

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Brothers

The selling of George Jackson

by Kate Ellis

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George Jackson might have been just another victim of institutional racism had not one of the largest paperback publishers in the country brought out his letters in 1970, at the height of the anti-war movement. His own account of the transformation of a gun-happy adolescent into a committed revolutionary made Jackson a culture hero for many blacks and much of the white left. *BROTHERS*, which purports to bring this hero onto the larger-than-life screen, raises important questions about the viability of using the vast resources of the bourgeois film industry for transmitting ideas that are specifically subversive to the class that controls that industry. Angela Davis, whose relationship to Jackson constitutes the "romantic interest" in the film, has defended it as "a mass cultural phenomenon, about how to sensitize people about the need to get involved with a movement." [\[1\]](#)

Presumably Edward and Mildred Lewis, who wrote and produced this film, share this assessment with her. But given the built-in pressures created by the enormous production costs of Hollywood films, the likelihood of cooptation is clearly much greater in the film industry than in the publishing business. *BROTHERS* serves as a good illustration of this point inasmuch as the Lewises, in making their film, have chosen to sacrifice most of Jackson's politics in order to sell the part they felt to have the widest appeal, which may in fact be the part with which they themselves felt able. How this dilution is realized on the screen is the subject of this review

The Lewises have used the conventions of two different kinds of films in order to attract two very different audiences. First, there is the blaxploitation film, one of the legacies of a militant movement for which Jackson spoke. Insofar as these films portray black men and women confronting the white power structure and winning, they project positive images of black people. At the same time, by reducing racism to a simple black/good-white/bad dichotomy, these positive images work to mask the nature of racism under capitalism. The Lewises seem also to have

pitched their film at white liberals, whose sense of outrage did much to fuel the Civil Rights and antiwar movements. But though outrage can lead to an understanding of the necessity for class struggle, it can also lead to a politics that seeks social change by making those presently in power feel guilty. Neither black pride nor moral outrage is inherently pro-capitalist, but when put together in the way the Lewises have done it, that is the message that comes across.

To achieve this end, Jackson's life before he went to prison had to be completely eliminated from the screen. David Thomas, the George Jackson character, is an adult in the film, whereas in actuality Jackson was eighteen when he received his one-year-to-life sentence. Thus the pastoral opening shots, in which an adult David is shooting rabbits with his younger brother and a friend, serve to dissociate the film's hero from any taint of juvenile delinquency. In *Soledad Brother* Jackson mentions that he spent summers during his grade school years with his grandparents in rural Illinois, and did enjoy shooting rabbits then. But he makes it quite clear that these innocent pursuits were a thing of the past by the time he began serving time in jail. Since the blaxploitation hero is generally a conscious product of the inner city, this alteration of biographical fact would seem to be aimed at heightening the outrage of the liberal audience while letting it keep its comfortable distance from a law-and-order stand on crime in the streets.

The scenes that follow, depicting the circumstances that lead up to the hero's incarceration, continue this whitewashing of Jackson's past. In actuality there was no question about his having robbed a gas station. In the film David and his friend pull into a gas station and we watch the friend rob the attendant behind a distant plate glass window, followed by David's dismayed response to the stolen money. In the next shot the friend has disappeared and David is in a courtroom with his entire family, who insist that he has never run afoul of the law. An aging white hack lawyer persuades all of them that David should cop a plea, that is, accept a light sentence instead of going to trial, and off he goes to jail. We never see the friend again.

Given white feelings around the subject of juvenile delinquency, a penal system that dealt in this way with an adolescent with the kind of record Jackson had amassed by the time of his final arrest would be too ambiguous to generate the level of outrage the Lewises must have felt they needed to make their point. So instead they show us the incarceration of a man who was an innocent bystander at a robbery, a man who has reached his late twenties without being touched by the strong arm of the law. His only "fault," then, would seem to be that he is black. Such racism is so blatant that it can arouse rage without pointing beyond itself to the rest of society. To intensify this racism the Lewises keep the rest of society out of the movie. Thus there is no mention in the script of those aspects of life outside the prison by which "Blackmen born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison." [\[2\]](#) Liberal benevolence will not change these conditions, whereas it can (and does

by the end of the movie) end an isolated case of racism that is divorced from its context and presented to us in this film.

The prison itself and the portrayal of the prisoners in it are examples of how the Lewises distort reality in order to appeal to a black audience. Rather than using a California jail, where prisoners would be overwhelmingly black and chicano, the Lewises chose the North Dakota State Penitentiary, where there are normally very few black prisoners. This also explains why the white prisoners all look like refugees from DELIVERANCE. The blacks, outnumbered by the white prisoners two to one, are mostly actors, whereas the white majority are mostly actual prisoners, and they have clearly not been selected for their charm in front of a camera. Thus when David decides to sit in the front section of the prison auditorium, and thus do for jails what Rosa Parks did for busses, the ensuing melee is clearly a matter of a small band of "good guys" overwhelmed by a bunch of neanderthals.

By setting up this clear dichotomy, the film does engage, for different reasons, the sympathies of both audiences. But in the process of doing so, it suggests that white prisoners are antisocial bastards who deserve the dehumanization, lack of privacy, and inedible food that prison life entails, and that only the black prisoners are victims of social injustice and racism. THE LONGEST YARD, a less politically ambitious film made for a mass audience, gives a much clearer sense of who the real enemy is as the black and white prisoners overcome their antagonisms in order to go after the guards, who are in turn being used by a sadistic warden.

A further source of social ambiguity is removed in BROTHERS by having no black guards. This falls in with the blaxploitation formula of ascribing all evil to white people. The one exception to this is an official high up in the California prison bureaucracy, perhaps the same man who is absent because he is attending a penology conference in Atlanta when a black senator shows up with Professor Paula Jones (the Angela Davis character) to check out the prison. In any case, we later see an official criticizing the warden McGee for trying to frame David Thomas and two other black prisoners in connection with the murder of a guard. We know that McGee is angry at the black prisoners for humiliating him during the black senator's visit, and that whether or not he set up the fight in the recreation area (integrated as a result of the senator's visit), he was the one who shot the black prisoner whose death caused the far more serious riot in which the guard in question was killed. The fact that Thomas was posthumously cleared of all charges stemming from that incident (this information is given at the end of the movie) seems to suggest that Warden McGee was wrong, and will be "taken care of" by some enlightened liberals higher up on the penological totem pole. Thus the politics that distinguishes BROTHERS from its blaxploitation predecessors has little to do with "the need to get involved with a movement" that will bring about fundamental changes in our class-stratified social order. Rather it is enlightened paternalism, liberal or revisionist, that will end the ills of the good-hearted black man.

I suspect that the ideology of the filmmakers is in part behind this. At the same time, the Lewises did have certain facts to deal with. George Jackson was cleared of the charges against him, and Angela Davis, too, won her case in court. Moreover *BROTHERS* does come down very hard on the abuses of the American prison system. A strong case is made against the policy of indeterminate sentencing that can put a person away for one year to life. We see guards brutally pulling prisoners out of their cells, making them strip, and then throwing them against the wall to be searched. We see two prisoners besides Thomas needlessly and sadistically killed. We can pick up, too, the fear of these guards, the sense that they are paunchier and dumber than the prisoners at whom they regularly scream and occasionally shoot. We see warden McGee telling his superior that he, McGee, has again failed the exam that would allow him to move up to the next rung of the prison bureaucracy. And we see him taking his frustration out on the guards who are his hatchetmen, reminding them with pleasure that they are not very bright (if they were as bright as he, they would be where he is) and threatening to fire them if they don't bring him the men who are circulating a one-page underground paper among the inmates.

The trouble is that McGee himself is nobody's hatchetman, just one sadistic guy who should not have risen as high as he did. The black prisoners expose him as a rotten father by staging a demonstration when the important senator comes to look at his prison. Furthermore the extent to which the racial antagonism in the prison is his creation is purposely left unclear. But how is this antagonism resolved at the end of the movie? Not by the discovery of a common enemy, as in *THE LONGEST YARD*, but rather by a sudden conversion on the part of the white prisoners following David Thomas's death, a realization that this member of the race they despised had indeed died for their sins. Therefore, in the second to last scene, the black prisoners are marching into the dining room, usually an occasion for the whites to trip them or comment on their animality. But this time they fall in alternately with the black prisoners and thus end the segregation in the dining room, born again through a messianic sacrifice.

The presentation of David's death prepares the way for this messianic, "born again" conclusion. The warden sets David up. Davis is taken by guards to the laundry room where several other prisoners have been brought. One white prisoner has a gun. That prisoner says he's going to escape and wants the others to join him. Guards watch all this on monitors. David realizes what is happening, grabs the gun, and goes out into the yard to face the warden alone. In classical Western style the two men face off in the yard. David kills the warden and is in turn killed by tower guards. In slow motion he spins around several times and falls.

Man against man; self sacrifice for buddies; heroic death — these things have all been part of revolutionary struggle, but experiencing them vicariously doesn't explain why we need to join a movement, or what we need to struggle against. This sequence only perpetuates the idea of the lone (male) hero making the world safe for the rest of us with his gun.

It is the final shot, however, toward which this whole series of co-optations has been working. Over shots of the now dead David is superimposed an image of Paula Jones lying in her cell, where she has been since the courtroom shootout, two tears rolling down her cheeks and the romantic theme we have heard whenever she and David came together surging in the background. The music, incidentally, is not a Muzak version of "There's a Place For Us" but something more amorphously syrupy by Tai Mahal, a musician I usually admire. Nevertheless here the relationship between George Jackson and Angela Davis has been so emptied of political content that scenes from *WEST SIDE STORY* look strong by comparison. This representation is particularly distressing if one goes back to *Soledad Brother*. For instance, in one of his letters to Davis, Jackson says this about women:

"In our last communication I made a statement about women, and their part in revolutionary culture (people's war). It wasn't a clear statement. I meant to return to it but I was diverted. I understand exactly what the woman's role should be. The very same as the man's. Intellectually there is very little difference between male and female. The differences we see in bourgeois society are all conditioned and artificial." [3]

Since many male leaders of the revolutionary black movement went on record as saying something very different about the role of women in revolutionary culture, it is doubly unfortunate that the relationship between these two people should have been made into the lowest common denominator upon which the film's two audiences are meant to converge. For not only is the relationship falsified, it is used to obscure the politics which, in real life, created its center.

Some time after David Thomas meets Paula Jones he starts wearing gold-rimmed glasses, an indication that he is now an intellectual. But no such claim is made for her, or at least no substance is given to it. Davis herself has noted that, while the film mentions her firing, it does not mention the fact that she was fired for being a communist. We see her at a rally urging students to support the three Mendocino (Soledad) Brothers, but she doesn't really say anything that a woman who loved her man would not say, either there or in her apartment or in the cell where she and David meet.

All the letters in *Soledad Brother* are love letters, though not in the way the movie interprets those words. What makes them revolutionary letters, for me, is that I can't imagine anyone reading them without coming to the conclusions that we could all be like this and are not: loving to parents, brothers, sisters, lovers, co-workers; sharing with them a struggle against the forces that profit from our isolation from one another, and therefore have a vested interest in keeping us hoping for salvation and fulfillment through the miracle of a "great love."

The problem of conveying this sort of content is one that political artists

in every medium come up against. For only to the extent that an audience is itself engaged in such struggles will the struggles' depiction on the screen have wide popular appeal. This was Mao's point in his lectures at the Yenan Forum, and no left theorist has come up, in my view, with a more accurate formulation of the relationship between culture and mass consciousness. What is disappointing about *BROTHERS* is the extent to which the relationship between Jackson and Davis was made into the apotheosis of individualist heterosexuality in order to sell the film.

I am not suggesting, though, that any attempt to use Warner Brothers, NBC, or any other branch of the bourgeois media, is automatically doomed to fail. As I have said, I found more progressive politics in *THE LONGEST YARD* than in *BROTHERS*. Much of this is due, I think, to the heavy dose of liberal guilt that the Lewises were trying to arouse, in comparison with its almost complete absence in *THE LONGEST YARD*. We were asked to believe by the Lewises that David Thomas was the embodiment of virtue, a truly Christ-like figure. The Burt Reynolds character, on the other hand, was just a regular old quarterback who fixed one too many games.

If the Lewises did not entirely succeed in using the vast resources of Warner Brothers "to sensitize people about the need to get involved with a movement," I think its shortcomings should be understood in terms of what it attempted to do: to appeal to two very different audiences, two groups which might possibly be open to an awareness of the need to be part of a movement. Yet the real interests of these two projected audiences are not as close as liberal rhetoric would like us to believe. Thus one can only unite these two groups by ignoring large segments of social reality that neither group is willing, at this point, to discuss in the presence of the other. In particular, it means leaving out the realm of the street, where blacks and whites are both victims and no one is really a hero. Commercial success in the film industry these days seems to involve exploiting white people's fears of street violence in one set of films, while black people's assaults on the white world are made super-cool in another set of films. The next step beyond *BROTHERS* would be to recognize the valid aspirations of both these groups, to record the role of racism in the lives of people who are neither demonic nor super-cool.

Notes:

- [1.](#) Angela Davis, quoted in *Seven Days*, 1:8 (May 23, 1977), p.35.
- [2.](#) George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, revised edition (New York: Bantam Books, 1972), p. 9.
- [3.](#) *Soledad Brother*, p. 226.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Healthcaring: from our end of the speculum Good vibes vs. preventive medicine

by Marcia Rothenberg

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I am a woman, a nurse, and a mother, so I've experienced the inadequacies, inequities, and indecencies of the U.S. health care delivery system from several angles. And I certainly would not deny that a white male dominated medical profession maintains its privileged position partly by trying to keep people ignorant, mystifying them with incomprehensible language and other professional trappings. But I also have learned that the roots of this privilege lie in an economic system where the many produce the wealth and the few appropriate it and use it, and the criteria for its use is how much more wealth it will produce for those few. So, when it comes to the question of how money should be used to improve and restore the health and safety of most of us — men and women — our priorities are different from those who hold the purse strings.

This may seem pretty elementary to some people, and certainly those of us who were in the Movement in the 60s and early 70s, and participated in the setting up of free clinics to meet the needs of whatever particular group of oppressed people we were working with, learned a lot about the limitations of alternative institutions. But the struggle for free clinics and the "Women and Their Bodies" literature which came out of the Women's Movement had some positive effect on raising the consciousness of people (some of whom became health care workers) as to how they were being short-changed by the system and what they ought to be getting and demanding.

However, what was fresh and progressive in the 60s and early 70s can look simplistic and politically backward now. The politics of the film *HEALTHCARING: FROM OUR END OF THE SPECULUM*, produced by New York's Women Make Movies and directed by Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, harks back to that earlier period, but to the worst aspects of that politics — narrow feminism and the alternative lifestyle. The main theme of the film is that only women can understand women and the workings of their reproductive system — thus women have to get together to learn how to take care of themselves. It is the

politics of "self health" at its narrowest; not preventive medicine, but good vibes.

The film begins with individual women telling about how they were messed over by male doctors who didn't understand and didn't care to understand their female medical problems. Then there are a series of pictures and drawings from medical histories showing how women once had their children naturally, with the help of other women like midwives; then medical science and male doctors came into the picture and women's suffering in childbirth began. The example used is the development of the forceps — expressly designed for the convenience of the doctor and as an instrument of torture for women and their offspring. In fact, the forceps was invented to deal with the problem of breach deliveries where survival of the fetus is closely related to getting it out of the birth canal. The forceps undoubtedly has saved the lives of many babies. That it has been misused for the doctor's convenience to speed up deliveries, and to free delivery rooms for the hospital administration, has to do with the system which places profitability above human needs. To imply that women were better off without medical science and technology is a celebration of backwardness and an insult to the millions of women and children who died and die in childbirth because of lack of medical care.

Although the film celebrates the "getting together" of women to control their lives, there are few visible signs of this, very few scenes where women are actually in the process of participating together in social change. There is a lot of emphasis put on the "knowledge of your body" aspect of self-health in the film, but most of it is discussion of teaching people, rather than shots of actual classes. The most relevant scene, and the best in the film, is in Chinatown in New York where you see women, old and young, stopping at a community health exhibit to hear short lectures on how to brush your teeth properly, with the aid of a clay model of teeth, and they also see different birth control devices demonstrated on a model of a pelvis.

Most of the film does not get into the Community. In fact, a lot of it is in someone's living room. There is a lot of footage in the living room of a mother and daughter who work as a team teaching self-health classes — I missed exactly where this was done or to what kinds of women. That did not seem very important. They smiled a lot at one another, and it was implicit and explicit that there ought not to be a generation gap among women — a woman is a woman is a woman. The high point of this lauding of self health is when the mother produces a speculum and proceeds to demonstrate the ultimate in liberation — self-insertion of the speculum while sitting in your living room chatting with your daughter. Voila — nothing to it. Cool, casual, self-satisfied. What do you see at the other end of the speculum, which is why you put it in to begin with? That is never dealt with. The point seems to have been the insertion itself. There was a bizarre smugness and self-indulgence about the whole scene — and an isolation from the reality pointed out by the Chinatown scene, albeit unwittingly.

The final example of self-health is a visit to a women's health clinic in Connecticut begun and operated by a women's collective. Very little is seen of the clinic in operation. Again, most of the time we are being told about the clinic by one of the women founders in a living room during a meeting of the collective. There is not much about the details of running such a clinic, the struggles, its strengths and limitations. Mainly we are left with the feeling that everybody feels good about it, that the women who are participating in the collective feel good about themselves and each other, and that the women doctors they hired appeared when they were needed, and good vibes were felt immediately because they cared.

The final scene in the film is fitting, underscoring the social isolation of the film. There is a "demonstration — that is, a staging of a demonstration. A group of women, some middle-aged, a couple of senior citizens, youngsters, a black, a brown, appropriately placed, carrying placards about getting together for better health care. The group is standing in front of a building which says Yale School of Nursing on it, but there is certainly no indication that the "demonstration" is in any way related to it. There are no people watching this demonstration — except us in the audience. All the women are singing joyously about "Getting Together", but the overall feeling is the same as the Pepsi Generation ad on TV.

If the reader detects a tone of impatience with the politics of this film, he/she is correct. We are living in the midst of a health crisis in this country. Money for public health care facilities is being denied, and the cost of private medical care is soaring out of the reach of all but the most privileged and wealthy in this country. Public hospitals and clinics are being closed and cut back at a time when, because of inflation and rising unemployment, more and more people need them. What people need to know are the facts behind this and the possibility of getting together and fighting to keep, expand and improve the public health institutions they already have, and demand that more of the wealth that they produce be used for their well-being. Films that ignore the social and economic realities of the world in which they are made and that create illusions about that world are irresponsible and reactionary.

Women Make Movies, 257 West 19th Street, New York, NY, 10011 (212-929-6477), produced and now distributes HEALTHCARING: FROM OUR END OF THE SPECULUM.

The Chicago Maternity Center Story Community vs corporate medicine

by Judith Kegan Gardiner

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"The film made me really root for the Chicago Maternity Center. I thought those men were crazy to tear it down. Having babies at home is better because in the hospital there are too many sick people. You could get sick; the baby could get sick. In the hospital they don't spend as much time with you. You're not the main thing. Besides, in the hospital the walls are all painted green."

In her reaction to *THE CHICAGO MATERNITY CENTER STORY*, released by Kartemquin Films in March, my 10-year-old daughter shared the enthusiasm of the 400-member audience with whom we saw its Chicago premiere. Like her, many audience members focused on the film's first part, which shows the birth of one of the last babies to be delivered at home through the Center. After the one-hour-long documentary, a panel of the filmmakers and women health activists answered questions centering on the "how-to's" of home delivery. In the audience, nurses training to be midwives supported home delivery, and about 20 women volunteered that they had had home births. The film shows home birth and informs the viewer of its advantages. However, as women health activists and natural childbirth advocates pointed out, the film is not up-to-date concerning today's primarily middle-class home delivery practices. It is not intended to provide guidance for prospective parents. Today, the panelists said, home delivery is an expensive option available to only a few women, not the inexpensive community service which was once provided by the Chicago Maternity Center.

As the title indicates, *THE CHICAGO MATERNITY CENTER STORY* is the case study of an institution — its history, its positive results, its opponents, and the unsuccessful organizing attempt to keep it alive. The second half of the film provides the political analysis of why the Northwestern University School of Medicine closed the CMC. The first part seemed the more emotionally charged, easier for the audience to respond to; they clapped when Scharene Miller's baby was delivered. Yet involving as the first part is, it is intellectually incomplete without the

second part. The film is a socialist-feminist documentary. The first part should appeal to any woman who feels she should control decisions about her body and reproductive life. The second half goes beyond the presentation of home delivery as an alternate service to criticize the American system of health care for profit. This part makes the film an effective organizing aid, capable of generating careful strategic analysis by committed activists and capable of moving a working-class or middle-class audience toward thinking about the need for collective action on behalf of women and people's health. The film's analysis is convincing and persuasive. The film as a whole successfully taps the feminist enthusiasm generated by the first half and leads it in the second part to anti-corporate anger.

The Chicago Maternity Center film began in 1972 as a short documentary to help save the Center, which was fighting to remain open. But by 1974, before the Kartemquin Collective could finish the film, the CMC was closed. Moreover, a fire in Kartemquin's studios burned much of their working print of the film. Instead of discarding the project, however, the filmmakers broadened their scope to produce the present film as a statement about women's health needs and the way dominant medical institutions fail to meet them.

