself aloof and dresses with self-conscious chic. Although these characterisations are consistent with the film's broader denunciation of individualism, they remain discordant with its elements of realistic observation. With an assembly-line, a lock-out and a sequestered boss, *Coup pour Coup* inevitably invites comparison with *Tout Va Bien*. But where Godard—through distancing effects and a formal consciousness of conflicting viewpoints—forces his audience to an intellectual analysis of the links between private and political lives, Karmitz never takes us beyond an emotional sympathy: as ephemeral, one fears, as the benefits of the strike for the women depicted.

JAN DAWSON



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**Fri. Mar. 10th at 7.30 p.m.**  
**NIGHT CLEANERS**

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## Nightcleaners

Great Britain, 1975

• Dist/p.c.—Berwick Street Film Collective. 3,240 ft. 90 mins. (16.mm.).

Various strands intertwine within this account of the 1971-72 campaign to unionise London's women cleaners. It begins with sequences demonstrating the nature of the work, and with interviews in which the women talk about hours, wages, conditions and the effect they have upon their lives: their descriptions are counterposed to those of employers, who emphasise the value of discipline, and one of whom commends his workers, pointing out that "without them I'd be penniless". Then the women's liberation campaign is introduced—with leaflet distribution outside tube stations and women collecting union subscriptions—followed by meetings with trade union officials in the general context of the mobilisation against the Industrial Relations Bill. The film then moves to ideological argument, turning somewhat incoherently on the various axes of working-women, women's liberation and socialism. Much of the debate and interest aroused by *Nightcleaners* has centred on the way in which this material is used. In a sense, the final result is as much a film about making a film as an account of the nightcleaners' campaign. The film-makers and their equipment are constantly visible, as a Godardian reminder of the cinematic process. The montage employs two striking forms: one, the use of black space, breaks down any narrative structure and becomes a device for separating sound from image, patterning the film as a mosaic of images and words but also lending it an over-extended quality and the feeling of gaps and silences waiting to be filled; the other is the use of extremely slowed-down close-ups of women's faces, which opens the film up to the criticism that it objectifies the women who are ostensibly its subject. A further question arises out of the procedure of the Berwick Street Collective. To the extent that their major preoccupation in *Nightcleaners* is with problems of ideology—the relationship between feminist ideas and the experience of one group of women workers; speculation on the nature of the image—the reality of the campaign is to a degree obscured. That the employers operate a subcontracting system, that government departments as much as anyone prefer this system to direct employment of cleaners, that the people distributing leaflets are doing the work of the union, in the absence of a properly constituted union branch: none of these facts emerge. What does come across very clearly is the result of an exploitative system—the isolation, lack of sleep and anxiety experienced by the nightcleaners—and this is the film's major strength.

ROSALIND DELMAR

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**Fri. Mar. 17th at 7.30 p.m.**  
**LE GAI SAVOIR**

## Gai Savoir, Le

France/West Germany, 1967

Director: Jean-Luc Godard

Cert: (not yet issued). dist: [Kestrel Film Production]. p.c.: Anouchka Films (Paris) / Bavaria Atelier (Munich). sc: Jean-Luc Godard. ph: Jean Leclerc. col: Eastman Colour. (No further credits issued). l.p.: Juliet Berto (*Patricia*), Jean-Pierre Léaud (*Emile Rousseau*). 8,190 ft. 91 mins. Subtitles.

Two young militants, Patricia (daughter of Lumumba and the Cultural Revolution) and Emile (Jean-Jacques Rousseau's great-grandson) come respectively from the factory and university barricades to a darkened television studio in which, with the help of audio-visual aids, they plan to study the nature of images and sounds. Their sessions take place at night, leaving their days and evenings free for militant action; and their curriculum devotes a year to collecting random images and sounds (broadcasts, film clips, posters, graffiti, etc.), a year to criticising and analysing the material collected, and a third year to creating their own models. They in fact decide to incorporate criticism into the first year of their programme; and having eventually concluded that the only way to define sounds and images is as a mixture of method and sentiment, go on their separate, revolutionary ways.

"What is an image?" ("or indeed, a sound?") asks a grimly jesting Godard; and the question is not, as with Bacon's Pilate, whether he will stay for an answer but whether his baffled public will remain to hear it, or understand it if they do remain. Where most film directors are content to construct their theories and rough drafts in private, Godard (possibly in an effort to avoid a paternalistic relationship with his spectators—"Ce n'est pas de donner des armes aux camarades ouvriers, mais de les aider à apprendre à en forger . . .") relentlessly takes them through each step of a backward-reasoning process which, on his own admission, adds up not to the film that "must be made" but merely to an indication of the paths that must still be travelled. And yet, try as he will to liberate sounds and images from the imperialist associations he has discovered them to contain, the master-pupil (or possibly the

master-slave) relationship survives, and the free associations that are made remain the master's own: the minute of silence is dedicated not to creative association but to a murdered Black Panther; the empty screen is offered up for thoughts of the Third World victims of French torture. So that—apart from his difficulty in maintaining a balance between theory and practice, or as he puts it between "discours intellectuel" and "discours révolutionnaire"—it soon becomes clear that, as a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist, the emancipation Godard envisages is not a liberation from all forms of propaganda but the substitution of one propaganda for another. Politically speaking, he may be right ("Elle a dit: Non, on va utiliser le Satellite du Tiers-Monde; s'il y a une censure, elle est révolutionnaire"); but if the choice is merely between reactionary and revolutionary propaganda, why does Godard open his film with talk of discovering free images and free sounds? And why, in a film dedicated to definition, does he use the word freedom so ambiguously, sometimes to depict a state of new-born innocence à la Rousseau, sometimes to denote total submission to Revolutionary discipline? At times the answer may look like vigorous dialectic, but at others it looks more like muddled MISTODIMAN (the mixture of method and sentiment that Godard advocates). He may, like Rimbaud, try to rediscover pure, untarnished sounds (witness the scene in which his two pupils satisfyingly mouth vowel sounds at one another), but he knows in advance that, like Bertolt Brecht, his quest will take him "from Rimbaud to Lenin", that his sought-after degree zero of sounds and images is in fact zero plus Mao Tse Tung. But it is not so much that Godard's ciné-pamphlet betrays a certain theoretical confusion (which has often accompanied the most powerful political statements, the most moving works of art) as that the medium he has chosen to express it magnifies the confusion to the point of deflecting the theoretical quest for clarity. It takes him only a few moments to demonstrate that the images and sounds which bombard us in our daily lives are charged with ideological (in this case, capitalistic) implications, a few minutes more to reveal the shattering effect of divorcing images from sounds. What follows after this (perhaps a deliberate and repeated return to zero) seems mere repetition: slogans and counter-slogans, puerile graffiti, verbal obscenities as a response to political ones. At the end of the third year of the curriculum, the pure image and the pure sound are still as inaccessible as ever, though Godard (as if just realising the implications of the 'commitment' theory that dominated so much British thinking in the Fifties, and punishing himself for ever enjoying Bogart movies and Cadillac convertibles) has at least discovered that there is no such thing as an apolitical image. What remains unexplored is the question of whether an (ideologically) good image is necessarily an (aesthetically/emotionally) effective one. And since the few scenes between seminars, where Juliet Berto swigs a Coke and Léaud eats a croissant, celebrate the reasons for revolutionary activity so much more effectively than all the posters of armies on the march, the answer would appear to be no. Here again, Godard has anticipated us ("Le théâtre documentaire ne peut pas se mesurer avec la réalité . . . ne parvient jamais à égaler la dynamique . . ."); but sadly, his documentary theatre doesn't equal the dynamic of an open university either.

JAN DAWSON



**Sat. Mar. 4th, Sun. 5th**  
**PIERROT LE FOU (A)**

**Sat. Mar 18th, Sun. 19th**  
**NUMERO DEUX (X)**

Saturday and Sunday 5 and 8 p.m.

**PIERROT LE FOU, France/Italy, 1965**

*Cert:* A. *dist:* Gala. *p.c.:* Rome Paris Films/Georges de Beauregard (Paris)/Dino De Laurentis Cinematografica (Rome). *p:* Georges de Beauregard. *p.manager:* René Demoulin. *d:* Jean-Luc Godard. *assistant d:* Philippe Fourastié, Jean-Pierre Léaud. *sc:* Jean-Luc Godard. Based on the novel *Obsession* by Lionel White. *ph:* Raoul Coutard. *Techniscope.* *col:* Eastman Colour. *ed:* Françoise Colin. *a.d.:* (none). *mt:* Antoine Duhamel. *songs:* "Ma Ligne de Chance", "Jamais je ne t'ai dit que je t'aimerai toujours" by Antoine Duhamel, Bassiak. *sd:* René Levert. *l.p.:* Jean-Paul Belmondo (*Ferdinand*), Anna Karina (*Marianne*), Dirk Sanders (*Marianne's Brother*), Raymond Devos (*The Man on the Pier*), Graziella Galvani (*Ferdinand's Wife*), Roger Dutoit (*Gangster*), Hans Meyer (*Gangster*), Jimmy Karoubi (*The Dwarf*), Christa Nell (*Mme. Staquet*), Pascal Aubier (*2nd Brother*), Pierre Hanin (*3rd Brother*), Princess Aïcha Abidir (*Herself*), Samuel Fuller (*Himself*), Alexis Poliakoff (*Sailor*), Laszlo Szabo (*Political Exile from Santo Domingo*), Jean-Pierre Léaud (*Young Man in Cinema*). 9,885 ft. 110 mins. *Subtitles.*

Bored and jaded with his life in Paris, with his rich wife, comfortable flat, and the monotonous social chatter around him, Ferdinand snatches at the escape offered by a chance meeting with Marianne, a girl he had known some years before. Marianne presents him with the picture of a life of violence—involvement with gangs, semi-criminal and semi-political; guns; sudden death; a brother in the South of France to whom she wants to escape. Ferdinand (whom she calls Pierrot) drives away with her. They ditch one car, steal another. Then, they arrive into an idyll of peace, sun, sea, trees and animals. But Marianne becomes bored with this game of desert island life, and a chance encounter takes her back to violence. She telephones Ferdinand to come to her rescue; he arrives to find her gone, a dwarfish gangster dead with a pair of scissors in his neck, and two toughs prepared to torture him to learn Marianne's whereabouts. When he finds her again, she involves him in a showdown between the gangs—an affair of hold-ups, ambushes, and car chases. His discovery that the "brother" is not really a brother, and that Marianne intends his own betrayal, sends Ferdinand chasing to their island refuge. There both the "brother" and Marianne are shot dead. Ferdinand tries to telephone his wife in Paris, paints his face blue, straps dynamite round his head, and lights the fuse. The gesture is too final; by the time he changes his mind and scrambles for the fuse, it's too late.

Godard's new film demands the closest analytical discussion; and in the space available here it is hardly possible to do more than suggest some of the lines such discussion might take. For the film, in theme as in style, is built out of juxtapositions, contradictions, a constant interplay between what people do, what they say, and what they are or might be. Marianne, for instance, appears to be living a criminal fantasy, a wish fulfilment game of easy death and comic-strip violence; then it emerges that behind this fantasy is another fantasy; and behind that, perhaps, a reality. Marianne can kill, coolly. Ferdinand, whom she calls a poor booby, really is a poor booby—trying to demonstrate that he doesn't have to keep to a straight line in life, he can only drive a car into the sea, or drape himself in dynamite. There is the contradiction between two escapist ideals, of a sort—the romantic idyll by the sea, and the enticing dream of violence and movement. And both of these are played off against Ferdinand's "normal" life, against the party scene shot in monochrome colours where the characters, as in *Une Femme Mariée*, chatter in advertising slogans. In detail, there's the contradiction of Marianne's (genuine) regret for the dead in Vietnam; and her (genuine) share in the intolerable clowning pantomime of the Vietnamese war staged for the American sailors. The reality of Vietnam; the games of violence; the shock of chance, coincidence, real death: Godard holds these and his other contradictions in balance, not commenting on them, but turning the film so that it reflects them like a prism. The theme, at points, touches that of *Le Mépris*; but with an addition of the stylistic emphases—pop art stylisation, fragmentation, use of neon signs, etc.—developed through *Une Femme Mariée*. Coutard's colour photography is as beautiful as it is imaginative; and there are camera devices—like the lights which play over the windscreen during the flight from Paris—as jolting in their effect as the film's chopped rhythm. A good deal is filmed in long shot, like the fantastically beautiful image of Ferdinand and Marianne walking away through a field of tall grass from the car they have set on fire. Ferdinand dies in long shot; runs to Marianne's rescue in long shot. This deliberation contrasts with the sharp jabs of action, parodied or taken straight, and the quick jokes. And it is this effect of ultimate calm, a kind of detachment, which enables Godard to keep his balance, always to come out right side up. His study of the "last romantics" is a study also of the absurdity and failure of the romantic solution—filmed, as of course it would have to be, by a modern romantic.

*Suitability:* A.

P.H.

**Numéro Deux (Number Two)**

France, 1975

Director: Jean-Luc Godard

*Cert—X. dist—The Other Cinema. p.c—Sonimage/Bella/SNC. p—Anne-Marie Miéville, Jean-Luc Godard. assoc. p—Georges de Beauregard. p. co-ordinator—Marcel Mossoti. asst. d—Gérard Martin. sc—Jean-Luc Godard. ph—William Lubtchansky. In colour. video engineer—G. Teissèdre. ed—(not available). songs by and performed by—Léo Ferré. sd—Jean-Pierre Ruh. technical collaboration—Milka Assaf, Gérard Martin. l.p—Sandrine Battistella (Sandrine), Pierre Oudry (Pierre), Alexandre Rignault, Rachel Stéfano. 7,920 ft. 88 mins. Subtitles.*

Two (occasionally one or three) video screens of varying proportion (square, rectangular), themselves filmed in 35 mm., present varying images of an extended family, which includes Sandrine and Pierre, their children Vanessa and Nicholas, and two grandparents, inside the modern flat in which they all live. The adult participants are accorded a number of monologues in which they place and explain themselves in relation to the small number of significant objects and concepts structuring the film. The 'narrative' episodes are prefaced and concluded by Godard himself, who explains in his video studio in Grenoble the genesis of the film, and demonstrates some of the technical possibilities his equipment offers (juxtaposition and mixing of images, relation of sound and image, silence, noise). 'Events' are domestic and/or incidental—peeling carrots, taking a bath—and exteriors are shot from the window of the flat.

Perhaps the most technically open-ended of Godard's films to date, *Numéro Deux* is also among the most claustrophobic contributions to an oeuvre which has often specialised in paranoia. It is therefore an investigation of liberation and repression, following the contradictory and often conflicting avenues provided by thematic restriction and technological innovation. Initially, it seems to undertake a feminist argument to counter the misogyny of the director's past, and to take up the Fonda/Montand dialogue where it was left by *Tout va bien*. Godard's opening discourse reflects on film production as an industrial process, born of the Hollywood or Mosfilm factories. The sense in which this continues the theses of *Tout va bien* is reinforced by the TV screen which shows, in turn, clips from recent successful movies (featuring Montand, Piccoli, Depardieu, etc.), news items concerning Cambodia and Saigon, and the May Day parade led by the trade unionists Maire and Séguy. But the macro-politics embodied in these *faits divers* are quickly modified via an adaptation of the production-consumption metaphor as expounded by Deleuze and Guattari in the *Anti-Oedipe*. Godard explains that to make a film you can think small: all you need to do is look around where things are happening all the time. Thus the children are central to the domestic register within which *Numéro Deux* steadfastly operates thereafter, and their first phrases, spoken as they look out from the balcony of the flat—"Once there was a landscape, once there was a factory. Is Mummy a factory or a landscape?"—precisely map Godard's present terrain. Similar shifts punctuate the film: "This is not a film of the left or the right but of behind and in front. The government is behind, the children are in front", which may be read both as a sketch of the Freudian unconscious and, paradoxically, of childlike innocence. "This is not a film about politics but a film about sex ('le cul'). Why either or, why not both?" According to Godard's own formulation, *Numéro Deux* is to be understood as a rephrasing of "Once upon a time" as "Twice upon a time", because the former fails to take account of the complexity of both the double and the reverse image (or soundtrack), and also of the relation of the domestic world to society as a whole and the state of woman to the state at large. Not surprisingly, sexual episodes assume greatest importance and are regularly reprised: the image of Pierre sodomising Sandrine, the parents giving the children a lesson in reproduction before sending them off to school, the old people musing on their depleted genitals, Sandrine masturbating. And similarly, history and politics figure as memories (of the grandfather) or isolated incidents seen from the window (as when Sandrine encounters a neighbour, but refuses to take a leaflet or to attend a woman's meeting). For these reasons *Numéro Deux* cannot be summarised except in elemental terms—"Before I was born I was dead", as Vanessa writes on her blackboard—since everything is significant and nothing is. The sense of flow and of process—or charge and discharge, as *Numéro Deux* has it—is certainly one of Godard's most exciting achievements to date; what he does not attempt, however, is a critique of the total process, of the implications of filming video on 35 mm. (beyond showing that the director can manipulate), of the flow between spectator and film which is, nevertheless, called for by the very private nature of his material. As a footnote, it should be added that the subtitles for the version under review are quite unacceptable and sometimes positively misleading. Nothing authorises the substitution of *Life* for *Match* (both magazines) or 'Republic Square' for 'Place de la République' and innumerable other naturalisations; and no attempt is made to render the puns: *sen* (his/her/sound), *montage* (montage/editing/sodomy), etc.

JILL FORBES



# QUEIMADA - BURN!

Produced by Umberto Crimaldi; directed by Gillo Pontecorvo; story and screenplay by Franco Solinas, Giorgio Arlorio and Gillo Pontecorvo; photographed by Marcello Gatti; music by Ennio Morricone; with Marlon Brando, Evaristo Marquez and Renato Salvatori. A United Artists Release.

Somewhere in the first several pages of the production notes of Gillo Pontecorvo's *BURN!*, the director states that "as the story develops, the picture gradually changes from a classical adventure to neorealism." This is the film Pontecorvo wanted to make. Further on he observes, "there is a very important role [in the film], that of Sir William Walker played by Marlon Brando. Brando is essential to the role; with one look he can say three pages of dialogue." This is the film he did make -- a romantic genre film loaded with the 'iconographic' presence of its star, exuding dilettantism and a self-congratulatory air for the film's profound 'relevance.'

There is no doubt that the film is well crafted and that Pontecorvo retains his sensitivity for anonymous faces, the fears and anguish expressed in them and the social implications, despite a pervading slickness to the overall production. And watching Marlon Brando can be enjoyable, since he does project an intelligence numerous notches above that of other screen idols -- the thinking man's 'Duke' Wayne. His relationship to commercial cinema has always been of a transitional nature -- he acted as a bridge between the innocence of the classic genre and the sophistication of the more engaged and free-form films of today. But with *THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS*, Pontecorvo had already established himself in a unique position; the sincerity of his work and its concurrent success with critics and at the box-office should have made him independent enough to avoid the failure of *BURN!* To practically build a film which purports to be so politically perspicacious in its revelations around the charismatic mannerisms of one man contradicts its intent. Before the film is half gone, we can hear the petard echoing and the film is well hoisted.

Brando's characterization of Sir William Walker, British agent and provocateur who is sent to the Caribbean island of Queimada to foment revolution, is imbued with all the hindsight of a mid-20th Century student of political philosophy. He almost singlehandedly invents Dialectics and has the extraordinary ability to smile 'ironically' at all the perverse twists of history while in the thick of it. He plays the compleat Hegelian, audiences have nothing on him, he's in it, out of it and beats you to the 'cogent' observation. Mustering up all the roguish grace he can, Brando postures with such an invulnerable awareness that his character negates its own historical context. It all becomes a story of a glamorous, albeit physically seedy, figure known as Marlon Brando who cleverly instills revolutionary fervor in black slaves and convinces the

Portuguese colonials that wage labor and independence is in their best interests as well as England's. And besides, Brando knows as we all do that the 19th Century has got to do its 'thing.' When he just about says this at several points in the film, it is an enticing mixture of poetic philosophy and *raison d'etat*. Marlon Brando: man-of-the-world, burdened by his own omniscience.

Naturally, things go off well and Brando leaves the island and its sugar plantations in the hands of a British sugar company. But all is not to work out well. Jose Dolores (Evaristo Marquez), the black slave Brando inspired to idealism and social consciousness so that he would lead the revolution, refuses to be placated by the new regime. It has, as Brando told the plantation owners it would, worked out best for capitalism. Ten years later Brando is sent for by the same plantation owners. Jose Dolores is leading another rebellion, this time against the British sugar interests and discontent is spreading. Brando comes back as somewhat of a 'technical advisor' (contemporary parallels are obvious) and destructively pursues the rebels, ravaging the land, and capturing his old friend and former tool, Jose Dolores.

One of the scenes most indicative of the film's failure occurs in the climax. When Brando reasons that to kill Jose Dolores would only make him a martyr and perpetuate the revolution, he suggests that he be let go, provided that he ignominiously flee the island. Yet he would still have his life, Brando reminds him. He unbinds the prisoner, but Jose Dolores is motionless, staring in noble silence. He prefers to wait for the gallows. Brando is uncomprehending and grows furious. He becomes frustrated by the invincible integrity of his prisoner, this 'Frankenstein' of his who refuses to play the game. And Brando spends the last minutes of the film in a fog of self-pity and incomprehension which leads to his sudden and violent demise. How can Brando, who had previously shown that he understood idealism and moral integrity to such a high degree that he could instill it in others and manipulate it, suddenly stand dumbfounded at its existence? What probably happened is that Pontecorvo and Brando had worked themselves into a hole where the character was too smart to get any credible kind of comeuppance, so they were compelled to superimpose one of those standard resolutions remembered from the days when Hollywood studios seemed to have kept them on file cards. They tossed in a blind spot commonly held by naive 'heavies': "A man without a 'price?' How can that be?" (This denouement is filed directly behind the card indicating a silver bullet for werewolves; somehow it always worked better in the movies of Michael Curtiz.)

Thus, the overly prepossessing Brando undoes the film, contrivance undoes Brando, and I don't know exactly where that leaves Pontecorvo...

Calvin Green



## Eisenstein's aesthetics

Even today the Bolshevik Revolution reverberates through our lives. During those heroic days Eisenstein was a student at the Institute of Civil Engineering in Petrograd. He was nineteen years old. He was not prepared for the overthrow of the existing order of society, the collapse of his culture and ideology and the dissolution of his family as his parents departed into exile. The Revolution destroyed him, smashed the co-ordinates of his life, but it also gave him the opportunity to produce himself anew. It swept aside the dismal prospect of a career in engineering, his father's profession, and opened up fresh vistas. In the span of ten years, as we know, Eisenstein was to win world fame, first in the theatre, then in the cinema. In order to achieve this, he was compelled to become an intellectual, to construct for himself a new world-view, a new ideological conception both of society and of art. He had to become a student of aesthetics in order to work in the cinema; he could take nothing for granted. And, of course, we cannot separate the ideas which he developed from the matrix in which they were formed, the matrix of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The ideology of the new order of society was proclaimed as political, revolutionary and scientific, and it was in this image that Eisenstein sought to construct his art and his aesthetics. When, through a chance meeting with a childhood friend, he became a scenery-painter and set-designer at the Proletcult Theatre in Moscow, he quickly recognised that the theatre should be a vehicle

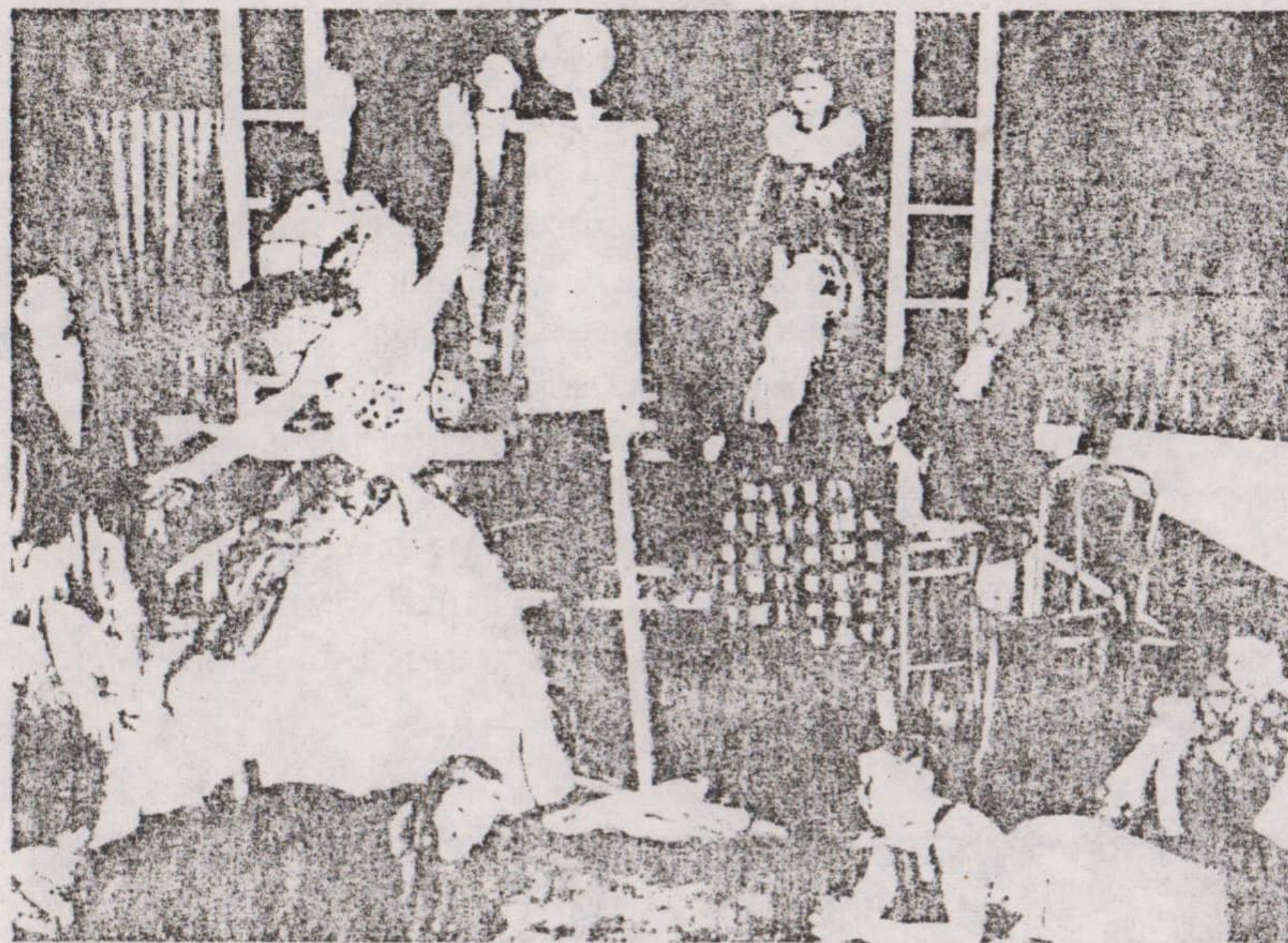
for political propaganda, a laboratory for *avant-garde* experiment, and, in the words of his mentor, the actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold, a machine for acting, manned by technicians, rather than a temple with a priesthood. In this, of course, he was not alone. He identified himself with the artistic *avant-garde* which he found, a dynamic *avant-garde* whose ideas were forged, among others, by Meyerhold, the poet and playwright, Mayakovsky, the painters Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin. Under their leadership the pre-Revolutionary movements of Futurism and Symbolism were reassessed and transformed. Art was to be a branch of production, in the service of the Revolution. Thus Constructivism was born.

Eisenstein's first production in the theatre took place in 1923. The play, an adaptation of a nineteenth-century work by Ostrovsky, was organised not into acts and scenes, but as a programme of attractions, as in the music-hall or the circus. The stage was laid out like a gymnasium, with a tight-rope, vaulting-horses and parallel bars. Caricatures of Lord Curzon, Marshal Joffre, Fascists and other political figures were lampooned in satirical sketches. There was a parody of a religious procession, with placards reading 'Religion is the opium of the people'. Clowns and 'noise bands' assaulted the audience, under whose seats fireworks exploded. At one point a screen was unrolled and a film diary projected. It was this travesty of Ostrovsky, produced incongruously enough in the ballroom of the ex-Villa Morossov, which was the occasion for Eisenstein's first theoretical writing, published in the magazine *Lef*. In this manifesto he outlined his concept of the montage of attractions.

At this point the greatest influence exerted on Eisenstein was that of Meyerhold. Meyerhold, already a successful theatre director before the Revolution, emerged after it as a leader of the *avant-garde*. He was motivated by a deep distaste for the methods of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Arts Theatre, later, of course, to be enshrined as the apogee of Stalinist art. Meyerhold's original antipathy sprang from his hostility to Naturalism, part of his inheritance from Symbolism, which until Futurists such as Mayakovsky

# EISENSTEIN





Above: Eisenstein's production of *The Wise Man*

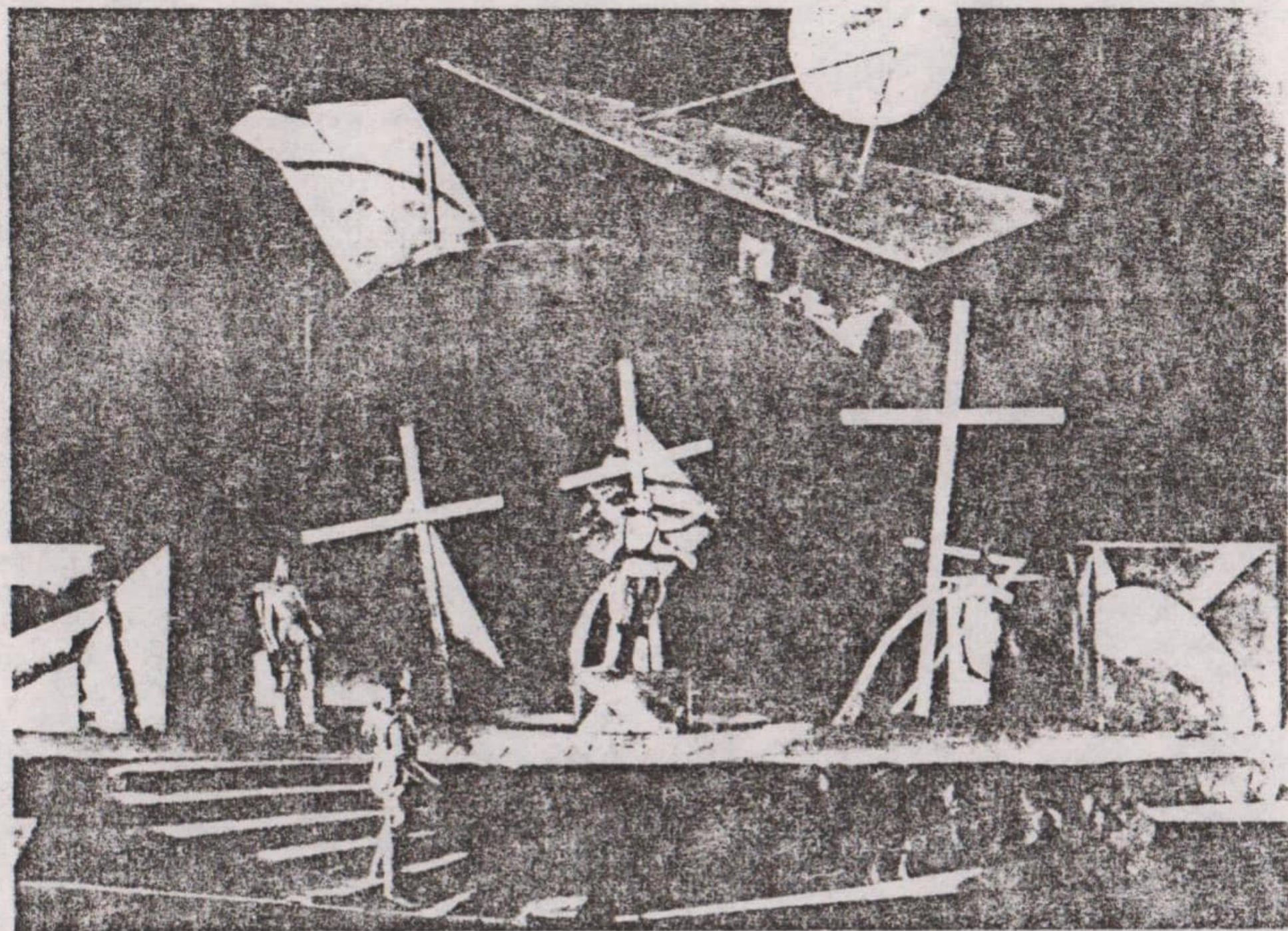
burst upon the scene was the leading foreign, imported counter-trend to the dominant domestic insistence on civic and social themes, going back from Tolstoy to Belinsky. In 1910 Meyerhold had set up an experimental studio where he worked under the pseudonym Dr Dapertutto, a name taken from the *Tales* of Hoffmann. Hoffmann, and German Romanticism in general, had an enormous influence on Meyerhold and on the whole Russian intelligentsia of the time. (Adaptations of Hoffmann's *Tales* were put on in the theatre by almost every leading Russian director, they were made into ballets, they provided the name for the Serapion Brotherhood, they are alluded to in Mayakovsky's *The Backbone Flute*, they were among the favourite works not only of Meyerhold but also of Fokine and, indeed, Eisenstein.) In particular, Meyerhold drew from Hoffmann (especially *The Princess Brambilla*) an enhanced interest in the *commedia dell'arte*, which he saw as the main element in a theatrical anti-tradition comprising

the fantastic, the marvellous, the popular, the folkloric: a non-verbal, stylised, conventional theatre which he could use as a weapon against Stanislavsky's Naturalism and psychologism. The links with the Futurists' adoption of the circus are quite evident: the two trends, towards pantomime and towards acrobatics, quickly merged.

Later a second fault, more obvious to a Constructivist than a Symbolist, was detected in Stanislavsky: his mysticism. Stanislavsky's closest collaborators, Mikhail Chekhov and Sullerzhitsky, were both absorbed in the Russian mystical tradition. Sullerzhitsky had been a 'Wrestler of God' who helped move his religious sect from the Caucasus to Canada, then returned to Russia where he was given a job as a stage-hand by Stanislavsky. He came to influence Stanislavsky enormously, infecting him with a naïve infatuation with Tolstoy, Hindu philosophy and yoga. Chekhov too developed the yogic strain in the Stanislavsky system, what he called its 'Pythian quality'. One student actor has described how 'we indulged in *prana*, stretching out our hands and emitting rays from the tips of our fingers. The idea was to get the person at whom your fingers pointed to feel the radiation.' These antics were out of key with the epoch of the machine, the mass, urbanism and Americanism. Meyerhold attacked them.

His own system, bio-mechanics, he conceived as a combination of military drill with algebra. The human body was seen almost as a robot, whose muscles and tendons were like pistons and rods. The key to success as an actor lay in rigorous physical training. This system was given a psychological underpinning by Pavlovian reflexology: 'The actor must be able to respond to stimuli.' The good actor—and anybody physically fit could become a good actor—was one with a 'minimum reaction time'. There were other important ingredients in Meyerhold's system: Taylorism, the study of workers' physical movements, invented in America to increase production and popularised after the Revolution in Russia, with Lenin's approval ('Let us take the storm of the Revolution in Soviet Russia, unite it to the pulse of American life and do our work like a chronometer!' read one slogan of the time); Dalcroze's





The set for Meyerhold's production of *Darius*

eurhythmics, influential on Massine's choreography; the *commedia dell'arte*; Douglas Fairbanks; the German Romantic cult of the marionette (Kleist, Hoffmann); the Oriental theatre (during his Dr Dapertutto period Meyerhold had invited Japanese jugglers to his studio). Further ammunition was provided by the psychology of William James; another anti-Stanislavskian, Evreinov, was struck by James's examples of how when we count up to ten, anger disappears, and how whistling brings courage in its train; Eisenstein cites James's dictum that 'we weep not because we are sad; we are sad because we weep'—which was taken to prove the primacy of physiological gesture over psychological emotion.

A Russian journalist described the work of the Proletcult Theatre in 1923, the year *The Wise Man* was produced:

A big training of proletarian actors is taking place. In the first place, it is a physical training, embracing sport, boxing, light athletics, collective games, fencing and bio-mechanics. Next

it includes special voice training and beyond this there is education in the history of the class struggle. Training is carried on from ten in the morning till nine at night. The head of the training workshop is Eisenstein, the inventor of the new circus stage.

Eisenstein's debt to Meyerhold even extended to paying particular attention to the movements of cats and tigers, which in Meyerhold's view exemplified the secrets of bodily plasticity.

Besides working for Meyerhold, Eisenstein had also collaborated for a spell with Forregger, in his studio of satirical theatre, where he designed Picasso-influenced sets and costumes and gleaned the idea of the 'noise band', which expressed the sounds of a mechanical, industrial epoch rather than those of the decadent artisanal orchestra, and also went to Petrograd with the film director Sergei Yutkevich where he did some designing for FEKS (Factory of the Eccentric Actor), run by Kozintsev, Trauberg and Krijitsky. The idea of 'American eccentricism' can, like so much else, be traced back to the Futurist Manifesto; the FEKS group were fascinated with what Radlov, another Petrograd director, ex-pupil of Dr Dapertutto, called 'a new aspect of the comic outlook on life, created by Anglo-American genius': all kinds of slapstick, comic policemen, rooftop chases, rescues by rope from aeroplanes, underground hatchways, etc. Radlov introduced contortionists into his plays and replaced Pantaloon in the *commedia dell'arte* by Morgan, the Wall Street banker. Eisenstein and Yutkevich worked with FEKS on what was billed as 'Electrification of Gogol, Music Hall, Americanism and Grand Guignol'. 'The tempo of the revolution', believed Kozintsev, 'is that of scandal and publicity.' For Forregger they did sets based on the 'urbanistic' *Parade*; Yutkevich has described the main influences on Forregger at this time as being *commedia dell'arte*, French cancan, ragtime, jazz, Mistinguette. (Jazz was also seen as 'urbanistic' as well as exotic: this was the time when Bechet and Ladnier received a tumultuous welcome in the Soviet Union, only exceeded by that given Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford.)

Eisenstein, with considerable bravado, attempted in his *Lef*



manifesto to give theoretical coherence to all these fantastic and bizarre influences which lay behind his production of 'Ostrovsky's' *The Wise Man*. He chose as his slogan the idea of 'Montage of Attractions'. Some years later he described how he invented this phrase:

Don't forget it was a young engineer who was bent on finding a scientific approach to the secrets and mysteries of art. The disciplines he had studied had taught him one thing: in every scientific investigation there must be a unit of measurement. So he set out in search of the unit of impression produced by art! Science knows 'ions', 'electrons' and 'neutrons'. Let there be 'attraction' in art. Everyday language borrowed from industry a word denoting the assembling of machinery, pipes, machine tools. This striking word is 'montage' which means assembling, and though it is not yet in vogue, it has every qualification to become fashionable. Very well! Let *units of impression combined into one whole* be expressed through a dual term, half-industrial and half-music-hall. Thus was the term 'montage of attractions' coined.

Some more information can be added to this: Yutkevich suggests that the word 'attraction' may well have been suggested to Eisenstein by the roller-coaster in the Petrograd Luna Park, which carried that name. Probably the idea of montage was suggested by the photomontages of Rodchenko, another of the *Lef* group, and George Grosz and John Heartfield in Berlin. But this would only take things back one step: Raoul Hausmann, speaking of Berlin Dadaism, explained, 'We called this process photomontage because it embodied our refusal to play the part of the artist. We regarded ourselves as engineers and our work as construction: we *assembled* [in French *monter*] our work, like a fitter.' Of course contacts between Berlin and Russia, between Dadaism and Constructivism, were very close at that time.

Half-industrial and half-music-hall: this expresses perfectly the curious artistic admixture of the time. Eisenstein, it will be seen, was very much swept along by the currents of the epoch. This is hardly surprising: only nineteen at the time of the Bolshevik

Revolution, he had been impelled into a vortex for which he was not prepared, an epoch of overwhelming force and change, unprecedented, unpredictable. It was not until this molten magma hardened into the lava of Stalinism that Eisenstein had time really to take stock of his situation. However, already there were some original traits to be seen. In particular, there was his quite idiosyncratic approach to the emotional structure of works of art. Looking back, he was to describe his project in *The Wise Man* in these typical words: 'A gesture expanded into gymnastics, rage is expressed through a somersault, exaltation through a *salto mortale*, lyricism on "the mast of death".' He wrote that he dreamed of a theatre 'of such emotional saturation that the wrath of a man would be expressed in a backward somersault from a trapeze'. This dream of emotional saturation was to stay with Eisenstein all his life. It became a preoccupation with the idea of ecstasy.

Eisenstein was influenced by two powerful, but in many ways incompatible teachers of psychology: Freud and Pavlov. In his *Lef* manifesto we can see plainly Freud's influence in his observations on the difficulty of fixing 'the boundary line where religious pathos moves into sadist satisfaction during the torture scenes of the miracle plays'. This interest in the overlapping of sexual and religious ecstasy is a recurrent feature in Eisenstein's work. Pera Attasheva recounts how Eisenstein was delighted to find at Mont-Saint-Michel two postcards in which the same model posed as Ste Thérèse de Lisieux and, heavily made-up, in the arms of a sailor. In Mexico he wrote of 'The Virgin of Guadalupe worshipped by wild dances and bloody bull-fights. By tower-high Indian hair-dresses and Spanish mantillas. By exhausting hours-long dances in sunshine and dust, by miles of knee-creeping penitence, and the golden ballets of bull-fighting cuadrillas.' One theme of the unfinished *Que Viva Mexico!* seems to have been this intermingling of sexual, religious and sadistic ecstasy.

However, during the 1920s, Pavlov became of even greater importance to Eisenstein. As the idea of montage developed in his mind, he tended to replace the idea of attractions by that of stimuli, or shocks. This merged with two other currents: the extremist



assault on the spectator and the demands of political agitation; after *The Wise Man* Eisenstein's next production, *Listen Moscow*, was called an 'agit-guignol'. Eisenstein had always been concerned with the agitational aspects of his work: during the Civil War of 1921 he had worked on an agit-train as a poster-artist, drawing political cartoons and caricatures, decorating banners and so on. This attitude to art was one of the dominating trends of the time; Mayakovsky boasted that his slogans urging people to shop at Mosselprom were poetry of the highest calibre and he designed and wrote jingles for countless posters and publicity displays; it led eventually to Mayakovsky's doctrine of the social command. The problem of art became that of the production of agitational verse: 'I want the pen to equal the gun, to be listed with iron in industry. And the Politburo's agenda: Item 1 to be Stalin's report on "The Output of Poetry".' In a curious way this was a return of the Russian intelligentsia to its old civic preoccupations: though of course those who had been through Futurism *en route* did not see eye to eye with those who had just kept trudging along with naturalistic writers like Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov.

Before he embarked on his first film, *Strike*, Eisenstein directed one more play, *Gasmasks*, devised by Tretyakov. For this production he abandoned the mock-Spanish ex-Villa Morossov for the Moscow Gas Factory, a setting suitable for the modern age, comparable with Mayakovsky's Brooklyn Bridge or Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. (Tatlin, taking his view that the artist was an engineer worker to its logical conclusion, actually went to work in a metallurgical factory near Petrograd.) Also relevant here was Tretyakov's preference for 'factography', as it came to be known, for which he propagandized in *Lef*. Literature became seen as a matter of diaries, travelogues, memoirs and so on, dealing with the raw material of life itself. Tretyakov developed the 'bio-interview', a technique like that of Oscar Lewis's *Children of Sanchez*; he wrote angrily, 'There is no need for us to wait for Tolstoys, because we have our own epics. Our epics are the newspapers.' It seemed only logical that if the theatre was to become a factory the factory should become a theatre. The stage first broke

through the proscenium arch, then outburst the brick-and-mortar integument of the theatre itself. Already the theatre had taken to the streets in great mass pageants, reminiscent of the *fêtes* of the French Revolution. Next they must enter the factory itself. Unfortunately, the experiment was not a great success. As Eisenstein ruefully described, the giant turbo-generators dwarfed the actors. However, it prepared the way for the next step: out of the drama altogether and into the cinema.