In the first section of the film we hear from several black, white, and brown women about their support for home delivery. These women were all clients or prospective clients of the Center. One black woman contrasted the harsh, impersonal care she received at Cook County Hospital, the city's large public hospital for the poor, where she gave birth to her first child, with the warm attention she received from the CMC for her second delivery. A Latina speaks of the alienation experienced by the women who can't express their pain or anxiety in a language that will be understood by the hospital staff; home delivery, when a woman is surrounded by her family and friends, is far better. These are the poor women whom established society accuses of stupidity and apathy toward its children. Instead, we see that the women are articulate and actively concerned with their own and their children's welfare in a setting that gives them opportunities for participation and expression.

Much of the first half of the film focuses on Scharene Miller, a young black woman in her first pregnancy. She comes to the Center for a prenatal checkup. Scharene is cheerful and casual. The male intern who asks her questions seems a little ill at ease before the camera, but his questions are friendly and thorough. Scharene listens to her baby's heartbeat through the doctor's stethoscope. We see that the care at the Center is humane.

Some background about the CMC intervenes between our first view of Scharene and her delivery: we wait, as Scharene does, for the pregnancy to advance. For 78 years, the CMC provided over 100,000 Chicago women with a low-cost home delivery service. Because of a commitment to its patient population and its special techniques and staff training,

insisting on and providing adequate prenatal care for all of its patients, the CMC's safety rate exceeded that of most hospitals and was far better than the Chicago minority maternal mortality rate. We see scenes from a melodramatic 1939 movie by Pare Lorenz called FIGHT FOR LIFE, designed as public relations for the Center. It has an all-male, all-white cast of professionals, even though the Kartemquin narrator tells us that Beatrice Tucker, M.D. was then co-director of the Center. In the old film a serious middle-aged physician tells a young man that he can serve people by working in the Center and learning sterile techniques. The need for the Center is emphasized by a scene of a woman dying under anesthesia in a hospital that has not taken proper precautions. (This section of the film frightened a four-year-old boy with whom I attended the performance. The movie is not designed for presenting the "facts of life" to very young children.)

After the clips from the older film, we return to Scharene's delivery. We see her house, with its pictures of King and the Kennedys, and the bed from which she is helped onto the dining room table, which becomes a delivery table. (The panelists later told us that now home deliveries use the mother's own bed for deliveries.) The film picks up the birth from the point at which Dr. Tucker arrives, though the narrator tells us that medical students and attendants have been waiting with Scharene for some time. Scharene's labor is long and difficult. She groans and cries while her friends hold her hands and try to comfort her. The attendants and the family prepare for delivery. Dr. Tucker briefly and efficiently tells them how to roll up newspapers and prepare a sterile field. All wait, sipping water, offering Scharene some, during the hours of her labor. At the time of the film Dr. Tucker was about 75 years old, but she seems tough and capable, not "motherly." "On your knees, Doctor," she orders a male resident physician. Later she tells him to "get your fingers out of there; you've been in there long enough."

We see the delivery itself clearly, both in close-up and from a middle range, as though we were one of the watching family members or friends. A young boy is present. One of the women interviewed earlier in the film said that she wanted home delivery so that her children would know about life; she didn't want them thinking that babies grew in the cotton patch.

Scharene's baby is not in the usual position; finally Dr. Tucker takes over from the resident, though she continues to instruct him throughout the delivery. She makes an episiotomy, and delivers the baby with forceps. As soon as the child appeared, the audience cheered and sighed with relief.

Some viewers criticized the delivery for being too difficult. They thought that a film in favor of home birth should show the far more normal easy delivery instead of a rare, long and painful one. Forceps were used in only 1% of CMC births. Current proponents of birth without violence wanted to see different techniques used and wanted the film to show a delivery without instruments. On the other hand, the film shows a safe

home delivery even in that rare case of "complications" so often used to frighten women away from home and into the hospital. The film avoids the goody-goody tone of commercial medical education material, and Dr. Tucker's tough humor contradicts the Marcus Welby stereotype of the ideal physician. The Chicago audience, for whom Dr. Tucker is already a legend, cheered when she first appeared; and they clapped even louder later when a panelist announced that Dr. Tucker, now about 80 years old and no longer able to make home deliveries, was learning Spanish so she could speak better with her patients in a neighborhood health clinic.

Having established that the CMC delivered high-quality maternity care to many of Chicago's poor women, the film fills us in on the statistics of the Center's operation. We need to know whom the CMC served and at what cost to understand why it was closed down. At the time the film was being made, an entire CMC home delivery cost a poor woman only \$50, whereas a hospital delivery might run anywhere from \$600 to \$1200. At the time of the Center's closing, its clientele was 50% black, 35% Latina, and 15% white. By the time the film was finished, Northwestern University Medical College had already withdrawn the residents and medical students that had rotated through the CMC as part of their obstetrical training. A physician I interviewed who had worked in the Center 10 years ago said that the kind of care shown in the film accurately represented the service as she had known it then, too. The departure of the Northwestern staff meant that Dr. Tucker was the only physician still making deliveries when the Center closed.

The second half of the film describes the losing struggle of patients, staff, and community groups to keep the Center open. First, mostly through stills, the film prepares us to understand the struggle by a history of the CMC and its funding. Originally a charity sponsored by the wives of Chicago's industrial magnates, the Center then became a peripheral arm of those same magnates' financial interests. Pictures of CMC board members change from socialite Mrs. Potter Palmer to B.D. Searle, head of the drug company. The final trustees of the CMC board are introduced in still pictures with captions showing their corporate positions. Many of them are also board members of the new multi-million dollar Prentiss Women's Hospital, built by Northwestern Medical College, which was taking over the CMC. The films show us promotional material for Prentiss Hospital, promising that Northwestern will continue to operate the unique home delivery service from its new site. However, as the new hospital is built, the CMC is closed, and home delivery is not resumed at Prentiss.

The film's narrator tells us that modern corporate medicine is designed to produce profit, not to answer people's needs. As visual corroboration of this idea, the film shows many graphics, chiefly ads and cartoons: in one cartoon a hospital board of directors smoke their cigars through dollar signs instead of heads. Such cartoons are not likely to change the minds of staunch defenders of free enterprise, though other evidence is more convincing: a Norman Rockwell-like sentimental picture of the old

family physician with a worried mother and a small boy illustrates an earlier, simpler health care delivery system, whereas a fast flash of brassy ads represents the present. In one ad, nurses ludicrously ride golf carts because their rounds are too long to walk. Other ads display distraught, depressed women who "need" tranquilizers. Still others show people connected with so many medical tubes and machines that they look like robots. Graphs show rising health care costs and profits. Health care is now a \$100-billion-a-year business, an industry larger than defense, with enormous profits made through selling technological equipment, expensive new facilities, and drugs. According to the narrator, profit is not the only question: the new technology is also designed to keep control in the hands of a limited class.

In contrast to our system, there is one quick still of a Chinese patient under acupuncture anesthesia. This visual allusion is not adequate to introduce the possibility of a health care system designed to serve human needs and keep decision-making in the hands of patients and providers. The film gives only the CMC as an example of humane health care and does not indicate that socialist priorities would make institutions like the CMC part of the fabric of everyday life and care, instead of the doomed anomalies they are under capitalism.

The background material prepares us for the specific fight that develops between the clientele represented by WATCH (Women Act to Control Health Care), an organization of the Center's clients and workers, medical students, and women health activists, and, on the other side, Northwestern University, with the CMC board of "trustees" now acting on behalf of the large medical school complex. The struggle is a prolonged one. At first Northwestern University, which had been providing medical personnel for the CMC, begins constricting its support. Unfortunately, by the time WATCH and the women working for the Center realize what is happening, it is already too late. They do not have a wide enough base in the community; not enough women who are clients of the Center's dwindling services have the time and energy to carry on the fight. Even worse, by the time they organize, they can only negotiate with Northwestern on its terms, rather than mount a wider community fight for other sources of support for the Center. This section of the film provides excellent source material for strategic analysis by groups doing institutional organizing.

We see a meeting of WATCH and some clips of women stuffing envelopes to send out appeals. WATCH members carry posters and hold demonstrations. They meet to decide tactics. Although the board of trustee members are identified for us by captions, the members of WATCH are not. For example, as Barbara Bishop is shown as a WATCH speaker several times, and in one scene, she is wearing a nametag that cannot be read by the audience. It takes a while to figure out that she is a Northwestern University medical student who supports the Center, while being under pressure from the obstetrics and gynecology department at her school to switch her support to hospital deliveries. Perhaps the filmmakers wanted to show WATCH as a collective without

specific leaders, but more identification of its speakers would have made this section of the movie easier to follow.

The physician I interviewed said that even 10 years ago the Northwestern obstetrics and gynecology faculty discouraged students from working at the Center and disparaged its level of care. She said the male medical school physicians kept trying to frighten students about what would happen if complications arose. They tried to make the students feel that home deliveries were unsafe. In fact, backup facilities for handling complications were excellent, the nursing staff at the CMC were trained midwives in essence if not in certification, and the safety record of the CMC was exemplary. The film omits such evidence that the medical establishment was in favor of hospitals and against home delivery for reasons independent of the profit issue. Instead, it simplifies the connections between corporate capitalism and medical ideology.

The scenes showing confrontations between WATCH and the CMC board of trustees are the highlights of the film's second part. They provide a parable of powerful liberals faced with feminists' and poor people's demands. "We feel even worse than you do," a suit-wearing, middle-aged white administrator tells a casually dressed, emotionally upset multiracial group. The CMC is a charity, the administrators tell WATCH, and it is too expensive for the university medical center to afford. The women reply that the university has been given huge federal grants for its new hospital, and some of that money can justly go for home deliveries. There is no demand for home deliveries, say the trustees, citing the declining patient load at the Center to only 30 a month. But the women reply that the university has been deliberately constricting the service, cutting down its physician supply. Moreover, as several of the women know from personal experience, the medical school staff either fails to inform women about the CMC services or actively discourages them from using it, saying they will be safer in the hospital. The trustees tell the medical students that they are nice, idealistic young people.

The confrontation ends with the trustees smooth, unruffled, and winning. The audience knows that their arguments are specious and their motives suspect. We can applaud the right-on replies of WATCH speakers that debunk the liberal trustees. But we also must concede that right answers don't transfer power. The board retains the power to close down a money-losing service that helps poor women while raising enormous sums for a prestigious, fashionable new facility that will be called non-profit but will enrich many.

The film ends with an explicit political statement by the narrator — women and health care workers must work together to take control of the institutions that affect our bodies, our children, our lives. We get a pitiful last glimpse of WATCH activists selling rummage on a street corner to raise money for the CMC, after we have seen the slick public relations brochures for the new hospital. Yet the film is instructive and cautiously optimistic rather than discouraging. Unlike SALT OF THE

EARTH, BLOW FOR BLOW, or UNION MAIDS, it does not end on the "up" note of a successful popular struggle. On the other hand, it does not show the patriarchal capitalist power structure as inevitably in command. Instead, we get one model of a humane, practical maternity service. We see a struggle in which women work together, learning their own strengths and those of their opposition. Our interest now is in the future," says the narrator, "health care for profit for a few or health care as a human right."

The movie does not paint an overall picture of what good socialized health care for this country would be like; its glance at China does not explain the health care systems of today's socialist societies. The slogan that "health care is a human right" was popularized by health activist organizations like Medical Committee for Human Rights in the late 60s and early 70s. Now, in the absence of a national health movement, organized to lead us toward socialized medicine in a reordered society, the ending of THE CMC STORY may leave us somewhat at loose ends. Despite these limitations, the film is effective. It argues forcefully for the benefits of home delivery. It raises consciousness about health care priorities under capitalism. And it helps generate the anger and enthusiasm needed for institutional organizing campaigns.

Kartemquin Education Films, 1901 W. Wellington, Chicago, IL, 60657
(773-472-4366), produced and now distributes THE CHICAGO
MATERNITY CENTER STORY.

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Kartemquin interviewed — Filming for the people

by Chuck Kleinhans, Robin Lakes, Julia Lesage, and Anna Marie Taylor

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From the start, about ten years ago, Chicago's Kartemquin filmmaking group has been making radical films for working class audiences. (See Julia Lesage's interview in *Cineaste* 7:1, Fall 1975 for an overview of the group's history.) THE CHICAGO MATERNITY CENTER STORY (see previous review) is their most recent film. To find out more about making it and how they evaluated the finished film, in April, 1977, we interviewed four members who worked on it following a screening and discussion of the hour long documentary in Logan Square, a Polish and Latino working class neighborhood on Chicago's northwest side. Suzanne Davenport and Jenny Rohrer conceived, initiated, and completed the film. Jerry Blumenthal and Gordon Quinn also worked on it at various stages.

Kleinhans: The film has had a very long genesis. Why? And how did that affect it?

Rohrer: This film had a reputation around Kartemquin for the last two years of being a big turkey that would never get finished. It was originally conceived to be a short film and be completed before the Maternity Center was closed, and maybe be a part of the effort to keep the Center open. But Northwestern beat us to that by closing the Center. All of us who were making the film were pretty unknowledgeable about the health care field. The more we found out when we did some research and reading in the course of making the film, the more we realized that we had a prime example of what the people in the free clinic movement and in radical health organizations had been talking about. In being able to film the Maternity Center while it was open, we had one of the few examples of good care around. Most people were fighting for an institution to respond to their needs. So the film kept evolving into a more ambitious one. Our research and trying to decide what we wanted to say took us quite a long time. The film changed form drastically.

Quinn: There are some other reasons why it took so long too. We had a fire and one print burned up in the middle of making it. Also people had to do other things to support themselves. Finally, when we mixed it, we didn't have the money to finish it.

From the start, it was going to be a film that had an analysis of the health care system. But particularly once the Center was closed, you couldn't just make a film about a struggle that failed. You had to put that in some kind of larger context. The film always intended to do that, but after the closing it became absolutely necessary. As you actually wrestle with the problem of telling a story or making a film, parts of the larger context disappear. We don't know how to give the overview as well as we know how to tell a very particular story about a particular struggle.

Blumenthal: It was actually the first film we made which had an extensive narration. The narration had to carry a lot of the weight, and writing it was a stumbling block.

Quinn: Right, we had a lot of things to say that did not lend themselves to being said in the verité style that those of us who were most skilled as filmmakers knew. We were trying to find a way — a stylistic way — to say some of those things. It's very difficult. But we really came to grips with that problem. We said, "Okay, these problems are inherent in this film. Let's not ignore them. Let's try to solve them. Let's work with narration, work with problems of abstract ideas, and work with the problem of bringing in a whole historical analysis for which we had very little visual material to support it." And I don't think we solved all those problems, but through our involvement in the health movement and through taking around rough videotape copies of the film to the kind of people who would be using the finished film, we did see that politically that information was necessary to tell the story.

Lesage: When I interviewed you before, you mentioned that this was one of the first times you took the politics of the Center's struggles as well as the health industry research back to meetings of Kartemquin as a whole. In your analysis is there material that you had to leave out that you really wanted to put in, in terms of political points?

Blumenthal: Yes, there was the stuff Suzanne was talking about at today's screening: the centralization of health care, the few big health centers near the lake in high income areas, and the movement of small hospitals and doctors out of the neighborhoods. Well, there was once a whole section of narration that we really struggled with about those issues. Suzanne argued that it ought to be in the film because it was very important information. And all that's left now is that at one point during the pre-natal examination we say over Scharene being weighed in that doctors are fleeing the inner city and nothing is being done to replace the services that they provided. We did not say more because we really did not have the pictures to support it, and a whole new section would have to have been integrated into the film, which already has its problems in integrating different parts.

Quinn: There were whole sections of the film that dealt with FIGHT FOR LIFE. And there were whole sections that dealt with the internal contradictions within the Maternity Center — being a charity institution, being a kind of scientifically elitist institution. But the film's an hour now, and you just could not find a way to integrate those into a manageable length film. You face those kind of real problems. More so than any other film, we struggled with this film to say more, to put it in a larger context, to try to deal both historically and economically, and to really trace out threads of the concrete struggle that we started with. That's where we always start. We start with something happening. Some people are struggling around the issue, or someone comes to us, or something's happening. From the beginning we try to put it in a larger context. But it's hard. The forms don't exist to do that kind of thing dramatically and effectively. And I think we're particularly unskilled at what forms do exist. In some ways you can't really say the kind of things we're trying to say in a network television format. But when it comes to writing narration and manipulating words, television documentarists are able to do a lot of things that we can't do, just because they have more skills. So we have to develop our skills and we have to find new forms.

Lakes: The footage of the actual birth and the footage of the Maternity Center — that part of the film was very positive and powerful: the part about what could be. But the part about what's wrong with American health care, where you used ads and still photos, was weaker. The whole concept of why a hospital is alienating and why women might not want to go there isn't a real simple idea. There's still a mystification of hospitals. Couldn't you have done footage in a hospital?

Rohrer: We thought of doing that, but we also thought that people, through their own experience, are familiar with hospitals, and because of that we wouldn't have to put that in the film. I don't know if we could have gotten access to any place to shoot that kind of material. A whole other area that the film doesn't even approach is what's been happening in the past three or four years about obstetrics and gynecological care in hospitals. Prentiss Hospital — which we talk about in the film — offers all these sorts of things that they say women want. If you criticize them they say, "But we have all those things that hospitals never had before." They allow husbands and friends in the delivery room and they allow rooming-in service and 24-hour service. All these special little deals that hospitals resisted until just the last few years are now just a whole other type of sales pitch, that hospital delivery can give to a woman at a certain price. And that's another set of contradictions, you know: that's how they responded to the women's health movement. And that's a very complicated thing because someone — although it hasn't really happened — could argue after seeing the film that hospital deliveries have changed, and that invalidates the political analysis in the film.

Quinn: In the second part, I don't think the answer is to do what Weisman did in HOSPITAL. In fact, the one of the same name with George C. Scott (dir. Arthur Hiller, 1972) is much better for showing

what's wrong. But I don't think that was our task in this film. We have found, from showing the film, that people really understand how bad hospitals are, they have had those experiences and the criticisms start coming up out of the audience. Sometimes people will say, "Why didn't you show that?" They're the very ones who will give us ten examples from their own experience about bad health care institutions.

Also, you can only make so many points in any presentation. And if you raise one thing, politically you then often have a responsibility to raise other things. For example, there are a lot of people who want to just trash Cook County Hospital, and say it's an awful place and terrible, and blah, blah, blah. But right now the fight is to keep County open. It serves the needs of a lot of inner-city people. And the people who get the care there know it could be improved, but it's important to them and they know that if the institution is closed, they're gonna be worse off than they were without it. So we just didn't want to get into that whole question, because it's not that hospitals are all bad; it's more that they aren't serving the needs of the people.

Taylor: Have you shown the film yet to black audiences, and has there been any particular response on their part? Have the black women who were involved in the film seen it, and what have their reactions been?

Davenport: Those who saw it were very interested in it.

Quinn: I showed the film to a black class. The only ones who stayed were women. And the response was a very personal response: "I know so-and-so," and that kind of thing.

Rohrer: At the Medical Center showing, it was very clearly divided along class lines. The black people who were there were not doctors but hospital workers. And they were very, very positive about the film and made real class statements. In other words, they were very precise in the way they answered the women who were into the aesthetic home birth type of thing. Their answers were: "This is about medical care for poor people. This is about community control. What you're talking about is a kind of home delivery for rich people." And their statements were like, "This film is a film that I would use ..." That came out over and over again.

Quinn: Also at that screening were some Muslims [followers of the late Elijah Mohammed] who are starting a health clinic, a whole health program, and they want to use it in the program. The Medical Center show was a nice experience because we often are put in the position of having to defend the delivery, especially the fact that this is not a very touchy-feely situation.

Kleinhans: Can you say a little bit more about the criticisms you've had.

Rohrer: Well, I just spoke Friday on the phone to some of the writers of the feminist health book *Our Bodies, Our Selves* in Boston. They just finished writing a review of our film for a women's health journal. They

really had sort of the classic reaction of that area of the women's health movement, which is "I liked the film a lot. I liked its analysis of medicine in general and hospital care, and how the fight is with hospitals and with those institutions." But they were totally shocked by the birth in a lot of ways. I think a lot of it was the fact that Scharene's birth was a particularly difficult birth. We say it in the narration, it fits within this one percentile of times when the Center uses forceps and episiotomies and stuff. But still they really react to that quite strongly and feel that the film really falls down in that, that the Center doesn't present a home birth that has a lot of qualities that they want seen in home births. And our response is, "Well, it's not that film." In *THE MATERNITY CENTER* you're seeing a difficult birth that in many ways wouldn't meet those expectations, which are legitimate expectations. It's a Center that wasn't perfect, you know. But we're talking about something else here in this film.

Another reaction was seen at a national conference in Tallahassee last month. This group (also called WATCH, like the women in the film, but it's Women Act to Combat Harassment) is in the National Alliance of Feminist Women's Health Centers, which formed after a lot of women received different kinds of harassment and arrests. They showed it the first night of their national conference. After the film and after the discussion, which focused on how they have to turn from providing alternatives into focusing on the quality of care in existing institutions and hospitals, the whole conference went to the one area hospital, Tallahassee Memorial, entered the hospital and did an on-the-spot inspection on the maternity floor. They brought with them a TV crew and found a number of things. It was 10 o'clock at night. All the women were asleep — all the mothers — because they were all sedated. Many of the babies were awake in the nursery crying. They found Phisohex in the nursery, which has been found to cause brain damage in newborn infants. Fetal monitors of the type they put into the uterus and screw into the baby's head were routine, in addition to IV's and everything else. And that was the one hospital in the whole Tallahassee, Florida area. And the next day four women — among them a woman who was noted for having started the women's self-help movement and several other women from around the country — were arrested for trespassing. They don't have as strong a reaction as the women from *Our Bodies, Ourselves* did to the birth.