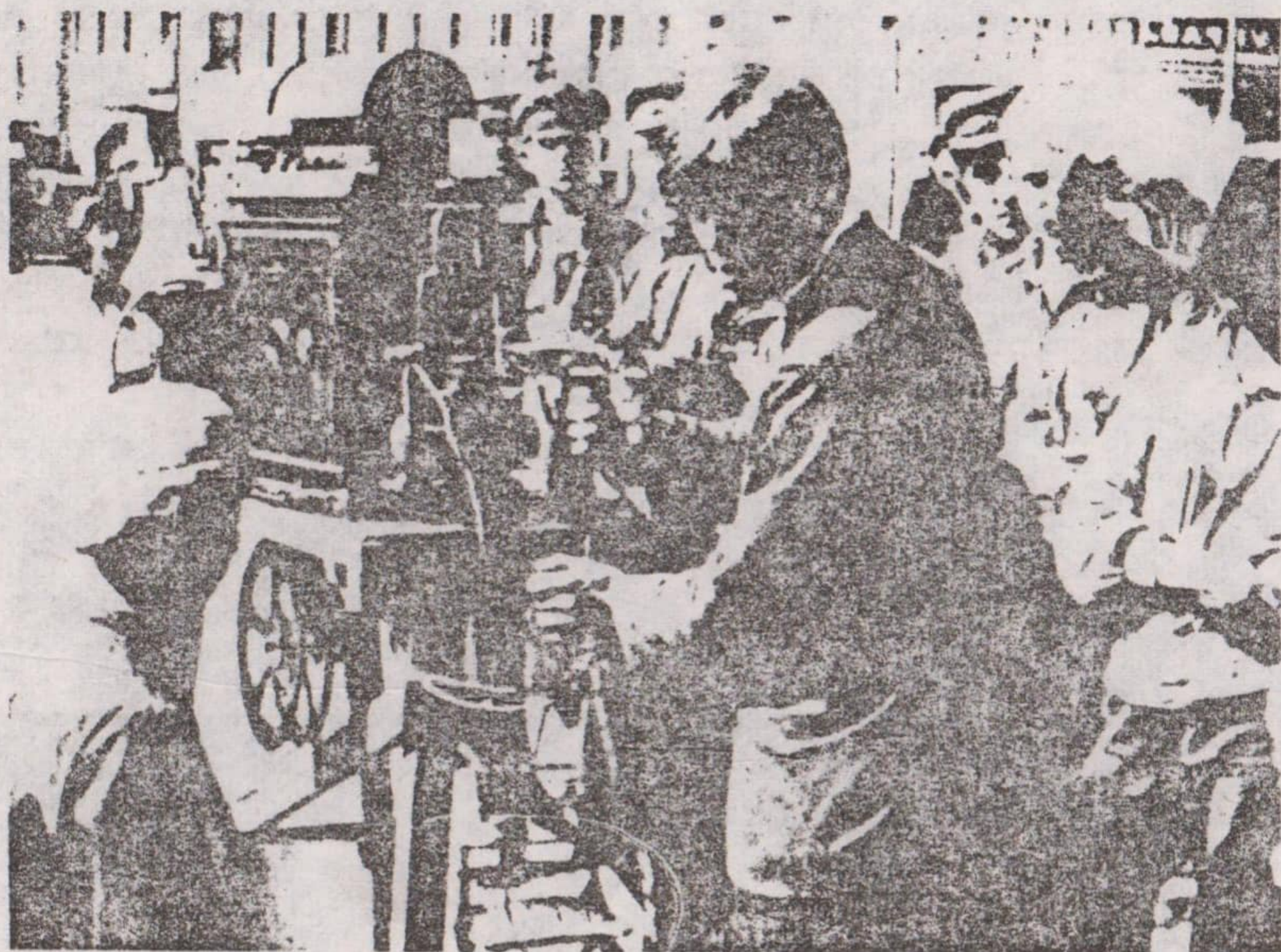
*Strike* was made in 1924; Eisenstein was then twenty-six. *Strike*, like *Listen Moscow*, was to be an agit-guignol. He planned to produce a chain of shocks: 'Maximum intensification of aggressive reflexes of social protest is seen in *Strike*, in mounting reflexes without opportunity for release or satisfaction or, in other words, concentration of reflexes of struggle, and heightening of the potential expression of class feeling.' Thus the concept of montage was retained, but that of attractions dropped, except in the reductive sense of shocks or provocations. The film was made up in effect of poster-like, often caricatural vignettes, planned for maximum emotional impact. The next year, Eisenstein wrote that:

The science of shocks and their 'montage' in relation to these concepts should suggest their form. Content, as I see it, is a series of connecting shocks arranged in a certain sequence and directed at the audience. . . . All this material must be arranged and organised in relation to principles which would lead to the desired reaction in correct proportion.

The dominant influence of Pavlov is manifest.

In order to transpose his system of montage from theatre to cinema Eisenstein made use of the discoveries which had been made by Kuleshov and Vertov. Before the Revolution Kuleshov had been a designer at the Khazhankov Studio, where he already began writing theoretical articles stressing the visual aspects of film. In 1920, after a period in the Red Army, he became a teacher at the State Film School, where he set up his own workshop; Eisenstein studied there for three months in 1923. It was there that he carried out his famous experiments in editing. The first was a demonstration of creative geography or 'artificial landscape',





Vertov's *Kino-Pravda*

placing the White House in Moscow. The second was a synthetic composition of a woman out of the lips of one, the legs of another, the back of a third, the eyes of a fourth and so on. The third showed how the expression perceived on an actor's face—grief, joy, etc.—is determined by the shots which precede and follow it. For Kuleshov this third demonstration was, of course, a blow against Stanislavsky; he insisted, when he made his film *Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviki* in 1923–24, that 'the most difficult task was to show that new actors, specifically trained for film work, were far better than the psychological-theatrical film-stars'. He hated Naturalism and always referred to actors as 'models'. The importance of Kuleshov's experiments was that they showed how, by editing, the anti-Naturalist, anti-psychologist trend in the theatre could also be introduced into cinema, using scientific, laboratory-tested and specifically cinematic methods. The second major influence was Dziga Vertov, the leading film documentarist

of the period who, like Eisenstein, was a contributor to *Lef*, where he had developed his theories of 'kino-pravda' and the 'kino-eye'. However, perhaps more important was Vertov's use of editing. Eisenstein was to tell Hans Richter a few years later that Vertov should be credited with the invention of musical rhythm in the cinema, governing the tempo of the film by the measured pace of the cutting, and hence with a decisive break-through in montage principles. Moreover, Vertov (or rather Rodchenko, who collaborated with him) was the first to realise the importance of the titles and to integrate them into the film as an element in its construction, rather than as troublesome interruptions. In *Battleship Potemkin* especially, the titles, on which Tretyakov worked, played an important role. The documentary tendency Eisenstein was hostile towards; he liked to repeat: 'I don't believe in kino-eye, I believe in kino-fist.'

During his work on *Strike* Eisenstein also elaborated his theory of 'typage' in the choice of actors. Like Kuleshov, like the whole theatrical tradition in which he worked, he rejected orthodox stage acting. Instead he preferred to cast his films simply by the physiological, particularly facial, characteristics he felt suited the part. He would often spend months looking for the right person. A man who he saw shovelling coal in the hotel at Sevastopol where they were shooting was drafted into the cast to play the surgeon in *Battleship Potemkin*. For *The General Line* his cameraman Tissé recalls:

The kulak's role was played by Chukhmarev, a Moslem and former meat contractor for the army. Father Matvei was found in Leningrad; before the war he had played the cello at the Marinsky Theatre, was drafted into the army and later joined the Red Army and suffered a concussion in the fighting at Kronstadt. The lovely sad wife in the scene of the divided hut was found in Neveshkovo, a village of Old Believers.

The heroine was found on a State Farm at Konstantinovka. Eisenstein has described how he developed the idea of typage from his thoughts about the *commedia dell'arte* with its stock types who are immediately recognised by the audience. He wanted faces





*The General Line: typage. Left: Chukhmarev as the kulak*

which would immediately give the impression of the role. Later he became interested in Lavater's system of physiognomics; probably Leonardo da Vinci had an influence too.

However, *Strike* still retained important elements from Eisenstein's past in the theatre. The guignol strain played a key part, particularly in the closing sequence, where the subjection of the workers is paralleled by the slaughter of cattle in an abattoir. The film is suffused with parody, a cartoonist's approach, squibs, lampoons, and so on, in the eccentric music-hall tradition. The critic Victor Shklovsky commented on the similarities to Keaton, both the fascination with machinery and the effective use of 'the eccentricity of his material and the sharpness of the contrasts'. A kind of Hoffmannesque grotesque is evident in *Strike* with the police spies who are metamorphosed into a rabbit, monkey, bulldog, fox and owl. The lumpenproletarian strike-breakers jumping out of their barrels, as Shklovsky comments, are like devils jumping

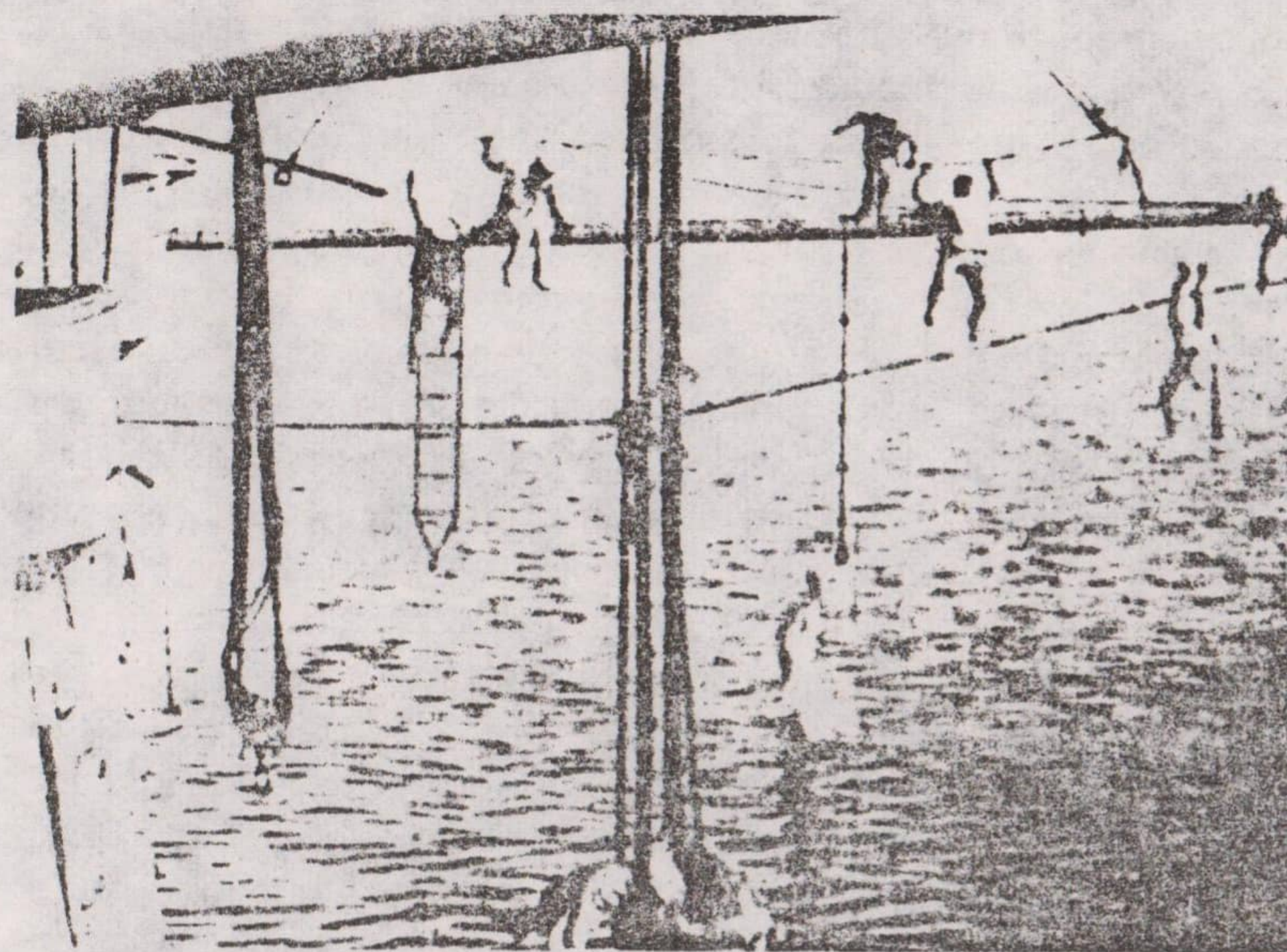
out of hell in a mystery play. The peculiar dwarfs who appear reveal a theatrical, almost Gothic, outlook, far from what was regarded as Realism. But as Eisenstein became more engrossed in the cinema this residue from the theatrical past began to fall away. *October* was the last film to have a very strong theatrical flavour, where the scenes of the storming of the Winter Palace were evidently echoes of the enormous pageants which had taken place in Petrograd, when tens of thousands had swarmed through the streets and squares, re-enacting the events of the October Revolution. In a quite different way *Ivan the Terrible* looks back to the theatre, but no longer to the theatre of FEKS or the Proletcult. Yet I think that these three films—*Strike*, *October* and *Ivan the Terrible*—are certainly Eisenstein's best, most extraordinary achievements. He was at his strongest when he was working within the theatrical tradition which exerted such influence on him in the 1920s: his more purely cinematic work lacks the bite, the lampooning edge which was his strength. In *Battleship Potemkin*, the most successful sequence, the famous massacre on the Odessa Steps, is really an extension of the agit-guignol he had worked at in the Proletcult Theatre; other sequences of the film, beautifully composed photography, heroic postures, etc., look forward to the artistic disaster of *Alexander Nevsky*.

During the years from 1924 to 1929, when Eisenstein left Russia for a tour abroad, he worked more intensively than at any time during his career, and also made a great effort to elaborate his aesthetic theories more systematically, in particular his theory of montage. It is popularly believed that Eisenstein conceived of montage as the basis of a film language, a cinematic rather than a verbal code, with its own appropriate, even necessary syntax. In fact, at this stage, Eisenstein was rather sparing in his remarks on film language and usually very vague. At a later date, as we shall see, he delved into linguistic theory, but throughout the 1920s his ideas of language and linguistics seem to have been extremely sketchy, though through *Lef* he was in contact with a number of the Formalist linguists.



What did interest Eisenstein, however, was the dialectic. He constantly stresses that montage is a dialectical principle. Eisenstein seems to have absorbed his notion of the dialectic in rather a haphazard manner. Certainly, the dominant influence must have been Debordin, the editor of *Under the Banner of Marxism*, the leading philosophical magazine of the time in the Soviet Union. Debordin was a militant Hegelian, engaged during the second half of the 1920s in a fierce controversy with the Mechanist school, militant materialists, whose hard core were leaders in the campaign of the godless against religion. Inclined towards Positivism, they regarded the dialectic as so much mumbo-jumbo. Debordin was able to counter their attacks by pointing to Engels's *The Dialectics of Nature* and Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, first published in Russia during the 1920s, in part on Debordin's initiative. Eisenstein frequently quotes from these two works; he seems to have been particularly fond of an excerpt from Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, 'On The Question of Dialectics', first published in *Bolshevik* in 1925. One sentence struck him forcefully: 'In any proposition we can (and must) disclose as in a "nucleus" ("cell") the germs of all the elements of dialectics.' Eisenstein was able to link this to his concept of the shot as the cell, or later, as his views grew more complex, the molecule of montage.

Clearly there were some difficulties in Eisenstein's position, of which he began to grow uncomfortably aware. The problem was to reconcile his 'idealist' preoccupation with the dialectic with the materialist inheritance he carried with him from the Proletcult Theatre: the stress on the machine, on gymnastics and eurhythmics, on Pavlovian reflexology. The dialectic, Lenin stressed, was knowledge: 'the living tree of vital, fertile, genuine, powerful, omnipotent, objective, absolute human knowledge'. In the past Eisenstein described how cinema was 'confronted with the task of straining to the utmost the aggressive emotions in a definite direction' (that is, an agitational task whose ideological roots lay in reflexology), but 'the new cinema must include deep reflective processes'. At first Eisenstein's ideas on this subject were rather abstract and vague. He criticised Kuleshov and Pudovkin for seeing

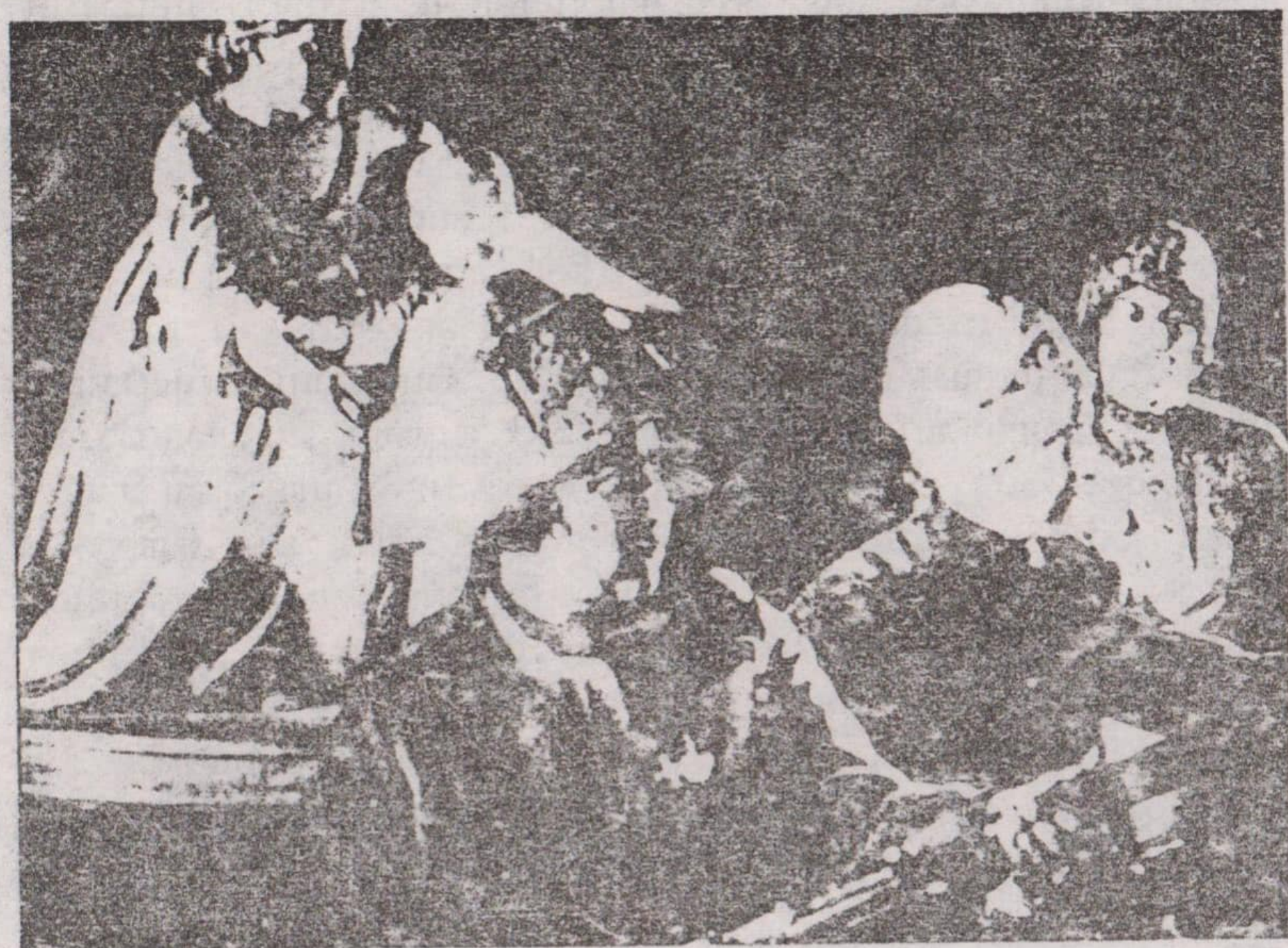


*Battleship Potemkin: gymnastics*

the unit of the shot as being like a brick; making a film was like laying bricks end to end. Pudovkin, wrote Eisenstein, 'loudly defends an understanding of montage as a *linkage* of pieces. Into a chain. Again "bricks". Bricks arranged in series to *expound* an idea.' He goes on: 'I confronted him with my viewpoint on montage as a *collision*. A view that from the collision of two given factors *arises* a concept. . . . So montage is conflict. As the basis of every art is conflict (an "imagist" transformation of the dialectical principle).'

But how did a concept arise from a collision? Neither Pavlov nor Debordin were very helpful on this subject. Marxism did not have a satisfactory aesthetics. Its most clamorous aestheticians were particularly hostile to the background from which Eisenstein had emerged, Futurism and Constructivism, and to which he still adhered. In fact, Eisenstein proved unable to solve the problems confronting him and eventually tacitly abandoned them. Primarily,





*October*: conflict within the frame

a work of art remained for him 'a structure of pathos', which produced emotional effects in the spectator. The problem was to get the maximum effect. 'If we want the spectator to experience a maximum emotional upsurge, to send him into ecstasy, we must offer him a suitable "formula" which will eventually excite the desirable emotions in him.' This was a simple physiological approach; conflict, on various levels and dimensions, on the screen excited emotions in the spectator, which would either strengthen his political and social consciousness or jolt him out of his ideological preconceptions to look at the world anew. What baffled Eisenstein was how *new* concepts could be precisely conveyed. He built up a model, first with four and then with five levels of montage (metric, rhythmic, tonal, overtone, intellectual), in which, in each case, every level except the last could be described as 'purely physiological'. The last (intellectual montage) was to direct not only the emotions but 'the whole thought process as well'.

Eisenstein conceded that his method might be 'more suitable for the expression of ideologically pointed theses', but explained that this was only a 'first embryonic step'. Ahead lay 'the synthesis of art and science' and the dream of a film of *Capital*, the summit of Eisenstein's ambitions.

This search for the synthesis of art and science led Eisenstein into a line of argument to which there could be no satisfactory conclusion. He became increasingly interested in the idea that verbal speech is a kind of secondary process and that the primary, underlying level of thought is sensuous and imagistic. He was impressed by the notion that the origins of language were in metaphor and in conjunction with magic and mystic rituals. He came to believe that the language of primitive peoples was more imagistic and metaphoric than the tongues of advanced nations. He saturated himself in the writings of anthropologists such as Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl and Malinowsky, and regarded myth as the primary function of thought; logical thought, in the more usual sense, came to be seen as a kind of shrivelled myth. It was in myth that the synthesis of art and science could be seen. This idea, of course, is at the root of *Que Viva Mexico!*. Eisenstein also became interested in the concept of 'affective logic', based on the observation that most people, in colloquial speech, did not utter complex and logically formed sentences so much as bursts of disjointed phrases which the hearer was able to connect. Finally, he was deeply impressed by the work of James Joyce and was persuaded that inner speech was closer to sensuous and imagistic thought than externalised, verbal speech. In some sense, the cinema might correspond to interior monologue; the drift of Joyce's literary innovations was towards a kind of cinematism of language. Of course, it is easy now to point out how many of his mentors have been discredited, how our concepts of myth and of the syntax of colloquial speech have been transformed, how it has been shown that inner speech is not less but more sophisticated and advanced than externalised speech. But at the time Eisenstein was working, and in the isolated conditions in which he worked, there was nothing abnormal about his line of thought.

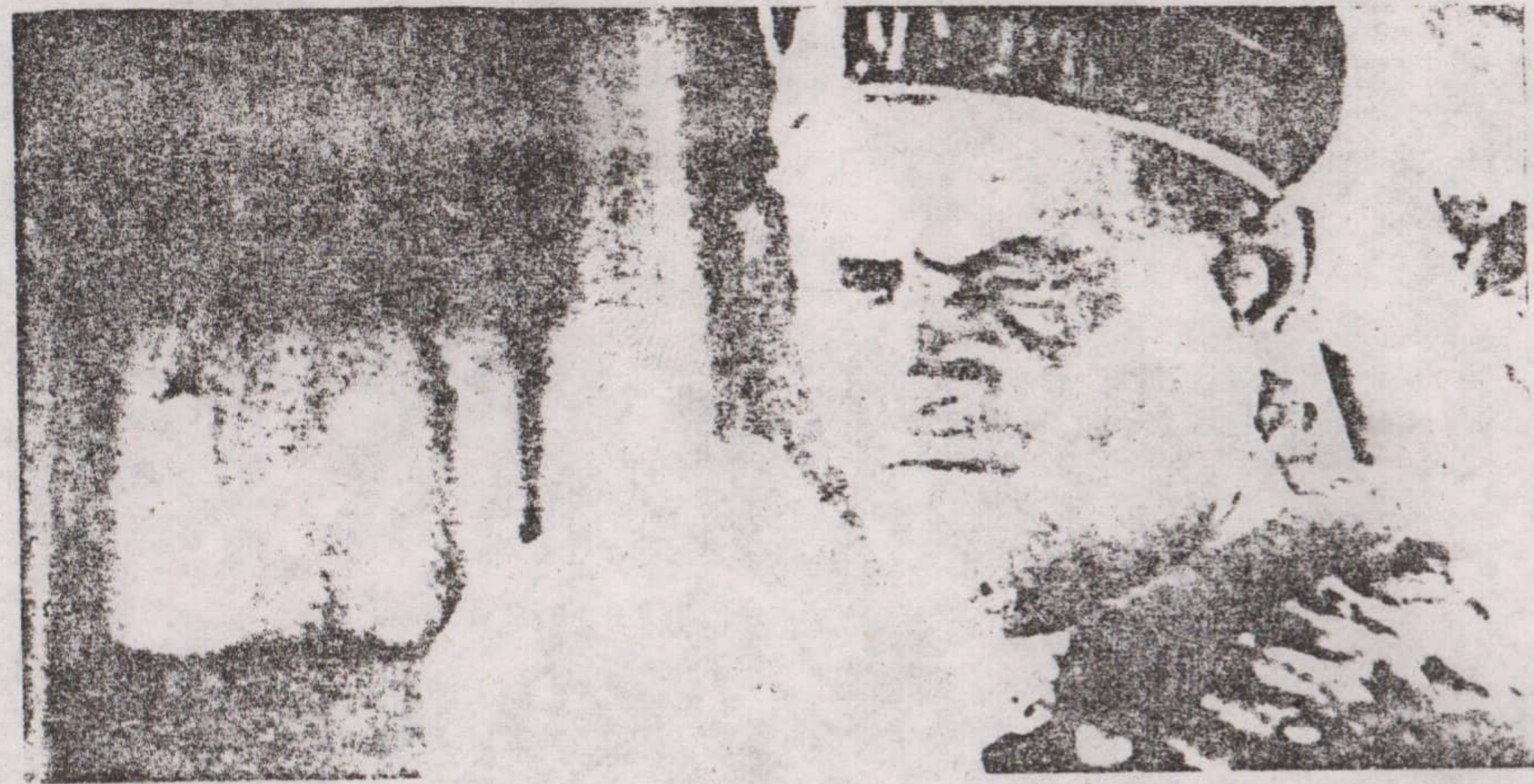


It did, however, bring him into error and confusion.

An important moment in the development of his ideas occurred when the Kabuki troupe of Ichikawa Sadanji visited Russia in 1928. Eisenstein, who had long been interested in Japan, was enormously impressed. He felt that there was a kinship of principle between Kabuki acting, the Japanese written ideogram, and his great discovery of montage.

How grateful I was to fate for having subjected me to the ordeal of learning an Oriental language [while in the army], opening before me that strange way of thinking and teaching me word pictography. It was precisely this 'unusual' way of thinking that later helped me to master the nature of montage, and still later, when I came to recognise this 'unusual', 'emotional' way of thinking, different from our common 'logical' way, this helped me to comprehend the most recondite methods of art.

Under the influence of the Kabuki theatre Eisenstein began to see montage as an activity of mental fusion or synthesis, through which particular details were united at a higher level of thought, rather than a series of explosions as in a combustion engine, as it had once seemed. Eisenstein was fascinated by the use of conventions, masks and symbolic costumes in Oriental theatre. He became interested in Japanese ideas of picture composition. Under the spell of the East, montage was defused for Eisenstein. Finally, the Japanese theatre suggested to Eisenstein the concept of a 'monistic ensemble' which came to dominate his thought more and more, culminating in the Wagnerian excesses of his stage production of the *Valkyrie*. He was struck by the way sound and gesture were correlated in the Kabuki theatre; this was a subject which became more and more crucial to him as it became clear that the sound film was to be the form of the future. Again, quite in the tradition of Meyerhold, he reacted against the idea that the sound film must mean the dominance of the spoken word and looked for a different way of combining the visual and aural components of the cinema. In the Kabuki theatre Eisenstein felt that the line of one sense did not simply accompany the other, the two were totally



*October*: sequence in the Czarina's bedroom

interchangeable, inseparable elements of a monistic ensemble.

This interest in the relationships between the different senses converged with Eisenstein's growing proneness to use musical analogies and terminology to explain what he was trying to achieve in the cinema. Thus, while pondering over the editing of *The General Line* he came to the conclusion that his montage should concentrate not on the dominant in each shot (tonal montage) but on the overtones. At the same time he put increased stress on finding the correct rhythm. And, when he discussed the relationships between the different senses and different lines of development, he introduced the idea of counterpoint and later of polyphony (noise bands, which in a way survived until *Battleship Potemkin*, with the 'music of the machines' passage in Meisel's score, now disappeared entirely). This stress on the 'synchronisation of the senses', and on analogies with music set the stage for the full-scale reflux of Symbolism which overwhelmed Eisenstein's thought during the 1930s.

Eisenstein's visit to Western Europe, the United States and Mexico had a shattering effect on his life. Firstly, there was the terrible catastrophe of *Que Viva Mexico!*, a film to which he became obsessively attached, which he was unable to finish and



'reality' are always the best propaganda for the *status quo*.

Meanwhile, however, Eisenstein was pursuing his researches. The dominant strand throughout the rest of his life was to be the investigation of the 'synchronisation of the senses', a return to the Symbolist infatuation with Baudelaire's *correspondances*, a frequent subject for debate in Russia in the two decades before the Revolution.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent  
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,  
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,  
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.  
Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,  
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies. . . .

Eisenstein went even further than Baudelaire by including taste. In his discussion of the Kabuki theatre he wrote:

Not even what is eaten in this theatre is accidental! I had no opportunity to discover if it is ritual food eaten. Do they eat whatever happens to be there or is there a definite menu? If the latter, we must also include in the ensemble the sense of taste.

Eisenstein allowed no scientific scruples to stand in his way; indeed, by an astute reading of Pavlovian reflexology, he was able to validate his ideas scientifically to his own satisfaction. The *Laocoön* was summarily dismissed:

And yet we cannot reduce aural and visual perceptions to a common denominator. They are values of different dimensions. But the visual overtone and the sound overtone are values of a single measured substance. Because, if the frame is a visual perception and the tone is an aural perception, visual as well as aural overtones are a totally physiological sensation. And consequently they are of one and the same kind . . . for both, a new uniform formula must enter our vocabulary: 'I feel'.

After this, however clumsily it may have been expressed, the way was open for every kind of interpenetration and admixture of categories.

Eisenstein's writings on synesthesia are of great erudition and considerable interest, despite their fundamentally unscientific nature. For example, he quotes numerous Baroque and Romantic authorities, who speculated about the colour symbolism of the vowels long before Rimbaud. He sees himself in the tradition of Wagner and the *gesamtkunstwerk* and quotes copiously from the French Symbolists. In particular, we can detect the influence of René Ghil, a close friend of V. Y. Bryusov, the poet and evangel of Russian Symbolism, and a frequent and respected contributor to Bryusov's review *Scales*. Another source for Eisenstein's speculations on colour symbolism is Kandinsky. Though he explicitly dissociates himself from Kandinsky's mysticism and spiritualism, his general tone and the trend of his investigations vividly recalls Kandinsky's programme for the Inkhuk (Institute of Artistic Culture). Clinging as hard as he can to the anchor of reflexology, Eisenstein explains that the colour stimulus acts 'as in a conditioned reflex which recalls a whole complex, in which it had once played a part, to the memory and the senses'. He also finds a crumb of scientific comfort in the theory of vibrations.

Another important forerunner whom Eisenstein cites is Scriabin, who wrote a colour score alongside the sound score for his *The Poem of Fire*. Scriabin also planned a stupendous *Mystery* with gestures, colours, perfumes, etc. Eisenstein used Scriabin, together with Debussy, to justify his theory of overtone montage and also saw himself as the vector of Scriabin's dream of a synthesis of the arts. (He does not discuss the occult and peculiarly Russian brand of Theosophy which underlay this dream.) The idea of synthetic theatre was one much voiced during the 1920s. Eisenstein adopted it and went so far as to write that the cinema was destined to fulfil the prophecies of Edward Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia, the great Symbolist and Wagnerian theoreticians of the pre-Revolutionary theatre. The logical extension of this, of course, was his production of the *Valkyrie* at the Bolshoi Opera in 1940. (In defence of Eisenstein it should be said that he was not entirely dominated by Symbolist and Wagnerian thought; he also hailed Walt Disney as a master of synesthesia.) The *Valkyrie*, according

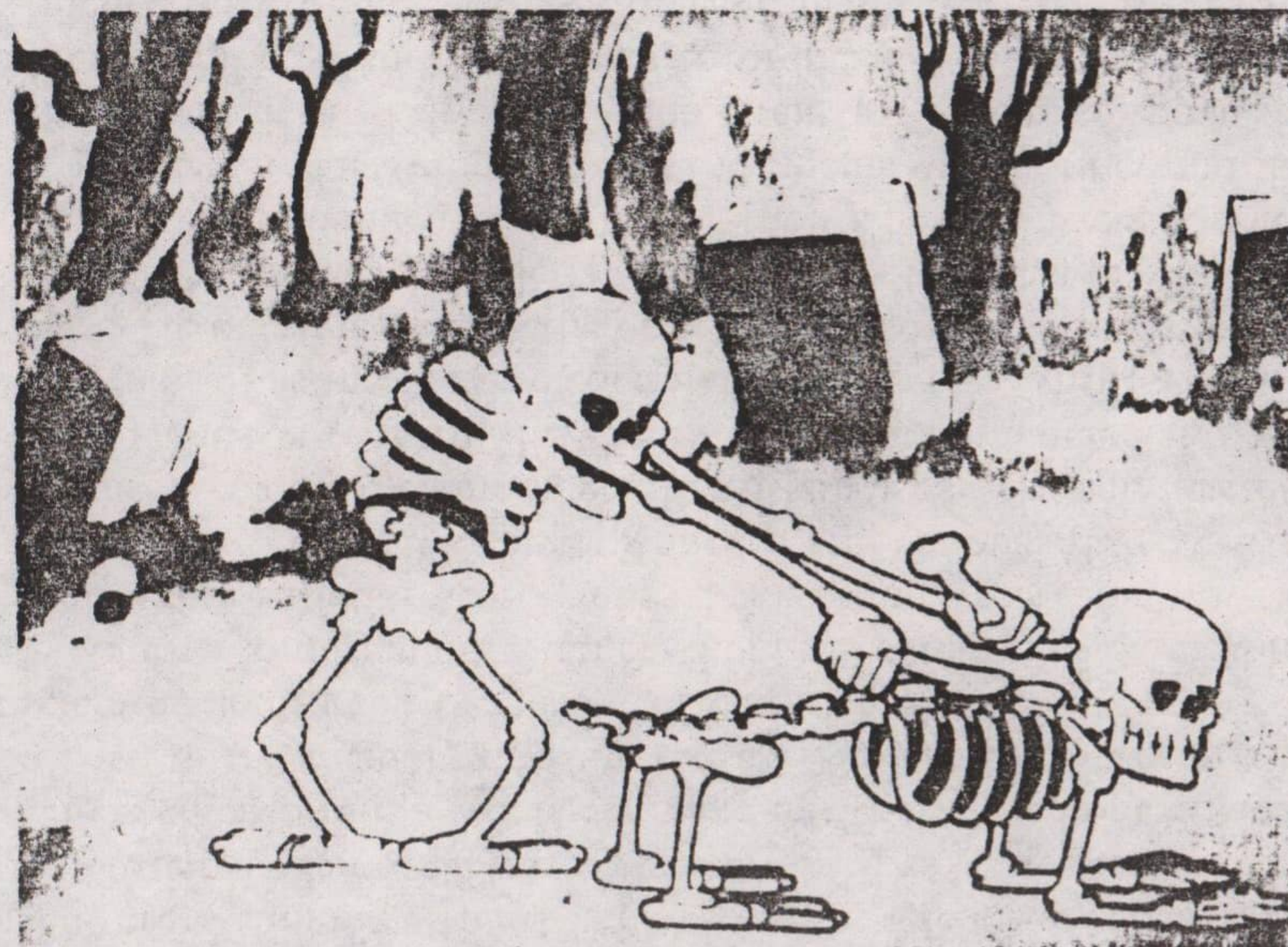




The operatic splendour of *Ivan the Terrible*

to Eisenstein's painstaking biographer, Marie Seton, had this aim: 'Men, music, light, landscape, colour and motion brought into one integral whole by a single piercing emotion, by a single theme and idea.' He himself wrote of his efforts to achieve 'a fusion between the elements of Wagner's score and the wash of colours on the stage'. This led directly on to *Ivan the Terrible*.

The result of this overwhelming Symbolist reflux was that the monistic ensemble gradually became no more than an organic whole and the dialectic was reduced to the interconnection of the parts. At the same time Eisenstein became interested in ideas of harmony, mathematical proportion, and the golden section as part of a search for Classicism. As far back as *The General Line* his cameraman Tissé recalls, 'we resolved to get away from all trick-camerawork and to use simple methods of direct filming, with the most severe attention to the composition of each shot'. (For the Odessa Steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin*, Eisenstein had



Walt Disney's first *Silly Symphony*

strapped a camera to a somersaulting acrobat.) This interest in geometry was not that of the Constructivist, derived from the machine, but relied on insights into the nature of art. Eisenstein was especially fond of citing the geometry of the works of Leonardo da Vinci. It seems at times a component of that obsession with science which he was never able to control, reminiscent almost of René Ghil. 'In his attempt to create the logarithmic tables of art there is something akin to alchemy,' observed one critic, and it is hard not to see much of Eisenstein's later writing as an attempt to shore up, scientifically and intellectually, an art increasingly pre-occupied with emotional saturation, ecstasy, the synchronisation of the senses, myth and primitive thought ('Folk images equal human knowledge,' he said, apropos of *Que Viva Mexico!*). Indeed there is something essentially Symbolist in his whole view of the near-identity of art and philosophy, though in his case philosophy was a bizarre mixture of Hegel with Pavlov.



One final strand in Eisenstein's aesthetics should be noted: his lifelong interest in caricature, in lampoon, in the grotesque. This derives in part from Meyerhold, Hoffmann, and the seventeenth-century French etcher Callot. The artists Eisenstein revered were Daumier, Toulouse-Lautrec and Sharaku ('the Japanese Daumier'). In Mexico he added Posada to this pantheon: the Dance of Death sequence which was to close the film owes its provenance to Posada as well as Hoffmann and Callot. Later he became obsessed by El Greco, about whom he planned to write a book. This reflects both an interest in caricature, or at least hyperbole, and the fascination of the strange sado-spiritual atmosphere of the Toledo of the Inquisition, similar to that he felt in Mexico. (Hence too his series of semi-caricatural drawings of the Stigmata and his admiration for Lawrence.) Eisenstein began his artistic career as a caricaturist on a agit-train; he ended it designing the strange, distorted costumes for *Ivan the Terrible*, twisting the actor Cherkassov out of shape till he collapsed from exhaustion. (In more than one way *Ivan the Terrible* returns, in a different form, to the ideas of the 1920s: there is even the gigantic Mayakovskian theme of the battle with God, strangely distended.)

It is instructive to compare Eisenstein with Brecht. They both started out in the same cultural milieu, with the same kind of orientation: the influence of Meyerhold (relayed to Brecht through Piscator), the interest in Oriental art, in music-hall, in sport; their commitment to Marxism and the Bolshevik Revolution; their Americanism, Behaviourism, hatred of Naturalism. Brecht might have echoed Eisenstein's words:

The Moscow Art Theatre is my deadly enemy. It is the exact antithesis of all I am trying to do. They string their emotions together to give a continuous illusion of reality. I take photographs of reality and then cut them up so as to produce emotions. . . . I am not a realist, I am a materialist. I believe that material things, that matter gives us the basis of all our sensations. I get away from realism by going to reality.

There are friendships in common. They both sought the same goal: the elusive unity of science with art. But at the end of the 1920s



*Ivan the Terrible*: Cherkassov

they took different paths. Brecht protested to Tretyakov against the idea of 'pathetic overtones'; he devoted himself to attacking Wagner, to insisting that the senses, as the *Laocoön* had showed, must be clearly differentiated, that the different components in a



work of art should be specified and be kept clearly apart. Brecht tried to find an artistic form for rational argument; Eisenstein repeatedly tried to cram and squeeze concepts into an artistic form he had already semi-intuitively (even 'ecstatically') elaborated: in the end, he decided thought and image were at one in myth and inner speech, abandoning rational argument for 'affective logic'. But it would be too easy simply to praise Brecht at Eisenstein's expense. Brecht always stayed with words, with verbal discourse, and was never compelled to face the problems of working in a predominantly non-verbal, iconic rather than symbolic medium.

Scientific concepts can, in fact, only be expressed within a symbolic code. Eisenstein's whole orientation, however, prevented him from pursuing the search for a symbolic language. In so far as he was interested in semiology his kinship is not so much with Saussure and structural linguistics, as Christian Metz supposes, as with Charles Morris and his Behaviourist semiotic. Eisenstein soon disowned his early experiments with non-diegetic metaphor, the necessary beginning for any movement towards the establishment of paradigmatic sets, such as the Gods sequence in *October*, though, as Godard has since shown in *Une Femme Mariée* and *La Chinoise*, this was not a dead-end street at all. Probably too he underestimated the importance of the support verbal discourse can and must give on the soundtrack. (Strangely, he was much more aware of the importance of sub-titles during the silent era.) His emphasis on the emotional impact of the cinema tended all the time to draw him away from the symbolic.

Paradoxically it was his conviction of the scientific basis of art which in the end led him into a full-scale retreat from the expression of scientific concepts through film. His acceptance of Pavlovian reflexology was unquestioning and rigid. (While he was in the United States he even felt moved to contrast Rin-Tin-Tin unfavourably with Pavlov's laboratory-trained dogs.) At an epistemological level, he was never able to resolve clearly what he intended by the marxism to which he was fervently committed. It fell into two unrelated shells, and lacked a binding core. On the one hand was a 'scientistic' materialism, which sought physiological explanations

for all human activity. On the other hand, there was a purely formal and abstract concept of the Hegelian dialectic, mechanically applied and eventually degenerating into an empty stereotype.

Eisenstein liked to compare himself with Leonardo da Vinci, as a great artist who saw his art as scientific and became, in time, more interested in aesthetic theory than in art itself. (He even compared his failure to complete *Que Viva Mexico!* with the catastrophe of the Sforza Monument.) His aspirations were greater than his achievement. Nevertheless, he was one of the few writers on aesthetics in this century to show any awareness of the cataclysmic reassessment of aesthetics which must take place. He was an original, unrelenting, and comprehensive thinker. The fact that he fell short of his own gigantic appreciation of his worth should not lead us to forget that he towers above his contemporaries. He still has an enormous amount to teach us.



## Beginnings – Sources

Alexander Dovzhenko

# BEGINNINGS - SOURCES

Alexander Dovzhenko

### Beginnings

In June 1926 I left for Odessa where I began to work in the studios as a director. Thus, in my thirty-third year I was to start my life afresh, to take on a new apprenticeship: until then I had never been an actor, nor a theatrical *metteur en scène*; I went little to the cinema, had nothing to do with artists and had no knowledge of the theory or the infinite complexity of the synthetic art of the cinema. Moreover, at Odessa there was no time to learn, and perhaps there was no one who could have taught me. The cinema factory was quite important, but the cultural level was rather low and the films did not shine for any outstanding quality.