Quinn: The discussion at the Medical Center about that was really good. There was even someone there who was complaining how it wasn't a Le Boyer birth, where the lights are dim and the baby comes into this little water bath and everything. We have had a lot of criticisms of how the woman is shaved, how she doesn't get the baby right after the delivery. There are lots of criticisms that do keep coming up in almost any audience about the delivery itself.

Lesage: There was one woman at the Medical Center who was marvelous. She said, "I agree with you that I would like to have a home birth like Dr. Eisenstein gives for \$800." But, she says, "I would never

use Dr. Eisenstein's movie, which shows this woman in a great oak bed with all the friends, delivering, in any of my classes." She said, "I would only use this movie in my classes, because this movie talks about what people really need." And she said that one of the things people want is to know that they're getting all the standards of bourgeois medicine if they're poor. So, for instance, to create a sterile environment might not be necessary, but the fact that the Maternity Center went to the trouble to create a sterile environment meant a lot to poor people, who knew that in a regular hospital, if you were rich, you got a sterile environment. If you can convince people that they don't need those standards it's one thing, but to just say you're not worthy of having those standards is another thing.

Lakes: Did you ever think of reshooting the birth scene after you shot this (laughter)? I mean shooting another birth?

Rohrer: If we had had our brains on, and known enough about birth, actually, maybe we wouldn't have chosen a woman with a first baby.

Davenport: As far as we knew, Sharene was not going to have a real difficult birth. She wasn't a high-risk patient. She was a candidate for a normal delivery. It's the kind of a risk you take. We could have shot two or three and chosen the best one, but that was beyond our economic resources.

Taylor: Well, I'm surprised about the controversy over the difficult delivery, because I thought it was wonderful to see how, in very difficult cases, they could handle it.

We also felt good that the baby looked terrific. And it ended very well, so we held it.

I've seen another film about natural childbirth, a very middle class film. In that film the delivery is very difficult too. I think it's good for these questions to come up, because I think that one of the disservices that one part of the home birth movement does is it really misleads people. It misleads women. It's gonna be this wonderful thing ... there's nothing to it, blah, blah, blah. And that happens sometimes. But it doesn't happen a lot of times. And it's real hard then. But I got a lot of response from women who were so glad to have seen that film, to have known that they hadn't failed in some kind of natural birth process. That it happens to other people too. It's important to be honest about those things.

Kleinhans: How did you yourselves change in the process of working with the film, from the time you conceived of it. I mean politically. What did you first see the film as politically, and are you happy with what you ended up with?

Davenport: When Jenny and I started out five years ago in 1972, we and the film were coming out of the women's movement: We were very into the problems of WATCH and trying to understand them. The WATCH group had a lot of tensions, divisions, and problems within it. As

filmmakers we were involved in the WATCH group in some way. The biggest change that we went through was broadening our understanding of what the struggle related to and just how basic it was. This is one reason it took us so long to do the film. It took us a couple of years of research, reading, talking to people, and developing our understanding of how health services developed and turned into a high profit, technologically oriented, highly centralized industry. We came to a more Marxist understanding of it, and then it wasn't just a film coming out of the women's health movement.

Taylor: Looking back on the process, is it possible to set out what was actually collective, and what were the important individual contributions? For example, the writing of the narration ... how was that put together?

Blumenthal: I think that everybody wrote the narration. I participated in the early stages of the film and the shooting of the film. And then I dropped out of it for a couple of years. And by the time I finished up my other projects, I said, "My God, it's not done yet." (laughter: "We needed a midwife.") I came back on it at a point when there was a two-hour version of the film. It was very clear to everyone that a lot of narration already written had to come out. The central issue was the one that we mentioned before. It was, "Well, there's stuff that's real important to be said to people in general, politically, but how do you say it? Do we have the material in the film to support it." Quite frequently our discussions or disagreements would run along that line. There would be one or the other of us, pushing to get something in, and one or the other, pushing to take it out because it was a film question. It was not a political question necessarily. Or the political part of it had to be, for the moment, looked at from the point of view of what was coherent.

Taylor: What about the shooting? The actual camera work? Was everybody involved in that as well? Or were there people who were mainly handling the camera ones who had experience?

Blumenthal: Both experienced and inexperienced ...

Taylor: And what was that based on? Was it based on who wanted to do some filming?

Blumenthal: We were trying to do something in the making of that film which we were trying to do as a group, throughout the period that the film was in gestation at Kartemquin. There were a whole group of people, some of whom had some skills and didn't have others, and others who had some skills and didn't have the ones that the others may have had. And we tried to share them. Some of the camera work was done by Sue, some was done by Jenny. It was at the very beginning of their film careers, before they had even really had any experience.

Quinn: I photographed the scenes at the birth ... it would have been impossible for Suzanne and Jenny to photograph at their level of skill. But the confrontations with board members and other things were

photographed by them.

We tried to push people. I mean this film was made by people trying to become a filmmaking group. It was made up of some people who had organizing backgrounds, some had Newsreel backgrounds, some people who had a real film background. There were tremendous differences in skills. And we put a tremendous amount of energy into skill sharing and developing collective styles of work in this group, and in this film in particular. More so in this film I think than in almost any other film that we worked on. It had real problems. I'd certainly never do it again in the way that we did it. I'd never try to put as much energy into skill sharing and doing things as collectively as we did. I think it had a lot of value to it and we learned a lot. But because it was the first time, I think we sort of went too far in that direction.

Taylor: Is that one of the reasons the film took so long?

Davenport, Quinn, Rohrer, Blumenthal: Oh sure. Definitely. No question about it.

Quinn: Part of it was just coming to grips with the immense differences in skills. And in the beginning thinking, "Well, this could happen through sort of a kind of collective process." I know for a long time the three of us who worked together tried to find a way to do things together. Probably it wasn't possible, and it was probably a mistake to put so much energy into that. Some energy it deserved, but not as much as we put into it.

Taylor: Does everyone feel that way about the skill sharing aspect, that you wouldn't do it again that way, that it took too much energy?

Rohrer: Not to the extent that we did it. When we started out Sue and I were interchangeably doing sound and camera, and it was Sue who pushed me to settle down on that instead of just interchanging so much. It took a lot of time. Sue and I were very active in other organizations and dividing up our time a lot. That's not the way that most political filmmakers approach projects.

Quinn: I've been very struck by the difference between New York and Chicago in terms of how political filmmakers work. There is very little, or was very little respect for anything that wasn't direct organizing in Chicago. And that greatly influenced our group and greatly influenced how we went about things. In New York there are several political filmmakers who really don't have very much connection to organizing — other than through the films that they make — which are usually in an organizing situation. But that's their connection.

Taylor: Are you thinking of something like HARLAN COUNTY?

Quinn: I'm thinking of HARLAN COUNTY, right. Barbara Kopple comes from a film background; she worked with film people. That's one of the finest films I've ever seen. I think it's politically excellent; I think the

whole process of making, it was terrific. But a lot of people in Chicago would have been very critical of her relation to the events. She was a filmmaker on the scene, not an organizer, not a political worker.

Blumenthal: Barbara Kopple's politics are in that film. They're in the four years that she devoted to that project. They're in her thirteen months living in Harlan County, and her determination to gather all the materials that she needed to finish the story and not end it prematurely. It's that kind of commitment that you need to make that kind of film. Whereas the kind of thing that we were doing — the collective process of working together and sharing skills — seems to me to be much more related to one's life than to one's work in a way. It's less appropriate in a situation where you have a product as the end of your activity — a film for example. Where you're really striving for excellence and completeness the two are in conflict with one another. Admittedly there's some kind of dialectic that has to go on. It can't be a totally elitist organization, but there's a real conflict of interests. If one is interested in going through the collective process on the one hand and educating people in the process of making this object, and yet on the other hand you're striving for excellence.

Lakes: Could you define excellence?

Blumenthal: Well, you define it for yourself. I don't know what other word to use.

Davenport: On the other hand there are other groups or individuals who make political films who are closely tied to political organizations. And they have a political consensus that's kind of up front and that people identify with or their organization has a particular view or line, and so they make films. As you know, a lot of people in Kartemquin — at least Jenny and Peter — came out of the particular experience of Newsreel in the 60s, although at different times. But the history of Newsreel was fresh in a lot of people's minds, whether they were in it, or close to it, or observers of it, in the sense of seeing the dilemma of projects vs. quality. That needn't be the dilemma, but in many ways people felt it was. A lot of the Newsreel films are still useful, but there was a real problem around that question of quality and so on. That question was where Kartemquin was politically and how much unity we had. In the history of Kartemquin, it was seen in the effort to be collective around skill sharing, the effort to be collective around questions of money and property, the effort to be collective around the political view of the film, as well as collective around the actual process of editing and shooting the film. In this period we were trying to deal with moving out of capitalist forms and trying to deal in some sense with what more collective, more socialist, forms would look like. It's a lot to undertake. We hit a lot of snags and sandbars. There was a lot of struggle and certainly one aspect of that was that the political tendencies that people were coming from were different in many respects. People changed politically in the course of the five years that we worked on the film. And so there were real differences as the film moved along.

For instance, Gordon and I had a lot of discussions as we worked on the part of the narration talking about industrialization. I would make an argument for saying more about the Northwestern Medical Center and the building of it as an example of centralization, and the process that was going on in Chicago of the centralization of health services, and of pulling hospitals out of the neighborhoods, and pulling doctors out of the neighborhoods and saying more bluntly in the film that those trends affected black and Latin people more than white working class people. For whatever reason, Gordon disagreed but would not say that it was a political disagreement between us. And whether that was because he felt that I didn't express it clearly or whether he just didn't see it as a political issue, I don't know. There are people who look at the Chicago Maternity Center film and feel that it should be more direct around the issues of racism. We had a long discussion about to what extent the film could have as its premise that there's a two-class health care system and that some people are exploited more than others. The tendency in the development of the film was to focus more on the quality of patient care, and how industrialization had affected that. I think those are political disagreements. Gordon might still not think they are, but I think they are.

I don't think it's a political disagreement but just a matter of organizing the material we had. I didn't do the research. I didn't write the initial drafts of the narration. I didn't go and find the materials out of which we finally fashioned the film.

You did all those initial things. You wrote the original drafts to the narration: you found all the materials — the pictures and stuff. That was all your work. There came a point in the film where I had to say "I can't put something voice-over for which there is no picture. We can't say this thing; you haven't straightened out these ideas here."

Davenport: But it goes back further, Gordon. We went out and developed the whole section about profit and how the ruling class makes money out of health and the health industry. There was really a lot of research, of picture taking, of additional shooting on the whole section about industrialization. Well, there were other points earlier when we felt, "Gee, we ought to go out and do some work, do other incidental shooting to show the difference between the two neighborhoods, more about the neighborhoods of Maxwell Street vs. the Gold Coast. And we should go out and show some more about the other medical center." And there was that time at which the narration included stuff about how Chicago had the headquarters of the American Medical Association and the American Hospital Association.

Quinn: There was a point where Jerry and I were both saying, and I think it's true, "We don't want to hear any more about going out and shooting any more stuff. Get it out of a magazine, get whatever is available, let's get this thing done." Had you done your work better in the beginning, had the material been there, it would have been OK. We did not have a political disagreement about those things.

Blumenthal: You're having the same discussion that you had a million times before. It's not a political disagreement. It's a disagreement about this particular film and what's to be done with this particular film. It would have been more of a political disagreement if there were options.

Lakes: And it wasn't an option because of money?

Blumenthal: It wasn't an option partly because of money, but money wasn't really the main thing. It was a question of energy — the film had been worked on for four years. And in order to make a movie about the two-class health system, which Suzanne is talking about, a tremendous amount of additional shooting would have had to be done. Basically, given the material that existed on film for us at that point, really a whole new film would be called for. That was not the film that they started out to make.

Quinn: And research, too. We'd done a lot of that research, but we had not come up with a way of presenting it.

Kleinhans: How do you feel about the film now? Are you satisfied with the politics of the film? How do you feel about criticisms from people who think it should be a filmically better film and people on the other side who think it should be even more explicit in its politics?

Rohrer: We made a decision, although we were new to the process of writing a narration, to write it from the point of view of someone who was involved in the struggle. Our first narration was a little clumsy. But after writing it, when the film was nearly finished, we went through the whole process of putting it on 1/2" videotape and showing it to lots and lots of people. We set up a number of screenings to what we considered our prime audience, our trial audience. We did three screenings in nursing schools and for some other health groups. We omitted one group of people who could have given us film criticism at that time, and that was media oriented people or filmmakers. We're now getting criticism from that perspective. And we agree with the essence of the criticism on the large part — that it's over-narrated, that it's too emotional, that it should be more like an impersonal reporter type thing. Some people say we should have more interviews with administrators of hospitals giving their viewpoints, like CBS.

Quinn: Jim Klein and Julia Reichert had two criticisms. One had to do with style, most of which we agree with; and the other does have to do with some of the politics of the film. We say some things that we cannot support because we don't have the graphics. For all the reasons we talked about before, the film has its inadequacies. And we say a lot of things that we can't really support visually. It's just there because we said it. And we have a few images that sort of help to carry it off, but not much. Jim and Julia say that kind of stuff weakens it. Our feeling is that although we couldn't solve the problem aesthetically, it's more important to try and say those things than to leave them out.

Blumenthal: The working class neighborhood audiences that we've

shown the film to do not make those criticisms of the film. They're really happy with it. It comes right out of their experience, and they've got their whole life to verify and support the things that we say. People who are sophisticated about media point out those filmic flaws but the working class people who see it are not so critical of technique. The tone of narration now is one of someone in the struggle to save the Maternity Center. In fact, the tone of the film may well be one of the things that makes it so appealing to neighborhood audiences. And if it is — and I really think that it is — well, then too bad if we can't get the libraries and high schools to rent and buy it. It's not a film for them. It's not UNION MAIDS.

Kleinhans: It seems like there's a trade-off. If you dilute your politics, you can get to a much broader audience, but you get to them with a very soft message. On the other hand, obviously you don't want to make a film that's so dogmatic and so rhetorical that it turns everybody off and you don't have an audience at the end of the film.

Quinn We all look at it and say, 'It could be a more skillful narration ... we'll do it next time.' The big thing that we've found so far in our showings is that nobody comes up and says, "Oh, that narrator!"

Lesage: That so-called objectivity is the sneakiest, most disastrous thing of all in narration, like the voice of God saying, "This is very objective, and I don't have any point of view of my own, and this is just the truth." Your narration already has part of that problem by being voice-off. But I think it's offset by the fact that it's really obviously participating in the struggle. You don't get the feeling that the narrator is necessarily taking a "everybody in the United States thinks exactly as I do" point of view, which is what so many narrators imply: "Now we see jolly Scotland," or something like that.

Quinn: It's very clear in our film that our narration has emotion and prejudice. You know right where the narrator is at, and you can take it or leave it or make your own judgments.

Lakes: This film gets people to say, "What's happening now? What can we do now?" I'd contrast that with a showing of UNION MAIDS at the American Library Association. Afterwards people just sat around and said, "Um, where are those good old days?" It didn't make them think anything about their own lives.

Quinn: Where you see the film is very important.

Taylor What about the funding you got from the Illinois Arts Council, where does that fit in? How is it in their interest to give you a grant? What's your interest?

Rohrer: We got a grant of \$10,000 to get prints and show the film in the Chicago area after we finished it. On the whole Kartemquin hasn't relied on grants for our capital; we used income from commercial businesses for our film costs.

Davenport: That's another dilemma that every group faces. To what extent do you want to be dependent on foundations? How much co-optation follows from that? What do they want you to do? Most of us in Kartemquin were pretty clear that we never saw foundations as a major source for anything. We knew they were very topical in their interests. We knew their interests changed from year to year. We knew they were basically corporate liberals who had various financial pressures that said, "You gotta get rid of your money." It was ruling class charity in a lot of ways. It hooked in with government policy. When Nixon came in, the country swung right, and foundations were funding law enforcement, only in a more liberal guise. When the Bicentennial came around, there was a lot of money for art and media. You know, that's another aspect of corporate liberalism. There are certain times and places and ways in which money is available in a more democratic way, and a lot of groups around here got money during the Bicentennial — the Women's History Project, the Women's Union, and so forth.

Quinn: There's a lot of space in there. We got a little note from one of the radio stations that said we should write a thank-you note to the American Hospital Supply Corporation because they paid for a public service spot announcing that our film was going to be shown. (laughter) They have guidelines that say they'll serve the community, and then they end up coming to people like us to in some way bring something to the community.

Rohrer: Our grant covers a series of screenings of the film in communities, along with discussions on health care afterwards. The Humanities Council was very interested in the discussions afterwards. As for how we actually spent the money: each of the neighborhood screenings took a good amount of money, and then two of us have been salaried rather meagerly to coordinate it. Also we spent money on posters and other PR material and on a translation of the film into Spanish.

Quinn: When working with liberals like Humanities Council people we've been criticized by some of them for not making a film that's more "objective," that's more like network journalism, which pretends to be objective but never is.

Kleinhans: That seems related to how people often treat political differences. They avoid openly discussing real political questions in a film by saying they don't like the form. That's a socially acceptable way of saying, "I don't agree with you." They mean they don't like the politics.

Quinn: Form and content cannot be separated; they are dialectically related. I saw both PUMPING IRON and HARLAN COUNTY with some filmmaker friends of mine. They thought PUMPING IRON was better because the cinematography is better. I said, "What do you mean better?" I don't care about some guy working out with weights, but I care about miners fighting bosses. Whether the camera shakes or not doesn't

matter as much as the fact that the filmmakers were there in Harlan County. That has to be seen as part of form.

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American Shoeshine Rag poppin' for those tips

by Robert L. Pest

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AMERICAN SHOESHINE, produced and directed by Sparky Greene, is a film of conflicting tendencies. For most of its thirty minutes, this short documentary undertakes an examination of the socioeconomic forces underlying both the origins and the continued existence of the shoeshine occupation. Using an expertly edited montage of first-hand accounts, stills, and "found" footage, some of which dates to the first decade of this century, filmmaker Sparky Greene follows the shoeshine business from the earliest days to the present, focusing on the gradual development of shoeshining as an occupation reserved almost exclusively for blacks. The shoeshine men themselves provide both history and analysis, often articulating highly developed views on the nature of both class and racial relations in American society.

But during the last third of the film, AMERICAN SHOESHINE moves away from this economic focus to become a showcase for individual exhibitions of "rag poppin," the musical effects achieved by "popping" a shoeshine rag. While this activity is not a problem in itself, the upbeat presentation of the history of rag popping as a way to get better tips, along with the uncritical inclusion of several "Step'n'Fetch It" type numbers to the accompaniment of rag popping, suggests a failure to consider the social implications of such self-debasing performances. That Greene was aware of this problem cannot be denied. One of the skilled practitioners of rag popping who appears in this film confesses that many people accuse him of being an Uncle Tom. Yet Greene seems to share with this man the view that, as an "art," rag popping is exempt from such considerations and that, like any art, it confers a special dignity on its masters. Had Greene chosen to confront, or at least acknowledge, the contradictions of this position, AMERICAN SHOESHINE would have been a different, and perhaps better, film. But as it is, AMERICAN SHOESHINE is still a direct and effective portrait of the history and practice of a unique occupation, the very existence of which reveals a great deal about the economic and social structure of American society.

The film's soundtrack consists almost exclusively of short, apparently casual comments made by the shoeshine men, sometimes on camera but more often in conjunction with related film footage and stills. Although the men who appear in the film represent something like a cross-section of the adults involved in shoeshining, the majority of those who speak at any length are older, thoughtful, and articulate. These men relate more than the history of shoeshining; they also share the wisdom born from years of trying to survive in a racist economy. Much of the power of *AMERICAN SHOESHINE* comes from the honest conviction and natural poise with which these men relate the details of their lives. Perhaps their friendly openness stems from the fact that they were filmed at their shops and stands, usually while working. For as the film develops, we discover that the workplace is often the only place where these men feel at home. One also suspects that many of them participated in the film out of a desire to better understand their curious position in society and particularly to come to terms with their own reasons for remaining in a job which both blacks and whites consider demeaning. Because this process of self-examination is so obviously at work in the film, and because Greene handles it in a compassionate and sympathetic way, the process of self-revelation never embarrasses either the shoeshine men or the audience.

But equally impressive in its honesty is the way that Greene structures these bits and pieces of experience and observation to reflect his own process of coming to terms with the material. The film is divided into three sections: the first focuses on the history of shoeshining, the second on the aspirations and ideals of the shoeshine men, and the third on rag popping. Each section develops slowly, almost randomly, until the first-person sections and the accompanying footage gradually achieve a convincing unity. Greene thus shares, in an unpretentiously reflexive fashion, his own excitement in discovering the connections among thousands of feet of film and hours of interviews.

The first section of the film deals with the history of shoeshining. Significantly, the primary speaker in this section is an Italian (the only non-black shoeshine man to appear in the film). While the screen offers various views of turn-of-the-century America, the Italian explains that the first shoeshiners were Greek and Italian immigrants. Only as these "new Americans" became assimilated into the mainstream did blacks, primarily displaced field-hands and sharecroppers, move into shoeshining. But the peculiar character of shoeshining dates from the entry of blacks into the profession.

The treatment of shoeshine men as "boys," as one veteran sadly implies, is no different from the man-child status of blacks during slavery. Greene uses footage of cotton picking and riverboat unloading to stress the connection between shoeshining and the Old South. For, as one of the film's subjects later comments, the "porter" professions, including shoeshining, were simply the North's way of dealing with the large-scale northern movement of Southern blacks at the turn of the century, a way of changing the appearance of racial relations without altering their

essentially oppressive nature. By focusing on these points, Greene suggests that both the surplus labor that gave birth to such a nonessential occupation and the social attitudes that made such blatantly hierarchical encounters possible have their roots in the Old South.

But at no point does the film move away from the concrete experience of the shoeshine men. Historical reality takes an added meaning when seen from the viewpoint of personal experience. Thus, the best analysis of the movement of blacks into shoeshining is offered by one man who cares little for historical forces: "I got hungry, that's how I got started. You get hungry, you'll do anything, you know."

But the history of shoeshining is also a history of men refusing to conform to the demands of the wage-labor system and refusing to abandon their ties to the community. Although many of the men interviewed seem defensive about the lack of status accorded shoeshiners, all of them seem to value their independence more than status. As one man proudly observes, "Nobody's looking over my shoulder." The job also seems to allow for considerable interaction with the community; in several cases the shoeshine stand serves as a center for community activities. One would certainly not want to deny that the relative independence of the shoeshine men is primarily a function of their peripheral relation to the economy. But the men in *AMERICAN SHOESHINE* value this independence, and transform it in many different ways to reflect their own personalities and to project their own values.

The second and longest section of the film is devoted to a series of individual portraits of shoeshine men. The aim here seems to be to explore, in a gentle but insistent way, the contradictions of the shoeshine men's own thinking. By far the most revealing insight arises from several of the older men who, while allegedly proud of their work, refuse to let their sons take it up. The extent to which these men have internalized the ideology of mobility is made devastatingly clear when one man reports a conversation with his son. When the son asked if he could shine shoes, the father responded, "If I ever hear talk of you gonna shine shoes, I'll break your hands." Others acknowledge their acceptance of middle-class thinking by the titles they insist upon — "boot black" or "leather finisher." Still others seem to pride themselves on being able to tell a person of "quality" by his shoes. Throughout this section one is made aware of the tension between some sort of awareness of economic realities, on the one hand, and a well-conditioned good humor, on the other. Smiles bring tips and even when discussing serious matters, Sparky Greene's shoeshine men smile.

But there are cracks in the smile — revealing cracks. One shoeshiner observes that "big business" types are the worst tippers. Some even hold a few dollars in their hands during the shine in an effort to get especially good treatment. But when the time to pay comes, the shoeshine man is lucky to get "fifteen cents." The tale of Beau Jack, a shoeshiner who

became a lightweight boxing champion, makes a similar point about "pie in the sky." Whether shining a white man's shoes or boxing in a white man's ring, Beau Jack gets only the share of the pie that others decide to give him. When his career ended, Beau Jack found himself shining shoes again; his managers had "taken all his money." The appearance of Beau Jack in the film, his scarred face the only remaining testimony to his boxing career, is more than pathetic. For when he comments that the only thing he ever enjoyed besides boxing was shining shoes, Beau Jack is in fact making an indirect but significant comment on the lack of opportunities, the limitations, and the manipulation which black Americans not only experience but often come to accept.

While the critical comments of the shoeshine men do not indicate or imply recognition of their oppressive situation, they do suggest that at least some of them are beginning to question the "smile" approach to economic survival. The fact that several lament the steadily shrinking number of shoeshine men also suggests that a concern for self-respect and racial pride is driving young men away from shining shoes. But Greene is uninterested in why people do not shine shoes. His concern is with those who do, whatever their reasons and however inadequate their analysis of their condition. This questionable focus, a concern with how people cope with a situation rather than with how they can change it, implies an acceptance of shoeshining as "interesting" or "quaint." It does not, unfortunately, lead to any challenge of the vertical social relations that support shoeshining.

In the third section of the film, Greene moves farther away from questions of pride and consciousness and into a discussion and display of rag popping. Rag popping is presented as a way of "coping." The "turtle dance," the most sophisticated form of rag popping, seems to have arisen as a way of getting bigger tips. "Pop the rag, they'll pop the money in your pockets." But in an occupation which allows little originality, rag popping became a form of personal expression, a way to distinguish oneself from one's peers. But the manner of expression is not neutral; rather, it is both personally and racially demeaning. The various dances and routines connected with rag popping embody the most vicious racial stereotypes. The principal "bug dancer" in the film acts drunk and foolish while dancing to the beat of the rag. Two other featured performers, Pork Chop and Kidney Pie, gained national recognition for their rag popping numbers. But their attire and their routine suggest that the real appeal of their act was in its insulting racial humor.

Greene's one-sided treatment of the "art" of rag popping might be seen as nothing more than an extension of the film's central preoccupation with how to cope with a dreary situation. But when a veteran rag popper talks about being called an Uncle Tom, the inherent weakness of Greene's position becomes clear. For no matter how "artistic" or gratifying an activity is, it cannot be treated independently of the social relations it both reflects and maintains. The racial stereotypes (ranging from "natural rhythm" to "devoted domestic"), reinforced by rag

popping, extend far beyond the world of the shoeshiners. No tip is big enough to justify personal and racial debasement.

The weakness of the third section of AMERICAN SHOESHINE is the direct result of the filmmaker's affection for his subjects. AMERICAN SHOESHINE is the shoeshine men's film; Greene obviously felt that rag popping was part of their story. But affection alone is not sufficient for dealing with a complex social and economic situation. Working people have always developed ways of making both work and the workplace more bearable. Often these psychologically necessary diversions develop into a form of their own. But activities like rag popping do not transform relations of labor, they maintain them. The shoeshine men in AMERICAN SHOESHINE have reason to be proud of their rag popping skills, but they also have other, more basic reasons to be proud and other, more significant struggles to engage in.

AMERICAN SHOESHINE is distributed by Perspective Films, 369 West Erie Street, Chicago, IL 60610

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

38 Families. Redevelopment. Revolution Until Victory. The Beginning of Our Victory New from California Newsreel

by Bill Nichols

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Since spring 1973 various members and former members of California Newsreel (previously called San Francisco Newsreel) have produced four films. A close look at these films will offer a better understanding of the group's dynamic as well as a view of some of the problems and successes of political filmmaking within the post-New-Left American movement. These films have their greatest value in ongoing political struggles to organize and mobilize working class and Third World peoples. It is important to bear this in mind as a fundamental quality for it places them in a different context than left-liberal films that circulate predominantly in a middle class, educational context (colleges, high schools, public libraries), such as *IN THE YEAR OF THE PIG* (Emile de Antonio, 1968), *GROWING UP FEMALE* (Julia Reichert/Jim Klein, 1970), and *I.F. STONE'S WEEKLY* (Jerry Bruck, Jr., 1976). In contrast, the Newsreel films are more direct organizing tools, and the three I've seen all have useful roles to play.

This is crucial. For whatever formal or stylistic flaws they have, they nonetheless work politically. Many of the problems I raise about them are problems that the films' intended audiences also raise. Other problems relate to theoretical questions about political films in general. As I discuss the films, I will be concerned with the broader question of the aesthetics of political cinema, and the attempt to build a revolutionary culture grounded in Marxist theory and dedicated to a radical transformation of the status quo. Despite their flaws, these Newsreel films play a role in this struggle.

The four films are *38 FAMILIES*, *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY*, *THE BEGINNING OF OUR VICTORY*, and *REDEVELOPMENT*. [\[1\]](#) Newsreel began work on *38 FAMILIES* and *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* prior to spring, 1973, but political upheaval in the group delayed both films. The issues were very complex, but the net result was that the majority of the members (mostly Third World) voted in

February, 1973, to purge four members of the leadership (all white), who had moved close to or already joined the Revolutionary Communist Party (a Maoist group, formerly the Revolutionary Union). [2] The purged members formed Single Spark Films, allied themselves formally with the RCP, completed *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* on their own, and went on to make *THE BEGINNING OF OUR VICTORY*, a film I have not yet been able to see.

Members of the remaining Newsreel majority had already completed *38 FAMILIES*, but then fell inactive as members drifted away. In 1975, Resolution Films, a group of five filmmakers, made *REDEVELOPMENT* and began to distribute it in association with Newsreel. Several people from Resolution and some people who had been recruited to Newsreel after the 1973 split now run California Newsreel in San Francisco and have recently expanded both production and distribution. They have also established a branch in Los Angeles.

In many ways, *38 FAMILIES* and *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* reflect the enormous gap in filmmaking skills between leadership and membership at the time of purge. The membership had little filmmaking experience and little training inside Newsreel. Therefore *38 FAMILIES* has a number of flaws that limit its political value. Basically, the film recounts the story of 38 families in Salinas, California who were evicted from a trailer court when they joined a strike against the farm company that also owned the court. All the families were Chicano and they banded together, refusing to leave their homes. When the company called in the police to evict the families, many of them set up a tent camp in an abandoned lot across the street. After a period of continual pressure on the city government, local officials allowed the families to move into an abandoned Army camp where they were told the city would provide decent housing within 90 days.

Although this series of events is relatively straightforward, it is actually difficult to reconstruct accurately from the film. The participants themselves tell much of the story in interviews (in Spanish, translated voice-over). The film jumps back and forth in time from speakers describing events to more cinema-verité-like coverage of actual events. But the film does so without clarifying the relation of description to events, sometimes alluding to central points such as the onset of the strike in a passing phrase. The film resembles those of Emile de Antonio or Cinda Firestone's *ATTICA* (1974) in its attempt to construct an overview from sync interview material. But *38 FAMILIES* is less successful. The interviewees are all participants with similar points of view, and this prevents the use of counterpoint and contrast such as Firestone employs when she cuts from the McKay Commission hearings to the Attica inmates' testimony. The similar viewpoints in *38 FAMILIES* compel the filmmakers to duplicate the omissions, repetitions, emphases, and contextual understanding of the participants rather than to formulate a broader interpretation of their own, as Firestone and De Antonio consistently do. The result is a high degree of confusion rather than clarification of issues.

Although the film doesn't draw more general conclusions from these particular events, its greatest value lies in its explicit treatment of a people and their struggle on levels that the mass media consistently neglect. Because it is the direct address of the people involved in the struggle, the interview material yields a strong sense of "being there." To show how people who are living in the midst of a situation perceive and articulate it can teach us how to communicate with other people in similar situations. Yet a film needs a clearer political analysis in addition to this basic rapport.

The makers of the film are aware of most of these shortcomings, which they argue are symptomatic of their relationships with the purged minority. During this time the more experienced members of Newsreel, including those later purged, devoted themselves exclusively to work on REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY to the neglect of other projects or training others. Therefore the makers of 38 FAMILIES lacked guidance. Furthermore they had no overall advance strategy. Consequently, the film did not raise the political questions relevant to the Chicano movement as a whole. The Third World members, some of whom were Chicano, undertook the project in order to do something, to feel useful, and because they thought their own Third World heritage would afford them some measure of rapport with the people they filmed. How many of the film's problems are directly attributable to the leadership at the time is difficult to determine, but the political context of its making certainly limited the film's political impact.

In contrast to 38 FAMILIES, REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY is one of Newsreel's most ambitious and provocative films. Designed as a compilation film in the tradition of the WHY WE FIGHT series overseen by Frank Capra during World War II, REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY has received appreciable attention and considerable use, especially by Arab student groups. [3] It is also the last Newsreel effort by the purged members, terminating a line of filmmaking continuity that extended back to the group's first film, OFF THE PIG (retitled BLACK PANTHER, 20 min., B&W, 1968).

REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY sets out to provide an historical account of the origins and goals of Zionism and to present the alternative claims of the Palestinian refugees for access to their homeland and their rights to self-determination. The film becomes very complex. There is the relation between re-occupying a homeland and establishing a socialist nation in the face of imperialism. There is the tension between the Palestinian liberation movement and the Arab governments themselves, which are often feudalistic and conservative. There are the conflicting claims and strategies of different Palestinian organizations. There is the diversity of organizational functions of which military operations are but one. And there is the need to draw a clear distinction between anti-semitism and anti-Zionism, a distinction which Lenny Rubenstein argues in his review of the film, "may be impossible to make without political rebellion in Israel." [4] (The film identifies Zionism as a movement built upon class privilege, which has not

benefited all Jews equally by any means.)

The most distinctive feature of the film is undoubtedly its historical orientation. This is rare in Newsreel films, which have generally centered on contemporary events or processes with minimal attention to historical background. Even in *THE WOMAN'S FILM* (40 min., B&W, 1971) on which some of the same people participated, historical background appears in a brief montage sequence in the middle of the film. Newsreel seems to have carried this concern with historical background over into *THE BEGINNING OF OUR VICTORY* (on the Farah strike), and this represents an invaluable addition to Newsreel's approach.

In broad outline, *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* argues that Zionism has been solely preoccupied with the creation of a Jewish homeland, with the result that it has played into the hands of other nations' imperialistic or unscrupulous counter-revolutionary interests. Zionist activity, the film argues, involved collaboration with the Nazi regime and aid to a relatively small number of German Jews who immigrated to Palestine, at the expense of those without the means for such an escape. Earlier Zionism involved appeals for British support, which played into British desires indirectly to control this strategic area and displace Turkish domination. More recently, Zionism has meant dependence upon the United States, helping maintain an American middle-eastern presence and providing U.S. investment with a lucrative internal market.

The film makes these points by means of a voice-over narration. Several different voices, male and female, narrate, effectively undercutting the omniscient voice-of-God narrator and giving the impression that a number of ordinary people have all arrived at the same conclusions. The image track consists primarily of archival footage arranged to illustrate the argument, which is clear and emotionally compelling. In fact, viewing the film can be a very rousing experience, in much the same way as viewing the *WHY WE FIGHT* films once was. *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* provides an invaluable alternative to the mass media's coverage of the Palestinian question and serves as an excellent introduction to discussion and debate.

That at least some of that debate centers around the film itself and the tactics it employs to achieve an emotional effect, namely its Manichean sense of good (Palestinians) and evil (Zionists), is the film's main drawback. This kind of melodramatic stereotyping seems more acceptable in propaganda films than elsewhere (especially if you start out agreeing with the basic premise). But it nonetheless seems at odds with Marxism, which insists that morality does not determine social conditions but vice versa. It isn't the unalterably cruel-hearted Zionists who have brought misery to the Palestinians, but history and the clash of hostile social formations that have produced the current situation in the Middle East. We may wish to make value judgments about people's responses to this historical situation, and, indeed, it would be hard not

to, but it is another thing to imply that morality, or immorality, created it. This choice represents an idealist, religious view of the world, which does indeed run the risk of confusing Zionism with Judaism, the "contagion" with all potential carriers. It is only a short remove from the classically right-wing propaganda tactic of guilt by association.

The filmmakers moralize in three considerably important ways. First, the narrators use imitation German-Jewish accents to read the words of Zionist leaders. In doing this, the film breaks down its own distinction between Zionism and Judaism and sacrifices political distinctions to emotional effect. At one point, however, the use of accents works extremely well. Individuals describe, in voice-over with Jewish accents, how the Zionists collaborated with the Nazi government whereas other Jews joined the Resistance. The use of Jewish accents here stresses the fact that not all Jews are Zionists and that Zionism followed policies detrimental to many Jews. Had the use of accents been limited to this one case, Newsreel would have made its point very effectively.

Second, the narration and supporting image track make frequent reference to Zionist military atrocities associated with the creation of the Israeli state and its subsequent expansion. For example, the film mentions massacres at Deir Yassin (254 civilians killed) and Kfar Kassim (43 civilians, including children, killed). A narrator tells us that an Israeli court fined the Army one cent for the latter massacre. At this point the only sound is the ringing clink of a penny falling on a table. Other sequences reinforce this point by likening Israeli tactics to American tactics in Vietnam.

Yet pointing out Zionist atrocities inadequately justifies the Arab cause. Neither Zionists nor Palestinians would cease to support their cause because of atrocities committed in its name. (Especially if the atrocities are not systematic — part of the implication in the film is that they are.) And since in the minds of many viewers, the most blatant atrocities have been committed in the name of the Palestinian liberation movement, the film's concentration on Zionist atrocities is disingenuous. The film does not once refer to acts of Arab terror, offer any explanation for its place within a larger strategy, or show why the mass media pay so much attention to it, compared to Zionist acts of a similar nature. With this particular approach, the film undercuts its own credibility. The tactic of condemning the side guilty of atrocities worked far more effectively against the U.S. war in Vietnam, but in the Middle East the issues of terrorism and viewers' media-influenced predispositions are very different and need to be dealt with honestly.

Finally there is a strong tendency to associate the Palestinian liberation movement with its guerrilla wing and to valorize militarism as the most emblematic aspect of the liberation struggle. Without clarifying the question of military atrocities more adequately, this is a very risky tendency at best. This emphasis also occurred throughout much of Newsreel's earlier filmmaking, in their films on the Black Panthers, for example. Such an emphasis is in distinct contrast to the relative de-

emphasis of militaristic values (vs. the necessity for armed struggle) in the films on Third World liberation which Newsreel distributes. [5] These films locate armed struggle in a concrete, historical context, where values other than militarism provide the basic direction of struggle. These films don't celebrate violence for its own sake but see it as a transitional necessity which involves much sacrifice. In many Newsreel films, violence was a personal and cathartic experience which lacked extended, historical roots or clear political rationale. Many Newsreel films tucked in an obligatory montage of armed struggle from around the world, especially in the short "turn on" films, which were designed to build morale. The message was less the role of violence in social revolution as the ecstasy of violence as personal liberation.

Although Newsreel avoids the worst of these dangers in REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY, the stress on armed struggle itself may be a function of Newsreel's perception of the Palestinian conflict more than the perception of the participants. The films about Third World liberation struggles which Newsreel distributes but which other people made, frequently emphasize, as dramatic highpoints, the articulation of principles by spokespeople and depictions of what revolutionary cadre do for those they liberate. This sometimes leaves the films flatter and less emotionally rousing to a white North American audience, but they are probably more indicative of the values and priorities found among the liberation fighters themselves.

Lenny Rubenstein (whose review condemns the film as simply inadequate) effectively summarizes many of the film's problems when he states that REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY fails to question

"the components of their (the Palestinian liberation movements) radicalism beyond military cadres and an occasional showpiece workshop; the extent of activity beyond military attacks; the rationale behind apparently suicidal terrorist attacks; their relationship to the demands of the Soviet Union's foreign policy, and their following among the Palestinians who cannot quit their jobs to devote themselves full time to the PLO." [6]

Indeed, the film treats the development of Zionism with far more clarity, and certitude, than the liberation movement itself. The film systematically identifies and criticizes the intentions and motivations of the Zionist leaders, whereas it allows the statements of Palestinians to stand unclarified and glosses over the relationships between different aspects of the struggle. This leads to contradictory explanations of the movement's goals as these two statements indicate:

"(An Arab boy says) We must liberate Palestine and make it possible for all people to live in peace — Jews, Arabs, or Christians. Our war is a war of liberation, it's not a war against the Jews. We do not want to push them into the sea ... We also don't want them to push us into the desert; that is why we must fight."

"(An Arab male adult says) The giant U.S. corporations and banks have billions of dollars invested in the Arab countries. They want to continue exploiting the Arab people. That is why they are trying to suppress the revolution. As Palestinians we are asking people to fight against imperialism and its partners ... the reactionary Arab regimes."

The film doesn't confront the degree to which these statements reflect a division between national liberation and socialist revolution. The film refuses to clarify differences in Palestinian strategy, preferring instead to give a blanket, emotional endorsement to guerrilla organization and an equally sweeping condemnation to Zionist policies.

For these reasons a great deal of the film's power lies in its ability to arouse strong feelings for the Palestinians and against the Zionists. This approach requires a certain amount of flattening of historical complexity in order to stress emotional factors — Zionist scheming and Palestinian resistance — that serve as the viewer's points of identification. An overly simplified account of historical events is common to propaganda films generally. We may wonder if its use here handicaps Newsreel's purpose by promoting a non-dialectical, almost moralistic concept of history. The very fact that the emotionally charged and biased argument is a convention of propaganda films, however, may indeed be recognized as precisely that. We may accept it as a convention in this context without expecting to find justification for it outside of this context. Emotionally charged and simplified accounts promote easy comprehension and identification. On the other hand, leftist propaganda using this convention is not very likely to help promote a genuinely Marxist understanding of history whatever its other virtues.

Verbal statements are of great importance to a film like *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* — to most political cinema in fact. Spoken language provides a vehicle for criticism and self-criticism, communication and meta-communication.

The latter, an examination of one's own assumptions or messages at another level, has become an area of considerable theoretical interest for both formal and political reasons. While a case can be made that such self-reflexiveness is important to the overall development of a political cinema, it is an activity far removed from the work of Newsreel and I cannot effectively discuss it in this article without adopting an overly speculative approach. But just the base level of criticism and communication in *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* (omitting reflexive operations), can serve as a focus for a few conclusions about structure in the films.

1. Newsreel's reliance upon the traditional form of voice-over commentary allows for contrapuntal interaction between word and image. This provides a valuable flexibility and one which cinema-verité emphasizing sync sound must replace — by other structures if the film is

to have an overall coherence.