An insignificant circumstance helped me at the start. I was often present at the location shooting of an Odessa director. What he was doing with his actors was so bad, so obviously feeble, that it encouraged me. I said to myself: I see that it is bad and I know exactly what is bad and why it is bad. So I am not so completely unprovided as it seems. Indeed, I have only to do it myself and I will do it better.

This deduction was not entirely justified. How often since have I seen young people, sparkling with apparent gifts, able to analyse in detail every sequence and every shot that someone else does, and yet who appear pitifully helpless when they get the chance to direct themselves. I must say that that

has never happened to me though I find the work very difficult. I've been a director for sixteen years.\* yet even so, at the start of each film I feel that I know absolutely nothing. I have never been a shirker in my art, but apprehension at starting work, and constant worry remain with me and will not leave me as long as I live. The work is as multiform and limitless as is life in our great socialist society in its victorious development. And no genius, no talent can ever achieve anything in art without the support of knowledge and experience. Not only the knowledge of the specific nature of his art, but primarily and essentially, knowledge of life. The cinema demands enormous and dedicated work – not only during the making of the film, but in the mental process of its conception. The cinema is an art of possessed people.

Coming to the cinema, I thought of devoting myself entirely to comedies and comic films. My first script, *Vasya the Reformer*, was conceived as a comedy, and my first attempt at direction, *Little Fruits of Love*, belonged to the same genre. Likewise my unrealized films are all conceived as comedies: *Homeland*, about the Jews in Palestine, *Chaplin Lost*, about the life of Chaplin on a desert island, and *Tsar*, a satirical comedy about the life of Nicholas II. But things turned out differently and I only made a single comedy. I've always taken a lot of pleasure in the few comic passages which have been scattered through my films. The comedy that we do in the Soviet cinema always seems to me for some reason feeble and false in principle. I do not know why, but we always deprive comic characters of intelligence when one must in fact do exactly the opposite. A comic character is not one with a frustrated or embryonic intelligence.

### Scenarists, Directors, Actors

Often the writer who comes to the cinema has not yet sufficient respect for our art to abandon to it all the power and the passion of his talent. Some writers do not understand that the world of cinematographic images is a unique and enchanted world. You cannot gallop across it on your literary charger just like that. The horse must become a cinema horse. Because of this a lot of directors, especially young ones, find themselves in an impasse, faced with a bulky book of mysteries entitled 'Literary scenario'. It was possible to write such a scenario, but to realize it on the screen is impossible. First it has to be translated from the 'literary'. Then of course, if the director is young, not too clever, and into the bargain too sure of himself, it's a foregone conclusion that he is going to come to grief. . . .

The scenarist must write a script that is really visual, and even give indications for the future director specifying that such a passage must be realized like this and not otherwise. Because it can happen that directors given a script can make a film totally different from that of the scenario. 'Well, I read it like that,' they say. There are different sorts of freedom of interpretation. The freedom of a subjective reading. . . . It is not that this

\* Written in 1942.



freedom must be crushed, but that it must be limited by the liberty of the writer who also claims his freedom and who, as the primary author of the work, has an undeniable right.

[In our plays and our films] all the characters explain to one another in the same oversimplified fashion what they are going to do next. Practically nothing in context. All on one and the same level. Total absence of thought process. The absence of context in the roles deprives the actors of the possibility of creating living characters. They do not live; that is to say they do not think ('I think, therefore I am'). They are speakers of dialogue.

To bring feeling to the stage or to the screen is not difficult. It is difficult to present *thought*. What is life, if not a continual process, infinitely complex, of the conflict of impulses, ideas, individual and mass thoughts? And what can actors do if they do not think, because they have not been taught to think? Because of this they are reciters of words, or rather actors who *act* thought without thinking.

### Zvenigora

What can there be more unacceptable in a film than the title: 'Twenty years have passed . . .'? Right up to the present, unity of time rules in the cinema as two-dimensional representation reigned for centuries in Egyptian art.

The chiaroscuro which gives three dimensions to painting and which seems to us so comprehensible and legitimate had to fight for centuries for acceptance. It was opposed and attacked as madness or magic. In the domain of cinematic unity of time, the tenacity of certain directors and writers, slaves to conservative inertia, really reaches a peak of virtuosity. A film with three or four actors, a film in which all the action takes place in one room and almost a single day – that's the latest fashion.

What are audiences going to say when they see presented before them, in six reels of film, a thousand years? And, into the bargain, without any 'story', without passion, without Asta Nielsen? . . .

### The Sources

I used to love to sleep on top of the full hay-cart and I loved to be carried into the house, heavy with sleep, when the cart stopped in the yard in front of our cottage. I loved the squeak of the wheels of the laden wagon at harvest time. I loved the twittering of the birds in the garden and in the fields. I loved the gentle croaking of the toads in the marshes in the spring, when the waters fell. I loved it when the apples fell in the meadow, in the evening, in the twilight – quite unexpected, rather secretly, they fell on the earth, in the grass. There was a mystery, something eternally unfathomable in that falling of fruit.

But more than anything else in the world I loved music. If I were asked what music, what instrument, what musicians I loved in my first childhood, I would reply that most of all I loved to hear the beating of a scythe. When, some calm evening round about the feast of Peter and Paul, my father began

to use the scythe in the meadow, near to the house, it was the most exquisite of all music for me. I loved it so much. I waited for it as, perhaps, only the angels awaited the Easter bells – forgive me the comparison, Lord! . . . Still today it sometimes seems to me that if someone started to use a scythe under my window, I would at once become younger, kinder, better; and I would fling myself into work. From my earliest years the high, pure sound of the scythe spoke to me of joy and pleasure.

Even today, when I close my eyes, I do not know darkness. Now, still, my brain lights up with a vivid and continual glow the visible and the invisible procession of images – innumerable, sometimes without pattern. The images float over the Danube and over the Desna. The clouds in the sky float free and capriciously; they swim in the vast blue emptiness and meet in so many combats and duels that if I could only snatch a tiny part to put it into books or into films, I would not have lived on this earth in vain and I would not in vain have given annoyance to my superiors.



## Film and Revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group by KENT E. CARROLL

*Why did you decide to call yourselves the Dziga-Vertov group?*

Godard: There are two reasons. One is the name Dziga Vertov itself, and one is the group Dziga-Vertov. The group name is to indicate a program, to raise a flag, not to just emphasize one person. Why Dziga-Vertov? Because at the beginning of the century, he was really a Marxist moviemaker. He was a revolutionary working for the Russian revolution through the movies. He wasn't just an artist. He was a progressive artist who joined the revolution and became a revolutionary artist through struggle. He said that the task of the Kinoki was not moviemaking—Kinoki does not mean moviemaker, it means film workers—but to produce films in the name of the World Proletarian Revolution. In that way, there was a big difference between him and those fellows Eisenstein and Pudovkin, who were not revolutionary. (. . .)

*Is he more than an historical example? Can those same principles be applied today? And if so, how can you apply them to the very different circumstances that exist?*

Godard: First we have to realize that we are French militants dealing with the movies, working in France, and involved in the class struggle. We are in 1970 and the movies, the tool we are working with, are still in 1917.

*Would you term that a contradiction?*

Godard: Yes, this is a contradiction. We have to deal with and be aware of this contradiction first. The group Dziga-Vertov means that we are trying, even if we are only two or three, to work as a group. Not to just work together as fellows, but as a political group. Which means fighting, struggling in France. Being involved in the struggle means we must struggle through the movies. To make a film as a political group is very difficult for the moment, because we are more in the position politically of just individuals trying

to go on the same road. A group means not only individuals walking side by side on the same road, but walking together politically.

*Is it necessary to work as a group? Could an individual, independent filmmaker make films politically?*

Godard: It depends. First you have to try and be independent from the ruling class economy. You have to realize what it means to be independent. It doesn't mean just to be a hippie on a campus. They think a place like Berkeley is a so-called liberated area, but when they go to the border of this liberated area they see that the bars on the prison remain, only they're more invisible. You have to be independent first from the bourgeois ideology, and then you can move toward a revolutionary ideology. That means you have to try to work as a group, as an organization, to organize in order to unite. The movies are simply a way to help build unity. Making movies is just a little screw in building a new concept of politics.

Gorin: What we are trying to make are revolutionary movies that will promote revolutionary change. You will have to break all the old chains. The first notion to disappear is certainly the notion of the *auteur*.

Godard: The notion of an author, of independent imagination, is just a fake. But this bourgeois idea has not yet been replaced. A first step might be to simply gather people. At least then you can have a free discussion. But if you don't go on and organize on a political basis, you have nothing more than a free discussion. Then collective creation is really no more than collective eating in a restaurant.

*Does it demand certain talents or certain kinds of knowledge?*

Godard: Yes, but you can't speak of kinds of knowledge or talent, only of social use of knowledge and social use of talents. Of course, to handle a gun you need a certain capacity, a certain ability. To run fast, you need to have good legs and good training. Not to be out of focus when you photograph something, you need a certain capacity. But then there is the social use of that certain capacity. That technique or that capacity does not just exist in the air like the clouds.

*You imply that your purpose is to break down not only an esthetic, but also the whole history of film. Then, is it more advantageous to be first a radical before becoming a filmmaker and attempting to make revolutionary films, or the other way around?*

Godard: I was a bourgeois filmmaker and then a progressive film-

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maker and then no longer a filmmaker, but just a worker in the movies. Jean-Pierre was a student and then a militant, and then he thought he had to go to the movies for a moment, just because it was an important part of the ideological struggle which is the primary aspect of the class struggle today in France. So we joined. And he had to learn techniques a little more than I, and I had to learn political work as a duty, not as a hobby.

*Is it possible to take advantage of expertise? Could you, working among yourselves and knowing what kind of film you wanted to make, use someone like Raoul Coutard?*

Godard: Why not? For example, at the moment we still need an editing girl or boy, not because we can't do it, or we don't know how to do it, but because we want someone better trained. That way it goes faster, and we have to go as fast as possible. I mean, Lenin can take a taxi because he has to go fast from one place to another and he doesn't necessarily care if the taxi driver is a fascist. The same is true with editing. We are hesitating for the picture we have done for Al Fatah between two girls who are politically involved in a different way. They are at different stages of the revolutionary process, and we have to choose which one is best for the movie from a political point of view. One of the girls belongs to a group which has a very precise political program we agree with for the moment. The other one is much less militant, but it might be that to work on this movie could be progress for her and, because of this progress, we might have a more productive political relationship together. . . .

. . . We made a step forward when we tried to reduce all those so-called technical problems to their utmost simplicity. When you read a book on photography, whether by Hollywood photographers, whether by Kodak, it looks like building an atomic bomb, when it is not. It's really rather simple. So we are trying to make only a few images, work with no more than two tracks, so the mixing is simple. For the moment, most movie makers, except some underground movie makers, work with ten to twelve sound tracks and mixing lasts one week. The mixing is only three or four hours for us. We just work with two tracks and possibly later with one track, because with one track, we can really have simple sound again. But for the moment, we have not the political capacity of working with one track. This is the political stage, not simply a problem of techniques.

*Is See You at Mao the first film you attempted to make by the*

*kind of revolutionary political process you've described?*

Godard: The first one was called *A Movie Like the Others*. It was done just after the 1968 May-June events in France. But it was a complete failure. So the real first attempt, with a bit of thinking, is *See You at Mao*, which is still kind of bourgeois, but progressive in many aspects of its making. Like the technical simplicity of it.

For example, in *Mao*, the shot of the nude women can generate a real progressive discussion. Just yesterday evening in Austin, a student said there was no difference between *Zabriskie Point* and *Mao*. I said, "Okay, but after seeing *Zabriskie Point*, what do you do?" "Oh well," he said, "I'm thinking more." I said, "Okay, what are you thinking more of?" He said, "Well, I don't know." Conversely from *Mao*, he asked why instead of a woman's body we didn't use a man's body? And I said, "Because we were actually discussing how to try and build an image for women's liberation." And then we had a real political and progressive discussion which you absolutely do not have the capacity of having with *Zabriskie Point*. That's what we mean by saying that simple techniques generate progressive political ideas.

*Is that how you determine if another step has been taken? Is the success of each succeeding film based on the reaction from the people who view the film, on your own attitudes about the film, or on a combination of the two?*

Godard: Mostly our own attitudes determine progress because, until now, there have been mainly negative aspects in our films. But the fact that those negative aspects can be transformed into positive aspects in succeeding films is because they were nevertheless achieved in a progressive way. There was a basic cut from the other movies. This cut was progressive, and although the results were mainly negative, we can dig out of that some progressive things. . . . You see a movie like *Amerika* by Newsreel, which I saw two days ago with the Newsreel people in San Francisco. They themselves say it is only feelings and that it is not good. They realize that, but they only feel; they do not have the capacity of saying what is not good. In *Mao* we realize that it's not good that on the assembly-line shot we are still obliged to use Marx's quotations instead of the voice of the workers. Yet, because of that, we can begin to deal with the class problem in England. But Newsreel can't do that. They can't because the next picture will be the same. But if it is not the same, it is not because of them. It is because there is some change in America and the changes in America are



not coming from inside America but from the struggle against America outside America.

*Is Pravda a step beyond Mao?*

Godard: Yes, but only because *Pravda* differs in the negative aspect; we made the effort to finish it, and not to quit and say it's just garbage. But having made that psychological effort, we must also put a notice on it. This is a garbage Marxist/Leninist movie, which is a good way of titling it. At least now we know what not to do anymore. We've visited a house in which we'll never go again. We thought it was a step forward but we realized, how do you say, a jump into emptiness. It was a learning process. And the first thing we learned was that it was not done by group work, but by two individuals.

*You continue to use the metaphor "step forward." Does that imply that at some point there is a final step, a full-blown revolutionary film with no negative aspects?*

Godard: No. Only revolution again. People think we are aiming at a model, and this model you can print and then sell as a revolutionary model. That is shit. That is what Picasso has done and it is still bourgeois.

Gorin: Precisely. What is the difference between the two conceptions? One is saying, finally, art is art, which means things are things, and they hope to stay the way they are. We are saying that art is revolutionary art, art is a sensation of movement, and movement doesn't exist with a Greek urn. Only specific movements can exist with specific situations. That means that revolutionary art is a very wide open country, and there is not one form, but hundreds and thousands of them that, like political revolution itself, will never stop.

*At the very beginning it's likely that it will be easy to gauge steps forward but, after the initial departure, how will you measure progression?*

Godard: At a certain point you go from quantity to quality. Until *A Movie Like the Others* I was a moviemaker and an author. I was only progressing from a quantity point of view. Then I saw the job to be done, and that I had the possibility of doing this job only with the help of the masses. For me this was a major advancement. You can't do it as an individual. You can't do it alone, even if you are an advanced element of the good militant. Because being a good militant means being related, one way or another, with the masses.

*Does it then follow that other revolutionary filmmakers, or would-be revolutionary filmmakers, have very little to learn from your own experience and that, secondly, at a certain point, each separate film can only be judged in its own specific context? That it can't even be related to the film that went before or the films that come afterward?*

Gorin: No, I think that all revolutionary filmmakers have to meet at a certain point. They must confront the same problem we did. First they will be engaged, in their own way, in a war that will be quite similar to our struggle. But you have to work on general principles because each step of the revolution is trying to produce a parallel approach. There should be different types of revolutionary moviemakers, and sometimes we have to fight with them ideologically because that is one way we analyze our principles.

Godard: For example, the Newsreel people are fighting the Underground moviemakers, and both Underground and Newsreel are fighting Hollywood. This is a contradiction within the imperialistic system. And then there is Dziga-Vertov. We are fighting Hollywood, Newsreel, and the Underground. But sometimes we work on a united front with the people of Newsreel because it is important at a certain point to work with them to fight both Underground and Hollywood. For example, we took a movie made in Laos (we think it is a revisionist picture, even if they call it a Marxist picture), and brought it to the Palestinian fighters just for them to see others in another part of the world fighting against imperialism. So at that moment we were working on a united front. It is like when you make a demonstration in the street. Sometimes you must coordinate it with a group you are fighting ideologically. You do this to concentrate on the main enemy at the moment. To have a revolutionary form does not mean a discussion between two intellectual old ladies in front of a cup of tea. Having a revolutionary form is part of being related to the struggle and an expression of that struggle. An example of the contradiction we are dealing with is the laboratories. Except perhaps in China, when you are doing movies, even revolutionary ones, you are absolutely not related to the people who are processing the films. Not at all. You just go to them like you go to the grocery. This is the situation. And this is the trouble with the movies. The economic reality is the lab and the studio. But they are just objects.

*But aren't they objects which you must presently use?*

Godard: And we use them. We exploit them. For example, if



you do fast editing, you know, a lot of shots, you have to be aware of the negative editing girl who is working at the lab. The boss of the lab is obliging her to edit as fast as if there were a very few shots. You see? She's just a worker on an assembly line and this assembly line is just a movie, frame after frame.

*Is one of the contradictions the distribution of the film?*

Godard: Yes, one of the contradictions is between the distribution and the production. This contradiction has been established by imperialists who put distribution in command, who say, "since we have to distribute movies, we have to produce them in such a way that they can be distributed." So we, Dziga-Vertov, have to do the exact opposite. First we have to know how to produce, how to build a picture, and, after that, we will learn how to distribute it. It means that with the very few films we have, the very little money, we must try not to distribute always the same way. The old way was to make it to sell it. To make another one to sell it. To make another one and to sell it. Now, this is over. It might mean that we will be obliged to stop making movies for economic reasons or maybe from political decisions. At a certain historical point we will know if it's more important not to make a movie.

*How do you see the possibilities of distribution, via EVR or video tape in home cassette form?*

Godard: I don't believe in EVR from the class point of view, because EVR is just a new name of 20th Century Fox or M-G-M. It's run by CBS. It has been invented by CBS and it's used by CBS exactly the same way they use the network. The result is that EVR is only distribution, it can't produce a movie. So if you want to work on tape, the video cassette is probably the future. It will have a significant effect on the future from both a technical and social point of view. With Sony for example, or Ampex, you have both the producing capacity and the distribution capacity. So there is a huge fight today between Sony and EVR. Because they are very well aware that if they sell tapes to workers like English muffins, then it means the end of the old imperialist form like CBS.

Gorin: We must make a real study of the possibility of the video tape because video tape is taken for movies but it is not movies; it is a very specific thing with its own political meaning.

*Are there any examples of people making genuine revolutionary films, political films by political means?*

Godard: Maybe, but if there are, they must be unknown; and they have to be. Maybe there are one or two in Asia, and one or

two in Africa, I don't know. In China they are probably working like that, but related to the Chinese situation. It's easier for the Chinese because there have been twenty years of dictatorship of the masses, and now the masses are taking over the ideological superstructure. This means that they have the capacity to really begin to work on art and literature in a true, revolutionary Chinese way.

*How do you evaluate films like Battle of Algiers and Z?*

Godard: A revolutionary film must come from class struggle or from liberation movements. These are films which only record, they are not part of the struggle. They are just films on politics, filmed with politicians. They are completely outside the activity they record; in no sense are they a product of that activity. At best, they are liberal movies.

They claim they attack when they're just what the Chinese call a bullet wrapped in sugar. These sugar bullets are the most dangerous ones.

They advance a solution before analyzing the problem. So they put the solution before the problem. At the same moment they confuse reality with reflections. A movie is not reality, it is only a reflection. Bourgeois filmmakers focus on the reflections of reality. We are concerned with the reality of that reflection. But, at the moment, we must deal and work with only a few resources. This is a real situation. This is a ghetto situation. Our commissioned movies have been rejected by British, Italian, and French television because they were fiercely attacking them. And they feel us out the same way as the FBI. And we have not a possibility of having an Oscar or selling to CBS. We absolutely have not.

Gorin: Movies were invented about the time that the old bourgeois arts were declining. Movies were used to reinforce all the implications of the other arts. In fact, Hollywood movies are really from the same old psychopolitical form as the novel.

Godard: You have a very good example with Emile Zola. He began as a progressive writer, dealing with mine workers and the working-class situation. Then he sold more and more copies of his books. He became a real bourgeois, and then photography was invented. Then as an artist, he began to make photographs. But what kind of photographs was he making by the end of his life? Just pictures of his wife and children in the garden. In the beginning, his books were dealing with a coal workers' strike. You see the difference? He could have at least begun again to photograph strikers. But he did not. He was shooting his lady in a garden. Just



like the Impressionist painters were doing. Manet was making pictures of the railroad station. But he was absolutely not aware that there was a big strike in the station. So one thing that can really be proved is that the development of movies and the invention of the camera did not mean progress, but only different kinds of tricks to convey the same stuff already in the novel. That's why the relationship between novels and moviemaking, the way a script is written and the way the director casts the film, why all those things are really a reinforcement of the same ruling-class ideology. The narrative line has brought the novel to death. Novelists became incapable of transforming progress into a revolutionary movement because they never analyzed where the narrative line was coming from. By whom was it invented? For whom and against whom? In a movie, there is no pure technique, there is nothing like a neutral camera or zoom. There is just social use of the zoom. The social use of the camera. There could be a social use of the 16mm camera. But when it was invented, there was no analysis of the social use of this light, portable camera. So the social use was controlled by Hollywood.

*Do all art forms have as much possibility as film as ideological elements in revolutionary struggle?*

Godard: I think it is much more difficult for painters and sculptors, much more difficult for arts like theater and music, because there is no science of music, and absolutely no social use of music except by imperialists. Look at the Rolling Stones. A year ago they were considered the leading hippies since the Beatles. Look what happened. Those Rolling Stones did a show at Altamont and allowed a situation where people were killed. There is nothing more to say.

Gorin: It is very hard to define a main form of art that is most representative of the current political movement. But on this political line, for the integration of the struggle, film is far more useful than music. But that doesn't mean, for instance, that in China, all forms of art cannot be revolutionary.

Godard: We think that the music in China is, for the moment, less revolutionary than theater, just because the Chinese tradition of theater is more Chinese than music. For example, the blacks here have a problem with their music because it has been stolen by the whites. So first they must recover it, and afterwards they must transform it, because now the whites have black sounds in their music. And this process is really very difficult. (. . .)

*Could there come a point when you decide that there is no point in making more films? Might you decide to devote your energies entirely to a different kind of revolutionary activity which would not allow you to make films?*

Godard: Well for the moment, we can't say because we are still dealing with movies. Some look to Che Guevara because he died fighting, and think they must do the same, but that is a very romantic notion. We speak of organization as outlined by Marx and especially Lenin. It means to change your life, even your personal life. To be related in a new way. For me, it means being able to work with Jean-Pierre, in the films. It means being able to work with the workers we are related to. But also to organize my own life, related to all that, to change it with my wife too, for example.

*That seems extremely difficult. It seems that many people, although radical, are involved in a political activity only in relation to their primary social identity or the work they do while their personal life remains quite separate.*

Godard: Yes, of course, and it is as difficult for the bourgeois as it is for the workers. The student or the bourgeois has to do the main effort, because they are in the position of having the possibility of doing it faster than the worker. And that is where the real difficulty is now.

*What about the problem of financing films? As more and more distribution outlets become aware, like the television stations, of the kind of films you want to make, and the reasons you want to make them, won't most of the regular sources for finance be entirely unavailable?*

Godard: This is why we may have to work just in a suburb or in a certain factory with the video tape. The only possibility might be to ask two hundred people for ten cents every week in order to deliver to them their information. Information from them to them. And this will be political work. But still we have the four pictures we are going to do for Grove Press. Grove Press has already bought two pictures in advance. What does it mean for us? It means we can control the picture except inside the States. It means, since it is more money than we have had in the last two years, that we have a capacity to think and work on the picture for six or seven months. It means we have no bread and butter problem for six months, and we have more creative possibilities. It means to pay people on the same basis that we are paid. But still we know



what Grove Press is, more or less, and we know, more or less, what we are. So the first picture, *Vladimir and Rosa*, will deal with sexuality. We know Grove Press is interested in erotic things as well as politics and avant-garde art. And since Barney Rosset is interested in that, we have tried to work within that, and to deliver the best picture we can. But at the same time, militants will be able to learn something from the movie. And if they are angry that it's handled by Grove Press, which is a contradiction, at least it is progressive to deliver a picture that will upset people. So if they're really angry, that may lead to political action. That a contradiction exists is obvious, but the answer is quite clear: we are far more realistic in our approach than those who act as if the revolution had already occurred.

*If a major film company came to you and said they'd give you, say, \$500,000 to make a film on a property they had selected, how would you respond?*

Godard: We'd take it immediately, at least today we'd take it immediately. Tomorrow we don't know. We need money badly. Even when I was a bourgeois movie maker I was never offered such an amount of money. Even when I was making *Pierrot le fou*, or *The Married Woman*. But now, no one would offer such a sum.

*Could you make a commercial film intending to use your share of the profits for other more political projects?*

Godard: That was just about the deal I had with United Artists a year ago that was broken by United Artists. I had a deal to make a picture called *Little Murders* by Feiffer. We had two screen writers, Bob Benton and Robert Newman, deliver a script on our indication, and then United Artists said to Bob Newman, 'Okay, your script is good, but we don't want any more Godard.' I think those two screen writers are honest liberals—they gave back the money, and then UA broke the deal without even telling me. I didn't receive the remaining \$5,000 on my contract. Apparently, United Artists had heard that we made a movie that Italian TV turned down and they too were afraid to be attacked in their own house.

*That doesn't really answer the question.*

Godard: If they had said what we must do we would have done the movie, and tried to spend the money in a good way. We would have tried to work politically with the union people, to use some of the money with ads in *Variety* in a political way. It would be almost nothing—but at least to fight that fight—and to

get money. The only people who can give us money now sometimes may act just out of charity.

*These two films, Vladimir and Rosa and 18th Brumaire, will they be fictional films?*

Godard: With *Vladimir and Rosa* we will try again with fiction but it will be very difficult. We were just on the beginning of that in Palestine because the Palestinian situation became very clear. The road leading to fiction is not yet clear—it's still bushes and trees.

*Is that a specific goal—to make a revolutionary fictional film?*

Godard: We think that movies are fiction and that reality is reality. That's all. We don't think documentaries are reality. Fiction is fiction, reality is reality and all movies are fiction.

The only problem is to try to make revolutionary fiction. To have made bourgeois fiction and to go into revolutionary fiction means a long march through many dark countries.

*Do you consider the Al Fatah film Till Victory your most successful attempt?*

Gorin: I think it is. Every political movement is a national liberation movement, and we have moved to our own point of liberation.

Godard: Now we have to convey this liberation movement into a class struggle.

*Is there a true revolutionary situation in the States, a situation that is in any way comparable to the Palestinian situation?*

Godard: You can't compare that.

*So the film can only be a function of your own political involvement as you relate to a specific political situation?*

Godard: It's like between man and woman. You can only work together when each one is the outside and the inside of the other one. If not, it's just a bourgeois marriage. For instance our contract with Grove Press is a bourgeois marriage. But it is correct because this is the way people are married today. . . .

*How do you now consider your older films, especially those like La Chinoise, which are pointedly political?*

Godard: They are just Hollywood films because I was a bourgeois artist. They are my dead corpses.

*At what exact point in time did the break from bourgeois to revolutionary filmmaking occur?*

Godard: During the May-June events in France in 1968.

*Are there any of these earlier films that you now consider to have any positive merit?*



Godard: Perhaps *Weekend* and *Pierrot le fou*. There are some things in *Two or Three Things*. Some positive things in those films. *One Plus One* was my last bourgeois film. I was very arrogant to make that, to think that I could talk about revolution just like that—just to take images thinking I knew what they meant.

What about *One A.M.*, *One American Movie*, that you shot two years ago during your last trip to this country? Will you ever complete it?

Godard: No, it is dead now. When we first arrived, we looked at the rushes. I had thought we could do two or three days' editing and finish it, but not at all. It is two years old and completely of a different period. When we shot that I was thinking like a bourgeois artist, that I could just go and do interviews with people like Eldridge Cleaver and Tom Hayden. But I was wrong. And Tom Hayden was wrong to allow me to do that because it was just moviemaking, not political action. When we were in Berkeley I talked to Tom and apologized and told him I thought he was wrong. But Cleaver was correct. We paid him a thousand dollars and for him to take that money was correct. His was a political decision—he needed the money to escape America.

Do you still maintain any relationship with people from the bourgeois days, people like Truffaut or Coutard?

Godard: No, not really. We no longer have anything to talk about. We are now fighting one another, not as persons, but they are making bourgeois garbage and I have been making revolutionary garbage. (laughter)

Some people may be put off by the voice tracks of both *Mao* and *Pravda* and the color quality of *Pravda*. Were these technical problems a question of time and money or in some way intentional?

Godard: *Mao* should be projected very loud, especially during the long tracking shot at the BMC factory that opens the film. The movie was originally made for TV and that terrible noise in it is important. For bourgeois people to be uncomfortable with that scene for only eleven minutes may make them think that those workers must deal with that screeching every day all their lives.

We had some technical problems using only two tracks and very little mixing. But it is not important that every word be understood. On *Pravda* we used poor raw stock, but the washed out look is correct. Politically Czechoslovakia is a washed-out country. But the American boy who was doing the voice track in *Pravda*

was inexperienced and we did not have the opportunity to make many takes. But, again, every word is not meant to be understood.

You've referred to certain filmmakers who, perhaps without them being aware that there were progressive elements in their work, had the capability of being Marxist filmmakers. Can you explain?

Godard: Yes, when we speak of the social use of techniques that is true. I just said that people like Jerry Lewis or Laurel and Hardy, if they were in the Russian Revolution, could have delivered Marxist movies because they had the biological capacity of doing those things. Or if they were in China now the Chinese Revolution could use this capacity in a revolutionary way. Just think of Laurel as a political commissar, and Hardy as a peasant. In their techniques, in their image and sound, is the possibility of a political analysis. They dealt with concepts, bourgeois concepts, but nevertheless, concepts. Even the Marx Brothers did not do this because the Marx Brothers are more the Jerry Rubin type. They are not dealing with concepts. Jerry Lewis and Laurel and Hardy are scientific.

Gorin: There are no feelings. Absolutely no feelings in Laurel and Hardy, and only a few in Jerry Lewis. In Chaplin, there is only feeling.

Godard: And what feelings there are could be transformed, with the help of the masses. . . .

Gorin: They demonstrate an attempt to at least see what a movie really is—nothing is considered reality.

Godard: So to say that was not a joke statement.

I think I understand what you mean, but many people dismiss what Jerry Lewis does, because he seems to deal with middle-class American values in comic-strip form.

Godard: You must see that it's because Jerry Lewis and Laurel and Hardy are really making a blackboard of the movie. A bourgeois blackboard, but it's a blackboard nevertheless. Not a university blackboard, but on this blackboard you can construct things.

Blackboard implies learning and understanding. Is there some potential efficacy in using film to rouse feeling and then use those feelings?

Godard: Of course, but you have to put feelings in their place. But until now, feelings have been put in command. Feelings first and then concepts. We have to do the reverse, and so for the moment when we say we don't believe in feelings it's just for a certain time. This certain time can be for a hundred years, but, for the



moment, we have to use feelings only after concepts. For example, in the Palestinian movie, at the end we try to use feelings, but only because we have the possibility to use them correctly. We can use a song, and with the song comes some warmth, but because there is the concept of the armed struggle before, you get the warmth in the right way. It doesn't make you forget things. On the contrary, it reinforces.

*An interesting concept is your distinction between taking a picture and building a picture, and secondly, the relationship between sound and image. How do these concepts relate politically?*

Godard: Because you belong to a certain society today in America, or we in France, you just think that when you are speaking that your words and your structure, that they go together, that there is a complete unity. But there is no unity. There is a continuous struggle between what you say and what you think and the way we are living in a certain social condition. You are not a unity. You are trying to be a unity, but the fact is you are not. And the movie represents that in a very simple way—it's just image and sound—it's not just adding together—it's a struggle. Hollywood wants to just add them together there on the screen, just like you put a stamp on a letter.

*Exactly what do you mean by a film as a unity?*

Godard: Well, to build it economically and aesthetically, as an ideological product for a different purpose. What is a bourgeois moviemaker doing? He is dealing with image and sound. He's building too. But for what? To achieve a truer presentation of reality, he's using hundreds of sound tracks, so that when you step on this carpet, you have the very sound of your foot on this carpet. But it means no more than that. He thinks it is real, but of course it is not. We are using the same elements, but in the way we use them we are transforming them. Our purposes are quite different.



## Politics and Production

Some pointers through the work of Jean-Luc Godard  
Christopher Williams

*'The prevailing lack of clarity about their situation on the part of musicians, writers and critics has tremendous consequences, which are not sufficiently stressed. For since they think they possess an apparatus which in fact possesses them, they defend an apparatus over which they no longer have any control, which is no longer, as they believe, a means for the producer, but has become a means opposed to the producer'. - Bertolt Brecht.*

<sup>1</sup>  
In a sense, the serious study of political cinema has always been inhibited by the aura which still surrounds its birthplace – post-revolutionary Russia. The diachronic version of Film History, in close association with the 'film language' approach, tended to establish Russian revolutionary cinema as not merely the model for a political cinema but as the fountainhead of 'artistic' cinema in general. The result of this strange amalgam was to create a critical situation of the widest confusion: the political elements of that cinema were mutated, probably under the joint influences of bourgeois liberalism and committed Stalinism, into a kind of vague humanism which could be trotted out at all convenient times and places; its technical, 'linguistic' elements became gospel; the films were buried in a highly reverential graveyard; the texts vanished completely. Eisenstein remained, of course, but for a-historical, and in that context virtually useless study – a totem. The illustrious founder of revolutionary cinema became the biggest single obstacle to its practice and its theory. It took history itself, in the shape of the French revolution of May 1968, to force a necessary re-evaluation of the whole concept of political cinema: a re-evaluation that is only just beginning.

In the aftermath of the revolution, *Cahiers du Cinéma* began to re-publish a wide selection of original Russian material; *Cinéthique* attempted a meditative praxis in the whole area of political cinema. These moves had their echoes in other cultures. At the same time, about 80 per cent (at a frivolous estimate) of young film-makers became 'revolutionaries' of one sort or another. This ferment was so disparate and various that it can't possibly qualify for descrip-

tion as a 'movement', running as it does the whole gamut from Warholian voyeurism through re-vamped social-concern 'realism' to agitational propaganda and sheer abstraction. The single common plank in all this work would appear to be a rejection of what are taken to be the norms of 'Hollywood', 'entertainment'-type film-making. But there was no agreement on what should be put in the place of these norms. Perhaps the most frequent suggestions were: a thinly-disguised new version of nineteenth century individualism – 'the soul of the author laid bare'; a more socialised version of the same thing, as in true-confession, talking straight into camera documentary (a technique obviously boosted by television); and, in contra-distinction to these two modes, attempts at a cinema that would be sophisticated technically, using elements from all the traditionally validated areas of cinema allied for the first time to an ideological armature that would be seen to be justifying itself throughout the whole procedure and process of making and seeing the film.

It goes without saying that there are enormous critical difficulties in attempting an analysis of this real fermentation, partly because of the ferocious anti-intellectualism of many of its practitioners, partly because established critical concepts (authorship, genre, etc) traverse the areas under discussion without establishing any points of contact. If we choose now to study the re-opened question of political cinema through the work of Jean-Luc Godard, it is because its more recent manifestations lie decisively within the third area of activity defined above, and because they are paralleled by interesting attempts to establish a new criticism in which political and aesthetic objectives might be held in a meaningful relationship with one another.

Our principal contention will be that Godard's cinema, for all its manifestly fragile qualities, constitutes an important link between the American-dominated cinema of the past and the politicised cinema of the future.<sup>1</sup> We must also confess to a sneaking desire to rescue the work from the love/hate pedestal on which bourgeois cinematic culture has enthroned it, and its author from the kind of false friend who loathed *Pierrot le fou* when it appeared, but five years later when confronted with *Pravda* looked back to the glorious era of *Pierrot*.

<sup>2</sup>

The only coherent way to defend and illustrate Godard's cinema as a whole is to see it as a cinema of consciousness, or as a cinema centring on consciousness. It is not a question of unified or homogeneous consciousness, but rather a multiplicity, a meeting-place of a whole number of differing kinds and degrees of consciousness. Among these kinds and degrees we can enumerate, perhaps rather arbitrarily:

– the individual/psychological consciousness of the director him-



self, or self-consciousness. This is especially evident, and even dominant, in the earlier films. Attenuated and qualified, it persists into the later work;

- a specifically cinematic consciousness, derived from Godard's thorough critical background and cinematic culture, and exemplified in the famous quote from the period of *Breathless* and *The Little Soldier* to the effect that when he began making features he knew a great deal about the cinema but nothing at all about life;
- the consciousness(es) of the spectator(s). This concern is perhaps the best expressed in the recent dictum that a film is not what happens on the screen, but what happens between the audience and the screen.
- a consciousness of fashion in several spheres, to which are closely allied a consciousness of journalism and journalistic modes. This has always been a particularly open and given aspect of his work, and could perhaps usefully be compared with the more covert employment of similar modes in a classical film-maker like Hitchcock. There would be no *a priori* reason to reprove it unless one were adopting an uncritically Leavisite/Holbrookian position;
- consciousnesses of colour and of form, employed both as adjuncts to the deployment of a series of ideas, and as weapons in their own right. This area could perhaps be resumed under the simple heading of an acute aesthetic consciousness.

(Related to this area, but perhaps not directly relevant to it is the marked technical expertise in terms of editing, music, camera movement or avoidance of it, soundtrack, etc).

In short, this confluence of consciousnesses (often in some sense flawed, often describable as 'self-conscious' whether one sees self-consciousness in a mechanical reproduction art-form like the cinema as desirable or not) implies only one thing: an intellectual cinema. To be able to defend Godard, you have to believe specifically in the possibility of a cinema of ideas. Not of people, not of stories, not of characters, not of emotion, not of *le vécu*, not of myth. But of ideas. At the same time it goes without saying that most of the above elements have roles to play and functions to fulfil - stories are told, 'real people' are met, emotions are experienced, etc, in Godard movies - but these roles and functions are subordinate to the main project, which ever since *The Little Soldier* has been specifically to provoke reflection. In the most recent films - the ones made since 1968 - this project has been sustained, and in fact substantially changed, by a profound but allied interest in relations of production.

At this point - the question of the possibility of a cinema of ideas - a certain critical confusion is liable to obtrude itself, largely because of the 'specifically cinematic' consciousness mentioned above. In his earlier films Godard took his visual style(s) from almost everywhere, or, to put it more discreetly, there was a multi-

in general, Minnelli/Rossellini/Renoir/Bresson/Dreyer in particular, and countless painters, designers and advertising artists whose influences are detectable in individual shots and sequences. He also seemed to borrow the instinctual (or so firmly culturally established that it may seem to be instinctual) humanism of the American cinema. The very people to whom the notion of a cinema of ideas is repulsive are usually among the staunchest lovers of those other cinemas just mentioned as source-influences for Godard's material: Hollywood, Rossellini, and so on. Godard loved - loves - those cinemas too, but while loving them he is not of them. He uses them, in at least a double fashion - to heighten consciousness of the artefact itself, to transmit whatever the thematic point of the moment is. And a third possible use is simply an aesthetic pleasure in the movement of the image/idea itself.

Any approach to cinema that is founded in a practice of sharpening consciousness, has to include a political dimension, be it explicit or only alluded to. The 'social cinema' normally adopts a practice of implying things only; they have to be perceived through armatures - of narrative, dramatic form, ideology, characterisation - that are often frankly reactionary. Godard's practice in this area is quite the opposite: explicit, along with a whole number of other more or less explicit concerns, from *The Little Soldier* onwards.<sup>2</sup> The best way to illustrate this might be to look in some detail at *Vivre sa vie*, his fourth feature made in 1962.

### 3

*Vivre sa vie* was the last movie Godard made to find general critical acceptance as an 'art' movie before the real trouble began over *Les carabiniers*. It contains (at least) the following elements, treated (expressed) explicitly:

- the relationships between men and women;
- the oppression of women;
- language and its use in society, silence and its use in society;
- questioning: the habit of asking questions, the practice of using the asking of questions as a form of relationship between people;
- acceptance: what is seen as the joy of simply accepting existence as it happens - 'tout est beau' - expressed in Nana's dance, which is also a deliberate form of offering, and which is related to her question to the philosopher, 'Why can't we just be silent?' (cf above, language and silence); which is also related to certain ideas of emotion, of warmth, and contact;
- appearance and reality;
- death as finality: something almost to be courted, at any rate looked forward to in a spirit of acceptance;



speech (scene 6): 'je lève la main – je suis responsable' etc;

– prostitution;

– communication;

– documentation/documentary;

– the pursuit of consciousness, present in alternating forms throughout the film, but expressed specifically in the scene with the philosopher Brice Parain, in which the principal ideas are that there is a certain difference between thinking/talking on the one hand and life (*le vécu*) on the other, and that to think properly you have to be at a certain distance from life – but this leads to obvious difficulties, so there has to be a balance;

– and, in the same scene, the practice of arriving at the truth through a process (or processes) of errors and lies;

– work – as oppression (the scene of Nana in the record shop) – and as the only thing worth doing (Parain) because it is the only process that leads you to the *not juste*;

– struggle: in her talk with Parain Nana makes another plea for a life that would be silent, happy, accepting and probably without conflict, but the idea of struggle informs the whole film and is present emblematically in the scene where she is being questioned by the police after having been arrested for shoplifting and her full name is revealed as Nana Kleinekampf ('little struggle');

– the relationship between life and art (the Oval portrait scene) – covered by Susan Sontag in her essay on the film.<sup>3</sup> (It goes without saying that the preoccupations listed above frequently overlap with one another, and recur in other movies.)

At the same time, the movie has a constant preoccupation with form, as in its opening, where we see Karina's face from three sides, with form expressed in terms of breaks and fragmentations, replicated in the episodic structure by scenes and the abrupt hesitations of music and speech on the soundtrack.

There have been widely different critical reactions to this kind of multiplicity of elements and motifs. For instance: to accept them uncritically (because they are fashionable?) – to deplore them *en bloc* – to say, yes, very interesting, but he should have taken one of them stuck to it, and explored it in depth the 'rationalist' approach). In my view a more useful position might be to accept the multiplicity of points of view and try to study how they contradict, confirm or reflect off each other. In this film as in all of Godard's the points of view are held together in a continuous discourse which oscillates between coherence and incoherence. But it's the primacy accorded the notion of discourse which distinguishes the mode from all others.

*Vivre sa vie* is an early film which prefigures the developments of the later ones. An extract that might be useful to teachers in this context, as it exemplifies the multi-directional aspirations of the movie, is Extract Number 2 (scenes 7 and 8). It begins with Nana, a shopgirl who would like to be an actress, writing a letter

of application to a madam for a place in her brothel. The camera begins by holding on the full text of the letter itself, as the girl writes it (writing as work seen literariness, the context of employment). The text is interrupted only for a joke: in mid-shot we see Nana rise to her feet and estimate her own height, almost in terms of hands, like measuring a horse, in order to give accurate details to her employer. Raoul, her future pimp, arrives, and for the rest of the scene dominates her with his offer of better-paid work. Set up behind him as they sit facing one another, the camera tracks from side to side while they talk, sometimes letting us see her at an angle, then blocking her out completely behind his head and back. We don't see much of his face, and what we do see is vulpine; but at the same time there is a kind of sincere charm to his flattery of her, to his assurances, to his almost naive insistence that he wishes her well. The emotion of contact, shared on both sides. After they have gone out together, there is a beautiful long-shot of the Champs-Élysées that served as backdrop to the previous scene, and a narrating voice intones an elegiac phrase: 'C'est à l'heure où s'allument les lumières de la ville que commence la ronde sans espoir des filles de la rue'. After this Nana is being shown her future beats, almost certainly by Raoul, but the sequence is immediately changed into a montage about prostitution in general, in which the severely Bressonian quality of the shots is counterpointed by an aggressively informative narrated soundtrack, with full documentation: statistics on health, police surveillance, what happens when prostitutes get pregnant or drunk, prices, and the fact that when on duty they have the right to refuse no paying customer. This mutates into a further montage of Nana in hotel rooms, and with her first customer. As he prepares to pay her, there is a remarkably expressive (expressionist?) big close-up of his hand, his trouser-pocket and his fly in close conjunction.