2. Voice-over applies a logical grid to historical events and runs the risk of oversimplification-into moral certitude, political dogmatism, and teleological determinism. Fortunately, this is a potential risk and not an absolute one. The style and content of the voice-over, leaving aside meta-communicative techniques, can do much to avoid this danger as can coupling voice-over to other forms of commentary. Multiplicity of viewpoints itself can be important. Newsreel uses this tactic to great advantage in *REVOLUTION* since the film's soundtrack divides itself among several speakers as well as interview material. The mixture of contemporary footage with historical analysis also subverts this risk by reaffirming the indeterminacy of the present alongside the struggle to shape a future guided by knowledge of the past.

REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY is one of Newsreel's most distinctive films, especially in the sense of attempting to reach an unconvinced audience rather than to reconfirm the views of the already convinced. As such it is one of the few Newsreel films that develops a comprehensive analysis and argument about a major struggle and one of the very few that attempts such an analysis from an historical perspective. The film not only shows how far and how fast Newsreel has come in its own development; it also suggests how much the left itself has developed since the days of the New Left's birth. Learning from strengths and weaknesses helps provide a context for further change among all cultural workers on the left.

Whereas *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* took the filmmakers far from their own backyard (an excursion they were to repeat in *THE BEGINNING OF OUR VICTORY*) *REDEVELOPMENT*, the only film to be associated in any way with the remnant of the majority side in the purge of 1973, deals very specifically with a problem centering in San Francisco — urban renewal. Its overall structure is looser than *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* and there is a stronger tendency to linger over specific events or situations rather than constantly move toward a more general overview. But this approach reveals both advantages and disadvantages that make the film of particular interest.

REDEVELOPMENT covers a vast range of material (usually in the words of actual participants) although it never fully resolves the problem of integrating this material into a coherent whole. Like *WE DEMAND FREEDOM* (55 min/B&W/ Third World Newsreel /1974), the film's final impression is a sense of confusion, which seems to be a direct function of the amount of material covered and the way in which the filmmakers relate this material. A brief summary of what seem to be the main sections of the film may help indicate both the strength of the film and its problems:

- 1) The current problem of redevelopment (from the point of view of a developer and a displaced resident).
- 2) How redevelopment of an area occurs over time in San Francisco.

- Use of the media to imply that the area is deteriorating and unsafe, followed by redevelopment plans and actions.
- Reactions of residents for whom the area remains viable even though redevelopment cuts off its life blood-street life, social gathering places, etc.

3) The context for redevelopment at a non-local level.

- The role of government in co-ordinating large scale reorganization in land use as economic needs change.
- San Francisco's envisioned role as hub of Pacific Rim business, a finance capital center.

4) Local resistance to the effects of this strategy.

- TOOR (Tenants and Owners in Opposition to Redevelopment).
- Protest marches, non-response by city government.
- Composition of TOOR and most other resistance groups is largely immigrant, low-income, many former longshoremen and seamen in particular.

5. More general traditions of class struggle in the Bay Area.

- 1934 general strike over union recognition.
- Union struggles against lettuce growers in Salinas.

6) The issue of community control.

- Pitfalls exemplified by local redevelopment agencies that strengthen local pockets of wealth and power at people's expense (investments of community churches, e.g., managed by high-paid, outside advisors).
- The necessary overview: Engel's argument that redevelopment helps rationalize and maximize profits; victory requires abolition of capitalistic production.

7) Problems of urban transit.

- Functions of urban transit: shuttle workers from a distance and increase land values along the transit route. (Example of high rises clustered near exits of Toronto's subway system, related to increased values in Mission District near BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) exits).
- Community response: businessmen see resistance as attempt to discredit city, resist progress. Residents see transit as betrayal, unresponsive to their needs.

8) Class structure in community organizing: petty-bourgeois organizing tactics (reforms that do not prevent redevelopment) and the dissipation of energy from basic issues. Citation of concrete examples in San Francisco.

9) Overview of urban core renewal.

- Will BART aid the worker, the average person? Official answer: yes, relieve congestion and pollution, attract new industry. Narration's unofficial answer: no, will rationalize profits and relations of production in finance center but will not provide jobs. To the contrary, will squeeze even more workers out.
- The international economic picture from which to view mass transit. Companies relocate overseas not because of lack of adequate mass transit, but because of cheaper labor, political "stability," and minimal worker organization. (Examples are based on quotes from officials of Hewlett-Packard.)

10) The present dilemma: Live coverage of a meeting between residents of Daly City, a suburb south of S.F., and the local government, ending with the frustrated outcry of a woman protesting the lack of community control: "What is the recourse for an oppressed majority?"

Some of the difficulties in integrating these sections into a single, coherent argument may be apparent from the differences in scope and level of argument between sections and the apparent arbitrariness of their sequential arrangement. Note, for example, the similarity between sections 4 and 6a or between 7 and 9. These difficulties do not undercut the integrity of the individual sections, however. The film organizes these sections in a crisp, efficient manner. Within sections the voices of participants figure prominently. Their perceptions provide the sections with internal organization and infuse them with credibility and everyday understanding. REDEVELOPMENT resists the temptation to draw from these perceptions a common thread which a voice-over narrator could summarize, and the film thereby avoids the dangers of moralism and determinism that surface in REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY.

Consequently, a much of the film's line of reasoning derives from various participants' comments and their juxtaposition. Even though these comments relate most strongly to other material within the same section, they do not provide the thread for an overall argument. This strength of local reference, the commentary's rootedness in specific situations, gives a very strong sense of how issues "feel" to the participants and how they are dealt with. The choice to give priority to the local context, the situation within a given section of the film, need not lead to overall diffuseness. What seems to make the overall structure somewhat murky has more to do with the arrangement of sections in relation to each other. The film simply attempts to cover too much ground via a pattern that shifts levels and topics far more often than is necessary. (Introducing a discussion of runaway corporations in section 9b is a good example: the point is valid and well-made, but its link to urban transit does not seem to be its most distinctive feature. If anything it relates better to 3a and 6b, sections dealing with the general conditions of capitalist production that relate to urban redevelopment.)

REDEVELOPMENT lacks a singular point of view mediated by a single textual code as REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY does in its historical

sections (via voice-over). The exact vantage point from which we observe the process of redevelopment seems to shift as though the film were trying to examine all its many facets without making any assumption about which facet is most important or determining. There is no political organization featured to provide leadership. This may well be indicative of the relative lack of leftist commitment to issues such as redevelopment during the period of the New Left. Redevelopment, like the prison issue so heavily treated by Third World Newsreel (in New York City), manifests itself most forcefully in the social fabric of the community rather than at the point of production. Left groups with a national organization have not given such issues the same degree of importance as economic exploitation and point of production organizing.

Usually, however, they do acknowledge the importance of the struggle against barriers to working class unity, such as racism and sexism. It is often left up to individuals in the community to act as best they can. For example, *BREAK AND ENTER* (42 min., B&W, 1970) also indicates how protest against poor living conditions arises with those directly affected, and thus the film shows the Young Lords, a community-based political group, playing a secondary, support role.

REDEVELOPMENT fluctuates between an historical and a current events point of view, between a contextual overview and an in-depth examination of specific confrontations. Its greatest strength lies in the analysis of specific aspects of a crucial problem with immediate relevance for California Newsreel's local constituency. Its greatest weakness lies in its failure to integrate these aspects into a coherent, historical whole. In this case, reediting what has already been shot would greatly enhance *REDEVELOPMENT* which is already of considerable use. Its limitations only point to the need for ongoing struggle on a unified front of theory and practice in both film production and political action.

Notes

1. *38 FAMILIES* (25 mm/color) is available in English and Spanish from California Newsreel only. *REVOLUTION UNTIL VICTORY* (52 min/B&W/ 1973) was originally called *WE THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE*. Calif. and Third World Newsreel in New York both distribute the film in English and Spanish versions. *BEGINNING OF OUR VICTORY* (Single Spark. Films, 1975) was withdrawn from circulation soon after its release although it has been screened a few times since then. *REDEVELOPMENT* (Resolution Films, 1975/60 min/B&W) is available from both Newsreels. California Newsreel, 630 Natoma Street, San Francisco, CA 94101; Third World Newsreel, 26 W. 20th Street, New York, NY 10011.

2. I have based my information about California Newsreel's internal history on interviews with members of the majority side and access to position papers developed by both sides. I have not been able to obtain an interview with the purged minority.

3. In both New York and San Francisco the film was one of the most widely distributed in 1974. Critical response ranged from high praise to great disappointment. In a review in *Cineaste*, Lenny Rubenstein, incorrectly calling the film WE ARE THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE, concluded, "Relying on the simplistic slogan of Third World struggle is no longer enough to win an audiences support" (6:3, 1974, p. 36). In more recent years, however, the film has not been widely seen or promoted.

4. Rubenstein, *ibid.*

5. Examples include EL PUEBLO SE LEVANTA (THE PEOPLE ARE RISING/42 min/B&W/Eng&Sp/1971), FALN (25 min/B&W/Dawn Films, 1964), NIGERIA: NIGERIA ONE (45 min/B&W/Facts Africa/n.d.), NOSSA TERRA (40 min/B&W/1971), PROCLAMATION OF THE NATION OF GUINEA-BISSAU (40 min/color 1973-TW Newsreel only).

6. Rubenstein, *ibid.*

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Film and ideology

by John Hess

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"It is clear that the arm of criticism cannot replace the criticism of arms. Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses." — Karl Marx

"Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice."
— Karl Marx

I've found the concept of ideology useful in my work with commercial films, but I have also found it difficult to explain in simple terms from a Marxist perspective. I want here to present an introduction to the concept, even at the risk of distortion by oversimplification. I hope to provide a starting point for further study, and begin a discussion of ideology per se in JUMP CUT. [1] I begin with a working definition of ideology, then quote a key passage by Marx which brings up the basic issues. After I discuss these issues, I briefly put the following articles in the context of the discussion.

Ideology is a relatively systematic body of ideas, attitudes, values, and perceptions, as well as, actual modes of thinking (usually unconscious) typical of a given class or group of people in a specific time and place. An example is ruling class ideology in the USA today, often called bourgeois ideology (It is important to point out that ruling class ideology and its manifestations differ from country to country.). I must add four significant qualifications to this definition.

First, Marx and Engels always considered the state, politics, education, religion, the law and other activities not directly a part of material production to be ideological forms or manifestations of ideology. Saying this raises a question about the relation between these various ideological forms, say, education, for example, and ideology per se. Does our education system embody, manifest, reflect, express, disseminate, or use ruling class ideology? These verbs describe a scale from a passive

relation to an active one. Unless we are to dismiss this question as a linguistic trap, we have to answer yes all the way around. Schools use bourgeois ideology to keep order — if students don't do well they will "fail" in our competitive society. At the same time schools overtly teach bourgeois ideology, for example the righteousness of the free enterprise system. However, if we examine schools carefully, we can also see how they covertly reflect and embody bourgeois values, for example, sexism and racism.

Second, ruling class ideology tends to dominate in any given society although it never does so completely. For example, a significant number of Americans today reject the idea that big business is in their interests. Also, while schools present a complete indoctrination in ruling class ideology, blatantly in classes on our political and economic system, less blatantly in the ways it encourages competition, individualism, and sexism, many people end up rejecting all or part of that indoctrination.

Third, ideology presents an incomplete, inaccurate, distorted understanding of social reality for two main reasons. Ideology represents the interests and views of only one class although often presenting them as universally true and valid. For example, the educational system clearly discriminates against all but those with money and power. While claiming to offer "equal opportunity" to all, the system provides inferior education to minorities, women, and the poor. In addition to representing class interests, ideology depends for its clarity on the corresponding clarity of the social relations extant in the society.

By social relations I mean the way in which a society organizes itself to produce, divide up, and use a surplus of goods beyond what's needed for subsistence. Have people divided themselves into extended families, tribes, classes? Who owns the land, the tools, and the other resources? Who does the work and how are they rewarded for it? The important question is, then, how clear are these relations. Under capitalism they are not clear at all. For example, while social mobility, getting ahead by hard work, personal responsibility for one's place in society, are all important ideas in bourgeois ideology, a hope held out to all, capitalism depends upon a large work force with no other way to earn a living than to work for the capitalist class. Since only a few can be a capitalist or make themselves independent under capitalism, social mobility, getting ahead, is not a significant reality for most people.

Fourth, although we can talk about ruling class ideology in general, each specific expression of it — ideas, the legal system, the state, movies, ethnic group ideology — is mediated. By mediated I mean that between the general ideology and its expression comes individual and group thoughts, experiences, creativity, needs, and so forth. For example, Hollywood films generally convey bourgeois ideology, but not solely or purely. Directors, actors and actresses, writers, the needs of audiences at a given moment all mediate between an aspect of the general ideology — say individualism — and a film, such as GODFATHER II. The dynamic

and the appeal of this film lie partially in the tension between extreme individualism, represented by Michael, and Italian ethnic cohesiveness, represented by the family. The appeal of many American films lies in their attacks on certain aspects of bourgeois ideology and life.

In this sense, many Hollywood films have progressive elements, which arise from contradictions between aspects of bourgeois ideology (individualism and ideas about the family) and between bourgeois ideology and life under capitalism.

The following quote from Marx's "Preface to *A Contribution to The Critique of Political Economy*," [1] one of his most famous statements, raises the crucial issues about ideology. I will draw out and discuss these issues.

"In the social production of their existence, people inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of people that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines, their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or — this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms — with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution." [2]

For Marx and Engels, the first fact of human existence is the production of the necessities of life: food, clothing, and shelter. In order to accomplish this production, people enter into social relations "which are independent of their will." Since history does not stop, we don't get a chance to sit down and figure this all out ahead of time. It takes place over long periods of time; for example, it took capitalist relations hundreds of years to develop in Europe.

These relations of production — the way a society organizes itself to produce its needs — which people enter into (or better, find themselves in) are independent of their will because each of them is born into a given situation, into a specific family, class, ethnic group, time and place. None of us can choose these things. Before we even have the capacity to make independent decisions, our family, schools, churches, and other formal institutions have contributed greatly to our socialization, have indoctrinated us in bourgeois ideology.

Marx's assertion that an ideological "superstructure" arises upon "the economic structure of society" has become very controversial. Because Marx uses words like "structure" and talks of "arising on a foundation," many have visualized the relationship between base and superstructure as one between the basement or foundation of a house and the upper floors. In some mechanical applications of these concepts, such an image is, in fact, asserted as what Marx intended. Marx's own phrasing, some sloppy reading, and especially dogmatic and mechanical applications of these concepts have led many who otherwise consider themselves Marxists to reject this way of conceiving the relationship as rigidly determinist.

According to this rejection, Marx here asserts that only economic life or activity constitutes reality while ideas, consciousness, the law, or politics are all figments of people's imagination, having no reality or importance. I too would find the image of a house with economics in the basement, politics and the state on the first floor, law and religion on the second, and art perched precariously on the roof silly and incorrect. But it seems very clear to me that this is not at all what Marx intended or said.

To begin with the economic base includes the "totality of these relations or productions." The capitalists own the means of production (tools, raw materials, land, factories) and the workers receive a wage for their time on the job. The totality of economic life (production, distribution, exchange, and consumption) includes our conscious as well as our unconscious participation in it. As one commentator explains it,

"When Marx insists that being ... is independent of the consciousness which reflects it, what he is getting at is not that human production occurs without thought, but that what happens in the world of production occurs independently of what people may happen to think is happening." [3]

The distinction is not between unconscious economic activity, on the one hand, and consciousness, on the other, but between our conscious activity in production and what we or anyone else thinks about that activity. Throughout history, the difficult thing has been to explain accurately human production. Few have even tried. The law, the state, religion, ideas, attitudes are the ideological forms in which people think about and try to change their conscious activity in production.

In the second part of the sentence I am discussing, Marx raises a second controversial point having to do with the relationship between base and superstructure. What does it mean to say that "definite forms of consciousness" correspond to the economic base? What is the nature of the correspondence between them? Here I must repeat what I said about historical time. Soon after the passage I've quoted, Marx says,

"The Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois modes

of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society."

He is talking about very broad segments of time, epochs, not a few years or decades. Marx does not say that every time unemployment changes or the stock market twitches, different movies or laws are made. He says rather that to each of the major modes of production "correspond definite forms of social consciousness."

To talk about film and ideology today creates a problem in that we have narrowed the scope considerably. We concern ourselves with the relation between a certain relatively short period of capitalism in one country and the ideology and film of the same time period. Perhaps because of the difficulty involved, the knowledge, new methodology, and precision needed, the relation between the style and content of films and 20th century capitalism remains virtually unexplored. [4] For the, most part in JUMP CUT writers have dealt with the relationship between films on the one hand, and superstructural phenomena, on the other: politics, racism, sexism, individualism. To go beyond this, we need to discuss the possible relation between the patterns of racism and sexism in the workplace as well as changes in the working class generally, and the way people are portrayed in films. What, for example, is the relation between BLUE COLLAR and ROCKY, and changes in patterns of racism in the working class and on the job?

Marx and Engels clearly saw a reciprocal relationship between base and superstructure. It's important to point out that Marxists understand things to be integrated structures, to be functioning wholes. However one understands the relationship between base and superstructure, we must realize that they are an integrated whole and cannot be separated. In later life, Engels felt compelled to defend Marx's view against the mechanical interpretations and applications by some younger Marxists as well as by opponents.

"The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results, ... especially the reflections of all those real struggles in the brains of the participants ... also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their form in particular. There is an interaction of all these elements in which the economic movement is finally bound to assert itself." [5]

Marx explains (or better shows us where to look for) the relation between base and superstructure. The realm of production, he says, "conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life." Because ideology is unreliable, because it mystifies social relations, we must ask ourselves what conditions exist in the capitalist mode of production that contribute to this mystification of consciousness. Marx, in *Capital* and in many other writings, takes the analysis of capitalist production as his central topic, so I can only scratch the surface here.

Class rule, division of labor, alienation, and fetishism constitute the four main, completely interrelated, aspects of this mystification. In bourgeois society, ideology functions primarily to reinforce these aspects of capitalism and to disguise as natural, inevitable, and even as people's own fault capitalism's devastating effects on people.

CLASS RULE

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force." [6]

The ruling class controls the "means of mental production" — they control the media, the schools, etc., and can hire ideologists to operate them. Thus, few Americans actually come in contact with left views on a regular basis. And when left ideas appear in the dominant media, they are usually ridiculed or grossly distorted. This does not mean that bourgeois ideology consists of false ideas about the world foisted on an unsuspecting people by a ruling class who knows they are false. Not at all. The ruling class believes and fights for its ideas. And the ruling class has the power and ability "to represent its interests as the common interest of all the members of society, ... as the only rational, universally valid ones." [7]

Other classes accept ruling class ideas to the extent they seem to make sense of social reality and help people live in our culture. In this sense an idea, such as extreme individualism, "works" in a bourgeois society — for some it works well, even though in the long run it doesn't solve the most pressing personal and social needs. "Dog eat dog" has some validity in a competitive society, but works well only for a few top dogs. But notice, too, what is hidden or omitted by such individualism — the idea that people could rise together as a class. Ideology is not simply the expression of some ideas; it is also the repression or omission of others. Thus it works overtly and covertly.

DIVISION OF LABOR

"For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each person has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him/her and from which he/she cannot escape. A person is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critic, and must remain so if he/she does not want to lose his/her means of livelihood." [8]

The existence of social classes already implies a division of labor between ordering and doing. Furthermore, fixing people into exclusive areas of activity, and Marx includes sex roles here, narrows them, lets them experience only a small portion of social activity, inhibits their ability to grasp the totality of the system. The status of various positions and roles attaches to the people who are forced into them. White-collar work usually has higher status than blue collar, for example. Division of labor touches all aspects of life: the boring routine detail work in factory,

office, and home, the isolated academic department, the split between filmmakers and film critics.

The division of labor between mental and manual work tends to strip most workers of any mental activity at all. [9] Meanwhile intellectuals often remain very distant, often purposely above the day-to-day life of ordinary people. They often appear to think that their ideas have a life of their own beyond the need for any political practice. [10]

ALIENATION

To be alienated means to be estranged, separated from, deprived of something. Marx lays out four ways workers are alienated under capitalism. They do not own the means of production (factories, land, machines, raw materials); they have no say over their work and often don't see enough of the whole process to understand it; they do not deal collectively with one another but individually with an employer; and they compete with each other. For these reasons, workers are alienated from the product of their labor, from the activity itself, and from each other. Because, for Marx, productive activity, the way we produce the necessities of life, is the key to human existence (as opposed to animal existence), alienation from this whole process means that we are not fully human — we are alienated from our very humanness.

On the one hand, bourgeois ideology presents an elaborate defense of these relations of production, of private property, individualism, competition, free enterprise, the naturalness and inevitability of capitalism, usually blaming the kind of behavior that results from alienation (the basic content of many news programs — crime, violence, and addiction) on the victims. On the other hand, the dehumanization of people under capitalism makes it very difficult for them to grasp and fight the system that oppresses them. Born into an alienated society, we tend to see it as inevitable, the way things are.

FETISHISM

When we agree with the capitalists that machines demand certain things of workers, that money earns interest, that workers enter into a fair contract with capitalists, we are giving our own creations (machines) the power to dominate us and we are taking parts of things (the actual contract between capital and labor) and abstractions (the relation between money and interest) for the whole thing. This is how fetishism works. Marx drew the concept of fetishism from the analysis of religion by the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. Fetishism endows gods, the creations of the human mind, with power to effect and even dominate our lives. [11]

We have created machines, even industry itself, yet we talk about their needs, their demands on us, without realizing that it is within our power to make them conform to our needs. If we believe that the capitalists and the workers bargain in equality, it is only because we have failed to fully examine the relation between them. As the current coal strike

shows, the ruling class is willing to use massive armed force to make people work for them on their terms. Their use of this force against workers has a long history. Is this kind of effort made to ensure that mines are safe? Only the united force of most working people can equal that of the capitalists.

So far in the passage we are examining Marx has pointed out those aspects of historical development which most rigidly determine (determine means "place limits on" not "cause") human activity and consciousness. But history is not static. Conflicts and contradictions are an important part of its very existence and dynamic. At first, in the development of a given mode of production, the newly developing relations of production greatly liberate productive forces. Capitalism, bringing the industrial revolution in its wake, had this liberating effect in 18th and 19th century Europe. However, once these relations' liberating capacity had spent itself, they became a hindrance to production. The fact that the government pays farmers not to produce, that every year farmers destroy produce, milk, even animals in order to keep the price up, that factories rarely if ever produce near capacity and often stand idle, that only massive arms manufacturing and sales abroad keep our economy afloat at all — these wasteful aspects of capitalist production show how production for profit fetters productive as well as human development in our society today.

As long as there are conflicting classes, as long as some people exploit others, as long as there is a social division of labor, as long as alienation and fetishism exist, society will be riddled with contradictions, which will continually lead to eras of social revolution. At the very basis of capitalism is the contradiction between the working class, which needs the highest possible wages to sustain itself and provide some security, and the capitalist class, which sees these wages as costs to be kept as low as possible. As a result of the contradictions between the working class and the capitalist class, there is class struggle, not just over wages, where it most obviously manifests itself, but for control of society itself.

The existence of this class struggle implies a number of important things about ideology. First, we cannot see ideology as total, as completely dominating people. Clearly, the more intense class struggle becomes, the less the working class accepts bourgeois ideology. In France and Italy millions of workers have joined parties dedicated to overthrowing capitalism and instituting socialism of some kind. If workers were totally dominated by bourgeois ideology, there would be no unions, strikes, or revolutions. Class struggle takes place in all areas of life: for example, in the struggles for better schools, health care, housing, and jobs; and in struggles against racism and sexism. Marx, just after the passage I have quoted, refers to the "ideological forms in which people become conscious of this conflict and fight it out." And the struggle against bourgeois ideology is the struggle to provide people, in whatever area of life they are active, with the tools to analyze more clearly the world around them so that they can change it. As part of that struggle, we must come to understand as clearly as we can where ideology comes

from, how it functions in society, how people respond to it, and how to combat it. This effort unites these articles and much of the work in JUMP CUT.

In his article James Linton discusses what he calls the "film-as-entertainment" ideology," and goes on to show how it — the use of fictional narrative and the establishment of identification in films — "protects the dominant ideology from serious examination while at the same time reinforcing its basic tenets." Michael Rosenthal, examines the relationship between ideology and the social and economic relations that Marx says determine it.

Discussing the specific case of the coming of sound and color, Edward Buscombe tries to work out the extent to which film economics and the needs of a dominant Hollywood ideology — realism — are responsible for these changes in film technology. Finally, Tom Powers examines a specific case of sexism in Howard Hawks' HIS GIRL FRIDAY, which many critics have long seen as a strong and positive women's film. His examination of the subtle sexism in the film will help us better analyze contemporary films.

Notes

I want to thank the other editors of JUMP CUT for their help in working on this introduction, and especially my close friend Sy Adler, whose wisdom and good sense have been a special help.

[1.](#) My reviews of [GODFATHER II](#) (JUMP CUT 7) and BORN TO KILL (JUMP CUT 10/11) dealt with issues of ideology. I would also recommend reading Chuck Kleinhans' "[Contemporary Working Class Heroes](#)," in JUMP CUT 2, our articles on [JAWS](#) in JUMP CUT 9 and [10/11](#), on [violence against women](#) in JUMP CUT 14, and the special sections on [theory](#) in JUMP CUT 12/13 and on [gays](#) in JUMP CUT 16. In fact, most articles and reviews in JUMP CUT deal with some aspect of ideology.

[2.](#) (NY: International Publ., 1970), p. 20. After examining the original German, I have decided to update the translations I use of Marx and Engels. They almost always use the word *Mensch/Menschen*, which means person/people, but is always translated as man/men. They would understand.

[3.](#) John Hoffman, *Marxism and the Theory of Praxis* (NY: International Publ., 1975), p. 111. I found this book an excellent discussion of the questions I am discussing although it has problems that cannot be overlooked.

[4.](#) Before he died, Charles Eckert was doing fine work in this area and was just beginning to get results. See "The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's MARKED WOMAN," *Film Quarterly*, 27 (Winter 1973-74) and "[Shirley Temple and The House of Rockefeller](#)," JUMP CUT, No. 2 (1974).

[5.](#) Engels to Joseph Bloch, September 21, 1880, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence, 1844-1895*, 3rd rev. ed. (1955; Moscow: Progress Publ., 1975), p. 394.

[6.](#) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (NY: International Publ., 1970), p. 64.

[7.](#) Ibid., p. 65.

[8.](#) Ibid., p. 53.

[9.](#) Harry Braverman has written the best description and analysis of what the division of labor means in people's lives. See *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (NY: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

[10.](#) See our editorial on theory and practice in JUMP CUT 10/11.

[11.](#) See *Capital I*, Chapter 1, Section 4, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof."

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But it's only a movie

by James Linton

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U.S. film producers and film executives defend themselves against attacks on the moral degeneracy or aesthetic crudeness (or whatever alleged shortcoming) of the movies with a notable consistency. In 1950, Eric Johnston, then head of the Motion Picture Producers Association of America, articulated this defense in response to Norman Cousins' attack on American movies. Cousins (1950) argued that Hollywood was working against the public interest by "portray[ing] Americans in exported films as a nation of slap-happy, triggerhappy dolts whose main concern in life is where the next drink or murder is coming from." Cousins contended that such a picture assisted in the Russian propaganda effort to convince the rest of the world that Americans are "selfish, depraved, ruthless, acquisitive, anti-humanitarian and anti-cultural."

In replying, Johnston described the Hollywood product as

"Light and frothy musicals. Comedies. Yes, and some 'bangbang' pictures, too, in which rustlers bite the dust when the brave cowboys take after them. Fun stuff. Escape stuff."

As to the charge that American films assisted the Russian propaganda war, Johnston observed, "The world is fed up with propaganda. It is the absence of conscious propaganda in our films that foreigners like." Hollywood, Johnston claimed, was doing a good job making films of "entertainment devoid of ideological lecturing and sermonizing."

Red Skelton offers another component of this defense in an ironic remark delivered on national television, on the occasion of Columbia Studio founder Harry Cohn's funeral. Before the two thousand people who had filled sound stages 12 and 14 at Columbia Studios to attend the gaudy funeral, Skelton observed: "Well, it only proves what they always say — give the public what they want to see, and they'll come out for it" (French, 1971).

We can characterize the combined elements of the defense which film producers employ to rationalize their activities as ideological in the

sense that they "constitute a set of closely related beliefs, attitudes and values characteristic of a group or community" (Plamenatz, 1970). [1] Plamenatz distinguishes among ideologies in terms of *spread* (i.e. the sort or the size of the group or community who share an ideology), *comprehensiveness* (i.e. the proportion of total ideas, attitudes and values an ideology covers), and *explicitness* (i.e. the extent to which the ideology is theoretically developed and consciously articulated). While it might appear that the film-as-entertainment ideology is confined to the producers of movies, it actually encompasses the vast majority of the audience as well, as the data on audience motivation would indicate (Opinion Research Corporation, 1957). It concerns only one portion of reality (the production and consumption of dramatized symbolic material), however, and is not fully articulated as a theory or doctrine. The film-as-entertainment ideology, then, is widespread, but partial and implicit.

One might question the concentration on the filmic version of the entertainment ideology when it is clear that television is a much more pervasive and powerful medium of communication and entertainment. Film has a much longer history than television, of course, and film executives have had to invoke this defensive ideology much more often, given the numerous times individuals and groups have criticized the moves over the 80-odd years of their existence (Jowett, 1976; Jowett, Reath and Schouten, 1976). As a result, film executives have been the most prominent in articulating this entertainment ideology (i.e. making it explicit). Television executives and performers have been less vociferous in defending themselves against such attacks, but when they have spoken out they have tended to employ similar rationales (Baldwin and Lewis, 1971; Kaufman, 1976).

Researchers, however, have more fully documented evidence of the widespread audience acceptance of the entertainment orientation for TV than for film (CBC, 1975; LoSciuto, 1971).

What are the tenets of the film-as-entertainment ideology, then? In broadest outline, this ideology posits that films are non-ideological. More specifically it claims (as David Kunzle [1975] observes of the apologists for Disney comics) that films "made in 'innocent fun' ... are socially harmless." Films are simply vehicles for allowing the tired citizen to relax, enjoy him/herself and escape from the care of the workaday world by exercising his/her imagination. They share in what Herbert Schiller (1973) describes as the

"one central myth [that] dominates the world of fabricated fantasy; the idea that entertainment and recreation are value-free, have no point of view, and exist outside, so to speak, the social process."

Extending this perspective leads to the identification of many positive social and psychological functions provided by entertainment (Mendelsohn, 1966). And if all else fails, there is always the claim that they are "just giving people what they want" anyway.

The importance of "enjoyment" in this conceptualization of film-as-entertainment suggests that films emphasize experiences and subjects which are pleasant. The tremendous popularity of films such as THE EXORCIST, JAWS and the recent wave of disaster movies should dispel that simplistic notion rather quickly, however. An understanding of the attraction of rather unpleasant and, in some instances, downright disturbing subjects requires a wider notion of "entertainment." Herbert J. Gans (1957) supplies such a wider notion by defining entertainment as the satisfaction of "various latent needs or predispositions."^[2] The crucial point to note here is that the needs or predispositions are *latent*, they exist and are fulfilled below the level of conscious awareness. In this sense, then, film viewing is analogous to dreaming as formulated by Freud (1923): In the dream the psychic self renounces the external world and the principle of reality which dominates it. As a result, the dream will express in some form the wishes that in normal life remain opposed by the conscious world. Christian Metz (1975) also draws an analogy between cinema-going and dreaming:

"For the vast majority of the audience, the cinema (rather like the dream in this) represents a kind of enclosure or 'reserve' which escapes a fully social life although it is accepted and prescribed by it: going to the cinema is one licit activity among others with its place in the admissible pastimes of the day or the week, and yet that place is a 'hole' in the social cloth, a *loophole* opening on to something slightly more crazy, slightly less approved than what one does the rest of the time."

Film viewers, then, have latent desires to be frightened, horrified and so on, and some films cater to such latent desires. In addition, however, the viewer does *not* want to be *overly* frightened or horrified. In other words, the viewer wants to leave the theatre in a basically pleasant, or at least non-agitated state of mind.^[3] The method whereby the filmmaker accomplishes this cathartic effect (in the Aristotelian sense^[4]) is as impressive a feat of cinematic "magic" as is any special effect, and a description of the process goes a long way toward providing an understanding of the ideological impact of the medium.

The pervasiveness of the notion of the entertainment film as a value-free and innocuous cultural product has already been mentioned. When people approach film in this manner, they tend to lower their "psychic guard," unlike the resistance they would exhibit if the films were approached or presented as "propaganda," or probably even as "education." The physical aspects of the viewing situation make us even less resistant. The darkened theatre, with the heightened intensity of message stimuli and increased sense of social isolation that it creates, and our relaxed posture, combine to make the message more emotionally potent and we are more emotionally susceptible to such stimuli (Tudor, 1969). Metz stresses the conditions surrounding cinema viewing that make it voyeuristic in the psychoanalytic sense.

Finally, films usually cover vast expanses of space and usually condense large time periods into 90 to 120 minutes. Moreover, they do so in a manner which conceals the episodic nature of the events, giving rather a sense of continuity and unity, of the unceasing flow of time and the unquestioned contiguity of space. The methods by which these results are accomplished deserve closer scrutiny.

Films are characterized by the predominance of the "story film," or the "traditional narrative" as it has come to be known. Films can (and do) encompass a wide range of techniques, styles and subject matters, from cinema verité documentaries to abstract films emphasizing color, shape, rhythm and so on. The most widely exhibited and most popular films, however, tend to be the ones which have "stars" playing characters, who become involved in events that are strung together in a basically chronological order, normally referred to as "the plot." Furthermore, filmmakers structure these traditional narratives according to classical dramatic principles. The opening exposition gives way to the complication, in which the problem or difficulty central to the narrative unfolds, and the situation finally turns to the favor of the forces of good at the climax, after which the loose ends of the plot thread(s) are tied together rather rapidly in the denouement. In other words, narrative films employ the curve of rising and falling action, and have a definite beginning, middle and end, which (contrary to Jean Luc Godard's dictum) occur in that order (Metz, 1974).

The object of the filmmaker, then, becomes one of persuading us to cross the distance that separates us from the screen and to imaginatively enter the space of the screen world, experiencing vicariously the events that occur within that world. This is where the emotional aspect of film becomes important. The vicarious involvement affects us both physiologically and emotionally. For example, as the unidentified man carrying a knife stalks the unsuspecting young woman through the jagged patterns of shadow and light in the deserted city streets, we experience fear for her fate, our heart rate increases, and our palms may become sweaty and so on.

How do filmmakers obtain this vicarious involvement in the flow of events? There are two principle factors involved: displacement of attention from medium to message (if you will) and identification with stars, characters and situations.

The desire to have the spectator "enter" the film (to a certain extent at least) can probably account for the narrative form's attraction to the filmmaker and for the particular manner in which the narrative is presented. John Fell (1974) believes,

"In the motion pictures there surfaced an entire tradition of [a continuity] narrative technique which had been developing unsystematically for a hundred years [in such diverse areas as theater, print, optical amusements, 'shows' and graphics]."

The narrative form had originally "developed to guarantee unflagging interest by omitting the "dead spots" of other drama, enlisting identifications with the performers and refining resources of suspense." Film perfected these functions.

Furthermore, the relation between the two components of the narrative is significant. Hanet (1974) delineates them by applying Genette's general approach to narrative structure to films. A narrative film is a combination of "what is being told" (i.e. the story/plot, or the diegesis) and the "how of the telling" (i.e. the process or method of narration). A central characteristic of narrative films, in this regard, is their general tendency to mask their process of narration in favor of emphasizing the plot or story (Metz, 1975). The conscious aim of the narrative film, then, is "to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience ... [Without such an approach] fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth" (Mulvey, 1975).

Film technology, and the particular ways in which it is employed in narrative films, contributes greatly to this masking of the method of narration. As Mulvey (1975) observes:

"Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movements (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanded by realism) all tend to blur the limits of screen space."

In other words, filmmakers orchestrate the action of their actors, compose and photograph images and join shots together in the editing process in such a manner as to hide the technical and stylistic means used to achieve certain responses. Our attention is riveted on the story and we are deeply involved with the characters in the film and in the sequence of situations in which these characters find themselves. For these reasons, the technical and stylistic means are transparent to us.

This brings us to a consideration of the second basic factor involved in bridging the space between the audience and the screen: identification. Film theorists have invoked identification in various guises from the very beginning (Dart, 1975). Unfortunately, however, there have been very few empirical attempts to study the dynamics of the phenomenon, and pronouncements have tended to remain at the level of speculation (Maccoby, 1968). Generally, "identification" has been conceptualized as "putting oneself in the place of" or "empathizing with" one or more characters in the film. It has been "measured by indications of emotional attachment or liking," (Clark, 1971) and two principal forms which have been recognized are similarity identification and wishful identification (Feilitzen and Linné, 1975). In the former, we identify with those characters most like ourselves, while in the latter, identification occurs with those we want to be like.

The phenomenon is much more complicated than most theoretical formulations have presented it, and the typology Andrew Tudor (1974)

presents is most useful in this regard. Two types of "star-individual identification" are combined with two different "consequences" to produce a four-fold classification: emotional affinity, self-identification, imitation (of physical and simple behavioral characteristics) and projection. "Emotional affinity" is the weakest and probably the most common, and Tudor describes it as follows:

"The audience feels a loose attachment to a particular protagonist deriving jointly from star, narrative and the individual personality of the audience member: a standard sense of involvement."

Tudor finds this form of identification "subject to rapid and extensive variation."

In the next strongest category, "self-identification," "the audience member places himself in the same situation and persona of the star." "Imitation," the third category, is most prevalent among the young. In this form of involvement, "consequences are no longer limited to the immediate cinema-going situation, the star acting as some sort of model or the audience." This category shades over into the final, most intense and diffuse form of involvement: projection. In this form, "the person lives his or her life in terms bound up with the favoured star." The star, in effect, "becomes a receptacle for the projected desires, frustrations, and pleasures of the fan." Projection is most prevalent in adolescents, a group which is "most likely to grasp at the models provided by the star system as a way of forming a sense of identity and a social reality." This approach also seems more prevalent among female rather than male adolescents. Tudor says that "our societies provide a very different socialization experience for girls than that offered for boys." Females are generally raised to be passive. "Reliance on vicarious outlet through [identification in] the movies must be described as passive and dependent" (Anast, 1967).

Tudor observes that there are also elements of involvement with story type although it is almost solely at the level of emotional affinity. Such involvement is realized through the existence of film genres.

"To see a movie made within a clearly recognized genre, such as the western or the horror movie, is to participate in a familiar locale and development, and this familiarity facilitates easy and immediate involvement."

The individual star (as well as the story type to a certain extent) is clearly important, then, in integrating the film viewer into the screen world. Even if a genuine "star" is not present in a film, it does not follow that identification does not occur. Film viewers also identify with non-celebrity actors as a result of the actor's characterization of an individual immersed in specific situations. (An element of this exists in identifications with celebrities as well.) It is in this regard that one must study such things as point-of-view, since its structure "is a mechanism whereby we experience contemporaneously with a character" (Branigan,

1975).

Nick Browne (1975) provides an even more interesting formulation. To the triangle of spectator position, camera point of view and a character's perspective (i.e. the normal notion of identification), one must add an identification "with a character's position in a certain situation." [5] This means,

"The way we as spectators are implicated in the action is as much a matter of our position with respect to the unfolding of those events in time as in their representation from a point of space."

And ultimately, Browne claims, the structures through which the spectator is so implicated in the action "convey and are closely allied to the guiding moral commentary of the film." In other words, the meaning which a film conveys operates in the moral, normative or ideological realm. Such an observation corresponds closely to Franklin Fearing's (1947) old but still relevant conclusion that the two main generalizations about the "effects" of movie content that seem justified are:

"Any film ... has some measurable effects on specific attitudes of those exposed to it, provided a measuring instrument (e.g. attitude scale) is devised for it, and provided the audience is sufficiently interested to give it sustained attention."

"Films ... assist the individual in structuring his (sic) world."

The sustained attention to which Fearing refers is created in film by the phenomenon of "identification." Given this concentrated involvement and the transparency of the various filmic techniques employed, we are unaware or unconscious of the many things which are happening to us as we watch. In addition, since four-fifths of all films are closed narratives (Linton and Jowett, 1976), the vast majority of films are self-contained experiences. This means that the immediate, conscious and behavioral effects of films are much less prominent than the longterm, unconscious attitudinal ones. The former would seem to be important only in cases of overidentification and for those who have difficulty in differentiating fantasy from reality.

But what are the "effects" of films on the rest of us normal people? Let us take the example of THE EXORCIST, referred to earlier in connection with the appeal of frightening, or otherwise disturbing movies. After much cursing and swearing, shaking of beds and levitation, much horrific self-mutilations and killings, the devil is finally defeated. "Things are back to normal and we get the strong impression that Chris and her daughter, like Karras, are saved" (McCormick, 1974). McCormick explains the overall effect of THE EXORCIST as follows:

"What THE EXORCIST does to people is to turn them to a

mystical, authoritarian solution to problems that seem to have dropped out of the sky. The irrationality of everyday life becomes rationalized by the more extreme irrationality of the occult. The status quo, it tries to tell us, is good, and momentary disruptions of it are what cause our suffering, but if we just sit tight and pray, help will arrive, and time-honored values will be restored."

More generally, popular U.S. films operate as "dramas of reassurance." The beliefs, attitudes and values presented in Hollywood films tend to resonate with the dominant beliefs, attitudes and values of American society. In other words, the dominant ideology of a society tends to be reinforced by the ideology presented in its films. [6] This assertion would seem to be in line with the findings of mass communications research, which indicate that its most powerful effects are in the area of reinforcement. [7] (Klapper, 1960; Halloran, 1964). These results are quite possibly due in large part to the widespread acceptance of the notion of film's (and more generally the media's) non-ideological character, which tends to deflect attention from, and make viewers less resistant to the latent messages of the films. It is little wonder, then, that Brazilian Cinema Novo filmmaker Glauber Rocha (1970), has been moved to describe Hollywood's allegedly non-ideological films as both the most political and "the most politically effectual" cinema.

The existence and strength of this film-as-entertainment ideology creates a dilemma for radical filmmakers. This dilemma involves the relationship between the film and its audience, which James Monaco (1976) describes as providing the "one single quality that separates 'political' from 'nonpolitical' film." A number of writers have discussed the nature of this dilemma and the method of dealing with it, centering their arguments around Costa-Gavras' work (Hennebelle, 1974; Kalishman, 1974; Monaco, 1976). Simplifying matters somewhat, one can describe the issue as the relative emphasis given to "political" subject matter ("content") or "political" presentation ("form"). Roughly the argument runs as follows. If one wishes to make political appeals to a large audience, one must not break too much with the aesthetic traditions with which large numbers of people are comfortable. At the same time, however, one must remember that forms are not completely innocent or neutral (especially the traditional, popular ones) and can subvert or pervert the intended political content of films.