The final point to be made about *Vivre sa Vie* is that it stands right outside its heroine. Her own consciousness flickers on and off. Godard's never ceases, nor does the discourse.

#### 4

Probably the richest period of Godard's work, and certainly the easiest to do a kind of classical *auteur* study on, would be the eight films made between 1964 and 1968 – beginning with *Une femme mariée* and going through to *Weekend*. For the purpose of this essay we'll treat these films in the most condensed fashion possible, partly because they're very well-known and much-written-about movies, but also because there is a sense, in which Godard has never been the author of his own work. The work has been plucked out of the atmosphere, out of what was going on, out of the different modes of consciousness set out above. An enormous number of different things are happening in these films: if we



try to single out the explicitly political elements, we see that they are stated sharply, clearly but in rather a self-contained way in *Pierrot le fou*, and in *Masculine, feminine* they spread out to permeate the whole film. Léaud equates modern life with military service: '24 hours a day authority – a life of taking orders'. In the launderette sequence Robert tells him: '... you'll never find an individual solution. There isn't any. You've got to throw yourself into the struggle, and by being in it you end up learning. You put up with too much. That's impossible. ... It's a kind of movement, you know; perpetual rebellion. I can't put up with all you put up with. That's why I'm active in the union'. Léaud finds work for a public opinion poll and then that 'the questions he had to ask deformed public opinions'; that all questions are informed by ideology.

The political emphasis explodes in extraordinary form in *Made in USA*, where Godard denounces explicitly his own devotion to American cinema but at the same time pays tribute to it in a film which is a kind of orgy of shape, colour, form, music and sound: abstract and concrete together, with a very highly developed sense of playing. Emblems abound, and are shuffled past and round each other: the bloody death's head in the doctor's surgery, the paint shop where movie posters are knocked up. Playfulness: the main body of the film ends with a series of confessions by the principal murderers. David Goodis kills Widmark, Paula Nelson then kills Goodis. 'Oh Paula, you have robbed me of my youth'. And yet this riot leads out into the simplest of interview-type sequences, in which Paula ends by flatly rejecting the bourgeois journalist Philippe Labro's contention that in the modern world there's no difference between right and left.

*Two or Three Things I Know about Her* presents a highly-coloured development of the documentary motif, and counterpointing this, the climax of the motif of individual-director consciousness. At this time Godard was expressing a great interest in television, and a desire to work in it, and his sense of the medium's possibilities is very well illustrated in the *Nouvel Observateur* interview reprinted in *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1966-7. At the same time there is the obsessive, doubting (in the best sense) commentary read by the director himself: 'me, writer and painter'.

*La Chinoise* (in the words of its script) marks the 'first timid steps' towards a Marxist-Leninist ideology and towards the elaboration of a science of images that might be both scientific and revolutionary. In memory, two other things stand out in the film: its strong formal sense, with controlled but blazing colour, and the distinctly voluntarist character of the protagonists' conscious engagement with political issues.<sup>6</sup> Playfulness again: the people reach out to try and grasp ideas, to try and grasp at practice. Wiazemsky and Léaud are used much as Karina and Belmondo or

Léaud had been used in earlier films: as sacred individuals, not as actors with a task of demonstrating certain things.

This brings us to *Weekend*, the culmination of the '64-'68 period and also the watershed film, the key to the past and future, containing both on almost equal terms. The film is built around the question of culture; it offers a description of a bourgeoisie concerned only with money, sex and self-satisfaction, interests which they pursue with some violence. This bourgeoisie is supplanted, in the closing sequences, by a band of hippy guerillas who are equally violent, though their violence seems to be constrained within ritual limits which have a literary flavour (poetic, anthropological and filmic quotations). The film's attitude towards the guerillas is not clear – do they represent the highest stage of barbarism, or a new post-bourgeois culture, or are they a striking device for rounding out the film? – but the project of destroying the existing culture rather than trying to salvage it does seem clear. Five symbolic moments illustrate this project:

- a distinguished concert pianist takes a grand piano in a pantechnicon to a country farmyard, where he plays Mozart to a small, bored and passive audience (musical action in defence of a culture), while the camera moves twice through 360 degrees passing the blank or neutral faces of the listeners. At the end of the performance the pianist puts himself down, he wasn't worthy to play this music – 'you should have heard Schnabel!';
- Jean Yanne, down-and-out by the roadside, begs a lift from a well-fed, chauffeur-driven elderly lady. 'Would you rather', she asks him before replying, 'be fucked by Johnson or Mao?' Yanne sizes her up and opts for Johnson. 'Dirty fascist' says the lady, and drives on;
- a sizeable chunk of the film is given over to three garbage-collectors, African and Arab, who are described as the Refuse-men of the Third World, and who deliver a great deal of Third World situation-speech straight into camera. Faces and words;
- near the end of the film, there is a massacre; horrible, says one character; not as horrible as the bourgeoisie, says another;
- a printed caption indicates that Godard is striving for the 'Language of October'.

In *Weekend* the class struggle is seen as a violent, anarchistic, apocalyptic clash rather than as a struggle between socialised forces. The confusion is embodied in the style of the film, with brightly-coloured references in all directions, and the formulation, at one point, that 'this is the end of the grammatical era, and the beginning of the flamboyant, especially in the cinema'. If a single emotion, a single formulation, crosses to the spectator, it is the violent rejection of a certain form of society and a great uncertainty about what to put in its place. There is even the familiar suggestion, rendered concretely in the film in terms of similarities



the murderously bourgeois one we knew already. *Weekend* kicks the discipline of *La chinoise* out of the window; but both films have to be seen as the complementary summation of a certain period. Both were being made in the year before May.

(This highly selective account has omitted at least three other important elements which peaked in the same period;

– the strain of individual romanticism, seen in *Pierrot* and in *Alphaville* – ‘I am as alive as my love and my despair’;

the tendency to reduce human life to animal simplicity and absurdity, felt in *Two or Three Things* and in the sequence in *Weekend* where we see a worm crawling through the mud and the reflection on the soundtrack that ‘we don’t know ourselves at all’;

– the militant feminism of *Une Femme mariée*.)

The images of this extraordinary period were confused, and had to be confused; it was the May revolution and its aftermath that gave Godard the cue for an attempt at ordering them.

5

In a short interview in the first number of *Cinéthique* (January 1969) we find Godard proposing that films should be made simply, quickly and cheaply, perhaps out of a system of assemblies, commissions and delegations. Revolutionary cinema should be a matter of simplicity: it could be practised by reading the magazine *Practical Cinema* and reflecting on its content with Marxist theory. At the same time he advances the idea that each shot (in a revolutionary movie) should be a criticism of the one before. Film magazines and reviews are nothing better than the truth once a month and should be replaced by roneotyped information sheets.

During and after the period of the revolution Godard had been very active making the Cinetracts – a series of very short silent films, composed almost entirely of stills representing moments of May/June or emblematic of ideas related to them, with handwritten messages – slogans and aphorisms – inscribed across them from shot through shot. He was also making *Un film comme les autres* (never shown in Britain) and *One plus one*.<sup>7</sup> All this work found its momentary synthesis in *Le gai savoir*, made for French television late in 1968, and of course never shown there. All the elements described in the preceding sections of this essay are present in the film, but redefined, or at any rate put in a new perspective, by the notion that revolution, or at least revolutionary work, both political and cinematic, are on the order of the day. The film is built around a couple (Léaud and Juliette Berto) whose main project is the search for a revolutionary cinema, and who are also, at moments, a loving couple too. ‘Love is a discourse in which each makes the other tell him what he is. Perhaps, in looking for the zero degree of images and sounds, in listening to its echo in my memory, I am living with you the zero degree of love’. The permanent fragility of the discourse is re-emphasised in a long dialogue shortly before the end of the film:

Léaud: When we were, when we were together, the sweet game

of being two was being played for us. Sometimes it happened to me, on the shoulder to sleep, and you had beaten me in the race, plunged into the night before me, and fear seized me at that sudden silence. Anguish at finding myself alone like a trial death. Not that I was afraid of dying, me, I’ve always been resigned to that, but that space stretched out in front of me in all directions like a lost path.

Berto: With the fear of finding myself before a mirror without image, of feeling myself the shadow of an absent being, detached from myself, committed to a world of dreams where I have no place, where I couldn’t follow him, and even if tomorrow I learn that if I have followed it for him, I shan’t be able to believe a word of it, and in any case I shall only have followed in his footsteps for a short time.

Léaud: In this way I spent half our life.

Berto: In the street, the metro, in that despair which . . . finally could only be compared with a prison, with a life of punishment, a sort of madness, in which I could end by forgetting even those I had lost. I have never in my life woken without sobbing – a deep, soundless sob –

Léaud: – at all the injustice of the night. Sometimes its feeling grew so strong in me that it lasted, open-eyed, for a long time, and you asked ‘What’s the matter? And I couldn’t say, believing that it was the mist of bad dreams still clouding my eyes, still struggling in the tangled memories of darkness –

Berto: Or else aware that telling about it would explain nothing.

Léaud: I deliberately turned the conversation over to things that had happened the day before, or what to do in the days to come, and thus I kept to myself, this almost present, this tearing of the depths, like a pain that you hide. In my youth I used sometimes to tell my dreams.

Berto: But I haven’t for a long time now. . . . That obscure part of existence, sometimes, more and more won over from waking life, from my very silence. It threw me into terrible doubts about everything.

Léaud: And firstly about us, about what made us be and say ‘us’.

Berto: An ‘us’ meaning you and me, an ‘us’ different from this false plural which exists only by my presence, and remains when these elements diminish, grow, vary, the kind of ‘us’ which is barely more than an extension of ‘me’.

Léaud: That reality that you could like me destroy, better than me. I say all this without examples, just like that. In abstract form, because this long discourse that I am,



however much I turn towards you.

Berto: My love,

Léaud: I know well that it's the artifice of a drowned man. I say you, I share things between you and me, as if nothing had happened, and though I sometimes have doubts that's the way I remember –

Berto: – that I still have my reason.

But this moment should not be privileged over the rest of the film, which consist of a large number of stylistic exercises aimed at starting from zero, at stripping cinema down to its simplest elements before re-constructing it along ideologically conscious lines.

Principal ideas here: to learn, to teach, to turn against the enemy the very weapon the enemy uses – language. Just as the social sciences dissolve man, so the film-maker can dissolve the elements of film – image, sound, movement, emotion – to find out what makes them work. This Léaud and Berto propose to do by collecting images and sounds on a random basis – not an unscientific procedure, says one of them, because the unconscious is structured. In this way there may be a chance for future film-production to be done on the basis of what's known rather than what isn't. They will collect facts, things, phenomena, discover the truth of internal bonds, and hence the laws that govern them. This activity will be practical and theoretical at the same time. Then a narrator's voice (Godard's?) talks about the international situation and the re-entry of revolution into the sphere of conflicting forces. Throughout the sequence Léaud and Berto are silent but listening. It culminates with a still of a demonstrating crowd, with the written caption: *Ce n'est qu'un début*, while the voice asks the question: 'By what game of tension and opposition must the phrase: There is nothing in the whole world which develops in an absolutely equal manner, be translated? The phrase, in its turn, goes deeper, stretches out, and multiplies. It points to the moment in which we are working here . . .'

Various tactics are suggested for meeting the demands of this moment. If you want to see the world, close your eyes. (*Si tu veux voir le monde, ferme tes yeux, Rosemonde*). There are no self-evident truths; self-evident truths belong to bourgeois philosophy. We must be careful not to fall into the ideology of 'real life'. Banks exist to lend banknotes; dictionaries exist to lend words. The eye must listen before it looks. We must be interested not in representation but in presentation. There is a system of education along simple class lines (illustrated with an excellent quotation from a French government minister). Thought is dialectical: Juliette thinks, and she is thought. Towards the end, the film breaks into a series of potential other films: an amateur film, a school film, an imperialist film, a didactic film, a guerrilla film. Then the screen goes black, while various voices, alternately clear

and muffled, make political statements, speeches, comments. Finally, Léaud comes up with a compound neologism – MI SO TO DI MAN – a mixture of method with feeling – as a way to define images and sounds i.e., the cinema. The film is a difficult one, and the above account simplifies its elements considerably. Nonetheless, it was a kind of launching pad for the various experiments Godard was to try out in the next two years.

## 6

Of these experiments we are in a position to explore three. *British Sounds* develops the practice first suggested in *Gai savoir* of separating out image and sound. The film is constructed in six simple episodes, each describing or accounting for different moments in political life in Britain. Visually, the style is extremely simple: elegant documentary reportage. The soundtrack is highly sophisticated, and illustrative of an evergrowing concern for text. The idea that there is a science of the image, and that it's important to build it, is reiterated. The break with the Hollywood system introduces a radical change in aesthetics. The aesthetic developing here would seem to be one of pictures being criticised by words. Pictures, images, can be very seductive; the more beautiful they are, and the more lifelike, the more potentially deluding and impregnated with the ideology of the status quo. The cinema, then, is confronted by a total dilemma: it would seem to represent 'things, facts, phenomena' but in fact it is not representing them but giving an image of them, and this image is of necessity not an innocent one. It is the role of the text to make this lack of innocence clear; to qualify or criticise with 'correct' words the sense impressions produced by the image. The text of *British Sounds* spells these aims out explicitly: the system of representation is part of bourgeois ideology, the cinema should 'not record realities, but simply areas of contradictions'. It is 'not a reflection of reality, but the reality of that reflection'. This reality of reflection can be seen clearly as a development of the problematic of consciousness in earlier Godard, and as bearing a clear relationship with the ideas of Brecht about the theatre.

Two films made in 1969, *Pravda* and *Struggles in Italy*, take the above proposals a stage further. Each is built around the problems between film and ideology. Each develops the practice, inaugurated in *Gai savoir*, of leaving the screen blank for short or longer moments, to several ends: (a) to replace an image called censored or appropriated by the bourgeoisie or international capitalism; (b) to interrupt the flow of images and sense-impressions in an attempt to force the spectator to listen to the text; (c) to play a positive role in reorganising the images so that they embody the growth of revolutionary knowledge and the struggle for that growth. This is the process that Godard refers to in several interviews and short articles as making film politically (as



opposed to making political films) and as 'the struggle for the editing'. *Struggles in Italy* is about an Italian girl. It begins with a sequence of very simply ordered shots describing her life in various spheres: in education (she is a student, and also a teacher – in her own time she gives history lessons to a young worker), in society (she is a consumer – she buys a blouse in a boutique), in relation to her family, in relation to a man, and her ideas about personal identity. The voice of the girl herself commentating: 'Earlier I said that I was a marxist and that I was a member of the revolutionary movement. But in reality (. . .) I said (. . .) something else. I said: there is idealism and there is marxism. And I did not say that marxism struggles against idealism. And this is the important thing, because when you say marxism you say struggle. (. . .) I said I was a marxist, but in reality I remained an idealist, because I did not oppose idealism, I did not struggle against it'. The struggle then begins, and it is projected into the visual fabric of the film itself by means of repeated re-iterations of the shots that went to make up the opening sequence, ceaselessly reorganised to fit a rigorously questioning commentary, punctuated by black spaces. 'The relationship between images and black spaces had been organised from this point, this centre called society. This relationship has a name: ideology. Ideology: relationship, necessarily imaginary, of yourself to your real conditions of existence'. In this second part of the film, the black spaces are a battlefield of ideas. 'Return to practice. Criticism of past practice. Transformation. (. . .) Begin to transform yourself. Produce knowledge'. Each area of the girl's life is gone over and criticised, its contradictions laid bare. And in particular the contradiction that for all her militant practice and for all her militant talk, she remains in practice and in ideas largely governed by bourgeois ideology (referred to as 'the determinant region'.) Whence a renewal of the struggle: 'To discover with Marx that life is a contradiction present in things and phenomena themselves which is continually posed and continually resolved. To discover with Marx that as soon as contradiction ceases, life ceases as well, and death comes. To discover that contradiction is universal and at the same time specific'. And this second section of the film ends with a formulation that bears equally on the life of a militant and on the cinematic process itself. 'The problem does not lie in the reflection itself, but in the struggle between a reflection that denies the objective contradictions and a reflection that expresses them'.

The third part of the film proposes changes. The black spaces begin to be filled. The space relating to society is replaced 'by a scene of a workshop, that is, by a scene of a production relationship'. (In practice, this is not so much a 'scene' as an image, a symbolic representation of a production relationship, but in both *British Sounds* and *Pravda* there are genuine scenes of production

relationships.) The space relating to education is replaced by the voice of the university apparatus 'speaking of ideas – in themselves. It does not say where they come from' while (in vision) the girl herself passes on the same message to the young worker. 'The blow had hit the mark. I was ensuring in my own practice the daily uninterrupted reproduction of capitalist production relationships'. The film ends on a note that would obviously repel the bourgeois critic if he were so unlucky as to stumble into a showing of it. How is the girl to change her life, to become transformed? 'Aggravate the contradiction. To bring into my life the struggle – the class struggle – the class struggle into my life. Programme: to think of subjectivity in terms of class'. And then on the kind of severely practical admission that doesn't – in conventional aesthetic terms – find much favour either, but which has come to characterise the endings of most of Godard's more recent work: 'But it is a difficult road. And what I have said is at most an indication of work and struggle'.

*Pravda* attempts to operate on two levels at once: to give an account of the Czechoslovak situation; and to initiate (as in *Struggles in Italy*) a programme of re-education of the intellectuals; the word 'intellectuals' we take here to mean anyone capable of responding to political ideas anywhere. The programme of re-education adheres verbally fairly closely to extracts from the Quotations of Chairman Mao, and to other material taken more or less directly from Peking Information and from classic Leninist texts. Two disembodied voices (named as Vladimir and Rosa, and who are perhaps the descendants of Léaud and Berto in *Gai savoir*) interrogate and inform one another ceaselessly on the questions of Czechoslovakia, modern revisionism, and re-education. What is particularly interesting about the film is that these elements are combined with a renewed symbolic vigour (in intermittent but strategically located shots) which is all the more striking for being juxtaposed with a very dense and militantly polemical text. For instance: Marxist-Leninist thought represented by a blossoming rose; the same rose trampled in the mud for the invasion of Czechoslovakia; red wine spilling from a lager glass (the brand name of the lager is 'International') to denote revisionist butchery (much as petty-bourgeois butchery was indicated by the flowing of rabbit and human blood in *Weekend*); a beautiful high-angled shot of a circular tramway terminal, to indicate at first appearance the enclosed situation in which the Czech working-class finds itself, and later the necessary circularity of all intellectual work; a girl stands holding the rose on a stalk (impression of fragility) while a peasant hay-wain crosses the back of the frame. These sophisticated images are complemented by the now familiar rough-and-ready ones (including many of production scenes), the black spaces for reflection and 'editing' – thinking about the shot which came before and the one which is to



come after – the same emphasis on work and struggle, the same urgent desire to 'establish new connections between images and sounds'. There is also a visual insistence on the colour red, a textual one on the idea that 'red' can mean very different things. In the last stages of the film, we have frequent shots of the cameraman himself, filming with the Little Red Book attached to the camera, while the voices of Vladimir and Rosa are already admitting (another usual motif) that the film is a failure. 'You've been wrong – too dogmatic. Images still have force. You've adopted the style of posters and slogans. You thought you were taking one step forward, in fact you were taking two steps back'. But mistakes have to be made in public, otherwise no work can get done at all. Who cares about failure? Thinking is difficult. Ideas come from social practices. . . .

7

One problem that has to be confronted immediately is the fact, as Gérard Leblanc put it in his article on *Pravda* in *Cinéthique*, that 'the Dziga Vertov group's films don't reach the masses, and the few militants who see them reject them for their intellectualism'. In other words, the Dziga Vertov group is not making agitational films in the accepted sense; there's no question of the films provoking (or even reflecting) revolutionary-type events in the 'real world'; the politicisation of film undertaken here is strictly internal to the film itself. The group itself stresses that the films are not intended for large audiences, but for small groups conscious of ideological questions. The films themselves make one acutely aware that even within these small groups there must be further subdivisions, even smaller groups, split up along the lines of political culture and cinema culture, and then again according to the various forms of cross-mating possible between these two cultures. *Cinéthique* defines itself as 'a movement of cinephiles moving towards politics'. Godard's status is essentially the same.

But the questions raised by this 'movement' can be of great importance both to mass cinema and to cinema criticism. They tie up, more than three decades later, with some of the propositions advanced by Walter Benjamin in his essays on 'The author as producer' and 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction'. In the first essay Benjamin called for the rejection of the old question, How does a work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a given period, and proposed substituting the question, How does the work stand in the relationships of production? He then surveyed various apparently 'political' art movements of the 20's and 30's – 'activism' and 'the new objectivity' – and concluded from their failure that the process of politicisation should intervene at the stage of production of an art-work and not merely as part of the preliminary ideological formation of its producer(s). The latter process can lead

only to works' of a political tendency', not to political works. 'However revolutionary this political tendency may appear, it actually functions in a counter-revolutionary manner as long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat ideologically and not as a producer'. The 'new objectivity' for instance, had the effect of making documentary fashionable; but documentary presented poverty as something 'beautiful', to be contemplated, without promoting political consciousness of poverty. 'Misery became a commercial asset'.

For Benjamin, photography was meaningless unless it had captions. It was the caption that in picture papers (and by extension, the cinema) could tear photography away from 'fashionable clichés and give it a revolutionary use-value'.

*The author as producer* ends with a single demand to the writer: that he should reflect, think about his position in the process of production. Godard's maxim – that it is more important to make films politically than to make political films – is an echo of these propositions.

The proposition about photography and captions is more fully developed in 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', which polemically goes much further in establishing the revolutionary credentials of cinema than anything in Eisenstein. Benjamin saw mechanical reproduction in all its forms – newspapers, photography, cinema – as being the instrument that opened a breach in the wall of the traditional values of the cultural heritage. These he defined as Uniqueness and Permanence, the qualities of which tie traditional, artisanal, individualistic art to essentially religious and ritualistic modes. The moving-picture image, with its characteristics of transitoriness and reproducibility has the effect of destroying the aura of permanence around the object, of 'prying it from its shell'. With the film, art leaves 'the realm of the beautiful semblance' and moves into a consciously mobilising stance. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon became even more explicit and more imperative in the film, where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding ones'. Godard carries this thought of Benjamin's a stage further with the proposition (in and around *British Sounds*) that photography, in its 'natural' state, was an ideological invention of the bourgeoisie and must be dissolved and reconstituted along critical lines before it can serve as a weapon for socialist purposes.

The theoretical consequences of this position have been admirably worked through by J. P. Fargier in his *Cinéthique* article *Parenthesis or Indirect Route*.<sup>8</sup> Bourgeois cinema is not only a vector for ideologies already in circulation; it also secretes its own specific ideology: the impression of reality. The impression of reality spawns two processes in the spectator: recognition, and then mystification.<sup>9</sup> The task of political cinema, and of cinema



criticism, is to destroy those processes. 'Life is not on the screen, and the most revolutionary film can only give what it has: images and sounds'. It should by now be clear that these lines of development must have their application to the whole of cinema, and not simply to one sector arbitrarily labelled off as 'political'. All films can be analysed on the basis of their production, of the choices that go into the making of sounds and images during the process of production of a film. 'The only way to rehabilitate art is to say that aesthetic practice is the principal practice in the process of production of a film'.

#### Notes

1. All cinema is political, but the particular form of this exploration prevents us from looking in much detail either at political themes and motifs within the traditional 'commercial' cinema or in the 'social'/'socially-conscious' (social-fascist?) cinemas, Lumet, Ritt, *et al*). Or at the Franju-Resnais-Marker filiation, or at the various cinemas of the Third World which played an important role in the cultural fermentation of the late sixties. All of these areas, and not least the first, need urgent re-examination. The most we can do here is refer to some of their aspects at the points where they intersect with Godard and with the critical pursuits contemporaneous with his later work.
2. Since *The Little Soldier* is a key movie, marking Godard's first plunge into both politics and reflexivity, it is only fair to say that despite the prominence in it of Mao's pamphlet *A single spark can start a prairie fire* and an acute awareness of the realities of the Algerian war, the general tone of the movie is, in simple political terms, predominantly reactionary. This arises quite naturally from the first category of consciousness stated at the beginning of this section: at the time he made *The Little Soldier* and in the period leading up to it Godard was nothing much more (in terms of his general ideas) than a petty-bourgeois right-wing anarchist with a good smattering of general culture. What redeems the film is its consciousness of dialectic and of process.
3. *Against interpretation*, London, 1967 (pp 196-207).
4. The article is at fault here for reproducing chunks of the soundtrack of *Struggles in Italy* without sufficient critical analysis. The notion of ideology is more complicated than the idea the film gives of it. (Writer's footnote, 1977).
5. These two sentences are something of a horror, and I am ashamed of them. The cinema may well be a vector for ideologies already in circulation; but if it is, it is *all* the cinema that acts in such a fashion, not just the 'bourgeois cinema'. 'Bourgeois cinema' is itself a fairly useless concept. The term has been employed by some critical schools (eg, the Russians in the 1920s, *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* in the 1960s-70s) and some film-makers, but such usages deserve critical analysis rather than the apparently uncritical endorsement I gave them in 1971.  
With regard to the supposed 'specific ideology: the impression of reality', I now think the question is much more complicated. Some films work some of the time through producing some of several different kinds of impression of reality; but the step from here to calling this, or rather these impressions the specific ideology of cinema in general or of bourgeois (sic) cinema in particular, is not one that it is seriously possible to take, in 1971 or now. Cinema uses varying ranges of conventions: conventions of production and conventions of reading and consumption. The 'impression of

reality' is one of these conventions, and it makes itself felt quite frequently at both levels. But there is no real evidence for the assertion that the action of this impression has dominating force across the range of cinema as a whole. It can also be argued that audiences which frequent film and television rapidly acquire a grip on the conventional languages of both media, and that their responses are channelled in the first place through recognitions that these forms are precisely both languages and conventional. The things that audiences do with these recognitions and understandings are indeed a proper area of study for criticism and theory; but to assert, as I did in this passage, a direct causal link: impression-of-reality > recognition by the spectator > mystification of the spectator is, to put it mildly, not a very bright thing to have done.

I am happy that the re-publication of these articles gives me a chance to correct a few of their failings. But it would be disingenuous to imply that this is merely a matter of a few personal amendments. In the years since 1972 the line which I so crudely borrowed from Fargier to make up one part of my conclusions about Godard has become a flourishing part of received opinion about the cinema. The model: realism = bourgeois ideology = mystification has served as theoretical underpinning to many an article, ranging from the straightforwardly crude to the immensely sophisticated, in *Screen*, *Screen Education* and elsewhere. What, generally speaking, these articles have had in common is a failure to analyse seriously, or even enquire very far into, the terms of the model itself. Elaborate positions, aspiring to the status of theory, have been developed from a basis of untheorised assumption. Thus part of the legacy of the situation of which this passage of *Politics and production* was itself a part is a widespread intellectual confusion, which has many manifestations but, I think, finds its roots in the model. (Writer's footnote, 1977).

6. Even at his most explicitly political, Godard is rejected by large sections of the left; it was probably the voluntarism of *La chinoise* that led *Cinéthique* to refer to it as 'smeared all over with politics, but but entirely invested with bourgeois ideology'.
7. Of which Thomas Elsaesser has given an excellent account in the *Brighton Film Review* No 21.
8. Reprinted in *Screen*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp 131-144.

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# What is to be done?

1. We must make political films.
2. We must make films politically.
3. 1 and 2 are antagonistic to each other and belong to two opposing conceptions of the world.
4. 1 belongs to the idealistic and metaphysical conception of the world.
5. 2 belongs to the Marxist and dialectical conception of the world.
6. Marxism struggles against idealism and the dialectical against the metaphysical.
7. This struggle is the struggle between the old and the new, between new ideas and old ones.
8. The social existence of men determines their thought.
9. The struggle between the old and the new is the struggle of classes.
10. To carry out 1 is to remain a being of the bourgeois class.
11. To carry out 2 is to take up a proletarian class position.
12. To carry out 1 is to make descriptions of situations.
13. To carry out 2 is to make concrete analysis of a concrete situation.
14. To carry out 1 is to make BRITISH SOUNDS.
15. To carry out 2 is to struggle for the showing of BRITISH SOUNDS on English television.
16. To carry out 1 is to understand the laws of the objective world in order to explain that world.
17. To carry out 2 is to understand the laws of the objective world in order to actively transform that world.

18. To carry out 1 is to describe the wretchedness of the world.
19. To carry out 2 is to show the people in struggle.
20. To carry out 2 is to destroy 1 with the weapons of criticism and self-criticism.
21. To carry out 1 is to give a complete view of events in the name of truth in itself.
22. To carry out 2 is not to fabricate over-complete images of the world in the name of relative truth.
23. To carry out 1 is to say how things are real. (Brecht).
24. To carry out 2 is to say how things really are. (Brecht).
25. To carry out 2 is to edit a film before shooting it, to make it during filming and to make it after the filming. (Dziga Vertov).
26. To carry out 1 is to distribute a film before producing it.
27. To carry out 2 is to produce a film before distributing it, to learn to produce it following the principle that: it is production which commands distribution it is politics which commands economy.
28. To carry out 1 is to film students who write: Unity - Students - Workers.
29. To carry out 2 is to know that unity is a struggle of opposites (Lenin) to know that the two are in one.
30. To carry out 2 is to study the contradictions between the classes with images and sounds.
31. To carry out 2 is to study the contradictions between the relationships of production and the productive forces.
32. To carry out 2 is to dare to know where one is, and where one has come from, to know one's place in the process of production in order then to change it.
33. To carry out 2 is to know the history of revolutionary struggles and be determined by them.
34. To carry out 2 is to produce scientific knowledge of revolutionary struggles and of their history.
35. To carry out 2 is to know that film making is a secondary activity, a small screw in the revolution.
36. To carry out 2 is to use images and sounds as teeth and lips to bite with.
37. To carry out 1 is only to open the eyes and the ears.
38. To carry out 2 is to read the reports of comrade Kiang Tsing.
39. To carry out 2 is to be militant.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?



# POLITICAL FORMATIONS

IN THE WORK OF JEAN-MARIE STRAUB

Martin Walsh

Few North American filmmakers and critics have approached political cinema with the radically conceived theoretical foundations that may be seen in a number of their European counterparts, and this difference of approach is currently foregrounded in the hostility toward the films of Frenchman Jean-Marie Straub.<sup>1</sup> His works are rarely exhibited, even in festivals, and yet they have acquired a formidable reputation for opacity and tedium. The reasons for this response are not difficult to comprehend, since they lie within the boundaries of a debate over the constitutive elements of political art, a debate which has, even today, barely emerged into the public forum in North America. That is to say, since the Cubist painters, since Eisenstein and Vertov in the cinema, since Meyerhold and Brecht in the theater, the central problematic of radical art has been the extent to which the form of the art-work must be radical, in support of its content. It is suggested that a work of art can only be radical if its articulating structure is as subversive of conventional forms as its "content" is critical of the dominant ideology.

This attitude is, clearly, not at one with our experience of much "political" film-thought in the U.S.A. For the "radical" films that are most widely acclaimed--BATTLE OF ALGIERS, Z, THE BALLAD OF JOE HILL--are all characterized by the very devices whose validity Straub (and Godard) consistently deny. While Pontecorvo, Costa-Gravas and Widerberg construct their various discourses around the emotional susceptibilities of the viewer, through the melodramatic conventions of identification procedures (antipathy toward the things of Z, empathy for the nobly humane Joe Hill), Straub has rejected this approach, attacking instead through the intellectual paths suggested by a thorough and critical examination of the conventional assumptions of both film industry and audience.

Where many American radicals appear to operate on the level of substituting anti-bourgeois/proletarian/materialist content for the bourgeois/imperialist/capitalist content of the Hollywood product, a few of their European counterparts can be seen working out of a more generalized notion of revolt. For these European directors, the Hollywood film (now perceived as a global form--Brezhnev/Mosfilm=Nixon/Paramount, as Godard puts it) is merely the most recent manifestation of a style of aesthetic expression commonly known as illusionism, which has dominated Western artistic practice for several hundred years. The perspectival oil-painting and the 19th Century novel in particular established certain codes which came to be accepted as prerequisite for filmic expression. In painting, emphasis on perspective (subsequently crucial also for photographic aesthetics) led to the erasure of awareness of the painting as a two-dimensional surface, and gave rise to the notion of transparency, of painting as a "window on the world"; of painting as a self-effacing means of representation. And during the 19th Century, the novel elaborated the notion of psychological insight as the motivating center of a narrative in which continuous linearity is largely determined by the sequence of cause and effect relationships. In the first twenty years or so of its life, the cinema gradually adapted to conform to these traditional codes of expression; this process of adaption is particularly clear in D.W. Griffith's work between 1908 and 1913, in which we find, for instance, an increasing dependence on the apparent depth of the image to "prove" its "reality"; or, again, the development of an editing style which wouldn't rupture either the spectator's identification with the characters on the screen, or his sense of the narrative's continuity: thus the "180° rule", and the use of "field and reverse" cutting become entrenched as elements of the way of making cinematic narratives.<sup>2</sup>



Brecht's initial elaboration of his theories of epic theater, and the slightly earlier work of Eisenstein and Vertov, together form the first prong of a politically motivated attack on this "illusionist" tradition. According to Brecht (and subsequently to Walter Benjamin), the radical work or art must oppose the illusionist mode at every level. Thus the means of expression is itself called into question: because the "means of expression" are ideologically determined, it is no longer sufficient to place a new "content" within the old structures of expression. Instead, the signifying system itself must be attacked, in order to overthrow the basis upon which the dominant ideological message rests. This procedure constitutes the crux of Godard's work, particularly since 1968 (as Peter Wollen has incisively demonstrated in AFTERIMAGE no. 4), and it lies similarly embedded in the films of Jean-Marie Straub: much of his work may be elucidated in terms of a systematic "deconstruction" of the old forms of cinematic expression.

One film in which the notion of "deconstruction" may be seen with particularly clarity is Straub's EYES DO NOT WANT TO CLOSE AT ALL TIMES, OR PERHAPS ONE DAY ROME WILL PERMIT HERSELF TO CHOOSE IN HER TURN, usually referred to as OTHON (1970, 83 minutes). The basis of the film is a performance of Corneille's play, Othon--but it is a performance which integrates the circumstances of that performance, and the process of its transformation into film, into its totality as an aesthetic object. That is to say, where an illusionist director would have simply created a historical melodrama, an autonomous world into which we would be transported for the duration of the film, Straub commences his film by presenting only a rear-view of the actors, concentrating our attention on Rome's rush-hour traffic in the background. He juxtaposes the ancient text with a modern Roman setting; the context of this performance is established through the sight and sound of modern vehicles. Then the camera moves in to the actors who deliver their lines rapidly, in a kind of expressive monotone: monotone because each character/actor hardly varies his style or pace of delivery, expressive because each monotone differs from the others, and suggests certain formalized relationships vis-a-vis the other characters. For instance, Galba, the old emperor, always paces his speech very slowly, and this dignity emphasizes his position at the head of his social hierarchy. The message is clear, but the signification of that message is equally so, in its formalized conception. Straub doesn't try to present either speech or gesture as naturalistic, but heightens their formalization, thus conforming to Brecht's dictum: "Instead of wanting to create the impression that he is improvising, the actor should rather show what the truth is: he is quoting."

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Straub's OTHON, however, is his use of cutting and framing, both of which are designed in opposition to the illusionist codes of representation, and serve to eliminate the possibility of any identification with the characters. Frequently cuts are made apparently arbitrarily, instead of conforming to some psychological demand; on other occasions, Straub violates the 180° rule, emphasizing the shot's materiality, rather than its transparency. The camera, in an illusionist film, is subordinated to the movements of the central dramatic characters--it pans to follow their motion, it moves to a close-up to record moments of "intensity"; Straub's camera never pans to follow movement, but follows a logic of its own, a logic devoted to the articulation of the material space in which the action takes place. The play is not the central discourse, which the images illustrate in a servile manner. In this connection, Noel Burch recently observed,

The idea that there are two tapes--an image-track and a sound-track--is something that people are not even remotely aware of in any sense, and therefore are not aware of the fact that essentially these are two different productions happening....the dominant concept is that the image produces the sound.<sup>3</sup>



OTHON's opening shot, which contains modern houses, and the ruins on the Palatine Hill, but no people, hints at the dislocation between "image-track" and "sound-track" that is to recur through the film; for instance, Straub often refrains from giving us an establishing shot at the beginning of a sequence: thus we don't know who is being spoken to, or even, on occasion, who is speaking, until the end of the sequence.

This decentralization of the actors is constant through the film, both in their frequent partial framing; and Straub's use of the "empty" frame.<sup>4</sup> Where the illusionist film centers its lead actors in the frame, Straub does not: in the sequence by the fountain, Vinus enters, and is initially seen only from the waist down, until he sits by Plautine, and when the camera subsequently shifts in on Plautine, Vinus is bisected by the left side of the screen--precisely the opposite of what the laws of "good photography" allow. [Similarly, the sound of the fountain is allowed to dominate the soundtrack, partially displacing the conventional center of aural attention, the text of the play.] And where the illusionist film cuts when a character exits from the frame (in order to expedite the progress of the narrative) Straub frequently lets his camera rest for twenty or thirty seconds on the "empty" screen: the materiality of the space in which the characters operate is reasserted. Further--and this is essential to the practical aesthetic success of Straub's project, as opposed to the veracity of his theoretical intentions--these "empty" spaces take on a rhythmic function, become a mode of punctuation, since their most emphatic occurrences coincide with the end of an Act in Corneille's text. Indeed this rhythmic aspect is one which it is virtually impossible to perceive in the sub-titled prints of the film, since one devotes so much time to reading that the aural music of Corneille's verse (which is magnificently highlighted by its formalized delivery) passes by almost unnoticed.

Inevitably, new ways of thinking are more difficult to adapt to than simply "new contents" expressed through the same fundamental method of expression as the "old content". And that Straub's films are difficult remains unquestionable--but the hostility that has greeted them is due rather to the audience's lack of a critical framework within which to situate them, than to any mindless incompetence on Straub's part. Straub's films are certainly not populist in any sense, but the fact that they appeal only to a small audience is not, surely, a critical stigma. (Nor is it an automatic accolade!) For what then of Dreyer, Snow, post-'68 Godard--or of Stockhausen, Cage, Reich, Varèse, in music?

What we have to accept as a given at this point is the idea that significant political activity (as well as aesthetic activity) can take place on the level of intellectual theory, even though this may result in a comparatively rarified practice. This obviously involves a broadening of the commonly held idea that politics is a pragmatic activity directed toward social manipulation. And here Godard's distinction between "making a political film" and "making a film politically" is of crucial importance. For, as Roland Barthes remarked apropos of Brecht,

Capitalist society endures, and communism itself is being transformed: revolutionary action must increasingly cohabit, and in almost institutional fashion, with the norms of bourgeois and petit-bourgeois morality: problems of conduct, and no longer of action, arise.<sup>5</sup>

"Making a film politically" becomes, for Godard, daring "to know where one is, and where one has come from, to know one's place in the process of production in order then to change it....to know that film-making is a secondary activity, a small screw in the revolution."<sup>6</sup> And of course Godard's distinction applies equally to viewing films: just as there is no guarantee that we view political films politically, so we may view non-political films in a political manner, as Chuck Kleinhans demonstrated in Jump Cut no. 2, in his article on EVEL KNIÉVEL and THE LAST AMERICAN HERO.

Straub's films are not merely complexly conceived in themselves, they demand considerable mental activity on the part of the audience. Like Brecht, Straub will not allow us to passively consume works of we are not being fed entertainment, we are being invited to reflect on and examine what we are witnessing. As Peter Wollen remarked apropos of WIND FROM THE EAST, we ask "What is this film for", rather



than merely internal questions such as "What is going to happen next?" In order to gain anything from viewing a film by Straub, the viewer is forced to work at the production of meaning. In the illusionist mode, we are invited to suspend our disbelief for the duration of the work; Straub's radical conception of film creation presupposes our critical intelligence being brought to bear constantly upon what we are viewing. In a sense, it is a process of co-creation between Straub and his audience, there is no trace of paternalistic condescension: he feeds us no easy answers.

In the demands he makes on his audience, in his rigorous analysis of the syntax of his medium of expression, as well as in his broad notion of what constitutes political activity, Straub is clearly very close to the spirit of Godard. Indeed we may say that in many respects Straub's work parallels Godard's continuing investigation of the potential strengths and limitations of the film medium, and the two directors have expressed their mutual admiration (Godard helped finance *THE CHRONICLE OF ANNA MAGDALENA BACH* (1968, 93 minutes). But in artistic temperament and moral sensibility, Straub recalls the work of Rossellini: in both, we might cite reflection, analysis, documentarism as their core qualities. Both refuse to manipulate or exploit their material for emotional ends. In each it is the precise integrity of the director's analytic powers that renders his work political, in its profoundest, moral sense: political in the manner they assume a responsibility to their subject matter. This responsibility is succinctly (and amusingly) suggested by the anecdote of Rossellini berating his cameraman for removing a boulder from the foreground of a landscape they were filming, saying that if nature put it there, art has no business removing it. Similarly André Bazin wrote of Rossellini that "Man himself is just one fact among others, to whom no pride of place should be given 'a priori'," <sup>7</sup> thereby pointing to a sensibility we find recurring in Straub's films, in such things as his insistence on using direct sound rather than post-synchronization, and his refusal to "type" actors according to convictions that demand "good" characters be handsome, "bad" ones visibly meretricious, and so on.

This latter refusal was in part responsible for the hostility that his first film, *MACHORKA-MUFF* (1963, 17 minutes) provoked. Adapted from Heinrich Boll's magazine story, "Bonn Diary", it told of the visit of Colonel Machorka-Muff to Bonn, to visit his mistress, and clear the name of General Hurlanger-Hiss, who has been accused of retreating in battle after losing only 8,500 men: Hitler decreed that 12,300 men was the requisite number to justify retreat. Machorka-Muff is promoted to General, and lays the cornerstone of the "College of Military Memories" (shades of Franju's *HOTEL DES INVALIDES*). He takes this occasion to establish that Hurlanger-Hiss in fact lost 14,700 men before retreating. The next day he marries his mistress, after her priest has assured her that, since she is Protestant, her seven previous marriages don't count. On their honeymoon, news arrives that the new Military Academy is under verbal fire from the opposition. However, Machorka-Muff and his old army friends have the majority in Parliament, and to allay any further concern, his aristocratic wife assures him that her family has never been successfully opposed.

Straub has made it clear that, of all his films, this was one of the most explicitly political in intention:

*MACHORKA-MUFF* is the story of a rape, the rape of a country on which an army has been imposed, a country which would have been happier without one.<sup>8</sup>

The reason I wanted to make a film about it at once was precisely my first strong political feelings, as I was still a student in Strasbourg, and which I still had, that was my first bout of political rage--exactly this story of the European defense community, i.e. the fact that Germany had been re-armed--the story of a rape. That is to say, the only country in Europe which, after a certain Napoleon, the first gangster in the series, had the chance to be free. This chance was destroyed. I know for a fact that in Hamburg people threw stones at the first uniforms, i.e. people didn't want them, they had had enough of it.<sup>9</sup>



Straub's protest against re-armament was predictably ill-received by the right in Germany, while the Leftist critics, agreeing with his sentiments, objected to the style of his presentation. They felt that Machorka-Muff had not been sufficiently characterized as a militarist; he didn't look sufficiently "evil." One presumes that the model these critics looked towards was that of Eisenstein, whose coarsely satiric delineation of the tsar's sycophantic forces in OCTOBER or STRIKE set the mainstream example of "political" film's typage of actors. Straub displays little sympathy for this essentially expressionistic tradition, preferring to create a visual environment that is "correct" in every possible detail: thus he refuses to conform to a convention that decrees that evil men look evil. No individual can personify the qualities inherent in our reading of the collective unit, the Military.