Monaco (1976) attempts to clarify the dilemma and "to begin to construct a theory of politics and film ... by study[ing] closely the connection between a film and the people who see it." Such an attempt involves a consideration of the audiences' pre-existing ideologies and the ways in which the filmmakers can penetrate them. Monaco's answer is a combination of Shavian sugarcoating to attract an audience and (it would seem a mild) Brechtian distancing to involve the audience intellectually. While such an approach seems appealing and plausible, on reflection it appears less realistic given the unproblematic approach Monaco takes to the nature of the film-viewing experience and the

ideology that surrounds it.

Metz (1975) contends, for example, that the political uses of the cinema are much more limited than those of the theater since in the cinema both the represented (i.e. the events, characters, etc.) and the representation (i.e. the film itself) are imaginary. As a result, "Attempts to 'defictionalise' the spectacle, notably since Brecht, have gone further in the theatre than in the cinema, and not by chance." In addition, we have pointed out how widespread and influential the film-as-entertainment ideology is. And an important element of this ideology is the understanding that a film is "a show to be exhibited in large theaters with a standard duration, [consisting of] hermetic structures that are born and die on the screen ..." (Solanos and Getino, 1970). The latter characteristic is particularly pertinent given the importance that Monaco places on the filmmaker's leaving "the audience to its own devices with these new materials" [which the filmmaker has generated].

The result is that the main work takes place not during the film (or play) but after it, as the audience begins to work out the dialectic. But the film-as-entertainment ideology considers films as self-contained entities not deserving of serious deliberation. Such an approach precludes viewers from dealing with the film (on a conscious level at least) after they leave the theater. The film-as-entertainment ideology, then, protects the dominant ideology from serious examination while at the same time reinforcing its basic tenets. Further serious study of the film-viewing experience, and the entertainment ideology that surrounds it, must be added to Monaco's (1976) consideration of the relationship between the work and the audience before filmmakers can either realize the "socially conscious entertainment film" (Brom, 1974; Corr and Gessner, 1974), or pronounce it a basic contradiction in terms.

Notes

[1.](#) Plamenatz (1970) actually restricts ideology to the levels of ideas or beliefs and of attitudes. Given the importance of values and their often inextricable connection to beliefs and attitudes, I have included them in the present formulation.

[2.](#) In addition, Gans notes that being entertained also means that viewers "want to be surprised with something new or different." Given that much of what passes for innovation in films is little more than slight variations in surface structure (especially in the case of film cycles), I have chosen to ignore this portion of Gans' definition.

[3.](#) Metz (1975) posits that the spectator's psychology ("the desire to go to the cinema") is

"a kind of reflection shaped by the film industry, but it is also a real link in the chain of the overall mechanism of that industry. It occupies one of the essential positions in the circulation of money, the turnover of capital without which films could no longer be made ..."

Given this position and the fact that spectators are not physically coerced into attending, "the [cinema] institution as a whole has filmic pleasure alone as its aim."

4. Lucas (1968) notes that in Aristotle's formulation,

"Katharsis, though affording a pleasurable relief, seems to be the consequence and justification of tragic pleasure rather than the pleasure itself. But it is implied that the pleasure is hard to take, which is the reason why happy endings are often supplied; they are a concession to the weakness of the audience."

5. Metz characterizes identification with the camera and with oneself "as a pure act of perception" (i.e. with one's own look) as primary cinematic identification proper, the others together constituting secondary cinematic identification.

6. One should also remember that the U.S. motion picture industry dominates the international film market. Guback (1974) estimates,

"Upwards of 30 million people around the world see the average American film during its period of release outside socialist countries."

Furthermore, the increased emphasis on the international marketing of films combined with "the great weight of the U.S. market and the U.S. film industry tends to give the increasing homogenized product a cultural bias" (Phillips, 1975). A similar domination of the production and distribution structure exists in the international television market (Guback, 1974), but this "global traffic in television" is perhaps even more culturally insidious since

"most programs in international circulation were originally made to satisfy the tastes of audiences in the countries where they were produced and first marketed" (Vans, 1974).

The ideological impact of this cultural bias is exemplified by Trach's (1975) finding that Canadians' beliefs about their own legal system are largely the result of their exposure to U.S. lawyer series. Even in some Third World countries, such as Colombia, "The amusement role of TV [and one would assume of film as well] is considered ideologically neutral" (de Cordona, 1975). The State allows such material to remain in the private domain, exerting *de facto* political control over only obviously political issues. In other less blatantly ideological areas, the programers are "subject to the power of the [foreign-controlled] advertising agencies and their clients" (de Cordona, 1975).

7. Mass communications are also powerful in those areas in which there are not already strong preexistent beliefs, attitudes and values. This makes them increasingly powerful in the modern world since our knowledge of that world has expanded, but more as a result of indirect

rather than direct experience. Similarly, this phenomena could account for the power of U.S. film and television material in foreign cultures (especially ones very different from U.S. society) since the experience presented would be very remote from the experiences of the foreign viewers. This would be more markedly so if the viewers accepted the films and television programs "simply as entertainment."

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Ideology, determinism and relative autonomy

by Michael Rosenthal

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One of the key problems confronting Marxist film theory, as well as Marxist aesthetics in general, is the status of ideology as a determined product of social, and specifically economic, relations. It is a fundamental and unavoidable premise of any Marxist enquiry that ideology – the "consciousness" of people in society and the material cultural products in which this consciousness is embedded – is, in fact, determined.

"The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which corresponds definite forms of social consciousness ... It is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."[\[1\]](#)

"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is, at the same time its ruling intellectual force ... The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas ..."[\[2\]](#)

Such premises are basic to the materialist conception of history as a whole. They are instrumental in distinguishing materialism from idealism, thereby making the radical critique of ideology possible.

These assumptions, however, also give rise to a major danger when we attempt to apply Marxist theory to particular films – a danger which is commonly, if vaguely, referred to as "vulgar determinism." The term is hard to define sharply because there are few proponents of vulgar determinism per se who will enter a debate on its behalf. Basically, it involves the assumption that the ideological superstructure is totally

passive, merely reflecting processes that are going on elsewhere in the economic base. Thus, one might describe ROCKY as a "bourgeois" effort to baffle and confound the working class, deluding the audience with false hope and distracting it from its revolutionary tasks. Or one might describe a Godard film as "petit-bourgeois" due to the class background of its creator. The shortcomings of such an approach are evident:

1. It reduces the film to a single meaning, as a one-to-one political allegory, thereby impoverishing it.
2. To the extent that it is true, it applies so broadly as to be useless — if all Hollywood films are merely "bourgeois," we cannot distinguish between them or explore them in any useful way.
3. It fails to account for empirically perceived limits to the ruling class' use of the ideological apparatus, for example, the absence of films glorifying the bicentennial, or the very few glorifying America's role in Vietnam.
4. It leads to a political quietism; if film practice is merely the passive reflection of something else, there is no point trying to accomplish anything within it.

Admittedly, there are very few examples of this sort of writing in JUMP CUT and other radical film journals. Nevertheless, the specter of vulgar determinism is always present as a danger and a threat, something we react against, and attempt to avoid at all costs. Among those costs, I feel, has been the substitution of a vaguely "radical" film theory for a properly Marxist film theory, an inability to situate given films within the analysis of classes and class struggle developed by Marx. The problem is determining how to avoid the traps of "vulgar determinism" without sidetracking determinism, and hence materialism, altogether. Must an understanding of ideology as determined by "social being" lead to a mechanistic reduction of film texts?

This problem, in its general form, has long been a central topic of debate among Marxists. Engels wrote numerous letters after the death of Marx protesting, with increasing urgency, the economic reductionism taking hold in the Marxist movement. [3] Recently, French Communist Party theorist Louis Althusser has attempted an important reformulation of the terms of the problem. [4] Drawing from Engel's letters, Althusser argues that the various superstructures (law, politics, ideology) are characterized by a "relative autonomy" from the base. These structures take concrete form in material apparatuses (such as the judicial apparatus or the state apparatus), which have their own specific unity and coherence. Each plays a part in determining social events, although the economic structures remain "determinant in the last instance."

These formulations while providing more sophisticated methodological tools, do not in any way "solve" the problem. It is too easy, when writing about film, to simply re-inscribe the old terms of the problem into the new phraseology, to conceive of relative autonomy as a kind of escape from the rigors of economic determinism, an escape which is always, inexplicably, foiled in the "last instance." Thus, although we can

describe films like GODFATHER II or CHINATOWN as "critiques of capitalism" because of their relative autonomy, they remain determined by capitalist economic relations, in the "last instance." The character of that determination, piled onto the last instance, remains a mystery. Furthermore, we often present it as some kind of antithesis of relative autonomy, as if it were a version of the antithesis of "freedom" and "necessity."

In consequence, our understanding of economic determination (which is a condition for an understanding of autonomy) remains in essence the same as in "vulgar determinism," while relative autonomy becomes a sort of ongoing exception. That is, we continue to see the economic base as mission control, which beams out commands to passive agents in the superstructures. With our magic protective shield of relative autonomy, we are safe from these commands until they catch up with us in the dreaded last instance. And, as Althusser somewhat cryptically assures us, "the lonely hour of the last instance never arrives." [5]

It is my impression, judging from my own difficulties and what I can surmise in the work of others, that a certain embarrassment around the concept of determination presents a continual frustration in all areas of Marxist film theory, including reviews of current films. We simply do not know how to insert our political understanding of the social environment, or our data about the economics of the film industry, into a discussion of a particular film without becoming mechanistic. Further, this has led to an evasion of the theoretically sticky areas of political film theory, with a consequent over-emphasis on questions of ideology and form, which critics can speculate about without the need for outside social reference.

The lack in film theory of an adequate concept of determinism and autonomy has been a major factor in this impasse. To help develop such a concept, I propose a "detour" into another area of Marxist study, whose theorists have paid a good deal of careful and rigorous attention to the question of relative autonomy — the Marxist theory of the capitalist state.

THE DETOUR

In the absence of any strong tradition of its own, recent Marxist film theory has tended to advance through detours into the methodologies, and often the terminologies, of disciplines related to other subjects of study. In the past several years, linguistics and the language-oriented science of semiology have been a dominant influence. While these methods have helped us to decode and identify ideological messages in films, they have serious shortcomings in terms of our overall understanding of ideology per se. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith pointed out in a recent JUMP CUT, linguistics concerns itself with the exchange of sign and meaning (in communication and understanding) and not with the production of signs (as in a Hollywood studio). [6] It therefore skirts the issue of political economy, and social class relations.

If we do not recognize the limitations of the linguistic model and attempt to extend the analogy overenthusiastically, that is, if we attempt to analyze ideology as a language, the limits of the linguistic model impose themselves in a way that limits our understanding of ideology as well. As a model of successful, completed communication, linguistics can hinder our exploration of the mechanisms of misrepresentation (intentional or otherwise) and misunderstanding that characterize ideological processes. Moreover, it becomes easy to misconceive ideology as a unitary, monolithic system, a great social equalizer that penetrates all "consciousness" in the same way. This can lead to an incorrect notion of "bourgeois ideology" as a solid, consistent bloc of ideas, spoon-fed to a passive population. The point here is not to attack semiology, but to stress the repercussions of ignoring the limitations of our analogies.

In particular, semiology can do little to illuminate the problem of determinism and relative autonomy, which it therefore tends to obscure from view. I feel that we can usefully approach this problem if we step outside of the "liberal arts," and explore the work that has been done analyzing the relative autonomy of other levels in society — particularly in Marxist state theory. Such a study cannot, of course, lead to an adequate general account of ideology, but in certain respects the points of analogy are compelling. We should recall that Marx considered political forms to be a level of the superstructure (he usually mentioned them first, throwing in culture as an afterthought) and therefore, to be determined by economic relationships. The same danger exists, as with film, of the mechanistic approach, of viewing the state as simply a passive tool of the ruling class (or dominant faction within the ruling class). This approach, called instrumentalism, is the basis of a lot of the work which undertakes to prove that state functionaries are in fact members of the ruling class (as if this told us anything about how the state operates) as well as to prove strange conspiracies and the like.

On the other hand, there is also the need to combat, while avoiding these errors, the bourgeois idealist notion of the state as neutral arbiter of social conflict, standing above the particular interests and expressing the "general interest." Hence Marxist state theorists must account for the many possible forms of the capitalist state (from liberal democracy to fascism) and for the many, often contradictory actions taken by the same state, while at the same time demonstrating how, in all of these forms, the state remains essentially capitalist. They must specify the character and limits of the relative autonomy of the state, as a guide to political action. [7]

Work on this problem has developed far more thoroughly and rigorously than it has in the area of ideology. The major thinkers of the Marxist tradition have addressed a good deal of their attention to the problems of politics, for the simple reason that most of them were political activists and not cultural activists. State power represents both the immediate goal and immediate enemy of practical revolutionary activity. Understanding the mechanisms of the state is a condition for

formulating effective tactics and strategy. We should recall (to our sorrow) that the recent, feverish attention lavished on ideology is probably a result of the historical separation of Marxist theory from working class politics. [8] Furthermore, the consequences of theoretical errors are more immediately apparent in the area of politics. For example, the mistaken theoretical line of the Communist International, in the period 1928-35, which held that fascism was the last desperate gasp of a dying capitalism, produced disastrous political consequences as Communist parties, "assured" of their imminent victory, refused to co-operate with any other anti-fascist forces.

In this essay I will survey some of the analyses developed by Nicos Poulantzas, a Greek Marxist writing in French. [9] This does not mean that Poulantzas' work is synonymous with Marxist state theory — it is one position in a many-sided controversy. What follows should be considered as an entry into the discussion, not as a conclusive statement. I am only selecting from his work those points that concern the questions I am posing.

SYNOPSIS

Poulantzas begins his analysis by attempting to situate the concept of politics and the state within the overall concept of mode of production. This concept, one of Marx's greatest contribution to the analysis of human social formations, denotes a specific unity of the forces of production (factories, labor, technologies, etc.) and the social relations into which people enter in order to carry out productive activity. In societies divided into classes, these social relations are always antagonistic. In this sense, mode of production designates the specific form in which one class is exploited by another, the manner in which the surplus labor of one class accrues to the benefit of the other.

In the feudal mode of production, the basic social relations are between the landlord class, and a class of peasants who own their own tools, but must devote part of their labor to the landlord's crop. In the capitalist mode of production, the "tools," such as factories or IBM machines, are not owned by the workers, who have nothing to bring to the production process but their ability to work, which they sell for wages. Capital, therefore, is not a thing (like a certain amount of money), but a social relationship. A factory only becomes "capital" when there is a capitalist class and a working class, just as a black person only becomes a slave within certain social relationships. A mode of production therefore is an ensemble of social relations in which material values are produced, and the dominant social relations themselves are unceasingly reproduced.

It is important to distinguish "mode of production," which is an abstract, analytical category, from a concrete, historical social formation (such as the U.S. in the 70s), in which several modes of production, and several phases of the development of a mode of production overlap, with one always dominant. There are still a number of craftspeople who own their own tools, but the commodities they produce enter the market system of monopoly capital, which therefore does not determine

everything, but does dominate everything. In order to understand any social formation, it is necessary to understand the basic social relations given by the concept of mode of production.

Most of the relations I have used as examples have been economic, relations of exploitation. Poulantzas, following Althusser, points out that the mode of production is constituted, not only by economic social relations, but by political and ideological (and other) relations as well. He refers to these as regions of the mode of production (the spatial metaphor is always cumbersome, but perhaps unavoidable). Each of these regions has its own characteristic structure.

He then distinguishes between political, economic and ideological structures in terms of the social relations, and social activities, or practices, which these structures organize. (Remember that these activities are always contradictory and antagonistic in keeping with the basic class character of capitalist society.) The object of economic activity is production in the strict sense; that of ideological activity is representation — what Althusser calls our imaginary relation to our real conditions of existence. Political activity has as its object the material alteration (or stabilization) of prevailing social practices and relationships.

This broad definition includes fundamental transformations, as in the case of revolutionary political activity. But it also, and more frequently, covers the adjustments in social practice that have to be made in order for capitalism to deal with new and changing problems, without at the same time challenging the basic relations of domination. For example, when the energy monopolies are faced with new economic contradictions, the consequent adjustments in social practice are worked out through legislatures, regulatory agencies, and other parts of the political apparatus. The point here is not to distinguish between some activities which are, and others which are not, political; but rather to analyze activities in terms of their political ramifications. In this sense, the contradictions that structure the political region are between practices that aim at maintaining the prevailing relations, and those that aim at transforming them.

The state is a political apparatus whose function is to ensure the reproduction of the system as a whole. If we refer back to the basic political contradiction (maintenance/transformation), it is clear that the state is entirely on the side of maintenance, and therefore serves the interest of the dominant class. Instrumentalist theory would agree with this assessment, and claim that the state is therefore a tool, entirely responsive to the will of the ruling class, which they can use to bludgeon down social contradictions. Poulantzas draws a different conclusion. He describes the state as the factor of unity and cohesion in society: the apparatus which keeps it from flying apart under the pressure of its intrinsic contradictions. Its role is to regulate these contradictions in order to maintain the unstable equilibrium of the system (unstable because based on contradiction, equilibrium because the system of

exploitation does in fact manage to reproduce itself, along with its constituent contradictions, from day to day and generation to generation).

It cannot perform this role as a tool, lined up squarely on one side of social contradictions. In order to regulate the contradictions that must necessarily exist in a class society, the state must include and contain them, so that these contradictions are condensed within it. As Marx put it, the state is the official resumé of society, a resumé, that is, not only of the elements of society, but also of their contradictory social relations (class struggles for short). [\[10\]](#)

A key feature of this approach is that it sees the state not as an object, a static thing, but as a social relation, just as Marx insisted that capital is not a thing, but a social relation. Similarly the state, while maintaining (and in order to maintain) dominant class relationships is also in Poulantzas words, "shot through and constituted with and by class contradictions." [\[11\]](#)

Poulantzas discusses the example of European social democracy and reformism. Radicals often treat reformism as a "co-optation" of revolutionary demands, and while this is in some sense true, it is incorrect to think of it as a devious bourgeois scheme, elaborated out of thin air to confuse the masses. The bourgeoisie would not, "by themselves," have elaborated reformism. The very notion is absurd because the bourgeoisie are never by themselves; they exist as a class only in relation to other classes. Rather, reformism is an effect of working class struggle on the political region, within the context of that class's fundamental political subjugation.

Social security, unemployment insurance and, by extension, the whole welfare apparatus are examples in recent U.S. history. These are administered in such a manner as to reproduce relations of subjugation and exploitation. Recipients are systematically humiliated, their lives are regimented by endless petty rules, they can be injected into the labor market and yanked back out of it by slight changes in the regulations, they are held up as a threat to the rest of the workforce, etc. However, if we forget that these systems came into being only after long and arduous struggles by the working class, we slip into something similar to the conventional myth of Roosevelt as a magnanimous sugar-daddy who "gave" the people social security out of the goodness of his heart.

RELATIVE AUTONOMY AND THE TOTALIZING INSTANCE

We can see from this example some of the important principles of the relative autonomy of the state. As the cohesive, regulating factor of the social formation it must make allowances (within strict limits) for the class interests of the dominated as well as the dominant classes. It is not a question of "concessions" made by the state (for this would imply that the state is a unified and conscious entity capable of entering negotiations) but rather of concessions and compromises within the state. Since its role is to reproduce (maintain) a complex unity based on

contradiction, it cannot be a monolithic, fissureless bloc, but is itself, by virtue of its very structure, divided. The state is not a tool in the class struggle, but an arena which is controlled and "fixed" by the bourgeoisie, but in which, nonetheless, a real struggle goes on.

It is therefore incorrect to pose the idea of relative autonomy as if it were somewhere intermediate on a spectrum between total determination by the economy or ruling class interests, and total freedom from these determinations. Relative autonomy is not an "escape" from determinism, tied down only by the "last instance;" it is the specific form through which determinism is exercised.

Similarly, it is incorrect to attempt to construct a general mode of relative autonomy; to pose such questions as "how relative is relative autonomy." For relative autonomy is not an idea, but the result of a material set of social practices. The concrete form taken by this autonomy depends on the conjuncture of class struggle at any given time. Liberal democracies and fascist dictatorships are both political forms of capitalist domination, but they clearly have very different degrees of autonomy inscribed in their structures.

This theory emerges, in part, as a sustained critique of what Poulantzas calls "the totalizing instance" (and what Althusser calls "expressive totality"). This is the idea that a single aspect of a totality can be the origin and reference point of the totality and everything within it. (I am expressing it in this general form because the "totality" in question may be the whole of a social formation, or its ideology, or it may be a single film.)

The classic examples of this style of thought are in Hegel, who saw the Roman period as "the age of Law," the Middle Ages as "the age of religion," etc. That is, everything done or said in the Roman period was simply a reflection of the animated principle Law, so that Law "totalized" all of Roman society.

The same kind of reasoning is involved in mechanistic determinism. In this case, the economically dominant class becomes the "totalizing instance:" all art is bourgeois art, all science is bourgeois science, all in all it is a bourgeois society.