Straub, then, ignores the potential for a vituperative caricature of "the Military mind." His portrait of Machorka-Muff centers not so much upon interpretation of his personality, as upon an agglomeration of documentary detail, seizing on elements of Machorka-Muff's environment that tell us far more about the mentality of post-war Germany than a caricatured presentation of the man could have implied. Straub's documentary mode establishes the context of individual actions with devastating precision. There is a profusion of tray-bearing servants throughout the film: their movements are always measured, even mechanical, but never sycophantic. Impersonality is the keynote, and the servants have no direct contact with anyone, everything passing through the intermediary of the white-covered tray; they are objects, rather than humans, to be summoned at the snap of two fingers. The notion of servitude runs through the film in other respects too: Inn becomes Machorka-Muff's servant, pouring his tea, holding his coat; a workman places the cornerstone Machorka-Muff purports to be laying; and, as a long newspaper montage makes clear, the church is at pains to be the lackey of the militarists: "Jesus objected not to the soldier's profession, but the whores" shouts a headline. It is up to the audience to pick up the irony here--Christ forgave adultery, but was crucified by a military governor, in fact.

These various "services" are never obsequiously performed however: it is the cold impersonality of proceedings, the cool efficiency, and glassy crispness, detached from any personalized context, that betrays the moral inadequacies of "the Military." Machorka-Muff's relationship with Inn is equally passionless; he initially has difficulty making contact with her, he thinks about phoning, but doesn't, and then when she phones him, the message is cryptic, enigmatic. The nearest they come to physical passion is Machorka-Muff's formal peck at the back of her hand. And Straub's handling of the final scene in which Inn assures her husband that no one has ever successfully opposed her family, again reveals their lack of any moral dimension whatsoever: Inn's statement is delivered with unannounced aplomb, upon which the screen goes black and the film is over. The very flatness, abruptness of the ending drains any emotional juice from the statement: we are left to consider the words themselves, in cold objectivity--no interpretive phrasing or reflection is allowed to modulate the hardness of the words themselves, with their barrenly aristocratic ethos.

The revelation and critique of Machorka-Muff's ideology is accomplished through the accumulation of documentary detail, and its subtle sharpening by Straub's precise use of both camera and soundtrack. Thus a snap of the fingers to summon a waiter is transformed into a moment symbolizing the spiritual essence of an authoritarian world. Machorka-Muff's stepping down at the close of his dedication speech becomes not merely an end, but a moment of crystallization: Straub's camera is low, looking up at Machorka-Muff; when he steps down, the frame is empty--just the whiteness of the sky remains: we are presented with a visual and emotional vacuum, a void that is underpinned by the incursion on the soundtrack of the wittily lugubrious band, grinding out its dirge. The laying of the cornerstone that follows is similarly visualized in its barest essentials: a single take, from a high-angled camera, contains within the frame the cornerstone, Machorka-Muff, and a workman. The workman lays mortar along the



bricks; he lifts the stone slab and places it on top of the mortar; (the diligence of the workman is counterpointed against the rigid inactivity of Machorka-Muff); Machorka-Muff ritualistically taps the slab with a hammer, three times. The ceremony is complete, and we are told that inside the cornerstone is secreted a photograph of Hurler-Hiss, and one of his epaulets. There are no fawning crowds, no impressive officials, or celebratory overtones. Straub's visualization is minimalist and documentary, rather than dramatic. And this is precisely its virtue. Pushed in this direction through his experience with, and admiration for Bresson (he had been his assistant on *UN CONDAMNE A MORT S'EST ECHAPPE* in 1956), Straub believes in the necessity of spareness, of the elimination of non-essentials, in order to penetrate to the core of a situation. The very emptiness of the cornerstone sequence testifies to its spiritual essence: the evacuation of humanity, the near obscenity of the mucilaginous mortar, the obsessively formalistic tapping of the slab, the fetishism inherent in the preservation through incarceration of the photo and epaulet, all these details form Straub's critique of the ideology of Machorka-Muff. It is the revelatory capacity of his documentarism that constitutes Straub's political commentary.

In *MACHORKA-MUFF*, Straub's emphasis on "the necessity of spareness" is not so much a radical innovation as it is a modification of the classical strategy of "form creating content"; that is, the emptiness and impersonality of his frames testifies to the moral vacuity of his characters, his style "proves" his theme. But his subsequent films raise more complex problems. An ascetic aesthetic has never been a touchstone of European art, but the cinema does contain exponents of the doctrine in both Dreyer and Bresson, both of whom have consistently worked in an intensely reflective manner that required, as Paul Schrader puts it, "sacrifice of the vicarious enjoyments that cinema seems uniquely able to provide, empathy for character, plot, and fast movement."<sup>10</sup> The purpose of this sacrifice is the expression of "the Transcendent on film", and Richard Roud has suggested that Straub's films be seen in the context of this endeavor. There is, however, a crucial difference between the austerity of Bresson, and that of Straub. Bresson pares away the non-essentials in order to enable the viewer to feel his way to the heart of the film; his end is epiphanous, transcendental. Straub's austerity is functional, it forces the audience to think. For Straub, conscious mental activity is a prerequisite of understanding. In taking this position, he is clearly in opposition to the mainstream of cinema's evolution. The conventional film denies the responsibility of the eye to the mind; its technique is devoted to the total creation and sustaining of illusion, in the course of which the director attempts to make the viewer forget the omnipresence of the camera and its manipulation of one's perspective; and emotional identification, in which the spectator associates himself with a character, and thus vicariously enters the world of the film, is another staple of the "illusionist" tradition. Straub rejects any attempt to anaesthetize the mind of the viewer; he refuses to make concessions to his audience's expectations. We are never allowed to identify with the characters that inhabit his films; our eyes are not glutted by sweeping camera movements or cluttered frames. We cannot enter into his worlds: but we may reflect upon them, and the "spareness" of his style functions as an invitation to reflection, to analysis. Straub's later films, in particular, create spaces in which, deliberately, nothing happens--they are spaces in which the eye and mind are invited to interact.

Straub's rejection of conventional narrative forms has been explicit right from the opening titles of *MACHORKA-MUFF*, which state that the film is "An abstract-visual dream, not a story." Although there is a story at the base of *MACHORKA-MUFF*, Straub's presentation, as we have seen, is focused on a second, analytic level of diegesis. Both levels are apparent in the opening scenes, in which we are given no means by which to orient ourselves to the narrative. A shot of a telephone, a pan along the skyline of a city at night, a man sleeping, followed by the eerie pomposity of three bowing statues, which are then revealed as being in the form of Machorka-Muff (the epic unveiling of his ego--thus stating Straub's intention in the film). This is succeeded by a shot of Machorka-Muff shaving before a mirror, while the commentary intones (it is Machorka-Muff's voice), "a typical capital-city dream." This line pinpoints the film's dialectical method: there is a perpetual disjunction between Machorka-Muff's percep-



tion of himself, and our perception of him. In this instance, the dream he refers to is the one we have just witnessed; but the image we confront as we hear the line "a typical capital-city dream" is of him shaving--Straub's framing presents it almost as a commercial for an electric razor, such is its confident glossiness. Machorka-Muff is himself the dream, in Straub's terms, the illusion of moral rectitude that must be revealed in all its falsehood. The dialectical relationship that exists between image and sound frequently establishes Straub's critical stance. There is, for instance, the early scene in the hotel lounge where Machorka-Muff chats with Heffling (a subordinate, who is not distinguished by a double-barrelled name, symbolically); Heffling leaves, and Straub in a comparative long-shot, observes Machorka-Muff walk with him to the door. The setting (the harshest of deco design), the lighting, the characters' movements, all express a rigid, formal propriety that Straub brilliantly undercuts through Machorka-Muff's musing on the soundtrack: "Maybe I'll have an affair with his wife, you never know what Cupid may keep in store..." The contradiction between the surface appearance and the subterranean reality of Machorka-Muff's world is brilliantly, and economically, given precision, revealing the hollowness of his pretensions toward "Honor, Decency", and concomitant Romantic-bourgeois notions. The conflict between theory and actuality is apparent again when Straub presents a conventional image of the newly married couple on their honeymoon, a waiter serving them champagne. Straub then satirically undercuts the image with Inn's single comment: "I always feel like this as a bride."

For audiences that are perhaps better prepared to accept the soundtrack as a purely illustrative addition to the visuals, Straub's interdependence of sound and image has met with considerable hostility, both on the part of the film industry itself, and of an audience unable to appreciate the rigor of his logic. Of all his work, the film that most clearly exemplifies his attitude toward the use of sound is *THE CHRONICLE OF ANNA MAGDALENA BACH*, one of the most beautiful achievements in film history. It is built around the triple axes of music, image, and commentary, music being the central component out of which the other two elements grow. Unusual, even unique, though this procedure may be, it is predicated on Straub's respect for the material elements of his discourse. Bach's music is obviously the most authentic data we have on the man's mind and personality, and Straub presents this quite unadulterated. The other information the film offers, both visual and verbal, is of secondary authenticity, to the extent that it is dependent upon actors, upon manuscripts by hands other than Bach's, and upon destroyed buildings. Straub never attempts an illusionist film, we are never invited to consider it a literal reconstruction. Instead, where authenticity is impossible to achieve, he prefers to make the impossibility explicit, creating a subtle dialogue between the 18th and 20th centuries. One point at which it erupts quite expressionistically is a scene in which Bach, playing the organ in the foreground, is set against the facade of a building in the rear. Since the 18th Century, the original building has been destroyed, and instead of faking the scene, Straub deliberately emphasizes the fact that the building is a back-projected image--not only is there agitation of the foreground, emphasizing its separateness from the background, but the two are tilted at opposite angles on the frame, making the unreality absolutely explicit. The image itself is beautiful; Straub's placement of a burning torch on the left side of the frame clinching the poise of the composition. The shot is a meditation about the distance between the 18th and 20th centuries--the impossibility and undesirability of accurate reconstruction. Instead of attempting a complete illusion of reality, the artifice is deliberately underlined. The artifice is offset by the placement of the burning torch, which functions as a symbol of the continuing, eternal vitality of the music, even if the man and his environment are lost. The emphatic artifice serves both to highlight the unassailable beauty and integrity of the music itself, and to reinforce our awareness of the limitations of the documentary mode. For what makes Straub an inherently political filmmaker is not his choice of subject matter, but his approach to that subject matter, his respect for the integrity of his materials. The search for truth is at the root of all his films; this truth can only rise out of documentarism, a documentarism that reflects on the degree of its truth: this for Straub is the root of political thinking:



The revolution is like God's grace, it has to be made anew each day, it becomes new every day, a revolution is not made once and for all. And it's exactly like that in daily life. There is no division between politics and life, art and politics. I think one has no other choice, if one is making films that can stand on their own feet, they must become documentary, or in any case they must have documentary roots. Everything must be correct, and only from then on can one rise above, reach higher.<sup>11</sup>

This explains the skeletal basis of the BACH film: each of its three axes is subjected to the same rigorous scrutiny and presentation. The spoken language portion (principally Anna Magdalena's monologue) derives chiefly from various 18th century texts--Bach's letters, a necrology written by one of his sons. Straub and his wife, Daniele Huillet, worked this material into the monologue form; preserving the original form of the language. What we have is a kind of documentary fiction: its presentation is consonant with this, it being read in a non-interpretive monotone; no emotional "bending" of the material is allowed. The musical performances that flow through the entire film are, quite literally, documentary, since Straub insisted on shooting with synchronous sound. The visuals too are documentary in the purest sense: a simple recording of the performances, with functional distances and angles: very few close-ups, high-angles used where necessary--as in observing Bach playing the organ, when we need to see both the movement of his hands on the keys, and feet on the pedals. Elsewhere, the visuals consist of gently panning shots across the original sheet music, and other manuscripts.

The documentary foundation of the film demanded, predictably, a good deal of historical research. Like Rossellini's THE RISE OF LOUIS XIV, ANNA MAGDALENA BACH sets out to present historically verifiable facts on the screen in the most coldly objective manner possible; they cannot be tampered with. What Paul Schrader has said of Rossellini's film, is as true of Straub's:

Because Rossellini makes no attempt to plunge the viewer into the drama of the past, making the past relevant to his immediate feelings...the viewer has a sense of detachment rather than involvement, of awareness rather than empathy.<sup>12</sup>

In the Rossellini film, this detachment is partly due to the presence of a voice-over narrator, whose omniscient, contemporary presence contrasts with Straub's use of the voice of Anna Magdalena, who remains ensnared in the 18th Century: her deadpan delivery, however, establishes a distance that works in a manner close to that of Rossellini, though it retains traces of a (suppressed because understated) personal intensity not present in THE RISE OF LOUIS XIV. Where it was possible for Straub to be authentic, he went to great pains to achieve it. In 1958 (ten years before he finally raised financing for the film), he went to East Germany, to visit the various towns Bach had been associated with; Straub says he did this

not only because of the towns, which in the end are not shown in the film at all. It was there I understood that one couldn't make the film in the original surroundings at all, because these have been altered in the 19th Century. The Thomas school where Bach lived for thirty years was torn down around 1900. The Thomas church in Leipzig was altered by an organ in a horrible neo-gothic style...<sup>13</sup>

Instead of trying to shoot on non-existent locations, Straub decided to limit his frame to interiors and the musicians themselves. The slow process of reconstructing what could be done began: even the musicians' spectacles are correct:

We got the formula for the glasses for each of the musicians, and we made corresponding spectacles for those who couldn't play without them....There are some original instruments among the ones we used, the oboes are all original; there are also copies, the violins for instance, they used to play standing, which is not done any more, and the violinists played without the chin-support.... Also, when we had a white transparent window in a church, it was because during the Renaissance and most of all during the early Baroque, most of the Gothic stained glass windows were dismantled and replaced by white glass.<sup>14</sup>



A concomitant to this painstaking sense of detail was the exposure of certain myths concerning our conventional image of what the period looked like. For instance the characters wear no make-up:

There is a contradiction between wigs and faces that have no make-up. And I didn't want to do what they told me, what they usually do in films. They accepted that, and the wigs have tulle as foundation, and it is visible underneath, it can be concealed with make-up, but I wanted to make it so that the wig is recognized as such. At that time it was like a hat or a sign of affluence, they just put it on their heads, and didn't want to make it look like real hair, as is customary in films.<sup>15</sup>

Just as the instruments are replicas of the original forms, so Leonhardt, the musician who plays the role of Bach, plays as Bach did--with his thumb, an unorthodox method; similarly, Straub refuses to conform to notions of the baroque cluttering the furniture--asceticism is the mode, and it is accurate.

All of this serves, of course, to explain Straub's insistence on the necessity for direct sound: overdubbing or post-synchronization would amount to falsification, cheating. This insistence is not of significance for the audience, nor even for critical evaluation of the film as an aesthetic object (it is, after all, difficult to decipher such details from a film soundtrack in a movie theater); rather it is indicative of Straub's concern for honesty at the level of his production procedure. If the musicians are to be seen playing music, then the music heard must be "correct" to the extent of synchronous recording. This desire for truth in his films has a further conceptual rationale: it involves the recognition of the fact that any attempt to portray the personality of the man, Johann Sebastian Bach, would be futile. What we evidently see is a young musician playing Bach--a fact which Straub does not wish to obscure--and it is a major reason in his decision to use non-professional actors. For actors are trained to stop being themselves, to try and slip into a fictional figure. Any such procedure would be dishonest, in Straub's eyes, so all Leonhardt does is play music--no acting is demanded of him, just as no interpretation of her script is required by the actress who plays Anna--she just intones it in a monotone; the fact that she finally achieves a rare incantatory beauty is a happy result of Straub's initial procedural rigor. Straub makes no attempt to establish either Bach or Anna as "real 18th Century people," for the ephemeral personal details that provide the core of Ken Russell's self-indulgent "musical biographies" have no place in Straub's aesthetic. Such details are never visualized, and are only mentioned when crucial: such as those points where the death of their first two children is calmly, matter-of-factly announced, as we watch Anna playing a delicate piece--"Death robbed us of our first-born and second-born." The flatness of the delivery lends it great pathos, but the music's ability to transcend such ephemeral (in the context of the present) detail is again underlined. A similarly symbolic moment occurs when Bach is arrested while conducting his choir: another conductor steps in as Bach is marched off, and the music continues unfalteringly, as if impervious to mortal dramas.

Always it is the music rather than the personality that is the central focus, and this recognition is evident as much in what is in the film, as in what is left out. Usually Straub presents us with the whole group of musicians playing, refusing to single out any individual. Bach is often to be found hidden in the depth of the frame, or placed near its edge; in this way Straub minimizes the dramatic possibilities, preferring to visualize Bach's elimination of his self in favor of his music. When we do get a close-up of Bach, playing a clavier piece near the end of the film, it is for functional reasons: our attention is directed to his eyes, which are soon to fail. In general, Straub makes us listen to the music, he refuses to divert us visually, just as he refuses to hypothesize on the nature of Bach's feelings at any point. By choosing to play the music, he makes the viewer draw his own imaginative conclusions on those feelings. Straub's artistry is inclusive of his audience, he compels us to participate in the creation of the film's "meaning"; we cannot remain passive. (Of course, if the viewer is there merely to be entertained, he/she is likely to become bored; indeed few people are prepared to think their way through films, and this in part accounts for Straub's relatively small audience.)



Having achieved a certain documentary truth and accuracy, Straub transcends this level to, in his own words, "rise above documentary to aim at something higher." Now it is exceedingly difficult to precisely locate the source of the film's beauty, but it is my experience that the film creates a quite extraordinary serenity that is beyond the limits of "mere documentarism." This results from the complex interaction of the musical, visual, and verbal elements, which Straub orchestrates with stunning sensitivity. One aspect of this is the close and moving identity that exists between the film's form and its subject.

The rigorous clarity of the music finds its counterpart (counterpoint) in the ascetic simplicity of Straub's visual presentation. There are almost no close-ups, pans, dissolves, or other camera tricks. [Varying lengths of pause on the verbal track are used to indicate the passing of time, instead of dissolves.] The organization of the compositions, their relation to each other, is a formal reiteration of the music's own structure. Straub's use of diagonal perspectives isn't merely a functional one (functional in that it facilitates inclusiveness, creates a sense of depth, of perspective, and so on); these diagonals also have a formal structural value. Straub tends to rhythmically alternate the direction of these diagonals (left to right, right to left), creating an equivalent for the contrapuntal mode of Bach's music. Rather than merely illustrating Bach's music in some manner, Straub has found a structural equivalent for it; as Richard Roud writes:

Throughout the film he plays with binary symmetry, left-right polarity, and the changing direction of his diagonals both in the camera set-ups and in the camera movements....There is even an extraordinary pair of shots, one in the first third of the film, and another symmetrically in the last third, which are almost mirror-images one to the other; as in a mirror-fugue, a popular musical device of Bach's day where every note is reversed, the angle and placing of the actors is completely reversed.<sup>16</sup>

The strongly formal sense of the film is in many ways simply a reflection of the formal, even mathematical, basis of much Baroque music--after all, rhythm is inherently a mathematical concern, a measuring process, and Straub has a clear grasp of this in both the small and large units of the film. The two shots of the sea, and the one of the sky function in this rhythmic sense also, being almost equidistantly placed. The discussion of rhythm and measure is difficult, however, because it can only be felt to be relevant--its effect is emotionally apprehended, and analysis of its cause can never prove the effect. Nevertheless, the sea-shots are not dependent upon their rhythmic placement for their importance, they have another relevance--their pictorial beauty and appropriateness. They function as breathing spaces on the film, a moment of release from enclosure, a moment, quite literally, of transcendence of the characteristically tightly-framed interiors. And their composition is equally literally transcendent; beside being a mode of punctuation, both the sea and sky shots lift the eyes upward. Both images are composed with a dark area on the lower half of the frame (either pebbles, or trees), and the eyes move naturally to the lighter area, which is upward, paralleling the uplifting music; but it is not distractive--the still, ethereal image allows one to concentrate upon the complexity of the music; as in the rest of the film, Straub's visuals highlight the brilliant vitality of Bach's music.

It is significant that Bach only speaks at rare moments in the course of the film; Anna is the biographer, events are seen from her external viewpoint. We remain outside Bach in the interests of objectivity; when he does speak, it is in connection with poverty, begging for cash; we hear him pleading the necessity for the advancement of musical art, the need for the encouragement of musical innovators. It is important that we hear this from Bach, rather than Anna. Straub is in many ways close to the traditional definition of the Japanese artist:

One who makes every attempt to obscure his personal, idio-syncratic tendencies in order to create a more impersonal universal expression.<sup>17</sup>



Straub's overt presence is certainly rare in his films, and I think we are invited to take those moments when Bach does speak in the film as being special moments: Bach's plea for advancement and innovation is to be read as Straub's plea for advancement and innovation in film. It is at these points that we realize just how closely committed Straub is to everything that Bach represents. And it is his breaking of the mold of objectivity (Anna's monotone) that constitutes his admission of this identity. Straub's ten-year struggle to make the film, to raise the finances for it, lends authority to the unexpected personal eruptions of Bach himself into the reflective texture of *THE CHRONICLE OF ANNA MAGDALENA BACH*. Straub has quite openly admitted his sense of a parallel between himself and Bach:

...this film interested me, because Bach was precisely someone who reacted against his own inertia, although he was deeply rooted in his times, and was oppressed.<sup>18</sup>

All of Straub's work is, in one sense or another, a reaction against his own inertia. *MACHORKA-MUFF* was an attempt at a meaningful response to a politically repressive occurrence, and both *NOT RECONCILED* (1964-5) and *OTHON* are attempts to come to terms with, and comprehend, history. Straub's oblique approach to the problem of Germany's Nazi past resulted in *NOT RECONCILED*, which was adapted from Heinrich Böll's novel, *Billiards at Half-Past Nine*. However, the source of the film is not a particularly helpful place to commence a critical analysis ("pace" Richard Roud) since the best it can do is attempt to unravel a singularly difficult cinematic experience. Straub, indeed, would prefer us to forget the novelistic source:

I believe one can't make a film of any book--because one films something about a book or with a book, but never of a book--one films always from one's own experience. A film lives and exists only when it is based on the experiences of the so-called director.<sup>19</sup>

Straub takes as his starting point the principle that film is "a perceptual present"--that there is, in our experience of watching a film, no past tense. He then transfers this idea to the narrative organization, eliding all the connectives that were present in Böll's novel, thereby formally underling the historical principle that present and past are indivisible. Again we note Straub's proximity to Marxist theory: "Not only the result, but the road to it also, is a part of the truth," Marx noted, and Straub's maieutic endeavor in *NOT RECONCILED*, to objectify the latent tendencies of the German nation, is predicated on this principle. The process of our struggle to come to terms with the film runs parallel with the protagonist Robert Fahmel's attempt to come to terms with his past.

As he had earlier done with *MACHORKA-MUFF*, Straub attacked his subject from an oblique angle:

The fact which interested me was to make a film about nazism without mentioning the word Hitler or concentration camps and such things that a middle class family did not suspect or want to suspect.<sup>20</sup>

In its individual elements, the film is congruent with the characteristic constituents of Straub's style: the documentary mode, the flat monotony of the actors' dialogue, an ascetic camera style. The elision of Böll's transitional statements reinforces the generalized image of the nation, rather than the intimacies of family relations. Everything in the film pushes beyond the boundaries of the personal, to the national. One might even say that impersonality is a central motif; like *Machorka-Muff*'s solitariness (eating alone, walking alone) the characters in *NOT RECONCILED* are alone, set in a hostilely impersonal environment. One shot that clinches this mood of pessimism is a 360-degree panning shot around a suburban desert, which culminates on a young man standing at a door; a child informs him that the person he seeks has never been there. Straub consistently uses empty spaces--often to create a sense that it is a space that has been vacated by those that don't "fit in"--like Robert's mother who has been committed to an insane asylum because she called the Kaiser "a fool". The barren nature of the environment is perhaps due, Straub seems to suggest, to the fact that the eliminative principles of nazism have rendered it spiritually sterile.



Like OTHON, THE BRIDEGROOM, THE ACTRESS AND THE PIMP (1968), a short film that Straub completed shortly after THE CHRONICLE OF ANNA MAGDALENA BACH, may be considered as a reflection on film expression. Indeed all of his films, largely as a result of his minimalist visual style, can be seen as essentially self-reflexive. Straub has consistently tested and re-evaluated the basic elements of the cinematic experience. In THE CHRONICLE OF ANNA MAGDALENA BACH, for instance, montage is entirely absent, each sequence is autonomous, and allows the music to swell and take on a life of its own. The static camera, like that of Lumière (or D.W. Griffith, whom Straub has particularly made reference to) invites us to watch for slight movements (leaves, musicians' hands, wigs) within the frame, and view them as if they had never been seen before on a screen. In OTHON the long scene by the fountain, with Othon and Plautine dressed in red and white, with the blanket of green grass and water as their backdrop, is both a meditation on the use of color and, through the insistent noise of the fountain throughout the scene, a gesture of homage to Bresson's LES DAMES DU BOIS DE BOULOGNE. In the films before THE BRIDEGROOM, however, reflections upon problems of cinematic expression were subsumed in the larger subject of each; in this 23-minute film, Straub uses his simple plot as a central core around which he can explore the expressive possibilities of cinema. The film grew, Straub tells us, out of two things:

It was born out of the impossible May revolution in Paris....it is based on a news-item (there is nothing more political than a news-item) about the romance between an ex-prostitute and a negro, seen in relation to a text extracted from a play by Ferdinand Bruckner.<sup>2</sup>

The narrative may be summarized thus: A middle-class girl is put to work on the streets by her boyfriend pimp. She meets a negro, falls in love. After fleeing from the wrath of the pimp, they are married. They arrive home to find the pimp awaiting them. She shoots the pimp, and their love triumphs. One's first viewing of the film may not, however, seem to match up to this description, since Straub has meticulously broken the film down into stylistically autonomous fragments. There are twelve shots in the film, and they form seven units which have, at first sight, little to do with each other.

The first unit comprises the titles, which appear over graffiti, among which we discern the statement "Stupid old Germany, I hate it over here, I hope I can go soon, Patricia." The second consists of a long tracking shot (the first half of which is silent, the second accompanied by Bach's "Ascension Oratorio"), which runs interminably down the prostitutes' row of Munich. The third consists of an entire three-act stage-play, which lasts ten minutes, shot in a single take. The fourth consists of a thriller-style chase. The fifth is a wedding ceremony. The sixth is a mystical slow pan that commences on an empty field, until magically a car is conjured out of nothing, and the camera seizes on it. The seventh segment is the shooting sequence, preceded by verses from St. John of the Cross. Only this final segment, the transcendental moment of the film, is in a style that we would recognize as pure Straub. The preceding six are, rather, a meditation upon the other stylistic possibilities of the cinema and in their sequential organization they constitute the history of that cinema; and the mood of the film's development, both in terms of its plot, and its aesthetic meditation, is crystallized by the tonal difference between the first and last images. The darkness and gloom of the Landsbergerstrasse is transformed into the shimmering light of the sky and trees of the final shot.

In what sense do I mean THE BRIDEGROOM...constitutes the history of the cinema? The scene on the Landsbergerstrasse, like the image of the graffiti, is absolutely non-interpretive--the camera simply records reality, like Lumière did. (The very darkness of the shot implies a "fallen" Lumière, though.) Then, through variations of the film's pace of movement, and the unexpected movement of another car on the street, the camera discovers its power to manipulate our emotions, expectations. The introduction of the film on the sound-track further transforms our response--it contradicts the visual reality before us. The dialectic of sound and image is essential. Then the stage-play sequences; rather than a production of a play, it is a critique of the play. Finally, Straub having concentrated on the sound-track, he turns to the text into its essential elements. These elements are the drama; what



Straub leaves us with is the empty shell of melodrama, with its intrigues and sexual games; the facade of psychological observation is stripped away; the deliberateness of cues is emphatically exposed--as when at a point of revelation, someone enters to thwart that revelation; the actors mechanically adopt "meaningful" postures, exposing the manipulative mode that we know Straub decries. The actors come and go through the two doors of the set like so many robots--the empty ritual of bourgeois drama is mercilessly exposed--and intelligently so. Straub's attack is not negative, for one senses that in clearing out these relics of theatrical practice, he is actively ushering in a new style. The long take that envelopes the play is both a reference to the earliest films, those static "filmed plays" that comprised the early history of film (and the early years of "talkies"), and a critical observation of that style. This critical attitude is enforced partly by Straub's characteristic diagonal camera angle which, in its very difference from the flat-on angles of the early Edison and Méliès films, emphasizes Straub's (and our) critical stance. One of the lines from Bruckner's play that Straub retains is from Goethe: "Even in science, nothing is known, everything is to be done." And the same, of course, applies to cinema.

The fourth segment of the film comprises five shots: the negro, James, leaves Lilith's apartment; he is followed by the pimp when he drives away; they chase across a bridge; by a gorge; up a scrubby hill. The sequence seems to bear no relation to what has preceded it--the stage-play. But the end of the stage-play consisted of Frede's decision to put his girl friend to work on the streets. And Frede is played by the same person who plays the pimp (Werner Rainer Fassbinder, another figure of the German theatrical and cinematic avant-garde): the continuity of person forces us to realize the continuity of narrative, elliptical though it may be. The chase sequence constitutes Straub's examination of the thriller genre. His sense of angles and lighting is correct: for instance, when James leaves the apartment, and comes to his car, Straub's camera is by the pimp's car--thus setting protagonist and assailant in conflict in the frame; and again, when the cars chase across the narrow bridge, Straub's camera sits at the end of the bridge, with the car and its headlights rushing dramatically at the lens. But Straub's critique of the mode is enforced by the way he evacuates each image of all the tension it has accrued, by holding the shot way past the theoretical cutting point. In the first instance, where an "action" director would cut when the cars moved off, Straub simply holds the shot until all movement has disappeared. In the second, Straub actually undercuts the mode during the chase: as the first car comes off the end of the bridge, Straub pans to follow its dramatic course, but instead of then panning back to pick up the arrival of the second car with all the dramatic tensions implicit in such a conventional procedure, he simply holds on the now-motionless first car, until the second one finally arrives in the frame of its own accord. In other words, throughout this sequence of images, Straub, while appearing to conform to the mode of the thriller, actually evacuates the impact from each shot, thereby exposing the overtly manipulative strategies demanded by this style of filmmaking.

After the thriller, or Hollywood, came the resurgence of documentary, and particularly cinema-verité. And this is the mode of the fifth sequence: a long single take of the wedding ceremony between James and Lilith. And, as the cinema-verité movement discovered for itself, the mode fails to penetrate to any essential truths: this at least is what Straub suggests by his decision to depict the wedding ceremony with such literal objectivity. It is both boring and theatrical--linking it in fact to the earlier stage-play sequence. Unlike Straub's documentarism, this one doesn't bear the seeds of its own transcendence. And then comes the near-mystical sixth segment: a long-shot of a field, a few buildings in the far distance, and trees. After a few moments, almost miraculously there appears a vehicle, right out of the center of the image--the camera pans slowly to hold it central in the frame, until finally the car almost fills the screen. This astonishing shot, in its context within this intensely metaphorical film, quite simply represents the rebirth of cinema, movement coming out of stasis.



And so to the final, seventh segment: James and Lilith address each other in the language of St. John of the Cross. James has come to "Buy the bride free who has served under a hard yoke." Thematically this sums up the development of the narrative--the freeing of a prostitute, and it foreshadows the shooting of the pimp, lending humanist authority to the killing, after which their love is fulfilled, and the camera can, to the strains of Bach's "Ascension Oratorio", track into the ecstatic, shimmering final image of sky and trees. But Lilith is not the only prostitute to be freed. The other is art, specifically film art, which, in the course of these 23 minutes, has evolved through its principle historical stages, until reaching its liberation in the materialist presentation that is Straub's own. The killing of the pimp is, metaphorically, the killing of German's decadent cultural heritage--the specifically German implication being raised in the graffiti that opened the film: "Stupid old Germany, I hate it over here, I hope I can go soon..." Straub has laid "stupid old Germany" to rest, the cinema has been liberated from its stifling conventions, and the film's movement from the sordid opening to the celebratory close cements the significance of this new beginning. Certainly, *THE BRIDEGROOM, THE ACTRESS, AND THE PIMP* is one of Straub's most difficult films, the near total elimination of the narrative proving a major obstacle for many viewers. But in the context of the post-New Wave film, its importance is unmistakable: the self-reflexive linguistic questioning places Straub in the central European tradition of Brecht and Godard. In the rigorously logical development of his work from the materialist documentarism of *MACHORKA-MUFF* to the exquisitely intelligent probing of *THE BRIDEGROOM...*, Straub's political integrity remains absolutely unmarked: he refuses to pre-package a message, he demands that we participate in the production of meaning, we do not consume his films, we participate in their creation of sense. In much major contemporary art, as Peter Wollen notes,

The text then becomes the location of thought, rather than the mind. The text is the factory where thought is at work, rather than the transport system which conveys the finished product.<sup>22</sup>

This precisely encapsulates the nature of Straub's cinematic texts, as it does that of Godard's. If we value Godard, or Makavejev, or Eisenstein, or Vertov, then it is necessary now to add the name of Jean-Marie Straub to that hierarchy of explorers of cinematic potential.

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<sup>1</sup>Although French by birth, much of his life has been spent under German influence (German-occupied France during the war, and then ten years living in Munich from 1958), and several of his films reveal an absorption in the nature of the German psyche of the post-war years.

<sup>2</sup>The 180° rule in cinematography means that the camera can point from anywhere at the subject so long as the camera is positioned only on one side of an imaginary line traced along the course of the subject's movement or along the line of the subject's glance. This guarantees that the person's glance or movement will seem to be in the same direction from shot to shot, and that any change in direction of glance or movement will occur according to narrative exigency and not because the camera was placed on opposite sides of the subject in successive shots. It is a rule observed in shooting so that the footage can be edited "logically" together. If the rule is broken, a person might be walking from left to right in one shot, but would appear to be walking from right to left in the next--with no indication of having turned.

"Field and reverse" cutting is called by the French *champ-contre-champ*, and very simply refers to showing the subject against a certain background and then cutting to a shot of that subject filmed from that background.



<sup>3</sup>"An Interview with Noel Burch", in Women and Film, Volume I, nos. 5-6, p. 30. Elsewhere in this interview Burch elaborates the notion of "deconstruction" rather more fully than is possible here.

<sup>4</sup>I am partly indebted to Beverly Alcock for this observation; a more detailed analysis of OTHON as a "deconstruction" film may be found in her thesis (recently completed for the Slade Film Department, University College, London) entitled "An Introduction to Some of the Problems Produced by Work on the Notion of Readership, and the Concept of a Materialist Practice in the Field of Film."

<sup>5</sup>Roland Barthes, Critical Essays, Northwestern University Press, 1972, p. 75 (my emphasis).

<sup>6</sup>"What is to be Done?" by Jean-Luc Godard, Afterimage no. 1, April 1970.

<sup>7</sup>What is Cinema?, Vol. 2, by Andre Bazin, Trans. Hugh Gray, University of California Press, 1971, p. 38.

<sup>8</sup>Straub by Richard Roud, "Cinema One" series, no. 17, 1971, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup>"Interview with Straub" by Andi Engel, Cinemantics no. 1, 1970, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>Transcendental Style on Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer, by Paul Schrader, University of California Press 1972, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup>Cinemantics, loc. cit., p. 20.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Schrader, "The Rise of Louis XIV", Cinema (U.S.A.), Vol. 6, no. 3, p. 4.



# TOUT VA BIEN and COUP POUR COUP

## Radical French Cinema in Context

JULIA LESAGE

In France, the largest and strongest left-wing organization is the Communist Party. It controls the largest labor union (the CGT, *Confédération Générale du Travail*), has a whole mechanism for diffusing its ideas, and controls a certain stable percentage of the vote in each election. Yet in France, the CP seems conservative to many radicals, its goals of material progress being those of the middle class. The *embourgeoisement* of Europe's left-wing political parties is a familiar phenomenon and has been described by the political scientist Maurice Duverger. Prophetically, Jean-Luc Godard in his film *LA CHINOISE* showed Maoist students rejecting the CP, for in the crucial test in the May-June '68 student uprisings, it was the CP that turned against the radical students. Both before and after May-June, 1968, French leftist groups elaborated positions in opposition to the Communists. Many turned to the Chinese cultural revolution as a model for both theory and practice and now define themselves as Maoist.

The film journals, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique*, and the director-partners, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, see themselves as Maoists. They stand in opposition to both the Communist Party and its union, the CGT. In contrast, the film magazine *Positif* and the film critic, Jean-Patrick Lebel, of *La Nouvelle Critique*, follow more of an old-left CP line. *Positif* has also taken up, quite inconsistently, the type of *auteur* criticism that *Cahiers du Cinéma* once began but now rejects on political grounds. *Cahiers* itself now writes as a Maoist collective which quotes both Chinese revolutionary statements and Bertolt Brecht's theories on art. *Cahiers* is struggling both against old concepts of filmic realism (as typified by the work of Bazin) and against the narrative film form. In many intellectual areas in France there is an intense investigation going on about the way we "attend to" things in reality,

and in radical French film criticism one finds a general rejection of naturalism in film. *Cahiers du Cinéma*, along with *Nouvelle Critique* and *Cinéthique*, has published whole series of articles on the way bourgeois ideology determines the way we read visual reality and the filmed images which we take to be a "capturing" of reality. In addition, as Jean-Patrick Lebel of *Nouvelle Critique* writes, prevailing ideology has shaped the way a camera will be used and the way the cinema industry grows. Although not involved in political action, *Cahiers du Cinéma* is seeking a new revolutionary film form which will reveal the structure of society and also not allow the audience to use film as a means of escape. To a large degree, they are taking up the struggle in cinema that Bertolt Brecht waged against naturalist theater. Often quoting Brecht, they see that a film which reveals both the structure of society *and* the way we interpret that society visually is more "realistic" than previous naturalist works which attempted to do neither.

The relation of such an anti-naturalist cinema to audiences used to narrative form is a problem not squarely faced. Is political cinema to be for an avant-garde or for a mass of people? Gerard Leblanc, editor of *Cinéthique*, insists that revolutionary film must align itself with people already in struggle and that new, politically correct film forms will emerge out of political struggle and not vice versa. Leblanc and *Cinéthique*, however, also reject traditional narrative film forms and traditional attempts to maintain an illusion of "that's how it really happened." Gerard Leblanc is also a professor at the politically active University of Vincennes, where he participated in a collective to make the film, *SOYONS TOUT* (ALL OF US). This was a film made by students about workers on strike which made no effort to hide the fact that these were students and not workers, and that the locale was a symbolic





COUP POUR COUP: Karmitz is at center, behind woman with children

factory, not a real one.

Of the film-makers aligned with the working class, the two most important directors are Chris Marker and Marin Karmitz. Unlike the situation in the United States, France has a long history of socialism, predating Marx, and the French worker generally has a better understanding of socialism and is more receptive to radical political parties. The two directors, Marker and Karmitz, differ according to that sector of the working class they choose to align themselves with, the two groups having widely different political lines. Chris Marker believes that cinema must have an effective liaison with working class militants. His film-making group, SLON [see "SLON: Working Class Cinema in France," last issue—ed.], works with militants of the CGT, the Communist trade union. In contrast, Marin Karmitz, along with the Maoists, believes that the CGT is dominated by revisionist ideology. He sees the union as pushing for higher salaries but as having abandoned all politically and socially revolutionary goals.

Unlike that of Godard and Gorin, Marin Karmitz's commitment to make proletarian cinema is also a commitment to teach workers how to make their own films about their own struggles. His film CAMARADES [see "Towards a Proletarian Cinema," *Cinéaste*, Vol. IV, No. 3—ed.] was the first in France after the uprisings in 1968 to have workers present their own image of themselves in a commercial 35mm film. Karmitz submitted CAMARADES to many intensive critiques by working class audiences who told him all the ways in which they found the film inaccurate. In general, they judged this treatment of a young worker's coming to political awareness as the work of an "outsider," traditional in form and not a complete and just representation of themselves. However, as one young worker said in an interview in *Jeune Cinema* (Feb. '72), "We were really very happy

that such a film just existed."

Karmitz's next film, COUP POUR COUP (BLOW FOR BLOW), is one of the few political films dealing with a French topic to have commercial success in France. It is the fictional reconstruction of various real strikes that occurred in 1968, here represented by women workers occupying a mill and garment factory where they sequester the boss. The protagonists are women workers, some of them young, some old, and there are no stars. It's rare to have women, especially in France, as heroines in films on some other basis than sophistication and sex. In this case the women workers are the film. A few professional actors play the "heavy" roles such as factory director, union boss, floor manager, etc. Before shooting started, the workers criticized Karmitz's script and after their first revision it was revised again on location. The cast improvised their own dialogue when they thought the script sounded unnatural. Some of the scenes were shot with videotape and replayed so the workers could judge whether the desired naturalness had been achieved.

The women in the cast had participated in various similar real strikes and they knew the problems working women would face in the long-term occupation of a factory. The mothers all had to face the problem of who would care for their children. The unions made no demands for child care and never fought to get women wages equal to men's. COUP POUR COUP shows the CGT as having no room at all for any feminist leadership, the one woman union representative being a well-dressed, pretty person in high heels who does nothing but echo the male head of the union local. Unsatisfactory as they are over a long term, wildcat strikes seem to be the only answer for women, and COUP POUR COUP prefigured the long Thionville strike in France, where the women had to conduct the strike on their own.



**COUP POUR COUP** opens on women sewing in an assembly line in a garment factory. The camera picks out faces of women on the line and then shows the ever-present efficiency expert checking how fast they work. The knowledge that these women are not actresses but really working women makes these early close-ups—of young and old faces alike—of special interest to the audience. One knows that theatrical films have not presented this image before. These women look beautiful precisely in their uniqueness, presented as themselves.

In the other section of the plant looms clack harshly with a noise that follows the women even as they go home. The sound track re-introduces this noise at various times, sometimes to show the intense mental fatigue workers on an assembly line suffer, later as an audio-motif to show the insistence of the women on strike.

The clack of the mills changes to the chatter of the women in the locker room on pay day, changing to go home and in a rush to get to the supermarket. From early in the film, there is an insistence that these women do double work—an eight hour day as factory worker and then all the late-afternoon and evening and early morning, too, as “homemaker.” As the shift goes off and they are paid, one woman rushes to the bus stop, having no time to converse a few minutes with her friends. She explains in voice-off that she has to catch the early bus so she can make it to the supermarket and then home. In the supermarket, she shops with one baby in the shopping cart and another toddler holding onto her hand. The loud clack of the looms continues on the sound track. This mother is too tired and too rushed to get her shopping done to even hear the conversation of her child, laughing and talking as he walks by her side. The scene changes to the back of an old flat where she is hauling now three children, one crying, and all her groceries up a flight of rickety stairs. Then she has dinner to prepare. Only after supper is there quiet, as she stands ironing baby clothes on the kitchen table, with the kids playing quietly near her on the kitchen floor. Suddenly the scene switches abruptly back to the factory, with the assembly line and all its noise. This whole sequence, set near the opening of the film, shows the daily routine of working mothers, and indicates why the occupation of a factory will be more difficult for them than it would be for men.

The image of children becomes a leitmotif for the film. After the women have started their strike and are occupying the factory, a sympathetic man—a fellow worker—comes to the gate to see what he can do to help. The woman who'd been shown earlier with her children in the supermarket gives the man her keys and asks him to take care of her children. As the women occupy the factory the first night, they build up a strike organization and also share a great deal of camaraderie. But they worry about their homes. The next day, they again gather by the gates under the sign defying the management and announcing to the world, “Factory occupied. The occupants are angry. **SECOND DAY.**” Coming up to the gates, hauling a baby buggy and two toddlers, is the young



**COUP POUR COUP**

man who'd offered to baby-sit. He says he just couldn't manage it. All the women on strike hoot and call him a coward. The babies are brought into the occupied mill and their mother takes them back into a floor manager's office as she tries to find a place for them to stay. Later on, the women turn this office into a nursery as more children are brought in. Humorously, the children are shown typically drawing on walls, making a mess, and needing baths and their diapers changed. In a scene critical of the union, the local union representative, a woman dressed up in a suit and high heels, comes in to complain about the mess; the women on shift in the nursery ask her to help but she refuses to do anything at all. Other scenes show children at strategy meetings and finally the older ones taking their places outside with strikers.

The issue of children in working mothers' lives is not the main point of the film—women's ability to conduct a strike, even to the point of imprisoning their boss, is. All these scenes with children, however, show in a cumulative way how the economic system fragments working mothers' lives. The capitalist system makes child care somehow different and separate from working in a factory. The reason corporations do not want to bring a woman's two labors together is that they would then have to admit that child care is part of a woman's real work and that mothers should have both facilities and equal pay for this labor that they now do for free.



Child care as unpaid labor is specifically a woman's problem, not a man's, and COUP POUR COUP shows very clearly that working women get no help from unions in this regard. The women are not only oppressed by factory bosses but must also reject the union since it refuses to recognize their needs. And even on the level of comradeship, a fellow male worker wouldn't handle the same burden of child care that was standard for the women. The male head of the union local, dressed nicely in a suit and tie, comes out to talk to these women, to call them his "comrades," and to try to get them to accept a settlement that would let the factory fire the militants. We see him on the phone talking to a higher union official—also male. This one then phones what must be a high-ranking official of the Communist Party—all three looking very comfortably middle class and handsomely masculine. "Keep on negotiating," the top official says to the union boss. "How would it look in your union to have a factory occupied by women? Negotiate. Later on you can start separating the healthy elements from the sick."

Needless to say, COUP POUR COUP was offensive to the unions. It does not present all the oppressors as men, however, for the time-and-motion controller is a woman, as is one of the local union heads. In the main body of the film, however, women, portrayed by real workers, find themselves capable of carrying on their own strike. The camera style and sound track, as well as the incident itself, dignifies the role of the working woman, who is usually underpaid and least respected by management and union alike. These women's faces are seen as beautiful. Their dialogue is caught naturally; their voices are never ponderous but laughing and joking, even during tense moments of the strike.

At the end of the film, the names of everyone who worked on the film appear in alphabetical order, their task on the film following their name. The credits last about ten minutes and labels like "worker," "cinéaste," "painter," "musician," "student," "teacher" and "high school student" are used. But most of the names are followed by the label "ouvrière"—"woman worker." The audience found this list of participants as moving as the film itself and stayed through to the end to applaud even though they didn't know the individual participants at all.

COUP POUR COUP had a good run in the theatres in Paris' Latin Quarter but has been the subject of controversy for French radicals and conservatives alike. Film journals here criticized it for being a film of revolt and not of revolution. They reject its politics of spontaneity. COUP POUR COUP was denounced by an Establishment film critic in *Le Monde*, who wrote that it was inciting workers to crimes, to the sequestering of bosses (punishable by article 341 of the penal code) and that the film was a "particularly exasperating provocation." But as Gerard Leblanc pointed out in the April *Ecran 72*, radical cinéastes feel that since COUP POUR COUP easily got past France's political censors, it could not be that dangerous; it is noteworthy, in this context, that there are some forty French films made by militants both before and after May '68 that have not

yet been able to get clearance even for the non-commercial circuit. When talking about political films in France, one must consider the political work that could be done with all those films made but never publicly seen.

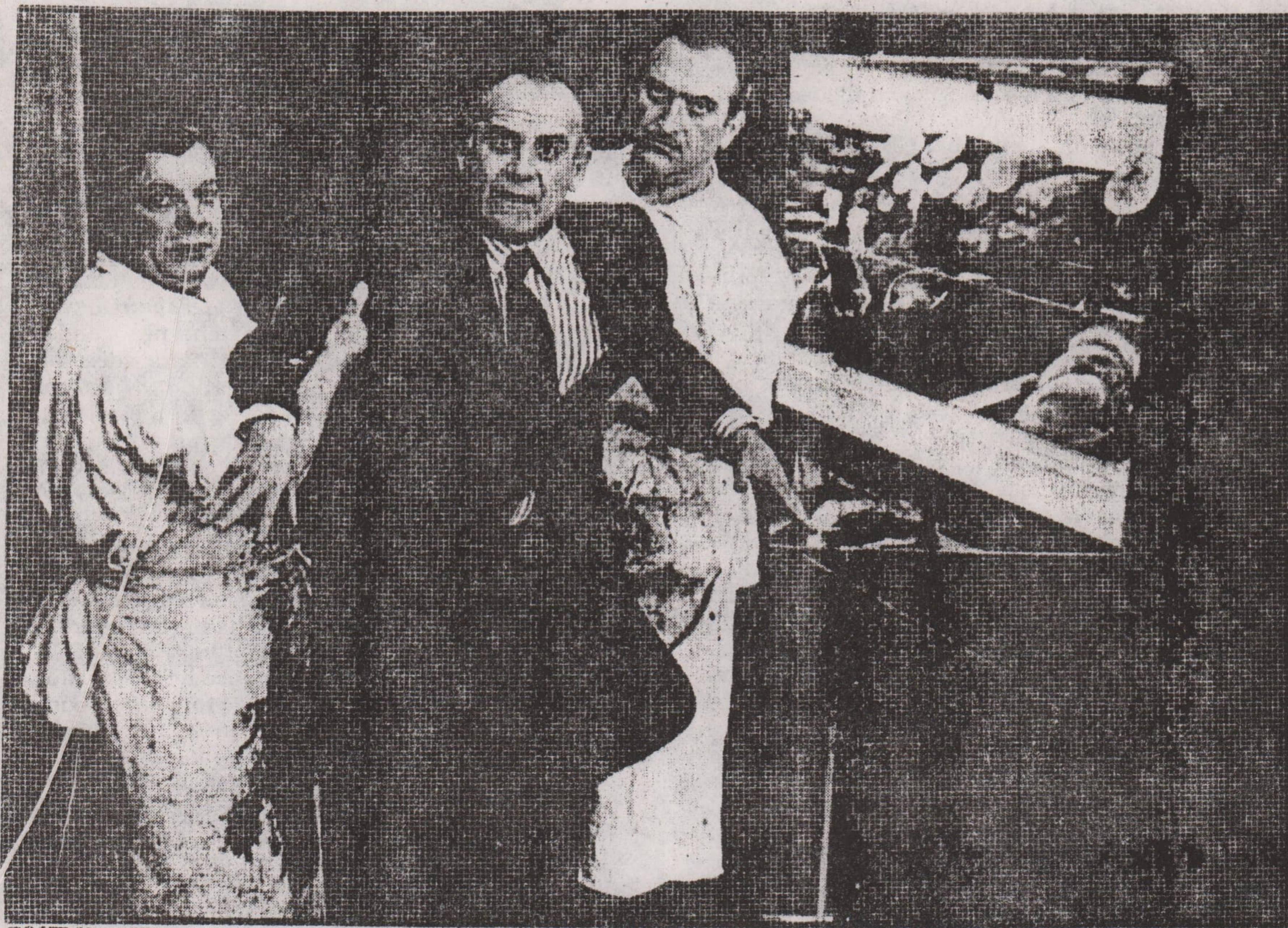
The problem of political censorship in France is a serious one. Political film-makers have to be circumspect in order to get a visa from the French censors and, thus, French audiences are really not used to seeing political critiques of their own country. Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, now making films in their own names and no longer as the Dziga Vertov group, get around this problem by their non-realist style, by not referring to actual figures in power, which would make the censors uncomfortable. Their latest film, TOUT VA BIEN (EVERYTHING'S OK), cleverly makes its political points by showing the fictional sequestration of a factory boss. Godard and Gorin do not intend to show "how it really was"—as in COUP POUR COUP—but rather they want to present a political analysis of where the bourgeoisie in France is at now as well as describe the present situation of French intellectuals who can remember how "revolutionary" they felt in 1968.

TOUT VA BIEN was made with Paramount Pictures' money on the basis of the film's having two name stars, Jane Fonda and Yves Montand. The film was, of course, finally rejected by Paramount even though it is an attempt by Godard and Gorin to speak more directly to a bourgeois audience. It is not as hard to understand as, say, VENT D'EST (WIND FROM THE EAST), but Gorin has said it was made to make French liberals squirm. TOUT VA BIEN not only has a comprehensible narrative but includes scenes and sounds familiar to the middle class.

The film features Jane Fonda as an American journalist and Yves Montand as her husband, a maker of advertising films. They visit the imprisoned director of a meat packing plant so that Fonda can get an interview with him about his being locked in his office by his workers. Godard films the plant, the Salumi meat company, with long tracking shots back and forth across a set that is supposed to be a cutaway view of the various rooms on the plant's top and bottom floors. He and Gorin make no effort to present the workers or the plant realistically. The set is painted bright red and blue and the workers are dressed in white aprons stained with the familiar Godardian ketchup-color blood. Of course, they use aprons while meat-packing but Godard also makes the blood stains a symbol of their oppression.

The local union representative, a laughable little fat man, has one long speech which he reads facing the camera, which also catches a photo of Salumi meat products and two uncomprehending fellow workers in the background. According to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Godard and Gorin took this speech directly from the CGT's union magazine, *La vie ouvrière* (*The Worker's Life*). To Godard and Gorin, unions simply function as a different way of controlling the work force. Currently in France, the Maoists are waging their strongest battle against the unions and the Communist Party, which they see as reformist and





TOUT VA BIEN

never revolutionary. As also shown in *COUP POUR COUP*, *TOUT VA BIEN* demonstrates how merely economic demands on the part of the unions leads them into negotiating and settling for higher wages, while they capitulate on other demands such as worker control or the reinstatement of militants who have been fired. These two films, plus the film of the Vincennes collective, *SOYONS TOUT*, and the Italian film, *THE WORKING CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN*, all show militant workers opposing the unions and being forced to resort to wildcat strikes. It is interesting to note that this latter Italian film strikes French radical film critics as precisely reformist and bourgeois, since it shows an individual worker trapped in a vicious cycle with no hope of breaking out of the situation by uniting with his peers.

In *TOUT VA BIEN* one of the most interesting things is the anti-naturalist effect of the long set speeches, not delivered naturalistically but spoken by people who are obviously acting, and frequently shot in one long take with the actor speaking directly to the camera. Godard and Gorin make the director of the Salumi meat plant an Italian, by implication a condemnation of Common Market capitalism which has increased the exploitation of European labor. This imprisoned factory boss—as interviewed by Jane Fonda—gives a long speech, the text of which *Cahiers du Cinéma* says comes from a tract entitled *Long Live*

*the Consumer Society*, written by M. Saint-Geours. Gorin said that he and Godard see no need to be creative and so take texts that already exist. It is a humorous parody of the vocabulary of the Establishment mentality and in intent it is similar to the speech of the BBC broadcaster in *BRITISH SOUNDS* (released in the U.S. as *SEE YOU AT MAO*). The boss' speech shows how educated European businessmen have come to terms with Marx (certainly not true of their peers in the U.S.). As the manager explains to Fonda and Montand why the economy is best as it is now, he finds a place for Marx within his intellectual rationalization. The class struggle is passé, he says; Marx belonged to the 19th Century and the word revolution has no sense now. Today, he declares, we have instead "the collaboration of the classes in order to find permanent material progress." And this progress comes not through struggle but by equilibrium, adaptation and dialogue. An American equivalent of this kind of thinking would be that of John Kenneth Galbraith of the McGovern brain trust, whose words echo these same concepts about class struggle and revolution being passé.

In *TOUT VA BIEN*, Godard and Gorin want to give a schema of French society as it is, not as it should be in some idealistic future. Thus, the workers are not given truly revolutionary dialogue either. The young militant telling Jane Fonda what the workers



are fighting for recites an extract from the Maoist review, *La Cause du Peuple*. In the spectrum of the French anti-CP Left, *La Cause du Peuple* is a Maoist-populist group advocating spontaneous revolts and wildcat strikes. Godard and Gorin present the militant workers sympathetically in *TOUT VA BIEN*, but only up to a certain point. The film shows the futility of a politics of mere spontaneous revolt and sees that revolution is a long way off. The film journals *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* also condemn the politics—or lack of politics—of “spontanéisme,” yet they stand in contrast to Godard and Gorin in that they look for some kind of political organization that will lead to the seizure of power.

The critique of spontaneous demonstrations and of short-term political planning is also an implicit critique of the kind of radical activity prevalent in the U.S.—of anti-war demonstrations, for example. But the furor over revisionism and “spontanéisme” in radical French cinema circles must be understood in terms of French politics. In 1945, after the war, later during the Algerian crisis, and then in the 1968 student uprisings, the radical Left felt it almost had enough power to bring off a socialist revolution. In 1945, the Communists had almost 50% of the vote but the conservative power blocs united against them. During the Algerian crisis, before de Gaulle came to power, they had France in a state of chaos by means of general strikes. In 1968, again revolution was in sight, but in addition to the unity of the bourgeoisie against the students, the Communists turned against them as well. However, with a long history of socialism and a recent history of near-successes, the Left in France—unlike the Left in the U.S.—can demand a powerful radical political organization that aims at the seizure of power. Much has been lost by the Left, however, since 1968, and Godard and Gorin in *TOUT VA BIEN* are basically asking French intellectuals—“1968–1972: Where are you now?”

Although they do not think demonstrations and revolts sufficient, Godard and Gorin in *TOUT VA BIEN* present these revolts in France sympathetically. For example, a voice-off reads a list of all the famous student revolts while the camera shows a line of militant students being rounded up by the police. American viewers will be reminded of Columbia, Berkeley, San Francisco State, Kent State, etc. In addition, *TOUT VA BIEN*'s most lighthearted sequence is of an American-style guerrilla theater group creating havoc in a supermarket and after seeing this sequence, one cannot go into a Prixunic, a Monoprix, or a Uniprix, without chuckling and thinking of the filmic event.

In this sequence, Jane Fonda is trying to prepare news broadcasts of political relevance in France, but on a level that she knows something about personally. So she goes to a supermarket to do an article on consumerism. Consumerism is a later phenomenon in Europe than in the U.S. Postwar European economy centered on reconstruction whereas the American economy transferred from wartime to a cold war and consumer economy. Europeans resent what they consider the Americanization of their everyday life—advertising, huge supermarkets, mass-produced

and uniform goods. They see supermarkets as driving out small businesses and signaling the end of fine craftsmanship, the end of the fine variety of fruits and vegetables that now can be bought in open-air markets on the street. Yet an increasingly corporate-controlled consumer economy is a logical development of the way the European economy is going and although people resent the loss of individuality, they want the cheap durable goods available from supermarkets or a better apartment in a huge suburban housing project. In this respect, the working class is doubly exploited. They must shop at supermarkets which are open later and have cheaper goods. American style advertising gives a false idea of material progress and the accumulation of things becomes what a worker can hope for in a capitalist economy, rather than real power over production or in the state. Godard has taken up this subject in several films. His *DEUX OU TROIS CHOSES QUE JE SAIS D'ELLE* (TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER) used the metaphor of prostitution to define what has happened to the working class in Paris as they have been moved out to a “better life” in huge housing projects in the suburbs. And the Dziga Vertov group's film, *PRAVDA*, defined exactly the same thing happening in Czechoslovakia, where the worker is led to accept consumerism as a goal, rather than control over economy, politics, and culture.

The sequence in the supermarket in *TOUT VA BIEN* opens with long tracking shots back and forth on customers checking out carts heaped full of goods, the name brands standing out distinctly. Godard and Gorin significantly include a lot of black customers buying things to show them equally exploited by consumerism. Two sounds dominate—the cash register and a set of chimes. As the cashiers are checking all these people out, a group of students come in to organize a guerrilla demonstration. They hassle a salesman selling the “great classics” by pointing out the lies in his books. They fill up carts with everything in sight and persuade the customers checking things out to take the items back from the cashiers, refill their carts, and join in the revolt. The sound of cash registers stops. Then the police come in and beat people up. In a witty visual aside, however, at the end of one long pan, the camera catches a cop snatching a garment off a rack, a little something he'll take home for himself.

By presenting the kinds of demonstrations actually happening in France—lock-ins, student revolts, and guerrilla theatre—Godard and Gorin show where French radicals are at. And it's a rather long way down from 1968. Unlike Godard's previous militant films, *TOUT VA BIEN* treats the position of the intellectual critically, but sympathetically. Most important are the long speeches given to Fonda and Montand. Montand, for example, explains how during the New Wave he'd thought of himself as a movie director who could create something new, but now he has come to give up any idea of himself as an artist. He sees that he is merely a worker making advertising films within the system that he hates. With the knowledge of themselves as workers, just as exploited



by the system as the lower classes, Montand and Fonda drop the notion of themselves as unique individuals who are in the special position of being able to be "creative." They also see that there is no such thing as being able to establish a sound emotional and sexual relationship in private. Jane Fonda realizes that Yves Montand has used the words "you" and "I" to talk about them at work but that "we" has meant only them together alone, i.e., in bed. "I need to have an image of us," Fonda says, "that includes both us at work and also that which you think about when you think of us—namely, my hand on your penis."

As the film ends with the two trying to begin a reconciliation, the voice-off sums up: "France 1972. They've begun to think historically. Each of us is his own historian." Then, as the camera tracks down long strips of barren urban land, the sound track plays a popular French song about sunshine. The words flash on the screen: "MOI-TOI" ("ME-YOU"), and the narrator repeats what the militant worker had said to Jane Fonda during the strike, "You don't have to be a leftist to think like this." Once again the visuals repeat: "MOI-TOI. FRANCE 1968/1972," and the film ends on the tracking shot of barren urban land.

The comparison of 1968 and 1972 is sobering and perhaps the point most pertinent for American audiences who—rather than think of dates—would

think of places of the last decade: Selma, Berkeley, Columbia, Kent State, Jackson State, the 1968 Democratic Convention, the March on the Pentagon, etc. Godard and Gorin show their "stars" coming to a painful understanding of where they are now compared to where they were. Although economically comfortable, Yves Montand is just as alienated in his job as are the production line workers. Urged to finish a job faster, he angrily says he can only work so fast. For a person in the "middle class," for the professional who must still work in order to pay the rent, eat, and get medical care, this understanding is a big step from identification with the owners, the controllers. Similarly, after having the reasons for the lock-in explained to her by the workers and understanding their conditions, Jane Fonda finds she cannot continue her formerly breezy and self-confident radio reports to America. She sees things are harder to describe, that glibness was a cosmetic for reality. This matches her questioning of her marriage: the answers are not as easy as before. Thus Godard and Gorin present no answers, not even a program. They do not find revolution just around the corner, nor inevitable. *TOUT VA BIEN* seems to say that wildcat strikes or the exploration of psychological oppression are symptoms of change, rather than solutions in themselves, but they are the beginning.

## NUMERO DEUX

### Numéro Deux

If *Numéro Deux* is the most important film Jean-Luc Godard in nearly a decade—specifically, since *2 ou 3 Choses que je sais d'elle*—should explain at the outset what gives the films privileged places within his oeuvre. Focusing in 35mm and wide screen on a fictional working-class family, both are essentially built up in issues of representation, and neither all itself to any organized political faction or to any links with the Dziga-Vertov Group and Jean-Pierre Gorin. The point of this distinction is that Godard's pre-eminence has always stemmed directly from his grasp of the problem of representation—a line of inquiry leading from the jump-cuts of *Breathless* to the fragmented double-images of *Numéro Deux*—a fact that his political commitments have always been inscribed within this concern; it is highly debatable whether he has contributed anything of value to political thought apart from this context. Yet broadly speaking, the increasing emphasis in his work after *2 ou 3 Choses*—in *La Chinoise*, *Weekend*, *1 + 1*, *Le Gai Savoir* and all the subsequent ventures—has until now been more on the 'signified' (subject) and less on the 'signifier' (manner of representation), away from investigation and towards didacticism.

The balance, to be sure, has usually been a delicate one, and one could argue that a reversal of emphasis in *2 ou 3 Choses* periodically threate

to annihilate the social subject and substitute Godard's questioning consciousness as the focal point. But here at least the meaning of Godard's narration is wholly dependent upon the accompanying images and sounds, while works as diverse as *Weekend*, *Le Gai Savoir*, *Vent d'est* and *Tout va bien*, the central verbal discourses tend to take on a relative autonomy to a certain extent, one can 'explain' these films simply by quoting from them.

In *Numéro Deux*, however, it is impossible to disengage the verbal elements from the contexts and retain any grasp of their assigned meanings—not only because much of the verbiage is unusually obscure, particularly in isolation from the other elements, but more centrally because the integrity of the image is challenged more basically here than before, thereby assigning the words a much more fluctuating and unstable role. Consider just a few of the strategies at work:

(1) The opening shot: on the left, a square of flickering red TV static; on the right, another square, more vertical, framing part of a man's face, later replaced by a comparable view of a woman's face. (They are the two leading characters' actors: Pierre Oudry and Sandrine Balthista.) Between the squares, and again in the surrounding blackness, the words MON, TOI, and SON in a vertical column; opposite the latter word is IMAGE, and to the right of IMAGE, SO again—until the second SON is covered by



widening of the right square, revealing the rest of Pierre's face, before receding again. Then IMAGE and SON flash on and off like neon signs, so that SON becomes alternately a personal pronoun ('his/her') and 'sound', depending upon which pair of words it attaches itself to. All these shifting co-ordinates help to establish an unsteady composite image whose 'meanings' are in a state of perpetual flux.

(2) Early in the film, Godard appears in his Grenoble studio—a full 35mm image—and delivers a monologue, standing on the right in profile and semi-darkness beside a TV screen which shows him more legibly head on. Shortly before the end, he reappears in the studio, sitting at a tape deck and set of sound controls on the left, while Sandrine continues an off-screen monologue; then she appears silently on a TV screen, overhead and further to the left, speaking but not in synch with her monologue; on the right, on the other side of Godard, her laughter Vanessa appears on another TV screen, and his gaze is diverted in her direction.

(3) More often, we are simply presented with two images at once against a black background—either adjacent TV-like squares of varying sizes or one image superimposed over another within a single square. On certain occasions, the latter technique permits an innovative use of simultaneous reverse angles, so that we see Sandrine, for instance, turned away from the camera in a long shot that is overlapped by a negative close-up of her looking towards another camera. Generally speaking, the notion of reverse-angles is central to Godard's ethical position: since Sandrine and her family primarily view the world outside (us) through a TV screen—and significantly, the only time we see them all in one frame is when they're grouped around an off-screen set—the tactics of his method are to reverse this procedure.

(4) The sound-mixing is comparably disruptive, with various verbal and non-verbal tracks repeatedly overtaking, supplanting, interrupting and contesting one another; and much as the visual duplications refer back to TV, the aural separations are explicitly connected to the use of earphones by various members of the family, with songs by Léo Ferré playing an especially important role... At no point do these devices become programmatic, because their functions shift at every turn, with duplications, variations and contrasts assuming fresh roles of signification in relation to the overall complex of elements.

'They say "Once upon a time,"' Sandrine remarks at one point. 'Why not "Twice upon a

time"?' Dualisms of various sorts—sound and image, documentary and fiction, male and female, 'chance' and 'necessity'—have always been essential to Godard, but here he takes the process a crucial step further. With one image and soundtrack to present or interrogate, he can attack his material like a theorem: one image of a person is an emblem, a sign, a signifier, an arbitrary block of space and time ('chance') which automatically becomes a postulate ('necessity'). But two contrary images of the same person at the same time—a procedure already familiar in Cubism—undermines the status of each as a premise. Thus with the absence of any fixed reference point or narrative guide, everything is thrown open to question, including the questions themselves, creating a perpetual passage into and out of meanings that is kept consistently interesting by Godard's wealth of invention. It is only during two extended monologues by the grandfather, when sound and image become momentarily singular, that the film threatens to grind to a halt.

I have deliberately postponed a discussion of the film's 'subject matter' in order to establish first the peculiar conditions under which this material is approached. A return to *2 ou 3 Choses* may serve as a helpful contrast: while the earlier film has a plot (however putative), a paraphrasable theme and a carefully defined trajectory and fictional time-span, the new film offers no such comforts or signposts. All the action is centred round the family flat (even the few exteriors seem to be shot from windows), and the framing is often 'intimate' to the point of ellipsis, with actors and rooms usually caught only in fragments. On the other hand, considerable stress is placed on certain factors that the former film rigorously excluded—above all, the body and its functions. Much is made of Pierre's impotence and Sandrine's constipation, and all three of the family's generations are presented in terms of their sexuality. If the overall ambience of this emphasis often seems as puritanical as the reticence of earlier Godard, the intention is nevertheless clear: to represent such subjects as the everyday matters they are, without any trappings of conventional eroticism, and to examine the points of contact between these concerns and 'political' relationships within and outside the family unit.

Thus while Sandrine remarks off-screen, 'Not a film of the left or right, but a film before and behind—before is children, behind is government,' the screen shows Vanessa's face superimposed over an image of intercourse,

Pierre entering Sandrine from behind. Clearly this can't be read as a simple joke or statement of equivalences, but several potential 'cells' of meaning interact: Pierre governs Sandrine, the government 'screws' them both, a child derives from their sex together; only later does this juxtaposition become justified in narrative terms, when we're told that Vanessa witnessed their intercourse, so that in a repeat of this shot we read the close-up as a reverse-angle. Elsewhere, the couple give a sex lesson to Vanessa and her brother Nicolas, and when Pierre compares their organs to lips and their intercourse to talking, Vanessa protests that the act is mute—recalling the metaphors of sex and language in Godard's brilliant (and neglected) short *Anticipation*, which also contested the assurances of a single integral image by situating this postulate in the realm of Utopia.

Not incidentally, it is worth noting that in many scenes, sexual and otherwise, a warmth between the characters is conveyed that has been conspicuously absent from Godard's other work over the past decade. More characteristically, the aim may be 'scientific' but the methods are generally 'poetic' and intuitive, usually reaching for the evocative metaphor rather than the precise one. In another sex scene Sandrine sits on Pierre's chest, facing away from both him and the camera while complaining about what she can't see. 'My mouth sees for you,' Pierre says, and when she asks him what he sees, he begins, 'Your body is like a river...'

A self-parody of the Godard method? Perhaps; and there are many such moments. But even here, the notion of one image impinging upon another (in this case, an unseen reverse-angle) remains essential. And puns and metaphors play an analogous role throughout. The question is raised whether Sandrine is a factory or a landscape—an electrical factory with charges and discharges, producing babies and meals, or a spectacle to look at, a part of society? When you go to a film, she declares, 'you sell out to the producer. Turn on the television and you become an accomplice... You're looking for news about yourself when what you see is news about others.'

Which is *Numéro Deux*? Sandrine delivers these words on a TV screen being watched by Godard; does that make him an accomplice? A stand-in for neither the characters nor the spectators but a mediator between these distant worlds, he occupies a distinct darkness of his own—an extension of the blackness surrounding TV screens and cinema screen alike, contiguous with both, identical to neither. All three forms of darkness suggest a womb in which meanings are spawned. 'Before I was born, I was dead,' Vanessa copies on a blackboard. 'Do all little girls have holes?' she asks her mother while taking a bath. 'Is that where memories come out?' Simultaneously destructive and constructive in its flight back to zero, *Numéro Deux* situates the loss of memory and the birth of signification on the same dark and slippery but fertile terrain—a factory-landscape where anything becomes possible.



The theoretical legacy of Dziga Vertov, one of the originators of Soviet documentary cinema, still remains unexplored. This can be explained partially by the silence surrounding his name in Soviet cinema criticism during the second half of his life, from the thirties onwards. In spite of this, Vertov's ideas and discoveries in the theory of cinematography greatly influenced the development of cinema throughout the world.

Vertov's theory of 'cine-eye', his new camera techniques, 'life taken by surprise' method (ie 'candid camera')<sup>1</sup> and his theory of montage were later taken over both by documentary and feature film directors. Unfortunately, even in the twenties, many of his ideas spread without his name being associated with them.

Dziga Vertov (Denis Arkadjevich Kaufman, 1896-1954) was born in Bialystok, Poland. His father was a librarian. Vertov attended a Music Conservatory and later was a student in an Institute of Psychiatry and at Moscow University. As a child he loved literature and wrote adventure novels, sketches and poetry. Vertov dates his fascination with cinema from his early youth when he first thought of the 'possibility of documenting sounds' or 'depicting in words and letters the noise of a waterfall, the sounds of a sawmill and so on'.<sup>2</sup>

From documenting sounds to documenting life – this was the ambition that led him to cinema.

'One day in spring 1918 – return from a station. In my ears there persisted the gasps and puffing of a departing train. . . . Somebody curses. . . . A kiss. . . . Somebody exclaims. . . . Laughter, a whistle, voices, the station bell, the puffing of a steam engine. . . . Whispers, exclamations, farewells. . . . And walking away I thought: it is necessary to find a machine which will not just describe but register, photograph these sounds. Otherwise one cannot organise or assemble them. They fly as time flies. Perhaps a camera? To record the visual. To organise not the audible world but the visible world? Is that the answer? And at this moment, a meeting with Mikhail Koltzov who offered a job in the cinema'.<sup>3</sup>

Together with the journalist and writer Mikhail Koltzov, Vertov made documentary films of the Civil War, directing weekly newsreels. He also directed a series of war documentaries: *Battle for Tsaritsyn*, *The Anniversary of the Revolution*, *Mironov's Trial* and others. At the beginning of 1920 Vertov went with Kalinin to the south-east front on VTsIK's<sup>4</sup> agit-train. The film footage from this

journey formed the basic material for two full-length films, *Agit-train of VTsIK* and *The History of the Civil War*.

From 1922 onwards Vertov directed regular newsreels called *Kinopravda* (cine-truth). In these he incorporated his new concept of the way in which news should be treated. In an article 'Love for the Living Man', which was published posthumously, he described how this new type of agit cine-periodical was created:

You see, this newsreel was special – it was always moving, it changed from issue to issue. Each *Kinopravda* was different from the previous one. The system of editing changed. The approach to the process of filming changed. The character of the captions and the way in which they were used changed. *Kinopravda* tried to tell the truth using cinematographic means of expression. Slowly but surely the alphabet of film-language was built up in this unusual laboratory. . . . Every day one had to invent something new. There was no-one to learn from. We were exploring unknown ground. Inventing and experimenting, we wrote leading articles, feuilletons, cine-sketches and cine-poems with our film shots. We tried in every way to justify Lenin's faith in documentary cinema: 'The production of new films which are permeated with communist ideas and reflect Soviet reality must begin with making documentaries'.<sup>5</sup>

From then on a group of pupils and followers surrounded Vertov. They called themselves 'Cine-eye'. They shot films, dividing the subject into separate thematic sequences. To them this was 'raw material', which would acquire cinematographic significance in the process of editing.

Vertov's future works form part of the incessant search by Russian artists of the 'twenties for new communist aesthetics. Vertov created new genres of poetic documentary cinema. The basic aim of his films was not only to depict current events in an informative and chronological manner, but, by splicing documentary material, to achieve an association of ideas. In this way he created synthesised, dynamic, cinematographic images which expressed specific social ideas or themes.

Vertov's theory of documentary cinema developed in close association with the political and aesthetic views of Lef, the revolutionary wing of Russian Futurism, led by Mayakovsky. Dziga Vertov belonged to a group of rebellious avant-garde artists who wanted to put their work at the service of the revolution. With Lef, he believed that 'art is not a mirror which reflects the historical struggle, but a weapon of that struggle'.<sup>6</sup> This led to Lef's theory of the utilitarian function of art, and the duty of art to fulfil social demands. The awareness that new social situations require new forms of expression made them realise that they had to reappraise their aesthetic values.

Lefists shared the belief of the proletarian writers' that their

DZIGA VERTOV

Masha Enzensberger



'creative work should be aimed at forming the psychology and consciousness of their readers towards the communist tasks of the proletariat'.<sup>8</sup> But they gave it a different interpretation. Unlike the supporters of gradual evolution in the arts, and unlike the proletarian writers, who called for learning from the classics and profound psychological insights in the creation of 'the living man', the Futurists and Lefists followed Mayakovsky's idea of a third revolution – a revolution of the spirit, ie revolution in art itself.<sup>9</sup> Lefists rejected all art of the past because they believed it was born of aristocratic and bourgeois culture and ideology. According to them classical literature diverts the reader from essential tasks of reality, and provides them with an escape into sterile dreams and superfluous psychological and spiritual experience, and for this very reason it was unsuitable as an efficient weapon in the hands of the proletariat. Instead of manufacturing 'aesthetic hashish', as they called it, they demanded that the centre of literary attention be switched from human emotions to the organisation of society, and thus they insisted on a transfer from literature of the imagination to literature of fact and direct agitation. Thus the main point of disagreement in their controversy with the proletarian writers was the concept of 'how', 'by what means' art should 'form the psychology and consciousness of their readers directed towards the communist tasks of the proletariat'.<sup>10</sup>

The specialists will invent a means of getting imaginative exoticism from Party history material, or treat it in say, ancient Roman or Babylonian tones, or even in the Sergievo-suburbs-icon painting style and everyone will feel that art is serving revolutionary construction (well of course, look at the themes, incidents, characters), while in reality art will be serving a philistine escapism from the revolution.<sup>11</sup>

In their drive to create a new revolutionary art Lefists rejected the impotent pre-war aesthetics, which were appropriate only to serve the corresponding pre-war social purposes. For an innovation in form appropriate to the tasks of socialist construction Tretyakov dismissed the traditionalists' formula 'form/content', 'what/how', since 'the forced pedalling of the "primacy of content" (ie of a completely indeterminate and undifferential phenomenon) was in fact realised in a deterioration in form. The "how" flew up the chimney'.<sup>12</sup> In its place Tretyakov put forward the Lef formula 'material-purpose-form/thing' and 'activation of each part separately'. The new socialist reality required 'an orientation towards the material, a focus on material in its most raw form – the memoir, the diary, sketch, article, outline'.<sup>13</sup> But by itself raw material can only serve an informative purpose. To make it the mouthpiece of new social and political ideas, ie agitation, it is essential to work out new formal devices to create 'an aggressive class-active art', 'art/life-building, art/activisor, art/agit'.

With this as their aesthetic credo – the fixation of fact and agitation – Lef put the main emphasis in the cinema on the role of the documentary, ie pragmatically orientated, topical agit films, as opposed to so called 'entertainment' films or 'cinematic belle-lettres'.

Dziga Vertov started his work in the cinema by declaring war on feature films – 'a herd of old-clothesmen, adept at selling their rags':

WE hereby announce that old films, romanticist, theatricalised, and such like films are leprous.

Do not go near them!

Do not touch them with your eyes!

Beware – danger!

Infectious.

WE affirm the future of cinema by rejecting its present.<sup>14</sup>

Vertov made this statement in the first public announcement of his programme, the manifesto 'WE', which was published in 1922 in *Kinofot*, the magazine edited by the theoretician of Constructivism, A. Gan. Both the essence and the formulation of this manifesto are reminiscent of the early declarations of the Futurists. Vertov himself said that the manifesto was a re-statement of ideas he had already expressed in 1919 in the *Manifesto on the Disarmament of Theatrical Cinematography*.

Soviet cinema critics usually interpreted Vertov's total rejection of 'acted' films<sup>15</sup> as the protest of a socially-conscious, communist artist against the domination of bourgeois melodrama and American Westerns and thrillers on the Soviet screen. Doubtless this was the position in Soviet cinema at the beginning of the 'twenties. In the period of NEP<sup>16</sup> commercial cinema immediately became more active and private cinemas opened which wanted to attract the public only for the sake of profit. As a result of their efforts 'the magnanimous image of the American millionaire-hero glimmered in the stern hearts of the Russian proletariat'.<sup>17</sup> Left-wing artists understood this to be the intensification of the class struggle on the ideological front. This issue evoked a sharp protest from those who worked in both feature and documentary films. A resolution which included this matter was taken at the 12th Congress of the RCP (B) in April, 1923:

During the new economic policy the number of cinemas, the films shown in them and the size of audience grew extensively. Since either old Russian films or films of West European production are shown, the cinema in actual fact propagates bourgeois influence and tends to demoralise the working masses.<sup>18</sup>

Even after this resolution most of the money allotted to cinema-



tography was spent on making feature films. Documentary cinema was left a purely informative function, or had a subsidiary role in popularising various fields of knowledge.

Soviet documentary film had to wage a long struggle for the right to an independent existence and for the recognition of the intrinsic artistic value of its methods. Clearly in the 'twenties Vertov's rejection of acted films cannot be explained simply by disgust at the trite and the empty. After all, at this time the best films of Soviet directors such as Eisenstein, Kuleshov, Pudovkin and Dovzhenko were being released. In fact, Vertov directed his most violent attacks of that period at the so-called 'intermediate trends' in cinematography, which combined both feature and documentary techniques. Vertov included Sergei Eisenstein's works in this category. He believed that such 'surrogates', 'acted films in documentary trousers', as he called them, constituted the gravest danger to the 'purity of "Cine-eye"'. One ought to look for an explanation of Vertov's rejection of 'acted' cinema in two closely interwoven directions. He fought for the creation of a truly militant and revolutionary cinematic art which would 'explore and scrutinise reality with a film camera':

Our immediate task is to see and hear life, to note its convolutions and its breaks, to catch the crackle of the old bones of life under the press of the Revolution, to watch the young Soviet organism growing, to fix and organise the separate typical phenomena of life in a whole, in essence and in conclusion.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, Vertov committed himself to work out the specific characteristics of cinema as a new medium, possessing its own unique means of expression and sources of influence on the viewer which are present only in cinema and in no other art. 'Everyone who lives his art searches for the essence of its techniques',<sup>20</sup> Vertov wrote in 1922. The primary aim of his work was the theoretical analysis and implementation of the most effective means of achieving an impact on a new audience, an audience produced by the revolution.

Reminiscing about his journey with the VTsIK train, Vertov described the reaction of an unsophisticated audience to the agit-material imposed on them:

Not only the painted-up Cossacks depicted on the sides of the train were called 'actors' by the peasants – so were the horses, if only because they were incorrectly shod in the drawing. The more remote the place, the less the peasants tried to grasp the overtly-agit meaning of the drawings. They examined each drawing carefully and each figure separately. Whenever I asked them whether they liked the drawings they would answer: 'We don't know, we are ignorant folk, illiterate'. This, however,

does not prevent the peasants, when talking to one another, from laughing at the horse 'actors' unequivocally.

#### *A Film-Show in a Village*

1920. I am a director of a cinema train. We give a performance in a remote station. There is a drama on the screen – Reds and Whites. The Whites drink, dance and kiss their half-dressed women. When they take a break they shoot Red prisoners. The Reds are underground, they are at the front. The Reds fight, conquer, and take all the drunken Whites and their women as prisoners.

The content is all right, otherwise why would they release dramas of the same pattern for the fifth year running? The audience are illiterate or barely literate peasants. They cannot read the titles. They cannot grasp the meaning of the film. They examine separate shots like the pictures on the painted train. Indifference and disbelief. This still unspoilt audience does not understand the conventions of theatricality. 'The madam' remains the madam for them, no matter what peasant clothes she may be shown in. These people are seeing the cinema screen for the first or second time, they still don't understand the taste of 'cine-spirits', and when real peasants appear on the screen after the 'sugary actors' of the drama, they all liven up and try to look behind the screen. A real tractor about which they know only by hearsay crosses the field and ploughs it in a few seconds before the audience's eyes. Chatter, shouts, questions. 'The actors' are forgotten. Now there are real things and people on the screen. There is not a single false theatrical movement to unmask the screen, to remove the peasant's trust. This sharp boundary between the reception of drama and documentary was noticeable whenever a first, second or third film was being shown – everywhere where poison had not yet penetrated deeply, where a demand for the venomous sweetness of fictional drama made up of kisses, sighs and killing had not yet been created.

#### *'Petrushka' or Life*

This was at the time when only the outlines of the movement of 'Cine-eye' were drawn, when we had to decide whether we should keep up with feature cinema, and produce 'cinematic spirits' together with the rest of the cinema director's 'brotherhood' – a profitable business and permitted by law – or whether we should declare war on feature films and begin to construct cinematography anew. 'Petrushka' or life?, we asked audiences. 'Petrushka', the hopelessly infected answered. 'We know about life already – we don't need life. Hide life, boring life from us'. 'Life', those who were not hopelessly infected and those who were not at all infected answered. 'We don't



know life. We haven't seen life, we've seen our village and ten  
verst around. Show us life'.<sup>21</sup>

Thus Vertov believed that one should divide the problem of influencing the viewer into two parts: in the first place, what kind of viewer are we considering, and secondly, what kind of influence do we have in mind. A film based on documentary material has a sobering effect on an audience corrupted by fictional drama, and their taste will inevitably be shocked by the straightforwardness of the film and its unembellished presentation of reality. At the same time, Vertov is convinced that this is the only correct way to the hearts of the illiterate working and peasant masses; 'their education, their habits begin with those things which we show them'.<sup>22</sup>

One can, of course, observe in this a naive and oversimplification of the problem which is typical for the period. It is also partially an attempt to refute the criticism that many of his experiments in form remained unintelligible to the wide masses because of their excessive symbolic complexity.

In the course of his argument against acted films, Vertov compared his own principles of agit based on visual presentation of material with consequent persuasion of the audiences - thus appealing to the consciousness of the audience - to the methods of fictional drama. The latter is mere manipulation of the audience, 'it shows the audience romantic, detective or social "fairy-tales", which are sufficiently skilful and convincing to intoxicate the audience and then to insinuate into his subconscious some thought or idea'.<sup>23</sup>

The next stage of Vertov's programme was to free the cinema in its early development from an artistically unjustified synthesis with other forms of art, ie theatre and literature. In his opinion, all feature films were created around a literary skeleton, furnished with cinematic illustrations:

WE clean 'cine-eye' from its hangers-on, music, literature and theatre, we search for our own rhythm, stolen from nowhere, and we find it in the movements of things.

WE invite:

-- out --

from the sweet embraces of the romance,  
from the venom of the psychological novel,  
from the paws of the theatre of lovers,  
turn your backs on the music,

-- out --

into the open field, into space with four dimensions (3 plus

time), into the search for our own material, our own measure and rhythm.<sup>24</sup>

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Breaking away from the old cinema which blindly copied the artistic patterns of literature and the theatre, Vertov saw the specific characteristics of the cinema as the dynamics of movement and the ability of the cinema 'to realise the unrealisable in life'. This made it essential to create an alphabet of cinema-language - a system of signs which would organise 'the chaos of objects moving in space' on the screen. Out of this the idea of 'Cine-eye' developed - Vertov's complex theory of cinema.

Vertov sees innate possibilities in the film camera of a fundamentally new perception of the world, hitherto unknown to man. Until now the film camera was completely subordinate to the human eye, copying its work and 'the better the copying, the more highly was the shot considered'.<sup>25</sup> But man's eye is imperfect. The film camera, whose technical possibilities of 'seeing' can be perfected without limit, must come to the help of the human eye and enable it 'to see the invisible', and to bring order to the chaos of visual phenomena surrounding it. Thus, for example, the spectator at a boxing match or ballet haphazardly moves his eyes from the whole group to separate faces, separate movements. With the help of the film camera, the 'cine-eye', the eyes of the spectator can be moved consecutively onto those details or those moments of action which it is essential to see:

I am the cinema-eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, can show you the world as only I can see it. From to-day I liberate myself forever from human immobility. *I am in perpetual motion*, I approach and move away from objects, I creep up to them, I climb onto them, I move alongside the muzzle of a running horse, I tear into the crowd at full speed, I run before the fleeing soldiers, I tip over onto my back, I ascend with aeroplanes, I fall and rise together with falling and rising bodies.

Here am I, the camera, rushing about guided by a resultant force, manoeuvring in the chaos of motions, fixing motion from motion in the most complex combinations. Freed from the obligation of 16-17 frames a second, freed from the limits of time and space, *I can contrast any points in the universe*, wherever I might fix them.

My way leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. And this is how I can decipher a new world unknown to you.<sup>26</sup>

In this direction one of the first of Vertov's experiments was to achieve slow motion on the screen, using a 'rapid eye', (running the camera abnormally fast during shooting). His camera-man, Kaufman, filmed Vertov jumping from a building in a Moscow



yard. When the film is projected onto a screen one can follow the changes in feelings and expressions on the jumping man's face. Thereafter the 'rapid-eye' was enriched by a whole series of camera techniques. At the same time Vertov broke with the existing convention of obligatory motivation of montage development of perspective. It was considered that a given cinematic event should be provided with an appropriate cause. Thus a shot taken from above could only be shown on the screen if it was preceded by a shot of a man looking down from above. Vertov, without any warning, unexpectedly inserts close-up shots of faces, of objects filmed from strange angles. In order to achieve the most vivid impressions, he fought the existing perception of things, trying to violate the current canons of cinema, to turn and present phenomena from a new point of view. In this way, liberated from spatial and temporal limits, 'the cine-eye' fixes living phenomena on the film. Its work is aided by the cineaste/pilot, the cineaste/engineer 'who afterwards edits the documentary material caught on film'. 'Cine-eye' = cine-see (to see through the film camera) + cine-write (to write on the film with a camera) + cine-assemble (to create a montage).<sup>27</sup> 'The result of this sort of combined action of the liberated and perfected camera, and of the strategic brain of man directing, observing and taking stock of things, is a noticeably fresher, and therefore more interesting, presentation of even the most ordinary things'.<sup>28</sup>

Vertov defines different camera techniques – slow motion, filming with a moving camera – tracking shot, filming from unexpected angles, with a hidden camera, filming when the subject's attention is distracted, 'candid camera', running the sequence backwards ('the negative of time'), animated stills, micro- and macro-filming, X-ray filming, etc as 'microscope and telescope of time' as 'the possibility of seeing without boundaries and limits', as 'the possibility to make the invisible visible, the vague clear, the hidden apparent, to unmask the disguised, to expose the acting in life, to turn lies into truth, ie cinema-truth (that is the truth extracted by means of cinematography, by means of the "cine-eye")'.<sup>29</sup>

In his work Vertov paid much attention to filming unawares and 'candid camera' especially when depicting human behaviour. This often required special technical equipment – 'invisible cameras, super-sensitive films, flashlight cameras, films for night time and also soundless cameras (vision plus sound), the perpetual readiness of the camera to film instantaneously'.<sup>30</sup>

In one of his speeches in 1929 Vertov recalled how, during the shooting of someone else's film, he would film the actors at the very moment the other director stopped filming. The actors were still totally involved in their roles but they had already stopped 'acting'. Later it turned out that Vertov's shots were much more authentic than those taken by the other director.

To remove man's mask and expose the discrepancy between

words and thoughts in real life the camera must penetrate reality at those moments when man completely reveals himself. Only then will the film camera succeed in pinning down the truth, instead of presenting a performance as if it were the true behaviour of man. When Vertov read about a bank cashier who turned out to be a thief, he made the following comment in his diary: 'If cinema-truth is the truth shown by means of "cine-eye", a shot of the cashier will be true to "cine-eye" only if his mask is removed and behind it one can see the thief'.<sup>31</sup>

Vertov regarded the 'slices of life' caught on film as a kind of 'raw material', which was as necessary to the documentary film director as a note-book to a writer or sketches to a painter:

*Kinopravda* is made from material in the same way as a house is made from bricks. One can build a stove or the Kremlin wall and many other things from bricks. And from film material one can construct various cine-things. Just as good bricks are needed for a house, good film material is required to assemble cine-things. This entails a serious approach to documentary shots – the factory of cine-material, where life comes through the camera-lens and does not disappear forever without a trace, but leaves an exact and inimitable record.<sup>32</sup>

One must handle this extracted material with care and respect – it is the irreplaceable witness of time. For this purpose he proposed that special documentary laboratories be formed – 'factories of facts' – stores of documentary films in which raw material, the product of enormous labour, would be kept catalogued according to chronology and subject matter. Unused film footage is not waste – it is the artist's raw material for future films.

Vertov's way of working on documentaries often evoked attacks and criticism as the recording of the accidental taken at random from life. The critics rebuked him for not working from a film-script, not realising that Vertov's method consisted in 'the assembling of slices of life towards a theme, and not the reverse'.<sup>33</sup> Thus instead of selecting shots according to an *a priori* elaborated plan, Vertov's system was to observe and record life 'just as it is', and only then to draw conclusions from his observations. Vertov explained that writing a scenario for a documentary film is like writing an account of living conditions of the unemployed before these conditions have been investigated. In this case one can only outline an approximate plan of action. This kind of preparatory plan is usually the first step in Vertov's multi-stage system of montage. 'Cine-eye' theory understands montage in the broad sense of the word – as the whole process of producing a film, from the moment of choosing a subject to the release of the film onto the screen. It begins with thorough research of all documentary material related to the chosen subject: manuscripts, books, newspaper clippings, photographs or bits of film already made. On the



basis of all this material a selection is made of the most valuable data to create the outline of the theme. This is not a static plan – it develops and changes in the process of further work. It is constantly measured against the reality, which it should reflect. It is in constant interaction with current events, which cannot be foreseen: 'It is not enough to film slices of truth. One must assemble these slices so that *the whole* also represents the truth'.<sup>34</sup>

The 'cine-eye' theory presupposes six consecutive stages of montage:

1. montage during observation – the orientation of the naked eye in any place at any time;
2. montage after observation – the mental organisation of what has been seen on the basis of its characteristic features;
3. montage during filming – the orientation of the camera-eye in the place investigated in point 1; adaptation to new conditions;
4. montage after filming – a rough editing of the film according to its basic features. Determining what bridging shots are required;
5. estimation on sight (the hunt for missing sequences) – the instantaneous orientation in any visual circumstances to catch the necessary bridging shots. Extreme attentiveness. Military drill – estimation on sight, speed, attack;
6. final montage – the discovery of minor hidden themes amongst the major ones. The reorganisation of all the material in the best order. The discovery of the pivot of the cine-thing. Co-ordination of similar shots and, finally, the mathematical calculation of montage sequences.<sup>35</sup>

The last three stages represent montage proper – editing. This means that every shot, every film scene acquires a distinct artistic expression and a particular significance only in combination with other shots. The difference between a film still and a photograph is that whereas the latter is a thing in itself, the former is a sign which functions only in the system of signs of cinema-language. The specific characteristic of cinema and the origin of its impact on the viewer lies not in the content of given shots, but in the combination of these shots in montage or editing. Vertov based his system of editing on a theory of intervals, ie, the replacement of one shot by another, the way two shots are spliced together. In his manifesto *WE* he explained that the 'cine-eye' method is the art of organising essential movements of objects in space, the search for 'the inner rhythm of every object':

The material – the elements of the art of movement – is the intervals (the replacement of one movement by another) and not the movement itself. They (the intervals) lead the action to its cinematic resolution. The organisation of movement is the organisation of its elements, ie, the organisation of the intervals

into phrases. Every phrase has its rise, its plateau and its fall (which are obvious to a certain degree). A whole work is constructed from phrases, just as phrases are constructed from intervals of movement.<sup>36</sup>

Later Vertov developed this theory, giving a more detailed description of the way in which one shot is to be replaced by another, one visual impression by another and of the rules of organising shots amongst themselves: The editor must take the following interrelationships into account:

1. the interrelationship of close-up and distant shots;
2. the interrelationship of angles;
3. the interrelationship of movements within a shot;
4. the interrelationship of light and shade;
5. the interrelationship of film speeds.

Depending on the combination of these interrelationships, the editor determines: 1. The order of sequences; 2. The duration of each sequence (in metres, in frames), ie the time each separate shot is seen. At the same time, apart from movement between shots (intervals), between two sequential shots, one must consider the visual relationship of each separate shot to all the other shots which take part in the 'montage battle'. The editor's most difficult and most important task is to find the most strategic route for the eyes of the viewer amongst all the interactions, interattractions and interrepulsions of the shots.<sup>37</sup>

Vertov's experimental work in editing overlapped with the previous and simultaneous discoveries of directors of acted cinema, like Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin. At that time it was already known that montage creates the possibility of parallel and simultaneous actions – that is, that actions can occur in different parts of the world and at different times and yet in the film they would be gathered together.

From opening windows, people looking out of them, galloping cavalry, signals, little boys running, water spouting from a blown-up dam, the even steps of the infantry, one can edit the celebration, let us say, of the construction of a power station, and the occupation of a peaceful town by the enemy.<sup>38</sup>

Although these devices were already widely used in feature films for different purposes and in different combinations, such 'tricks' were inconceivable in documentaries. E. Svilova, Vertov's wife, assistant and editor of all his films, applying to join the 'cine-eye' group in 1924, said: 'I can state with assurance that no one has paid any attention to documentaries. In my opinion it has never even entered the head of a single director that documentary material can be edited into montage, that documentary material is life'.<sup>39</sup>



Vertov enriched existing cinematic technique and interpreted it in an original way, and he was the first director in Russia to use it in documentaries. He wanted his films, which were constructed from documentary material, to function not as a mere reflection of reality, but as its conscious interpretation by cinematographic means. To this end he considered it artistically justifiable to introduce new spatial and temporal relations into documentaries. For example, in one of his early works, the 13th issue of *Kinopravda*, in honour of the 5th anniversary of the October revolution, he created, by means of montage, a synthesised cinematic image – the funeral of revolutionary heroes who had died in the fight for Soviet power: on the screen one sees the burial of men killed at Astrakan (taken in 1918), graves are filled up in Kronstadt (taken in 1921), the guns fire in memory of the soldiers who fell in Petrograd (1920), Muscovites stand silently with bared heads on the banks of the Moskva river (1922).<sup>40</sup> In the same way the scene of drunken women dancing was created in the film *Cine-Eye* – it was assembled from footage shot in different villages at different times. The cross-cutting technique allows the artist to achieve a convincing synthesised impression of an event, or a synthesised image of a person, combining the features of many different people. In *The Lullaby* the mother rocking her baby who is the narrator of the film turns, in the course of the film, into a Spanish, a Ukrainian, a Russian and an Uzbek mother. All the same, it is as if there was one mother in the film. The image of the mother is divided amongst several faces. The image of the little girl in this film is also formed from the images of a series of faces. 'It is not a mother who is before us – but the Mother, not a little girl – but the Girl. . . . One can really understand this only directly from the screen. Not a man – but Man!'<sup>41</sup>

Vertov also used elements of photo-montage, paralleling work in this field by the Soviet artist Rodchenko, and John Heartfield in Germany. The technique of photo-montage was aimed at showing either simultaneous actions, or at singling out details from the general picture or was used to bring together and contrast two or more facts.

Vertov not only ignored chronological order from time to time, but in some of his works he preferred poetical connections (relational editing) to logical ones, in order to make a stronger intellectual or emotional impact. In order to define their artistic function and significance, the examples of such connections would have to be examined in the context of the film in which they appear, bearing in mind the characteristics of the specific genre (a topic vast enough to require a separate article). One should also remember that Vertov always insisted that his method was that of the communist artist, and was different from the objectivist approach to documentary material: 'We are here to serve a specific class – workers and peasants. . . . We are here to show

the world as it is and to explain the bourgeois structure of the world to the workers'.<sup>42</sup> The director explained many scenes in his films by his wish 'to open the eyes of the people to the connection between social and visual phenomena'.<sup>43</sup> He gave this as an explanation, for example, of the episodes in the film 'Cine-eye', when a loaf of bread turns back into rye and a joint of meat turns back into a cow. 'By revealing the origin of objects and bread the camera graphically demonstrates to every worker that he himself produces everything and consequently, that they belong to him'.<sup>44</sup>

In his time Vertov's work was often criticised for such free interpretation of documentary material, which led to a distortion of fact. A controversy about the permissible degree of subjective interpretation of factual material by an artist appeared in the pages of *Lef*. It was primarily concerned with *Lef's* attitude towards acted/unacted films. Tretyakov questioned whether Vertov's films could be called pure documentary: 'Pure documentary is the editing of facts simply in terms of the actuality and social significance. When a fact becomes a brick in a construction of a different kind – the pure documentary concept disappears, everything depends on the montage'.<sup>45</sup> The literary critic, script-writer and theoretician of Formalism, Viktor Shklovsky, also reproached Vertov for violating the laws of documentary cinema. In an article 'Where is Dziga Vertov going?', he wrote: 'Documentary films require titles, dates. . . . Dziga Vertov cuts documentary films. In this respect his work is artistically not progressive. . . . I want to know the number of that steam engine which lies on its side in Vertov's picture'.<sup>46</sup> Vertov answered his critics, insisting on the right of documentary films to function not as 'documentary minutes', but to analyse and synthesise facts. There is no doubt that all the data concerning material which has been filmed should be kept in a film library. It should be available to directors, 'it should serve as a valid documentation for the editor, as a guide for the correct montage route'. 'But this does not mean, of course, that the editor is obliged to present all this data in his films as an appendix to each shot'.<sup>47</sup>

In this controversy a certain lack of appreciation and underestimation of Vertov's innovations was apparent. This innovation manifested itself, apart from his other achievements, in his elaboration and creation of new genres of documentary films. The variety of genres in his work can be seen even in the titles and subtitles of some of his films. *The Anniversary of the Revolution* (historical documentary); *The opening of the Tomb of Sergii Radonezhsky* (cine-sketch); *Agit-train of VTsIK* (film journey); *Lenin's Kino-pravda* (Cine-poem); *Man with a Movie Camera* (cine feuilleton); *Cine-eye* (candid camera); *Symphony of the Donbass*; *Three songs of Lenin*. Thus it is obvious that Vertov did not confine himself to methods of reportage, but interpreted the concept of documen-



tary more widely. His experiments in form always originated from the specific characteristics of the genre chosen. In this connection, it is worth looking at the film *Man with a Movie Camera*, which suffered the sharpest attacks of the critics for its excessive use of formalist devices. But if it seems that the means are more transparent in this film than the aim, it is only because Vertov wished to acquaint the viewer with the means, to expose all the technical devices known to him which are conventionally hidden. He maintained that while working on this particular film, he had the following intention: 'in our . . . garden we grow different fruit, different films. Why shouldn't we make a film about cinema-language, the first film without words, requiring no translation into other languages, an international film?'<sup>48</sup> At the same time, he tried in the same way to show the behaviour and actions of a man with a film camera in different situations. That role was 'played' by Vertov's brother, camera-man Michael Kaufman. Vertov always regarded this work as the creation of 'film-producing films'. He ascribed his later artistic achievements, which were acknowledged by the critics, to the discoveries which arose out of this experimental film. He maintained that the critics who praised some of his films highly, while slating others, failed to appreciate the intrinsic relationship between such films as *Cine-eye* (candid camera) and *Kinopravda* (newsreel).

There is no such thing as 'cine-eye' for the sake of 'cine-eye', 'candid camera' for the sake of 'candid camera' or hidden cameras for the sake of hidden cameras. This is not a programme, it is the means. *Kinopravda*, which was accepted by critics, was made by means of 'cine-eye'.<sup>49</sup>

And 'cine-eye', Vertov said, involves 'every cinematic technique, every cinematic invention, every device and method which helps one to discover and show the truth'.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly, the turning point in Vertov's life and career in the mid-thirties, when he was no longer allowed to make his own films (his last independent film *Lullaby* was released in 1937), can largely be attributed to changes in Soviet cultural policy, ie tighter control by increasingly bureaucratised administrative bodies over all artistic activity in the country. All the artistic groups of the twenties were now dissolved and replaced by Unions of Writers, Film Workers, etc. Artists of different outlooks and aesthetic trends were now to be united under centralised leaderships.

There was no room left for the genuine and stimulating controversy among Soviet artists so characteristic of the twenties. Together with other outstanding masters of the Soviet cinema Dziga Vertov had to defend his artistic methods against charges of formalism.

After continually failing to get approval for a number of his

own projects, Vertov ended up working as a newsreel editor – an activity which by then offered no scope for the experimentation characteristic of his early years.

Unfortunately even now many Soviet cinema critics and film directors tend to explain Vertov's silence in the last two decades of his life as 'a creative crisis'. Vertov, they speculate, ran out of ideas, his narrow mechanical conception of montage was no longer fitted to cope with the growing demands of the day. . . .

Vertov's diary sheds some light on the atmosphere which surrounded him at the time: ' . . . 100 per cent frost of distrust from the army of distributors, 100 per cent frost from those at the top of the administrative ladder'.<sup>51</sup>

Relentless public denunciations, bureaucratic arbitrariness, deliberate dispersal of the 'cine-eye' team, and gossip, were eventually too much for him. In his diary for 1945 Vertov rejoices at the republication of Mayakovsky's work and then adds bitterly:

It is a good thing that he was not a film director. A film cannot be preserved in manuscript. Originals don't exist. Working copies are mutilated. Unreleased films are either stolen in bits and pieces or die unknown at one stage or another. The idea, the treatment, the script is the only surviving copy of the film.<sup>52</sup>

A man of rare consistency and principle, Vertov refused to compromise in his work:

If an artist is so hungry for creative work that he can no longer sustain the torture of waiting, the torture of standing idle, and if he then shamefacedly agrees to make a film in obviously hopeless conditions – he makes a mistake. . . .

I, myself, am terribly hungry for work. This is an artist's hunger, of course. Food wanders around me, surrounds me. If I depended only on a pen and paper, I would write endlessly, day and night. But I have to write with a movie camera, write, not on paper but on film. My work depends on a whole series of organisational and technical factors.

I must win my rights in my work. And if I cannot get anything from this administration, or that governing body I will still not surrender. Don't we all remember what Mayakovsky said in a similar situation: 'Governing bodies come and go, art remains'.<sup>53</sup>

#### Notes

1. This term seems to me a more accurate translation of the Russian 'zhizn' vrasplokh', ie filming of 'life as it is' than 'life slap-up' previously used in *Screen* (Winter 1971/72 v12 n4).



2. Vertov, D. *Statti, Dnevnik, Zamysly*, Izd. Iskusstvo, Moscow 1966, p73. This is the only existing collection which contains in a chronological order some of Vertov's articles and speeches (part I), excerpts from his diaries (part II) and scripts and treatments for his films. Edited and with an introduction by S. Drobashenko, the collection systematises the evolution of Vertov's ideas of documentary cinema as well as highlighting many important aspects of his personality, life, conditions of work and professional experience. There is also a monograph in Russian by N. P. Abramov, *Dziga Vertov*, Moscow, 1962; translated into Italian (Rome, 1964) and French (Lyon, 1965) with the same title. Both books have Vertov's filmography.
- At present Vertov's widow, E. Svilova is preparing for publication in Moscow recollections of Vertov by his friends and colleagues.
3. *Op cit* Vertov, I, p73.
4. VTsIK - *Vserossiiskij (Vsesojuznyj) Tsentral'nyj Ispolnitel'nyj Komitet* or All-Russian (All-Union) General Executive Committee, VTsIK was the central executive committee of the Congress of Soviets, All-Russian for the RSFSR, All-Union for the USSR from 1923. Its 200-300 members were elected by the Congress of Soviets and delegated with supreme by the latter when it was not in session. In fact central executive power quickly passed to Sovnarkom, the much smaller Council of People's Commissars. (Editor's Note.)
5. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p157. For Lenin's ideas about cinema see *Samoe vazhnoe iz vseh iskusstv*, Moscow 1963, p123.
6. Mayakovsky, V. *Polnoye Sobranie Sochinennii*, Vol 12, Goslitizdat, Moscow 1957-1961, p65.
7. The writers united around a literary magazine *Na Postu* (*On Guard*) known later by the name of their organisation RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers).
8. *Lef*, 1923, No 4, p4.
9. Due to a confusion in polemics at that time it should perhaps be noted that the proletarian writers also called for revolution in literature, but they understood it not aesthetically, but as 'proletarianisation' of literature. The new revolutionary literature of the working classes should be created by the proletariat itself, of which they considered themselves the representatives. For O Brik, one of the main theoreticians of *Lef*, proletarian art was not art for the proletariat or art of the proletariat, but art created by an artist with talent and a proletarian consciousness.
10. See note 7.
11. Tretyakov, 'We Raise the Alarm', *New Lef*, No 2, 1927, quoted in *Screen* Winter 1971/2, v12, n4, p68.
12. *Ibid*, p72.
13. *Ibid*, p72.
14. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p45.
15. This is a literal translation of the term originally used in Russian to denote scripted and acted films as opposed to documentary films based on actual events.
16. *Novaja Ekonomicheskaja Politika* or New Economic Policy was the name quickly adopted for the series of economic measures proposed by Lenin at the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) which served as guidelines for Soviet economic policy until 1928. The ad hoc centralisation of industry, militarisation of labour and direct requisitioning of grain surpluses adopted during the period of civil war and foreign intervention was replaced by a policy of developing the productive forces of the Soviet Union by encouraging trade, restoring the labour market and taxing the

- peasantry, thus promoting centralisation and economic growth without destroying the alliance of proletariat and peasantry. (Editor's Note.)
17. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p77.
18. 'O partiinoy i sovetskoy pechati', *Sbornik Dokumentov*, Moscow, 1954, p275.
19. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p153.
20. *Ibid*, p47.
21. *Ibid*, pp89-91.
22. *Ibid*, p91.
23. *Ibid*, p92.
24. *Ibid*, p46.
25. *Ibid*, p53.
26. *Ibid*, p55, quoted in *Screen*, Winter 1971/72, v12 n4, pp55-56.
27. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p111.
28. *Ibid*, p56, quoted in *Screen*, Winter 1971/72, v12, n4, p57.
29. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p143.
30. *Ibid*, pp197-8.
31. *Ibid*, p197.
32. *Ibid*, p78.
33. *Ibid*, p77.
34. *Ibid*, p135.
35. *Ibid*, p97.
36. *Ibid*, p48.
37. *Ibid*, p114.
38. Kuleshov, Lev. *Iskusstvo Kino*, Tea-Kinopechati, 1929, p161.
39. *Lef*, 1924, No 4.
40. The footage Vertov used in this issue of *Kinopravda* was not shot by his camera-men. The film consisted of three parts: the first - the October parade and workers demonstration in Moscow 1922. The second - a flashback into the five years which had elapsed since the revolution - assembled from various documentary films of the Civil War, war communism, post-war reconstruction and the first year of NEP. The third part was devoted to the first achievements of the Soviet Republic - electrification, a new radio station, the first tractors.
41. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p160.
42. *Ibid*, p98.
43. *Ibid*, p69.
44. *Ibid*, p69.
45. *New Lef*, No 11-12, 1927, quoted in *Screen*, *op cit*, p74.
46. *Sovetsky Ekran*, 1926, No 32.
47. Vertov, D. *Op cit*, p87.
48. *Ibid*, p158.
49. *Ibid*, p137.
50. *Ibid*, p75.
51. *Ibid*, p166.
52. *Ibid*, p263.
53. *Ibid*, p187.



# DZIGA VERTOV

an introduction by David Bordwell



Until a few years ago, Dziga Vertov was only dimly visible in the imposing collective shadow of Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Dovzhenko, and Eisenstein. Since the Twenties, critics and historians tended, rather inconsistently, to dismiss Vertov either as a Russian Lumière, passively recording reality, or as a monomaniacal formalist. In France, Eisenstein partisans were quick to attack Vertov for a lack of stylistic invention: Jean Mitry, believing the objectivity of the camera to be a pleasant fiction, claimed that Vertov refused "to compose reality before the camera," and Léon Moussinac asserted as early as 1928 that "Vertov substitutes reality itself for a feeling about reality." On the other hand, English disciples of Eisenstein found Vertov "an austere fanatic . . . obsessed with form" (Thorold Dickinson) and, despite his "virtuosity," "rather out of date" (Paul Rotha, 1930).

Such verdicts, while unconsciously recognizing the basic tension in Vertov's aesthetic, scarcely do justice to a filmmaker who seems from our perspective today a vital, if eccentric, figure. It is clear now that Vertov's rambunctious manifestos, theories, and films were an essential part of the creative explosion that propelled the Soviet cinema of the 1920's to world prominence. Moreover, the man who coined the phrase and the concept of *cinéma-vérité* and who in 1923 prophesied television and multimedia can hardly be considered "out of date." When Leacock speaks of a "Living Camera" and Godard quotes Vertov in *WIND FROM THE EAST*, one is made acutely aware of the modernity of a theorist and filmmaker whom critical tradition has relegated to the status of a flamboyant fanatic. Not only, then, does Vertov's career typify the aspirations, energies, and eventual defeat of the Soviet avant-garde, but his work remains of capital importance to film history as a whole.



Vertov, like Pudovkin and Eisenstein, was a curious mixture of scientist and artist. Born Denis Kaufman, in Poland in 1896, he began writing poetry at the age of ten and for a while attended the Bialystok Music Conservatory; later, while studying medicine in Moscow, he wrote poems and satires. (It was perhaps during this period that he adopted the pseudonym Dziga Vertov—from the Ukrainian "spinning top" and the Russian "turning.") From his medical studies and his literary activity stems the characteristic Vertov duality of scientific control and artistic impulse, two preoccupations which

fused in a concern with the idea of montage. Science, poetry, and music blended in his sound-recording experiments in the "Laboratory of Hearing" which he set up in St. Petersburg in 1916. He later recalled this work, which resembled contemporary experiments of Russian and Italian Futurists, as "a fascination with a montage of stenographic notes and sound recording—in particular, a fascination with the possibility of documenting sounds in writing, in attempts to depict in words and letters the sound of a waterfall, the noise of a sawmill, in musical-thematic creations of word-montage."

From this it was only a step to the cinema. "One day in spring 1918—return from a station. In my ears there persisted the gasps and puffing of the departing train . . . Overheard curses . . . A kiss . . . An exclamation . . . Laughs, whistles, bells, voices . . . And, continuous throughout, thoughts: it is necessary to find a machine which is capable not of describing but registering, of photographing these sounds. Otherwise one cannot organize or assemble them. They fly, as time flies. But perhaps a camera? . . . To register what one sees. To organize not the audible world but the visible world? Is that the answer? And at this moment, a meeting with Mikhail Koltzov who offered a job in the cinema." Through Koltzov, Vertov became an editor for the newsreel section of the Moscow Cinema Committee. Vertov the technician was to master the challenges of this new means of registering parts of reality, while Vertov the artist was to discover in the assemblage of these parts a new medium of formal expression.

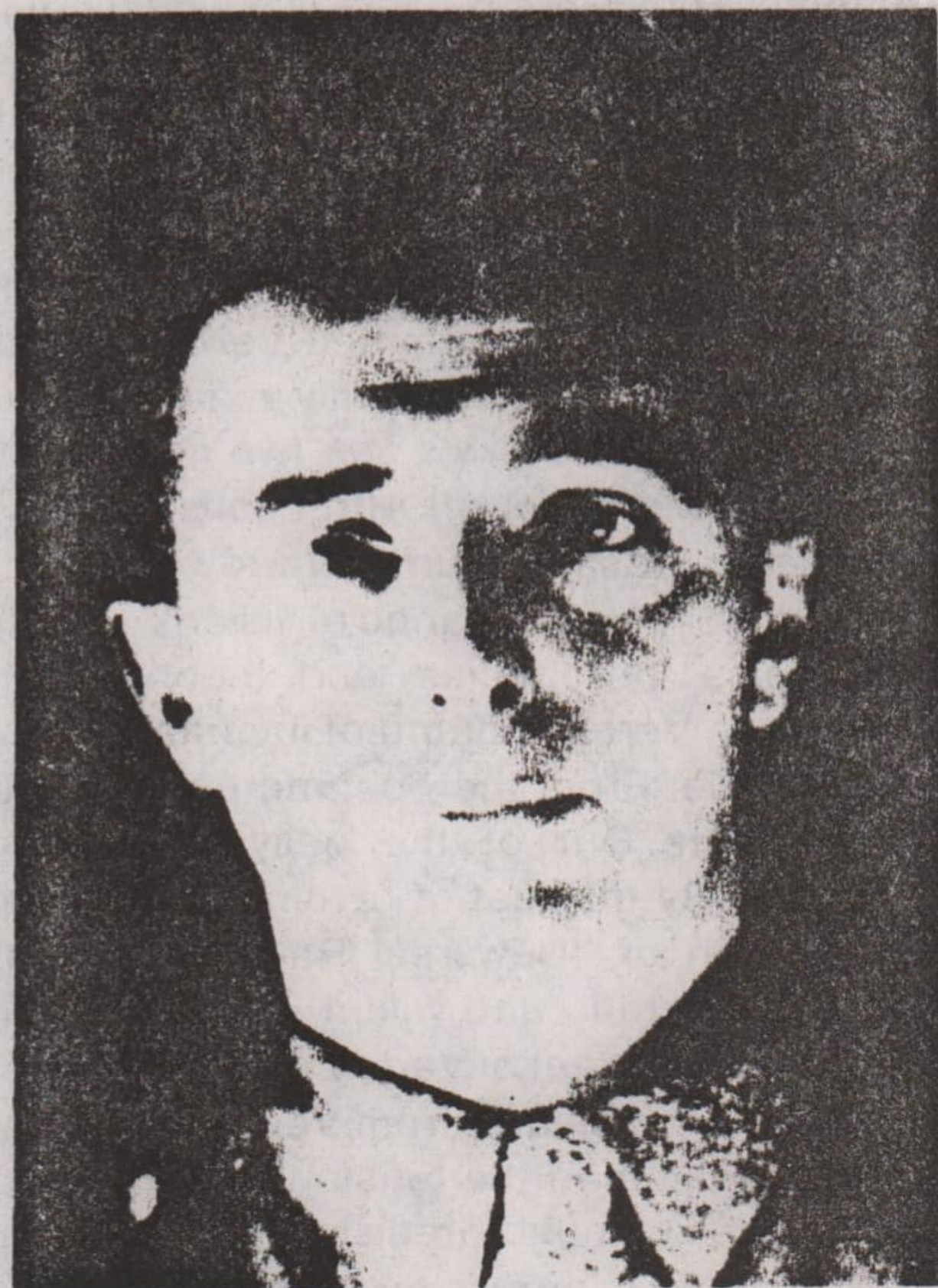
Not that the discovery belonged to him alone. Between 1910 and 1918, the montage idea was distinctly in the air in avant-garde art. This was the time of Boccioni's Futurist sculpture, Braque's and Picasso's cubism, and Apollinaire's fragment-poems. The Russian Futurists had experimented with assemblage-principles in many media: Malevich's early cubistic, collage-like paintings, Tatlin's sculptures of real materials projecting spikily into space, Meyerhold's theatrical productions which systematically decomposed classical texts, Mayakovsky's machine-gun bursts of verse, and even the linguistic researches of the Formalist literary critics had all prefigured a technique of fragmentation and recombination of materials that was later to dominate the Soviet avant-garde. When the Revolution came, the Futurists welcomed it eagerly and put themselves at the disposal of the Bolshevik regime by designing posters, working on agit-trains, fighting in the Civil War, and organizing a new culture for the new state.



The pressing political demands of the moment thus caused most artists to temporarily put aside their experiments with montage, but Vertov's job as compiler of newsreel footage gave him a unique opportunity to apply principles of assemblage to the new medium of film. Between 1918 and 1921, Vertov edited the first Soviet newsreel series KINONEDELIA (CINEMA WEEKLY), supervised the newsreels shot on the Civil War front, compiled footage for two long films, THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION (1919) and BATTLE AGAINST CZARISM (1920), put together several shorts for the agit-trains, and, in late 1921, climaxed his apprenticeship with a thirteen-part HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR. At first, he was simply ordering casual footage. "KINONEDELIA," he recalled, "hardly distinguished itself from preceding newsreels; only the subtitles were Soviet. The content never changed—always the same parades, the same funerals." Gradually, though, Vertov realized that even such material could be arranged in significant patterns, and artistic expression could supersede the mechanical linking of shots. By 1921, Vertov had experimented with one- and two-frame shots, tinting, and the shooting of original footage. With the stabilization of the Soviet government and the end of the Russian blockade, many avant-garde artists were ready to return to their experiments, and Vertov was by this time firmly in their midst.

The beginning of the 1920's witnessed enormous controversy among Soviet artists. It was a time of attack, regrouping, and counterattack, of manifestos, journals, and heated public debates. The issues at stake were large ones. What kind of art was best for the Soviet people? What was the artist's role in Soviet society? Vertov, who had gathered a following of zealous young documentarists, took a firm position in the "Council of Three" manifesto (1920), which attacked theatrical and literary films as "impotence" and "technical backwardness" and compared an interest in narrative film to an interest in one's own backside. Dr. Vertov had examined the commercial cinema and diagnosed its disease as malnutrition: Soviet film was gorging itself on ersatz drama. The only remedy was a healthy diet of real life, in the form of the newsreel-documentary. Two years later, Vertov got a chance to try a cure: in January of 1922, Lenin ordered the establishment of a fixed ratio between Soviet documentary and entertainment films (this ratio was called Leninist proportion). Within four months, Vertov released the first issue of KINO-PRAVDA.

"In their own time," Vertov later wrote of his KINO-PRAVDA episodes, "these funny experiments evoked not laughter but a storm of controversies, ideas, and plans." The twelve issues of KINO-PRAVDA released in 1922 were usually popular with audiences, but Vertov's experiments—e.g., mixing footage from various sources to make a point, using specially-designed inter-titles—drew the fire of the press and those whom Vertov called "the apostles of cinema." In December of 1922, the "Council of Three" renamed itself the "Kino-oki" ("Cinema-Eyes") and issued a vitriolic manifesto in defense of Vertov's work. "We declare that the old romance



DZIGA VERTOV

Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive

films, theatrical films, and the like have leprosy! Don't let your eyes go near them! Don't let your eyes touch them! Fatal! Contagious!" The Kino-oki proposed a new cinema, based on technology ("We introduce the creative joy in each mechanical job, we marry men to their machines"), poetry ("Long live the poetry of the changing, moving machines!"), and music ("We are in search of a cine-tone-scale"). The manifesto's discussion of the cinematic "interval" prefigures the montage experiments of Vertov and others in the following year: "The intervals (passages from one movement to another) and not the movements themselves constitute the material (elements of the art of movement)."

By 1923, Vertov was allied with Vladimir Mayakovsky's avant-garde LEF group, which gathered together the Constructivist artists Rodchenko and Stepanova, the philologists Brik and Shklovsky, the Futurist poets Krouchonykh and Pasternak, and the theatre directors Meyerhold and Eisenstein. The activities of the LEFists during 1923 show that the time of montage had come. In that year, Rodchenko first utilized photomontage to illustrate the journal *Lef* and Mayakovsky's volume *About This*; Meyerhold's production of *Lake Lyul* used area lighting to switch the audience's attention from one episode to another; Eisenstein's production of *Every Wise Man* featured a technique he called "montage of attractions"; and Vertov's next numbers of KINO-PRAVDA pressed further with explorations of the powers of film montage. The thirteenth episode, dedicated to the anniversary of the revolution, is considered by Vertov's Soviet biographer Abramov a turning-point in Vertov's development because the film was "the first documentary speaking of the country's present, past, and future in language of artistic journalism. The chronicle scenes were not



used solely for their information or newsreel value. For the first time, they served as historical documents. They were put in a film which could be compared to a poem." Besides juxtaposing events from various times and places, Vertov utilized titles designed by Rodchenko to reinforce the theme of revolution.

The editing experiments of KINO-PRAVDA seem to have decisively determined Vertov's Kino-Eye aesthetic, which was first fully expressed in the July issue of Mayakovsky's *Lef*, two months after Eisenstein's "Montage of Attractions" essay had appeared in the same journal. Vertov's article, "Kinoks—Revolution," is a melange of visions, jottings, poems, epigrams, prophecies, and theoretical points, all written in Vertov's brand of incantatory Soviet manifesto style. From the opening poem ("Intestines of experience/Out of the belly of cinematography slashed/By the reef of revolution. . .") to the final prediction of "Newsreel Radio News," the essay, however erratic and willful, represents the first extensive statement of Vertov's theory of the Kino-Eye.

Nothing is clearer from Vertov's "Kinoks—Revolution" essay than the tension between his notion of cinema's scientific precision and his awareness of the camera's purely creative dimensions. At one extreme, Vertov has a very Futurist faith in the power of the movie camera to capture reality completely. "I am eye," proclaims the manifesto, "I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see. . . . My road is toward the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I decipher in a new way the world unknown to you." In part, this is the world of casually-caught spontaneity. Vertov recalled that he originated the Kino-Eye when, after performing in a film, he did not recognize his own face on the screen: "First thought of the Kino-Eye as a world perceived without a mask, as a world of naked truth." But the camera does not merely copy what we glimpse at odd moments; thanks to the resources of various shooting-speeds and lenses, the camera perfects, fulfills human vision. Moreover, like all machines, the camera can be made constantly more efficient: "We cannot make our eyes better than they have been made, but the movie camera we can perfect forever." True to his Futurist alliances, Vertov sees the camera as the epitome of modern technology, a mechanically accurate, scientific registering of the world.

Simultaneously, though, Vertov maintains that by editing, cinema organizes reality into a kind of totally expressive truth, a systematic "research into the chaos of visual phenomena filling the universe." Like Eisenstein, Vertov emphasizes that a series of images can totally grip the viewer's attention: "The eye obeys the will of the camera." In addition, given montage's power to cleave time and space, one can make large-scale points by the juxtaposition of shots; citing KINO-PRAVDA NUMBER 13, Vertov points out that footage shot in different places over a four-year period can be combined into one meaningful sequence. But Vertov doesn't stop with Kuleshov's recognition of montage's narrative powers, for, anticipating Eisenstein's intellectual montage,

Vertov sees that "This unusual flexibility of edited structure allows to introduce [sic] into a movie continuity any political, economic, or any other motif." By the end of the essay, montage has become a means of ordering virtually the entire cosmos: "This is I, apparatus, maneuvering in the chaos of movements, recording one movement after another in the most complex combinations. Freed from the obligation of shooting 16-17 shots [i.e., frames] per second, freed from the frame of time and space, I coordinate any and all points of the universe wherever I may plot them."

Thus Vertov's Kino-Eye theory consists of two components: "1) The Eye, disputing the visual concept of the world and offering its own 'I see' and 2) Kinok-editor, who organizes for the first time what had been so perceived into minutes of life structure." This tension between mechanical objectivity and artistic shaping is by no means unique to Vertov; a similar dichotomy exists in many LEFist works. Such a tension reflects the burgeoning Soviet society's need to justify the artist's role in the life of men and yet recognize the indisputable control the artist exercises over his work.



Vertov's films and polemics of the 1922-1923 period thus take their place as part of the preparation for the astonishing creative outburst that shook the Soviet cinema from 1924 to 1930. With Kozintsev and Trauberg's OKTYABRINA, Kuleshov's MR. WEST IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS, and Eisenstein's STRIKE (all 1924), the montage style was introduced into Soviet cinema. With POTEKIN (1925), MOTHER (1926), BY THE LAW (1926), THE END OF ST. PETERSBURG (1927), and ZVENIGORA (1927) the style reached its maturity, but by the time of OCTOBER (1928), STORM OVER ASIA (1928), ARSENAL (1929), THE NEW BABYLON (1929), THE GENERAL LINE (1929), and EARTH (1930), montage seemed to many observers merely an end in itself and the bureaucrats' purge of the "formalists" began.

Just as Vertov had helped create the montage style, so his applications of it during this period roughly corresponded to the general trend toward greater experimentation. His feature-length production, KINO-EYE (1924) has an almost crushing structural symmetry, paralleling old and new, youth and age, city and country, disease and health, dissipation and courage. KINO-PRAVDA NUMBER 21 (1924), dedicated to Lenin's memory, pays still more attention to form and style. Broken into three sections, each with its theme carefully built up out of compiled footage, LENIN KINO-PRAVDA uses tinted shots and rhythmically cut inter-titles to evoke specific emotional responses.

Vertov's next feature, STRIDE SOVIET! (1926) contains parallelisms as neat as KINO-EYE's (yesterday and today, capitalism and socialism), but the famous "heart of the machines" sequence, a vibrating montage of mechanical devices, marks a new virtuosity in Vertov's craft. He began acknowledging his artistic intent: a 1925 number of KINO-PRAVDA was labelled a "cine-poem" and STRIDE SOVIET! was subtitled a "symphony." Similarly, Vertov claimed that A SIXTH



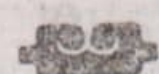
OF THE WORLD (1926) was a "lyrical cine-poem"; Abramov compares the film's theme-and-variations form, its verselike inter-titles, and its patriotic fervor to the poetry of Mayakovsky and Whitman. Comparable poetic and musical affinities dominate ELEVENTH YEAR (1928), which turned the construction of the Dniepr dam into a metaphor for Soviet solidarity. Vertov's symbolic superimpositions and his recapitulation, at one point, of key-images from earlier sections of the film reveal the distance he had traveled from the simple reportage of KINONEDELIA. The dispassionate film technician had become a lyrical cine-poet and -composer.

Vertov's formalism reaches giddy heights in THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA (1929). Ostensibly a trip through Moscow from dawn to dark, the film is as much an essay on cinema as a tour of a city. Vertov had used the film process as a subject before: one episode of KINO-PRAVDA begins with a reel of film being threaded onto a projector, and in A SIXTH OF THE WORLD Vertov had included a film-within-a-film. But MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA is his only full-length dissertation on the crucial problem of his Kino-Eye theory: the relation of cinema to reality. People in a movie theatre onscreen watch the movie we're watching. Then we watch a cameraman making the film we're watching. Glimpses of everyday life, at first blush pure "city-symphony" spontaneity, are again and again bracketed by Vertov's reminders of the apparatus of cinema at work. On one level, Vertov wittily attempts to integrate film-making with Soviet life as a whole: a woman putting on her slip is compared to a camera's replacing its lens; hair-cutting is juxtaposed with film-cutting, sewing machines and type-writers with editing machines.

On another level, though, Vertov presents us with an introspective meditation on the ability of film to transform reality. His flaunting of almost every cinematic device (variable speeds, dissolves, split-screen, prismatic lenses, multiple superimpositions) becomes an assertion of the absolute power of the camera. Vertov plays with point-of-view (we see a drunk, then we see the camera filming the drunk) and editing: we are brought up short when, during a burst of frantic movement and frenzied cutting, the frames freeze into a procession of stills moving from a long-shot of the city to a close-up of an old woman; suddenly we are shown a close-up of a child on a strip of film. We are now in the editing room, where these bits of real life are assembled at will. At another point, in anticipation of LA CHINOISE, a man audaciously points a camera at us; in the lens we can see the reflection of the camera which is filming that camera. Long before the Marxist film theorists of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinétique* called for a cinema which declares its sources in a context of production and consumption, Vertov was mounting a continuous *autocritique* of film-making.

By the end of the film, when a Brobdingnagian cameraman turns his lens toward the tiny crowd beneath, we accept Vertov's demonstration: not only is the Kino-Eye a vital part of life but it offers a way to transcend our vision of life. And yet the world of THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA, shorn of psychology, motivation, even causality, exists only

on film; with this startlingly modern work, Vertov abjures the scientific registering of "real life" and explores film as art, artifice, and artifact.



Vertov was unusual among serious filmmakers of the period in that he impatiently awaited the coming of sound; perhaps because of his "Laboratory of Hearing" experiments, he held that visual montage must be complemented by aural montage. The "Kinoks-Revolution" manifesto had already hinted at a synesthetic blend of sound and image: "The ear peeks, the eye eavesdrops." In 1929, Vertov wrote that sounds could be edited as easily as images, and "their editing can make them in harmony or not in harmony, or can mix them in necessarily diverse combinations." It was with eagerness, then, that he began work on his first sound film, ENTHUSIASM OR SYMPHONY OF THE DONBASS (1930). Here Vertov tested his theory of sound montage by recording natural sounds and editing them as flexibly in synchronization, in parallelism, in counterpoint—as if they were images.

Although the experiment attracted interest in Europe, it was not popular in Russia. More successful with Soviet audiences was THREE SONGS OF LENIN (1934), generally considered Vertov's masterpiece. Structured on contrasting songs sung by women of Uzbekistan, the film glides freely through time and space to link the women and their music with the life of Lenin. Vertov scoured Soviet archives for newsreels, filmed spontaneous on-the-street interviews, and tracked down recordings of Lenin's speeches; yet he transformed all this raw reportage into a lyrical meditation comparable to Mayakovsky's poem *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* of ten years before. Images recur like leitmotifs from song to song; sound and image sometimes converge, sometimes separate; dramatically apt settings reinforce the effect of Vertov's specially shot material. "This intervention on the director's part," Abramov observes, "... constitutes his renunciation of theories of passive, contemplative recording of reality and reproduction of life 'as it is.'" Built out of much stock footage but composed like a poem or a song-cycle, THREE SONGS OF LENIN marks Vertov's reconciliation of documentary reportage with formal control.

But sound was not the only change in Soviet cinema between 1929 and 1934. The pressure that had been on the extreme leftist artists since the middle Twenties increased powerfully. By 1929, Trotsky had been exiled and Stalin was overseeing the first Five Year Plan; Mayakovsky's *Lef* and *New Lef* had collapsed; and the Association of Proletarian Writers was dictating literary activity. The intensity of the opposition was driven home to the avant-garde by the restraints placed on Mayakovsky; such stifling was generally believed to have triggered his suicide in 1930.

In the same year, *Izvestia* attacked Dovzhenko's *EARTH* as "counterrevolutionary." The film industry was now under the control of Boris Shumyatsky, who discouraged montage experiments and emphasized story and acting. In 1932, the Central



Committee took power over all artistic activity in the U.S.S.R. and decreed that socialist realism was to be the official style of Soviet art. As a result of this, a new kind of Soviet film emerged—what Luda and Jean Schnitzer euphemistically call the “prose films” (as distinct from the “poetry” of classic montage), or in Dwight Macdonald’s more precise name, the “Stalin school.” Between 1932 and 1934, there appeared Ermler and Yutkevich’s *COUNTERPLAN*, Pudovkin’s *A SIMPLE CASE* and *DESERTER*, Kozintsev’s *ALONE*, Dovzhenko’s *IVAN*, and the Vassilev’s *CHAPAYEV*. The victory of socialist realism was made abundantly clear at the January 1935 First Congress of Film Workers, which presented the ugly spectacle of the 1920’s montage masters, in an orgy of confession, promising to repent and in turn denouncing each other for formalism.

Vertov’s position in all this furor seems to have been ambiguous. *THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA* and *ENTHUSIASM* were scarcely socialist realism and prompted even Eisenstein to rap Vertov’s knuckles for “formalist jackstraws and unmotivated camera mischief.” Thus, between 1930 and 1934, Vertov was forced to turn out several essays defending himself against charges of formalism. But Vertov had also once advocated realism of a sort, and *THREE SONGS OF LENIN*, perhaps because it had a clear structure and a sanctified subject, was acceptable to the cultural bureaucrats. A 1935 anniversary volume on the Soviet cinema notes that Vertov was “among the early advocates of Soviet themes,” compares his early work favorably to Kuleshov’s, and congratulates him on *THREE SONGS OF LENIN*. Perhaps the ambivalence of Vertov’s position at this time is best revealed by the ranking of awards concluding the 1935 Film Workers congress: Vertov’s seventeen years of work in the Soviet film industry was rewarded by the Order of the Red Star—far below the honors accorded to the more tractable Vassilevs, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko, but nonetheless a notch above the current pariahs, Eisenstein and Kuleshov.

But even this degree of favor in 1935 doesn’t seem to have benefited Vertov in the long run. In 1937, he made his last independent film, *LULLABY*, another “cine-song,” this time on the theme of motherhood; it is reported to have many of the traits of *THREE SONGS OF LENIN*. After this, he compiled *SERGEI ORDZHONIKIDZE* (1937) and, apparently, made *THREE HEROINES* (1938), a documentary dedicated to women aviators. After struggling to realize several projects, Vertov returned to the craft of his youth—the editing of war newsreel footage. His one large work of the period, *FOR US, THE FRONT!* (1941), was severely cut. From 1946 to his death in 1954 he edited the newsreel *NEWS OF THE DAY*. Few artists of Vertov’s generation opted for the alternatives offered by Mayakovsky’s suicide and Meyerhold’s death in a labor camp; most simply adhered to policy. For Vertov, there was only the quiet humiliation of obscurity. What could be more shameful for the Vertov of the spunky manifestos than cranking out Stalinist newsreels? Writing of himself in the third person, he observed, with both humor and self-pity: “The tragedy of Vertov is that he didn’t know how to grow old.”

From what little of Vertov’s work that is available in the United States today, it is hard to make sound critical judgments; we must simply hope to see more of his films and read more of his writings. But I believe there is already a *prima facie* case for a Vertov reevaluation. His strident manifestos had a crucial effect on the development of Soviet cinema, forcing Kuleshov, Pudovkin, Eisenstein, and the FEX group to work out their own approaches more conscientiously. In a larger context, Vertov’s films represent the successful transference of Constructivist theories from art to the cinema, and his theoretical essays still pose basic questions about film technique and its relation to life and politics. He is a grandfather of *cinéma-vérité*: in the Twenties it was only *KINO-PRAVDA*, the name of a newsreel, but by 1940, he saw it as an autonomous aesthetic method: “By the Kino-Eye, for the Kino-Eye, but with the truth of the means—that is cinema-truth.” His notion of the Radio-Eye (“a means of abolishing distances between men”) anticipates television as a mass medium. And, taking his theories to a fanatically logical conclusion, he envisioned a montage of visual data, acoustic data, tactile data, and olfactory data—what we would call mixed media—which would culminate in universal telepathy, “the stage where we will surprise and record human thoughts.”

Vertov is, in short, one of the first and most intellectually vigorous artists in documentary film. Yet in the end his bloodthirsty polemicism, his technical ingenuity, his visionary prophecies, and his hunger for a scientific registering of reality remained secondary to the lyrical temperament of a poet and a composer. “My complex way,” he explained, “leads in the long run to the same complex simplicity that we find in the smile and the pulse-beat of a child.”

#### DZIGA VERTOV FILMOGRAPHY (1896-1954)

1913-1919 KINONEDELIA (CINEMA WEEKLY), 43 issues. 1919 ANNIVERSARY OF THE REVOLUTION, 12 reels. BATTLE AT TSARITSYN, 3 reels. THE MIRONOV TRIAL, 1 reel. UNSEALING THE RELICS OF SERGEI RADONEZHISKY, 2 reels. 1921 AGIT-TRAIN, 1 reel. 1922 HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR, 13 reels. TRIAL OF THE SOCIALIST-REVOLUTIONARIES, 3 reels. 1923-1925 GOSKINOCALNDAR, 55 issues. KINOPRAVDA, 23 issues. 1924 DAYOSH VOZDUKH, 1 reel. KINO-EYE (LIFE UNAWARES), 6 reels. 1926 STRIDE, SOVIET!, 7 reels. A SIXTH OF THE EARTH, 6 reels. 1928 THE ELEVENTH YEAR, 6 reels. 1929 THE MAN WITH THE MOVIE CAMERA, 6 reels. 1930 SYMPHONY OF THE DON BASIN (ENTHUSIASM), 6 reels. 1934 THREE SONGS ABOUT LENIN, 6 reels. 1937 LULLABY, 7 reels. IN MEMORY OF SERGO ORDZHONIKIDZE, 2 reels. SERGO ORDZHONIKIDZE, 5 reels. 1938 GLORY TO SOVIET HEROINES, 1 reel. THREE HEROINES, 7 reels. 1941 IN THE REGION OF HILL A. BLOOD FOR BLOOD, DEATH FOR DEATH, 1 reel. NEWSREEL CAMERAMEN UNDER FIRE. 1942 FOR YOU, THE FRONT! 5 reels. 1944 IN THE ALA-TAU MOUNTAINS, 2 reels. YOUNG PEOPLE VOW, 3 reels. 1944-1954 NEWS OF THE DAY, 55 issues.



## Brecht in Britain: The Independent Political Film (on *The Nightcleaners*)

Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen

I

To begin with this paper is concerned with situating *The Nightcleaners* in relation to political film-making in this country and in examining the kinds of issues it raises, because one can only really assess the unique contribution *The Nightcleaners* is making towards the development of political cinema in this context. At the beginning of the Brecht Event James Pettifer in his paper posed the central problem for political film making when he pointed to the important formal differences between two proletarian films made under the sponsorship of the German Communist Party – Mutter Krause and Brecht and Dudow's *Kuhle Wampe* – demonstrating precisely in what ways Brecht and Dudow differed in their treatment of the notion of class struggle and class consciousness. While Mutter Krause simply shows that a political force for change exists, Brecht and Dudow attempt to show the methods by which class consciousness itself is changed to achieve the end of the class struggle. In our discussions about Lindsay Anderson yesterday it became very clear that what was at stake was in fact what do we understand by working-class consciousness in terms of the British cinema. Alan Lovell pointed to a certain notion of working-class culture, hypostasised from social reality, unchanging and untouchable, having been an important element in British popular cinema over the past two decades and not to be discounted. Such a view of working-class consciousness is extremely problematic as is the vague 'socialist tradition' so often invoked along with it; both notions should be scrutinised. The whole critique of working-class culture generated by writers like Hoggart, E P Thompson and Williams (although he has transcended the limitations of such a position in recent years) presents it as an organic entity, a monolithic 'positivity', a view which lacks any real sense of contradiction and struggle within working-class consciousness. It is this hermetically closed culture, this corporate class consciousness which has served as a major obstacle to the development of Marxist theory within the Labour Movement and checked the emer-

gence of a hegemonic socialism. In the ideology of Labourism we see not only the authentic heritage of working-class radicalism, but the deadly legacy of utilitarianism, Fabianism and Methodism. The lack of any real critique of these ideological determinations on working-class culture has been wide-ranging in its effects; in terms of British cinema they have led to a kind of utopian idealism on the part not only of film-makers working within the system, like Anderson, but also of those outside it in the political cinema. Too often the problem is posed simply in terms of film as a commodity, and control of the means of production and distribution (the position expressed by Alan Lovell yesterday) and the whole question of film as an ideological product is overlooked. As far as collective political film-making is concerned, since 1968 the practice of political cinema has undergone radical changes; along with the politicisation of younger film-makers has gone a highly eclectic aesthetic development. It is worth looking in detail at some of the assumptions behind such developments because only in this context is the unique contribution of *The Nightcleaners* revealed.

In general terms developments have been intimately linked to a profound ideological reaction to the Hollywood system and to the ownership and control of the television industry, involving a re-discovery of notions of 'human nature', 'freedom' and 'self-expression'. This ideological tendency is, I believe, profoundly misleading and has been a major hindrance to the development of the alternative cinema in general. It has led to the adoption of an essentially defensive stance in relation to the whole question of the constitution of the media past and present and even to its own revolutionary potential. This defensive stance has served to mask many of the problems which revolutionary cinema must face, such as the very fact that mere ideological formulae cannot but produce false solutions to political problems. In 'Constituents of a Theory of Media' (*New Left Review* n 64, November-December 1970), Enzensberger describes this position as resting on the thesis of manipulation – the idea that the media comprise a concrete entity consciously performing a repressive function in society. This renders possible an idealistic belief that there can be such a thing as pure, unmanipulated 'truth' and the posing of a simple solution, ideological in nature, that control of the means of production must of itself serve as some guarantee of revolutionary content. The foremost limitation of the manipulation thesis is that it lacks any adequate theory of what ideology is and how it functions in the film text – how the media as one of the ideological apparatuses of the state inculcate and transmit ideology. Ideology is not a question of conscious ideas circulating in people's heads, but is essentially unconscious in nature, consisting of a system of representations (images, myths, ideas or conceptions about the world) – a structure in which we think and act. In this sense it is inscribed into the very material practices of the cinema; it consists of the



film is to submit oneself to the rules and meanings generated by classic Hollywood cinema and by television documentary, for it is these dominant cultural modes which have set the standards of visual literacy and readability for us. Thus, in this sense, to work outside the system is still to work in all important respects within its reflection; all artistic production is a struggle within ideology. In his essay on the classic realist text (*Screen* v 15 n 2, Summer 1974), Colin MacCabe described one of the fundamentally reactionary practices of the classic realist cinema as precisely the petrification of the spectator in a position of pseudo-dominance offered by the metalanguage – a higher degree of abstraction which speaks the truth of the other discourses in the film text. This metalanguage, resolving as it does all contradiction, places the spectator outside the realm of struggle, ultimately outside the realm of meaningful action altogether. The metalanguage offers to the spectator a point of view which is both self-evident and unproblematic and is presented as a sufficient basis for struggle. The dominance of the metalanguage not only characterises most classic realist film texts made within the system, but most of those made outside it.

In Britain collective film-making practice, despite its achievements (which have been considerable), has been particularly affected not only by the manipulation thesis and the assumptions of the classic realist text, but also by wider political misconceptions about the nature of working-class culture. A persistent limitation has been, on the one hand, a militant economism which sees the control of the means of production as a sufficient guarantee of revolutionary content, and an ultra-leftist idealism which poses the notion of working-class consciousness as the sole basis for struggle. Political cinema has been seen primarily in agit-prop terms – the instrumental means by which the 'voice of the people' can be heard. Ideology is seen as a monolith propagated by the bourgeoisie through the media to manipulate and deceive the masses, who are a monolith too. For instance *Cinema Action* has concentrated on documenting workers' struggles (UCS, the dockers etc) from an essentially workerist perspective; *Liberation Films*, a community-based group, on the other hand, has concentrated on more populist, grass-roots struggles within local communities, taking up a liberal/social-democratic stance, while the newly-formed *Newsreel Collective* are developing an ultra-leftist variant of this position. What characterises all these films is their dependence on *cinéma-vérité* forms which purport to capture the world as it 'really is'. The effect of such a form of realism is to convey the impression of a homogeneous world – a false sense of continuity and coherence reinforced by identification: the impression that truth can indeed be manifest out there in the visible world. It embodies a belief in what Christian Metz has called 'the innocence of the image, which is somehow mysteriously exempt from connotation'. This unprob-

lematic, immediate transparency of the image (discussed by Stephen Heath in relation to the photograph), legitimised by synchronous speech, constitutes a behaviourist strategy aimed at producing the impression that individuals and groups participate in some mythical unity of consciousness. Such a simple reproduction of reality tells us nothing about that reality – the real forces in operation – and yet it produces in the spectator the effect of reality, a reality from which contradiction and struggle have been eliminated.

The best films of this kind – for instance *The Miners' Film* made by *Cinema Action* which is being shown at the festival and the London Women's Film Group's *Women of the Rhondda* – while working within the assumptions of the classic realist text and subscribing to a mythical unity of consciousness, do succeed in a real sense in exploring the strengths of 'proletarian positivity' and provide at least some basis for struggle in that they help provide an understanding of the past and set up one central contradiction: between the dominant discourse of the time and that of the film text itself. In this way they are progressive in a limited, short-term sense. At worst, augmented by commentary and glib slogans, films of this kind can deny the reality of contradiction altogether (eg the *Newsreel Collective's* film on abortion) and simply present a view to be consumed by the viewer. *The Nightcleaners* is a film which radically challenges the assumptions behind this practice of cinema and is undoubtedly the most important political film to have been made in this country.

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the film it is worth saying a few words about its relation to the whole question of feminism. Feminism and how one analyses patriarchy have posed a persistent problem for the vulgar Marxist notion of ideology, and it is significant that it has been in films such as *The Nightcleaners* and *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* made by the London Women's Film Group which have had to confront the contradiction between sexism and class struggle that the limitations of the vulgar Marxist position have been transcended from an absolute necessity, as it were. For Marxist-Feminists the nightcleaners' campaign raised fundamental issues of both a theoretical and practical nature, some of which *The Nightcleaners* examines in detail; most importantly, the relationship between sexual oppression and class exploitation. In addition, the predominantly middle-class composition of the Women's Liberation Movement and the 'socialist tradition', especially the trade-union movement. The feminist intervention redefines what we mean by class struggle, and in this respect, *The Nightcleaners* offers an important contribution.

## II

Our descriptive analysis is divided into two parts, corresponding



to the two main subjects of the film: the analysis of a process of struggle and the cinematic presentation of that analysis.

#### A. First level of dialecticisation

The first image of the film presents us with an extremely grainy closeup of a woman's face, with the titles diagonally traversing the frame. The image itself has a jerky, stop-motion movement. This opening shot draws attention to the codes associated with mechanical reproduction and iconicity, ie to the transforming/productive role of camera and processing techniques at play in the cinematic construction of a film text. One of the basic materials for the construction of a film being precisely iconic images, this opening in effect foregrounds the fact that these images are in no way 'natural' or 'real', but the product of a work of constructive transformation. Moreover, the graininess, the nature of the close up and the jerky motion all emphasise that the 'recorded' image itself has been worked on: the shot does not 'scan the face of a woman', it scans the image of the face of a woman, resulting in a new, different image, setting up a tension between the image obtained through the process of mechanical reproduction (first transformation) and that same image re-worked (second transformation), to some extent broken down back into its component elements. In short, the opening shot proposes two elements: the image together with the process of image construction.

This shot is followed by a shot of a clapper board and a woman talking on the telephone, immediately followed by a re-take of that shot. This arrangement, emphasising discontinuity and repetition, introduces another crucial aspect of text construction: editing. Instead of being drawn into the film by means of 'invisible' editing or by a logical succession of shots, the discontinuity and repetition focus attention on the very fact that the sequential arrangement of images is neither accidental nor self-evident, but a strategy involving exclusions and selections.

These same two shots also introduce the notion of the construction of the sound track, partly by referring to the function of a clapper board (synchronisation of sound and image) and partly by the sudden violent eruption of sound into the silence of the opening. In this instance, the reader is prevented from considering the sound as somehow naturally emanating from the image and the construction of the sound track itself is underlined instead. These shots also introduce still another element into the text: they foreground the relation between the image and the pro-filmic event, ie between the act of filming and that which is filmed.

It would appear therefore that the first few shots of the film provide a concise but complex (de)construction of the very process of film-making.

At this point, a second set of images emerges, relating to the work performed by the nightcleaners and the conditions under

which that work is carried out. The analytical-descriptive presentation of this work interacts with the presentation of the cinematic work necessary for the construction of a film text, the co-presence of these two work processes resulting in a mutual transformation: whereas the cinematic process was dominant initially and drew attention to itself only, the meanings produced by the foregrounding of these codes and processes alter when seen in context of the work performed by the cleaners – for example, the discontinuities and repetitions acquire a different connotation when applied to the gestures of the women; but the meanings produced by the images of women at work also change, because they are caught up in a process of cinematic construction/re-presentation – for example, certain aspects of their work, attitudes, etc are re-arranged to bring out their most salient and relevant features. This dual process of transformation constitutes the first level of dialecticisation of the film.

Into these sets of images, a new device intervenes: sections of black spacing break up the flow of images. Initially, from a cinematic point of view, the black spacing re-focusses our attention on the editing work, but the alternation between image/black spacing/image, etc also serves as an analogy for the composition of the image band itself, for this consists of a series of separate images. The 'blind spots' between them, normally invisible because both camera and projector are designed to create the illusion of a continuous flow of images, are re-introduced by the marked interruption of groups of images. However, the device has more important functions than this. In the more usual forms of cinema, the filmed world (the diegesis) is presented to us as a coherent, homogeneous whole, precisely because of the apparently uncoded transparent form of text construction relying heavily on the powers of analogical representation. Every corner of the frame is 'filled up'. There are no gaps or absences in it. This illusion of homogeneity banishes contradiction from the frame, as the frame precisely forms the boundary of a plenitude which is the image. The insertion of black spacing destroys this imaginary plenitude, re-creating gaps in the text and shattering the diegetic homogeneity, thus re-introducing contradiction into the frame. Yet another connotation of this particular device is the impression it produces of 'obliterated, absent images', perhaps even impossible images, in the sense that there are important aspects of any social process which cannot be filmed. Images never present the reality of a situation, only its phenomenal surface, and even that only in a fragmentary form. In this film, not only is the illusion of a diegetic homogeneity dispelled, but also the idea that reality itself is available in the form of a homogeneous surface waiting to be filmed. Finally, perhaps the most significant aspect of the black spacing is that it allows the reader time and together provides the reader with an incentive to think. Indeed, it seems inevitable that when



a reader is suddenly confronted with such inserts, this should produce the questions Why? and Why here? These are in fact the questions the reader must ask and attempt to answer in order to construct the coherence of the film for him or herself. It is therefore also imperative that the black-spacing device be repeated regularly throughout the film, because, as it progresses, there is the ever present threat or temptation to become immersed in/submerged by the flow of images. This repeated breaking of the flow is one of the most essential aspects of political film-making (allowing the reader to construct a critical reading of the text as it unfolds, and not to sweep him or her along on a stream of emotionality). However, although very effective, the insertion of black spacing is by no means the only possible way of achieving this, as is demonstrated by Straub/Huillet's insertion of the car journeys through Rome in *History Lessons*.

To sum up this first part of the analysis: the initial images of the film present (a) the fact of cinematic construction (a layer of recurring devices which will run throughout the entire text) and (b) the outline of the socio-political situation of the nightcleaners, ie the basis of the struggle. Moreover, the relation between (a) and (b) is also brought to our attention, that is, precisely, the problem of the 'representation of a struggle' in cinematic terms.

#### B. Second level of dialecticisation

This level depicts the social forces at work in the struggle, and their development during the period covered by the film. It proceeds by orchestrating a series of discourses in struggle: the real object of the film becomes the charting of the shifting relations between these discourses, each representing a political/ideological position within the social formation and caught up within its dynamic. In this context the term 'discourse' is being somewhat loosely used to refer to series of signifiers, distributed across various materials of expression which, taken together, outline the space of a particular position outside the discourse. It is the struggle between these positions, the shifting pattern of antagonisms, oppositions and alliances which form the object of the film at this level.

##### 1. The discourse of the nightcleaners.

As the film progresses, the mode of inscription of this discourse changes from the spoken enunciation of their initial situation, predominantly presented in the form of sync-sound interviews providing the reader with information, towards images of women listening, their comments on the developments within and issues raised by the struggle being presented in voice-off. The change from immediate expression to learning, listening and drawing conclusions is underlined by means of a change in the mode of inscription, a strategy which introduces the first of the three learn-

ing processes which structure the text: the learning process experienced by the women in struggle.

One particular aspect of this discourse, the importance of which cannot be stressed enough, decisively distinguishes this film from more conventional political films. It avoids the trap of presenting the working class as an ideologically homogeneous bloc and focusses on its internal contradictions as well: eg the woman who continues to do night work even though it is likely to kill her, not because she cannot afford daycare facilities but because she doesn't trust anybody else with her children (the ideology of the family at work with tragic results).

##### 2. The discourse of women's liberation.

This discourse undergoes a linear development, from a position totally divorced from the struggle to a position where it assumes the role of the union (with all the contradictions and problems that such a position entails for a movement which is not – as yet – really geared to fulfil such a function). From isolated voice-off, this discourse gradually draws nearer to the focus of the struggle until finally, after a period of practical involvement, it emerges as the main organisational force. The most important point about this discourse is that it too presents a learning process, developing alongside that of the nightcleaners, converging with it and changing as a function of it.

The first intervention in this series is the voice-over towards the beginning of the film, discussing women's conditioning. However, this statement appears to lack any real connection with the images at that particular point, and intervenes as an intrusion. The second instance of that discourse, discussing women's sexuality, again appears divorced from the reality of the struggle. However, it is immediately followed by images which do establish links: the point about the sexual exploitation of women for the purposes of capitalism is echoed in an image of a nightcleaner, framed in a lit window, forming a frame within a frame and evoking, amongst other things, the aesthetic inscription of the 'image' of woman as spectacle. Moreover, this image is followed by a sequence in which two women talk about the destructive results their exhausting working conditions have had on their emotional as well as their sex lives. In this way, the links between the two discourses are suggested, although still in a roundabout way. The next intervention presents the leafleting activities of the women's movement, which is one step closer to the reality of the struggle, although still largely ineffective (as the women point out themselves). Gradually, the representatives of the women's movement become more closely identified with the struggle, a shift in their position underscored by the fact that their discourse is now presented in the form of images with sync-sound, discussing strategy and practical organisation, culminating in their assumption of the duties



of a trade union, supporting to the best of their ability a full-time officer (May Hobbs).

3. The discourse of the film-makers.

By this we do not mean the discourse of the film-makers as 'authors', but only those interventions which are directly denoted in the film itself. Initially, the film-makers are present as voice-off, asking basic questions about wages and conditions, ie as passive recipients of information. As the film progresses, they appear as more and more involved with the struggle until towards the end of the film they are discussing theoretical issues and aspects of socialism with the nightcleaners.

4. The discourse of the employer.

This discourse is carried by a small number of people and changes in the space of the film only from a straightforward authoritarian position to a social-democratic, manipulative one. This change appears to occur under the pressure of the struggle (threat of unionisation) and in the context of the requirements of capitalist competition between small employers and big ones: a 'good' and 'responsible' union may help an employer to eliminate his weaker competitors. It is also interesting to note that there are a series of signifiers distributed across the film denoting the absence or elusiveness of the representatives of the employers (petty officials). The radical separation between employer and worker is not only underlined by 'absent' mediators, but also by the fact that the 'discourse' of the employer has to be brought to the cleaners in the form of a tape recording!

5. The discourse of the spokeswoman of the nightcleaners.

As the struggle develops, the discourse of the nightcleaners splits into two: that of the cleaners themselves and that of their spokeswoman (May Hobbs). She functions as the direct antagonist to the discourse of the employer. Her discourse evolves from a total immersion in a mass struggle (her speech at the Trafalgar Square meeting) towards total isolation from that struggle, as a result of organisational difficulties and a series of other pressures. Towards the end of the film, she is seen sitting alone in the frame, biting her nails, against a blank background. In order to understand how this has come about, it is necessary to chart the progress of the discourse of May Hobbs in relation to that of the unions, that of women's liberation, that of the nightcleaners and of the publicity media.

6. The discourse of the unions.

This discourse is inscribed in two forms: one verbal (union representatives talking), the other processional (demonstrations and marches). As far as the nightcleaners' struggle is concerned, both activities appear unhelpful, to say the least. The union is also the main carrier of the discourse of sexism (see below): eg the union

man paternalistically wagging his finger while laying down the law to a group of women; the two workers dancing together, connoting an explicit exclusion of women from their activities. The issues put forward in this discourse acutely pose the problem of the limitations of Labourism and its relation to the real interests of the working class: eg the women saying they vote Labour because 'it is the only Party for the working class'. Whether because of their organisational inertia or because of a strategic unwillingness to support the nightcleaners at that time, the result of the unions' lack of effective support is to create a vacuum filled by the representatives of the women's movement. But as that movement is not really geared for such a function, the cleaners' spokeswoman, May Hobbs, comes to lack a secure base, and in the end finds herself isolated largely because of the nature and the configuration of the discourses surrounding her.

7. There are also isolated interventions by various political figures and other observers such as the bourgeois media. The main function of these interventions, apart from placing the struggle in a wider political context, is to provide one more essential piece of information regarding May Hobbs' situation at the end of the film. The main point about the publicity media is made by the women's movement: the danger that certain aspects of the struggle will be incorporated into the capitalist spectacle: the film shows May Hobbs getting caught up in this process of incorporation, a factor which substantially contributes to her final isolation, as do the interventions by professionals in the arena of 'political' spectacle (eg Audrey Wise).

8. All seven of the previous discourses together act as a carrier for the discourse of sexism (particularly evident in the union-discourse), spanning across the entire text, sometimes explicitly, sometimes in the form of an unspoken problem (eg in the employers' discourse). The inscription of the ideology of sexism is diffuse and fragmented because it does not relate exclusively to any single discourse or political/ideological position, but pervades a large number of them.

9. Throughout the film, a series of other devices punctuate the text. One such element is the repeated return of shots of women working in total isolation, at night, in big empty office blocks, suggesting that, although the struggle is going on and a large number of people are learning valuable political lessons, the cleaners are still working under appalling conditions. A fact which bears repeating. Another consistent feature of the film is its treatment of the individual workers, which one might call Brechtian in the sense that each worker is shown not only as a member of a class, sharing many characteristics with other members of that class, but also as an individual with more than just class characteristics. Finally, another punctuating device is worth noting: the use



of what Brecht called 'quotable gestures', such as the (slow motion) gestures of the black woman hovering an office, the wagging finger of the trade-union representative, etc.

### C.1

None of these discourses in fact contains the truth of any of the others; none stands in a metalinguistic position vis-à-vis the others. On the contrary, each develops as a function of the discourses surrounding it. Moreover, each is tied directly to the concrete situation in which it occurs, to the historical phase of the struggle, and each is determined by the dynamic of that struggle. It is the viewer/reader who has to read the pattern of relations between the discourses and thus produce his or her own critical reading of that struggle. This means that the double learning process inscribed in the film (discourses 1 and 2) must be matched by a learning process in the viewer/reader, ie the learning processes forming the focus of the film must be completed by a corresponding learning, cognitive process in the reader.

It appears then that the structuring pattern of the film is provided by a double movement: on the one hand, there is the triple learning process contained within and produced by the interaction of the multiplicity of voices and which is shown to characterise this particular phase of the nightcleaners' struggle; on the other hand, there is the dialectic between the cleaners' work and the film-makers' work as manifested in the tensions and transformations at play between the filmic and cinematic codes described earlier. The relation between these two processes is itself a dialectical one; there is, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, a 'constant dialectic between the action which is shown . . . and the attitude of showing an action', which may be transformed to read: there is a constant dialectic between the learning process depicted and the depiction of a learning process.

### C.2

In the present cultural context in Great Britain, *The Nightcleaners* figures as the most accomplished example of political cinema. But it would be wrong to assume that a mechanical repetition of its procedures is all that is now required. All elements present in the film are directly linked to the specificity of that particular phase of that particular struggle. The presentation of any other struggle would necessarily involve other 'discourses' and therefore different relations between discourses, and would not necessarily revolve around the learning processes dramatised in this film. This makes *The Nightcleaners* a unique text constructed according to the basic principle that historical events must be presented dialectically and that 'the point is to change it'. It is this very principle which also guided Brecht's theatre practice/theory and which dictated the devices he would use in any given circumstances.

However, I think that in relation to this film, it would be point-

less to talk of 'Brechtian influences', or of a conscious application of Brechtian devices. By asking the same questions Brecht asked about the mode of representation of a political struggle, the film-makers are impelled towards a re-invention of certain techniques, procedures and representational devices, pioneered by Brecht.

### III

*The Nightcleaners* raises important issues for the development of political cinema in this country; if we take it seriously, it could provide a basis for a new direction in British film-making. At the same time, we think there are enormous problems involved – real barriers to such a development. In the first place, the lack of a critique of ideology and the state has been a persistent shortcoming of British film-making since Grierson, as Alan Lovell points out in *Studies in Documentary*. Grierson's essentially pragmatic stance saw no contradiction involved in making films about social reform within the context of state sponsorship, and one can see how his ideas in many ways affected the development of the 'free cinema' movement. On the other hand, attempts at making a radical break with this structure in the 1930's in the work of such people as Ivor Montagu, the Progressive Film Institute and the alternative 16mm distribution network Kino (despite their obvious interest as prototypes for alternative film-making practice today) tended to assume a retrograde and moralistic stance towards the whole question of the popular nature of the cinema, seeing the mass audience as drugged by an oppressive, monolithic cultural product into a uniform passivity.

Collective film-making groups could offer the possibility of a radical break with the social relations not only of production, but also of consumption, and it is only if these social relations are tackled at one and the same time that the retrograde aspects of the manipulation thesis can be successfully combatted. The analysis of film as an ideological product as well as a commodity means that it is necessary to work at the level of the social relations into which the cinema is inscribed in order to achieve a different constitution of the subject in terms of ideology. At the level of production, collective work, as Brecht observed, paves the way for an entirely different notion of artistic production and radically challenges assumptions about the artist in bourgeois society. But as Colin MacCabe pointed out earlier this week, collective work should not be simply defined as groups making democratic decisions, because the code of authorship comprises only one element in the totality of the film text. Brecht, as has been pointed out, did not in fact develop a theory of collective work in relation to independent cinema; nevertheless he did offer us one insight.



which is that it can only be really productive in terms of the kind of knowledge it produces. The practice of film-making involves, in these terms, not only control of the means of production but a struggle in ideology. At the level of consumption, showings of films in the women's movement and on the Left in general should be orientated much more towards challenging the artificial division between work, which is 'productive', and leisure which is seen exclusively in relation to consumption. New social relations of consumption for political cinema would involve creating a situation in which the viewer is not only able to participate, but is required to do so. The act of filming and the act of viewing comprise two moments of equal value, neither having priority over the other; just as the film-makers produce the film text, so the viewer must work on the film text – to achieve the process of meaning-production which is the film. It is particularly important that this work is carried out on the Left and in the women's movement at the present time, where political film is seen in the most functional and/or philistine terms and where the critique of film as an ideological product is almost totally absent. The kind of accompaniment of film which prevails at present involves using films as an excuse to discuss 'political issues'. Here it is the film itself which is seen as the 'political issue'.

A radical change in the social relations of production and of consumption at one and the same time highlights one final, central problem which is, of course, the present very sharp divide between political film-makers and film theorists. Our present mutual distrust is based on internalised remnants of the good old bourgeois distinction between 'doers' and 'thinkers'; the notion of the film-maker and the viewer both having an equal part to play in the process of text production offers some way out of this ideological impasse and moves towards the notion of a generalised activity of reading/writing as a pleasure/knowledge-producing process.

## Discussion

Y: Could you clarify how the film was received?

Claire Johnston: On the whole it's been very badly received in the women's movement, especially perhaps by women who were very much involved in the campaign and saw the film originally as a campaign film. It was initially intended to be made in a cinéma-vérité manner (which produces rather interesting formal effects in that it's shot in one way and at the editing stage it was transformed into something else), there was a very close involvement between

the film-makers and women's liberation, and there were expectations that it would be a useful campaign film for the nightcleaners' struggle, but in terms of conventional notions of agit-prop, of course, the film didn't fulfil those needs at all.

Paul Willeman: Most of the real objections came from people not involved in cultural struggle at any level, people who tend to see their actions as interventions in economic struggles: the militant Left in general. I have very little information about the reception in the working class, but there would presumably be ideological difficulties, at least initially.

Y: Who would the campaign film have been shown to if the initial plan had in fact been carried out?

CJ: The purpose of the campaign film was to make money for the campaign and to generate interest and discussion about the issues within the women's movement and on the left in general. The idea was to make a film very rapidly in the manner of the News-reel Collective now, who aim to make about a film a month, and to use that film as the abortion film has been used in the abortion campaign. Such films are seen as having a very short life, and being used for very specific purposes – a very functional, instrumental notion of cinema.

Y: Isn't it possible to combine both processes into one by filming in a cinéma-vérité way for use in a campaign, and then cutting something more culturally meaningful afterwards, using the same material?

CJ: That's a question of the work involved in making even the simplest film. The Berwick Street Collective work full-time at film-making, where most of the other groups, the Women's Film Group for example, can only do it in their spare time, and even the Berwick Street Collective have to do commercial work to support their political activities.

PW: But there are also serious ideological problems involved in the cinéma-vérité method with its ideology of transparency. To make a quick film like that might do more harm than good.

Martin Walsh: In your opening remarks about the nature of cinematic discourse itself, you said that in *The Nightcleaners* we are made aware of it at various levels. I agree that is so in the opening, but it seemed to reach a stasis very quickly, and the freeze-frames and slow motion later in the film seemed to me at least to sentimentalise and romanticise the issues in a manner reminiscent of the German New Objectivity of the 1920's or the Dorothea Lang/Eugene Smith photography of poverty. There's a high-angle close-up of the face of a cleaner in which her eyes gradually close in resignation. It's so emotionally loaded that it begins to eliminate the level that is there in the opening scenes.

PW: First of all, there is, as Claire pointed out, a tension in the film between the humanism and sentimentality involved in shoot-



ing cinéma-vérité and its transformation by other cinematic procedures. As for the sentimentality, which I would rather call emotion, in that particular shot, there is nothing inherently evil in having a certain emotion and identification provided it doesn't carry away the rest of the film. In this case, I don't think it does carry it away precisely because of the formal procedures which have been used to transform this essentially cinéma-vérité shot and the political weight put on it which is that of a contradiction for the working class. The sentiment is generated by the fact that you know she is going to die because of that contradiction.

MW: But there's a lack of any commentary on that when the image occurs, and such images occur at many points. You can't take a photograph and just leave it there, it needs some kind of commentary to clarify the meaning.

PW: I think the commentary on that meaning is precisely its insertion in a continuing series of shifting discourses. Its commentary is its political weight, the political load it carries. The sentimentality or emotion is a surplus. There is a humanist overtone, precisely because the film was shot in a cinéma-vérité style, but that is criticised because the cinéma-vérité has been dismantled.

CJ: That tension has been interpreted rather differently within the women's movement, where that manipulation of the image has been seen as an attempt to objectify women, ie as going against identification, towards objectification.

P: You talked about the black spacing between the images as one of the formal structures that criticise this use of the image. But the black spacing throws a great deal of weight on the image it surrounds, emphasising the absence of commentary. Where I thought this was most crucial was in the use of images of the family and children, which were given great weight as images but went uncriticised.

PW: Who were you expecting to criticise them? Those images of the family do have the connotations of family ideology, and this is linked to the other image we have been discussing, but it is one of the objects of the film to provoke the audience to criticise some of its images, as you are doing now. There are also wrong images in it.

C: The film started out visually as an agit-prop film and then through a radical reorganisation and distortion became a kind of theoretical film. Do you see this as a model for future production? Is it possible to conceive of films, perhaps for another kind of audience, that accept the tension between agit-prop and theory, or must theoretical films be made first and political films only later?

PW: In answer to your question I'd like to refer to a film which I would really call theoretical, rather than *The Nightcleaners*, and that is *Penthesilea*. That is a film which deals precisely with the theoretical problems of cinematic construction and the ideology

of patriarchy. *The Nightcleaners* does raise theoretical issues when compared with the dominant mode of making political films today, but it is not primarily concerned with those issues. The problem is whether a primarily political film of this type can proceed on these, for want of a better word, avant-garde notions of cinematic construction. I think it's an absolute necessity that it be tried, because at present I do not see any other form within British political film-making that counters the ideology of immediacy and transparency which is central to the notion of a coherent working class ideology, ie to workerism. I hope it is the first in a long and fruitful line. But obviously there are all the initial difficulties. Additional information and theory have to be supplied, at least initially, until the form has become a habit. But the primary function of *The Nightcleaners* is to create political knowledge. As far as I'm concerned I have learnt a lot about the politics of the nightcleaners' struggle from the film.

S: The most significant thing you seem to be saying about the film in the end, though, is that it's made in Britain. A lot of the claims you are making for its formal properties, and even to a certain extent about the way it presents the woman question, can be made for Godard's films. *Pravda* or *Le Gai savoir* or *Tout va bien* contain the techniques you have been discussing and the concerns you are articulating; the only significant difference about *The Nightcleaners* is the fact that it was made in Britain. Isn't that somewhat nationalistic?

CJ: It's not nationalistic. We're making an intervention in British film culture, and the last section of the Brecht Event is about the relevance or not of Brecht in Britain. As Alan pointed out yesterday, there is a tendency to look across the Channel for all one's cultural references. British cinema does present real problems, its conservatism must be confronted, and also the limitations posed by the lack of Marxist theory. The point about Brecht is that he came from a very vital Marxist tradition. You don't have that tradition here.

PW: I would agree that there are a lot of formal procedures which are very similar to those used by Godard, but it's very striking that some people who had been involved in the nightcleaners' struggle and had adored Godard as a great universal artist violently objected to *The Nightcleaners* applying those things at home. They were OK so long as they were exotically artistic over the Channel, but not once the point was a concrete analysis of a concrete situation that they were actively involved in and that they had to learn something about. And there is a crucial difference between this film and all Godard's, and that is the very fact that we talk about Godard. Even the Dziga Vertov Group is just a super-auteur; the notion of the individual artist is still at work. In *The Nightcleaners*, there is no artistic auteur at all.

Alan Lovell: I was puzzled by your use of 'discourse', which you



said was rather loose, and wasn't clear in what way you were using it, unless it was to cover up a problem about the author of the film. As I see it, your use of 'discourse' gives a sense that the film consists of various things that happen independently, there's a point outside the things actually occurring: there are some six 'discourses' playing in the film, all of which are independent and don't come from any central point. But it seems to me that you can't evade the fact that those discourses are always the work of a film-maker, whether it's a particular person, a collective or whatever. Even the fact that discourses are selected implies some point of choice. One thing that's quite striking in *The Nightcleaners* is the absence of any discourse about racialism, despite the presence of black cleaners and a very curious appearance of Indians on the anti-industrial-relations-act march shouting 'Heath out!'. That is a choice of the film-makers. There's a very definite point of view at work in the film.

PW: It was your own decision to set about constructing the author from the text after the event. Isn't that a politically dubious way of proceeding, the very fact that you should decide to do that?

AL: My point is to emphasise that these choices are being made, not to disguise it.

PW: One can criticise not so much the choice of images, but the political implications of the way the struggle has been represented, the framings, the elements present and so on. That is not at all to feel the need to have to attribute them to a source, to the subject that put them there in the first place.

AL: Let me put my point in another way. You say that there is no metalanguage, whereas essentially I'm arguing that there is.

Ben Brewster: No, there is certainly a standpoint, and Brecht always insisted that you couldn't produce any distance from the various typical actions in a work without making that work from a determinate standpoint, meaning of course a Marxist-Leninist standpoint. But that doesn't constitute it into an overarching discourse which relativises each of the subsidiary discourses, measures their truth and untruth.

AL: But there is a choice, a very important political choice, of the women's movement as against racialism.

BB: Yes, but that's rather like what we were saying about *If . . .* yesterday: you can attack that film on the grounds that it shouldn't have been made about a public school. In exactly the same way one might (of course I'm not) produce a critique of *The Nightcleaners* saying that it attacked the wrong problems, that the wrong discourses have been isolated. But again you could only do that from a specific political position.

Z: How is the film in fact being distributed?

Berwick Street Collective: As Claire said earlier, the film doesn't fulfil the messianic functions the organised Left – the Communist

Party, the International Socialists, the International Marxist Group, etc – require of a film. Our struggle is in a sense as much with the Left as it is with the film-making tradition we come from. The distribution will largely have to rest with us, for we have to struggle with the Left's notion, for example, of what the working class will understand, what they mean by understanding. If somebody doesn't understand something, and if in the middle of a viewing someone gets up and says, 'I'm bored to tears with this', we the film-makers have to be there to discuss it. The film isn't meant to be shown with everybody unanimously understanding it, it offers itself to be argued with. The film encourages argument, which the Left don't particularly like in a meeting. So we have to fight with them. At the moment it is a losing battle. The short term validity of agit-prop films at the moment is the fact that in a period when the revolutionary movement is at an extremely low ebb, you can send them by rail to someone who knows nothing about them but picks them up and shows them that evening to an audience which has no preparation for those particular films, and a certain minimum amount of information is conveyed and enthusiasm generated. The problems presented by a film like *The Nightcleaners* which demands so much energy and effort from the people who see it can't be resolved within the confines of that practice. It presupposes the development of an understanding of film on the part both of the people who are to see it and on that of the people who wish it to be seen. Whether in a few years time this is a film one would want to show is very much open to doubt, but it does pose a question about how films are seen at the moment.

S: But it is in fact distributed like that. I booked the film from the Other Cinema and they just put it on a train addressed to me.

Berwick Street Collective: The question is who are you, how did you hear about the film, and what was it that brought you to the point of asking to see that film? Did you go through the Other Cinema catalogue and decide by the title, well, I shall see that film because I like the subject, or had you heard something about it, or were you involved in the nightcleaners' struggle?

S: I work in a college of education and booked it in the context of studying documentary film-making.

Berwick Street Collective: Well, that's a very different notion of looking at films from that of most political audiences or film-makers.

CJ: That underlines the fact that there is a gulf between radicalism in film criticism, which already at this moment has a place in the educational structures, and radicalism in film practice. Trying to bridge that gulf is a massive problem in its own right. It is at the moment easier to use *The Nightcleaners* in film education than in any other way. That's not to invalidate talking about Brecht within an educational context, of course, but there remains the problem of bringing that discussion closer to film-making. That was one of the aims of an enterprise like this seminar.