The crucial point is that Marx based his materialism on social relations of contradiction and struggle, while "totalizing" tends to eliminate these from the analysis. For example, it would not be correct to consider the antebellum South as a "slave-owners' society." One might employ this term with the best of political intentions; but it implicitly denies that the culture, the work, and the struggles of the slaves (on a day-to-day basis as well as in mass insurrections) were an essential, constituent part of the whole society. It is more correct to call it a "slave-owning society," structured by the contradictory social relations between slave-owners and slaves. Similarly, we do not live in a "bourgeois society;" but in a society in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant, and in which the bourgeoisie is therefore the dominant class. This is not always

the most convenient thing to say, but it is useful to keep in mind when we are attempting to analyze social (including filmmaking) practices.

SO WHAT?

What is the bearing of this material on our study of ideology in films? It struck me, when reading Poulantzas, that his discussion of state power touched on problems that had most baffled me when I tried to write about films — in part because his description of the state, as a "factor of cohesion in a social formation," would seem to apply, without much stretching, to ideology as well. Nevertheless, as I cautioned earlier, we have to watch out for overstepping the limits of an analogy. We cannot project a description of the state directly onto the problem of ideology, without distorting or denying) the particular unity and cohesion of ideological structures. [12] Ideology and politics do not operate in the same way, and we need a clearer sense of the distinction between them, based (for example) on the specific character of representation, and on the specifically commercial nature of much of the ideological apparatus — the relation of Gulf and Western to a ticket buyer is different from that of a state agency to a citizen.

What ideology does share in common with politics (and this was the point of my analogy) is that each is characterized both by class domination and by relative autonomy. Thus, while the study of state power cannot generate an adequate general description of ideology, it can help us to formulate some of our questions about ideology.

It suggests to me, for instance, that we should not conceive ideology as a *thing*, as a completed and coherent system of ideas which the bourgeoisie utilizes to brainwash the rest of society. Rather, we should approach ideological processes as social relationships, "shot through with and constituted by" class contradictions. The concept of ideological domination implies ideological struggle; it does not imply the complete elimination of social contradiction from the sphere of discourse. This is in part what distinguishes ideology from propaganda. Ideological domination does not exclude social struggle, it includes social struggle. If successful, it subsumes various, contradictory discourses within a relatively coherent (but always unstable) discourse of domination. Poulantzas puts it as follows:

"The structure of the dominant ideology cannot be deciphered from its relations with a 'class consciousness' considered in a vacuum, but from the starting point of the field of class struggle, i.e., from the concrete relation between the various classes in struggle, the relations within which class domination functions. Hence we can understand not only why the dominated classes necessarily experience their conditions of existence within the discourse of the dominant ideology, but also why that discourse presents elements borrowed from ways of life other than that of the dominant class." [13]

In order to develop these ideas rigorously, we would need a general theory of ideology, including a workable definition of ideological class practices. I do not pretend to have such a theory in my pocket, and do not have the space here to discuss the problems involved. This absence imparts an unavoidable vagueness to the discussion, a vagueness that I feel is implicit, if unstated, in most of what appears in JUMP CUT. Given this limitation, I would like to suggest a number of possible lines of enquiry, and areas for future work, prompted by my reading of state theory.

The first concerns our discussion of individual films, particularly films in current release. This is an important area of work, because it is through movie reviews that Marxist film theory most often comes in contact with a wider readership. Yet movie reviews lose their impact under the weight of fruitless debates over whether a given film is "bourgeois" or "progressive" — attempts to totalize the film on the side of one or another team.

Marxist film critics have long been aware of the extreme complexity of the ideological inflection of mass films; but I feel we have lacked a theoretical framework adequate to generate new knowledge about these problems. When we see films, such as ROCKY or WHITE LINE FEVER, which present certain working class experiences and resentments in a genuine form, yet which work towards complacent or reactionary resolutions, we are unsure on which side of the grand political scale to assign them. We find it difficult to praise the commodities of the monopoly capitalists who own Hollywood, but we are unwilling (properly) to trash every Hollywood film that comes down the pike, a strategy which would consign our criticism to sectarian irrelevance. Often we simply tack on to favorable reviews a standardized note that the film "stops short" of dealing with the real causes.

If we view these contradictions as characteristic instances of relative autonomy as it operates in the field of ideology, we may come closer to an understanding of ideological practices in film. The film is a "determined" product of society because the class contradictions, which determine the whole structure of society, operate as well within the ideological structures. It is further determined in the sense that the dominant ideological discourse in society is generally dominant in the Hollywood film. Yet this domination is not exercised directly as a simple tool of mind control, as "bourgeois propaganda." There are virtually no films which directly sing the praises of the Du Ponts and the Rockefellers. In order to be effective in maintaining bourgeois hegemony in the long-run, the structures of the apparatus must permit the overriding of short-run ruling class interests by giving expression to what Poulantzas calls "elements borrowed from ways of life" of the dominated classes. These are not wholly absorbed into a "bourgeois world view," but retain an integrity as one of the aspects of a contradictory and conflicting unity.

It might be possible, then, to view an individual film, as well as the

ideological apparatuses as a whole, as a site of ideological class struggle. This does not mean that the outcome, within a given film, is ever in doubt, that the proletariat might suddenly and unexpectedly emerge victorious. It might mean that within the action of the film, the relations of ideological domination are worked out, as potentially subversive material is articulated within the dominant discourse. The film must actually perform the work of making the various contradictory elements cohere in an unstable equilibrium. This would imply that a film is not a homogenous totality with a single ideological "message," but rather presents a conflicting unity.

This is the case even with such overtly propagandistic products as cold-war anti-Communist films like RED NIGHTMARE or I MARRIED A COMMUNIST. These films did not attempt to depict even a distorted image of Communist ideology; their Communists are presented simply as gangsters. What they do depict, and very clearly, are the changes brought about in society by the development of monopoly capitalism (increased conformity of consumption, destruction of family ties, etc.), articulated in the form of the dominant anti-Communism. The most self-consciously progressive films made in the same period (e.g., HOME OF THE BRAVE) attempted to focus on social injustices in such a way as to emphasize the fundamental soundness and perfectibility of the dominant social relations. In each case, the key principle is one of ideological relationship rather than ideological "message." Clearly the terms of this relationship have to be more rigorously worked out; but we must be able to pose these questions before we can begin answering them.

A materialist understanding of relative autonomy can also help us to formulate the kinds of questions we pose when studying the material apparatuses of the film industry. Too often we merely allude to the self-evident fact that Hollywood film studios are owned by the bourgeoisie and run for profit, and we leave it at that. This would be enough to account for the prevalence of "bourgeois ideology;" but if we accept the idea that the industry allows within its structures for a certain ideological latitude, it is necessary to develop a far more rigorous analysis of the structures of the industry, to determine the range and limits of that latitude. All of the large media industries are out for a buck, yet each differs in its characteristic structures and forms of autonomy. For example, it seems to me that television is on a much tighter leash, in terms of autonomy, than is film, which is itself on a tighter leash than the print media. (Consider the excision made in a single work as it passes from print to screen to tube.) If we ask why this should be the case, we must consider what the differences are, in these apparatuses, which permit differing levels of autonomy.

Part of the answer to this particular problem is that each of these media has a different capital entry threshold. You can produce a book and distribute it nationally for a few thousand dollars, while the production and national exposure of a television show requires access to millions. But this is only a first step toward the answer, and immediately suggests

new problems, such as the differing content of "distribution" when applied to books and TV and films.

What mode and level of control does a distributor exercise, as opposed to an exhibitor, a scriptwriter, or a major shareholder in Gulf and Western? Under what conditions are constraints exercised directly (as when a studio shelves or reshoots part of a film) and how are indirect constraints structured into the "free play" of the system? What (if any) has been the effect on ideological practices of the absorption of the majors into multinational corporations — and if there has been no effect, why not? What is the role of the audience in determining the presence and extent of non-dominant ideologies within films? Marxist film theory should be able to deal with these questions in concrete and specific terms. To do this, we must attempt to analyze the film commodity with the same care and rigor that Marx devoted to his analysis of commodities in general. Such an analysis must certainly involve a clear formulation of the separate moments of production, distribution and exhibition, and an understanding of the social relations that structure each of these processes, as well as their interaction in the overall reproduction process of the film industry. While I feel that a good deal of raw data has been dug up on these issues, the theoretical terrain on which we can position this data has been lacking. A clearer understanding of relative autonomy can help to establish this terrain.

This exposition runs counter to a concept of autonomy which underlies much recent Marxist film theory (although it is rarely directly spelled out in these terms): the notion of autonomy as a kind of escape from the grim and perplexing laws of determination. In this view, the overwhelming majority of films are totally determined by "bourgeois ideology," "bourgeois form," "bourgeois relations to the spectator." The privileged terrain of "autonomy" is reserved for a few, exceptional films, which carry off mini-revolutions by transforming the "mode of production" of film (its formal signifying techniques) in purely filmic terms.

I have no desire to challenge the potential value of research into the ideological implications of cinematic form. But it does not help to base this research on *ad hoc* theories which use Marxist categories in a purely metaphorical sense. Such is the case, for example, when the term "bourgeois" is detached from all socio-political frames of reference, and used to refer to whatever is typical and conventional. Consequently, whatever challenges the typical and conventional becomes "revolutionary" in the fullest allowable sense. Eventually, this leads to such notions as Godard having a "non-bourgeois" [\[14\]](#) camera style, or Straub carrying out "significant political activity on the level of theory." [\[15\]](#)

The same logic can equally well support the claim of a "revolutionary new laundry product," which carries out a transformation in the autonomous "detergent" region. Or it can support the production of a "revolutionary chair," which, by means of a properly glued-on tack, calls

into question the bourgeois, consumerist attitude of the sitter toward the chair.

The central problem of Marxist film theory is to correctly situate film within the class struggle, not to find an analogy in film for the class struggle. The isolation and ineffectiveness of formally innovative film raise questions which must be confronted head-on, and not transformed into a virtue. Otherwise, we return to the idealist vision of the artist as "unacknowledged legislator of mankind (sic)," once a revolutionary in the private region of his/her soul, now a revolutionary in the private region of his/her theory.

The relative autonomy of ideology does not mean that it can follow a purely independent form of theoretical development; nor does it provide a mode of escape from class domination. Rather, it is a mode of class domination, a necessary and integral characteristic of the ideological apparatus under capitalism. We can understand and analyze *A STAR IS BORN* as an instance of relative autonomy as clearly as we can a film by Godard or Straub-Huillet. And we could add (for the sake of argument) that the Straub-Huillet film is a determined instance of the relations of domination because it reproduces an ideological cleavage within film audiences, fostering open contempt for the "laziness" of the mass audience.

It is interesting to note that much of the formalist tendency in theory winds up using the method of the totalizing instance — the theoretical opposite pole of relative autonomy. Thus the use of "illusionism," of certain narrative conventions, even of optically ground lenses can be sufficient, in and of itself, to totalize a film as a "bourgeois" product. And so we return to a situation which was initially seen as the fatal snare of "vulgar determinism" — a theory so broadly general that it can detect no significant political distinction between *SALT OF THE EARTH* and *GONE WITH THE WIND*.

The Marxist study of film has been going in circles between concepts of "revolutionary form" (which bars the dominant practice of film — the commercial feature — from consideration) and nebulous concepts like "false consciousness" (which oblige us to play at being mindreaders of the working class.) I have tried to indicate a theoretical terrain in which discussion can occur in a manner that will help us formulate what we already know, as well as produce new knowledge. I hope this discussion will bring us closer to the fundamental political questions which must underscore all Marxist theoretical work, work which aims to guide practical action.

Notes

[1.](#) Karl Marx, "Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*," in Marx & Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1974) p. 182.

[2.](#) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York:

International Publishers, 1970) p. 64.

3. In particular, see the letter to Joseph Bloch (Sept. 21, 1890) in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976) pp. 57-62.

4. Louis Althusser, "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in *For Marx* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 87-128.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

6. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Moving On from Metz," *Jump Cut* 12-13, p. 41.

7. For a good general survey of work in the field see David A. Gold et. al., "Recent Developments in Marxist Theories of the State," *Monthly Review* 27:5, pp. 29-43, #6, pp. 36-51.

8. This phenomenon and its theoretical consequences are discussed at length in Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976) p. 29 et. pass.

9. Available in English translation are two theoretical volumes, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1973) and *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975); and two volumes of concrete political-historical analysis, *Fascism and Dictatorship* (London: New Left Books, 1974) and *The Crisis of the Dictatorships* (London: New Left Books, 1976). Unfortunately, these books are all inordinately expensive, and their style is often less than fluid.

10. Karl Marx, letter to P.V. Annikov (Dec. 28, 1846) in Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1955), p. 156.

11. Nicos Poulantzas, "The Capitalist State," *New Left Review*, No. 95 (Jan.-Feb. 1976) p. 75.

12. Louis Althusser falls prey to this error in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) pp. 127-186.

13. *Political Power and Social Classes*, p. 209.

14. Brian Henderson, "Toward a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style," *Film Quarterly* 24:2 (Winter 1970-71). Is it perhaps a proletarian camera style? A petty-bourgeois camera style? A camera style of the united front? Or, inevitably, a camera style above class.

15. Martin Walsh, "Political Formations in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub," *Jump Cut* 4, p. 13. Much of this theory (not Walsh's in particular) derives from a mangled reading of Althusser — from applying to ideological discourse the categories Althusser developed to describe scientific discourse, thereby garbling his most fundamental

distinction.

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Sound and color

by Edward Buscombe

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The last issue of *Film Reader* [1] devoted half of its total space to examining the relations between industry, technology and ideology in the cinema. *Film Reader's* initiative is a welcome sign that film theory is paying more attention to economic and technological determinants and that film history is increasingly moving out of the era of mere facts and figures towards consideration of more substantive matters.

However, an article by J. Douglas Gomery in this issue, [2] though providing valuable detailed information on the introduction of sound into Hollywood, raises some problems concerning the extent to which economics can assist our understanding of the cinema. Gomery claims that "economic theory can explain the coming of sound." [3] Gomery has in mind the theory of technological innovation. [4] This theory seeks to explain the factors governing the invention, innovation and diffusion of new technology in any given industry: in what circumstances new techniques or products are first invented and then introduced as practical and commercial propositions subsequently adopted by the industry as a whole. A considerable literature exists on this subject, but we may take as representative the work of one author cited by Gomery. Edwin Mansfield, in his book *Technological Change*, [5] lists several factors governing a decision to innovate once an invention has been produced:

"To begin with, the firm should estimate, of course, the expected rate of return from introducing the new product or process. In the case of a new product the result will obviously depend on the capital investment that is required to introduce the innovation, the forecasted sales, the estimated costs of production, and the effects of the innovation on the costs and sales of the firm's existing product line. ... In addition the firm should estimate, as best it can, the risks involved in innovating." [6]

Mansfield also enumerates those factors affecting the rate at which an innovation will become diffused:

"1) the extent of the economic advantage of the innovation over older methods or products, 2) the extent of the uncertainty associated with using the innovation when it first appears, 3) the extent of the commitment required to try out the innovation, and 4) the rate of reduction of the initial uncertainty regarding the innovation's performance" (Mansfield, p. 88).

Mansfield also suggests that a number of factors might be expected to affect the speed of any single firm's response to a new technique:

1. the size of the firm: one would expect larger firms with more resources to be quicker at innovating.
2. the degree of expectation of profit from the new technique.
3. the rate of growth of the firm: expanding firms might innovate more easily.
4. the firm's profit level: prosperous firms would have the necessary capital or credit.
5. the age of the firm's management personnel: younger management might be more receptive to new ideas.
6. the liquidity of the firm: the more liquid the firm, the better it might be able to find finance.
7. the firm's profit trend: firms with declining profits might look harder for new profits or techniques (Mansfield, p. 93-95).

There is nothing very profoundly "theoretical" about Mansfield's formulations, yet they do have some explanatory power in relation to the coming of sound. Gomery has shown that Warner Bros. did pay careful attention to the question of costs and to the problem of finding the necessary capital. [7] Furthermore Mansfield's four factors affecting the rate of diffusion help to explain why the changeover to sound was so rapid. The economic performance of the new product and the speedy reduction in the uncertainty regarding that performance more than outweighed the original uncertainty itself and the high costs of installing new equipment.

The seven factors characterizing those firms most likely to innovate should provide an explanation for the fact that it was Warners, one of the smaller companies, which led the way in sound. Unfortunately, the theory of technological innovation breaks down at this point, since Mansfield can find no statistically significant correlations across a range of industries for factors 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. The only factors known to affect a firm's willingness to innovate are its size (bigger firms do innovate faster) and the expected rate of profit. The latter point seems fairly obvious, while the former shows Warners to be an exception to the rule. Gomery is forced to look elsewhere for an explanation of Warners' actions, which were, he claims, the result of the farsightedness of Waddill Catchings, the entrepreneur who masterminded the firm's strategy.

Gomery's theoretical position therefore ends up not so far as he thinks

from that of the film historians he takes to task. He sets out to prove that sound was introduced as the result of an economic law which "theory" can explain. But instead, sound turns out to be the result of one man's initiative. The only substantial difference between Gomery's explanation and that of previous historians is a dispute over which individuals should get the credit, Catchings or the Warner brothers themselves.

Thus the theory of technological innovation seems of limited use, and Gomery reverts from a search for economic explanations back to a kind of "great man" theory of history. But could a different kind of economic theory explain the coming of sound? This would depend on what kind of explanation we are looking for. The theory Gomery wants to use could only explain why it is that innovation takes the course it does. It doesn't explain why there should be innovations in the first place, a more fundamental and surely more interesting question. To answer it, we cannot adopt a simple notion of supply and demand, since the public could hardly be said to have demanded sound pictures until it had seen and heard them. True, once sound had been successfully demonstrated, demand affected the rate of diffusion. But the initial investment in research and development had to be made when future demand could only be guessed at.

One must start with the fundamental law that in a free market economy, a firm is motivated by, to use the terms of capitalist economics, a desire to maximize profits; or, in the terms of Marxist economics, a desire to maximize the rate at which it extracts surplus value. In any given economic situation, this can be done in a number of ways. For example, a firm can attempt to develop fresh markets and so achieve economies of scale. In the late 20s, the film industry had no easy way of finding fresh markets — domestic and foreign penetration of the market being near saturation point. (In 1926 U.S. attendances ran at 100 million a week. In Britain, for example, U.S. films had 74¾% of the market at this time.)

Another possibility is for a firm to lower its costs of production. Given that constant capital costs, both fixed and circulation (that is, the costs both of buildings and machinery, and of raw materials), were relatively inelastic, this could be done only by reducing the cost of variable capital, i.e. labor. (I am assuming, though I cannot prove it, that in the film industry in the late 20s, the costs of constant capital were in fact inelastic.) But in a labor-intensive industry such as filmmaking, and one in which automation had at that time gone as far as it could go (another assumption I cannot actually prove), it seems as though there was little opportunity for cutting costs. However, it is worth noting in this respect that Warners' original motive in developing sound was to use it as a means of recording vaudeville acts and musical sound tracks for silent pictures. In other words, sound was at first intended to increase the productivity of vaudeville performers and theatre musicians. Only subsequently was it seen as a means of creating an entirely new product.

Another way for a firm to increase the rate of surplus value is to increase its share of the existing market at the expense of its competitors. This

can sometimes be achieved by price cutting. But the U.S. film industry had evolved by the end of the 1920s into a mature oligopoly in which the sale of the product (i.e. exhibition) was tightly regulated by the major firms dominating the market, in co-operation with each other. Each production company needed the sales outlets (theatres) of the others in order to market its products. Thus none of the large companies could involve itself in a price war against the wishes of the others. The smaller companies, who might have had most to gain from price competition, were in the weakest position to do anything of the kind, because few of them had theatres of their own and because the majors controlled the most important theatres.

Only one way remains in such a situation for a company to secure an advantage over its competitors. It can create a new product. In a sense, of course, this happened all the time in Hollywood, since every picture was unique and its uniqueness was protected by copyright. But precisely because all products were unique, no company possessed a decisive advantage. This required an innovation of a different order. Such an innovation was sound, a wholly new kind of product, which would make all other kinds obsolete. And the possession of this invention did, indeed, for a time give Warners a chance to increase its share of the market. (It seems likely also that it did for a while increase the absolute size of the market, bringing new customers into the theatres. And it may have helped postpone the decline in attendances brought on by the depression.) The profits which a monopoly on a new product make possible are known in Marxist economic theory as "technological rent." [9] And the search for this monopoly explains why innovation should be a necessary feature of the economic system even when business seems good.

From this perspective, we should not view innovation in the film industry as a rational and sought-for outcome of attempts on the part of altruistic inventors to "improve" film technology, nor as proof of capitalism's success in combining profit with the satisfaction of human needs. Human needs are many, but capitalism will produce only those innovations from which rent can be extracted, since the whole basis of the system is production for exchange value rather than use value. Sound would not have succeeded, admittedly, had not the public found a use for it; but the public was given "what it wanted" only because sound offered the opportunity for a monopoly. And the same principle applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to any other technological innovation. The history of the invention of the camera itself is written largely in the patents taken out for each new modification.

Gomery argues convincingly against those film historians who claim that Warners decided to produce sound films in a desperate gamble to ward off bankruptcy. Gomery shows that the decision formed part of a carefully thought-out strategy to upgrade the company's status to that of a major. [10] But the case of sound (introduced by Warners and Fox, at that time two of the smaller studios) does not show that technological innovation in the cinema results only from a special set of

circumstances. An oligopoly reduces competition in certain areas; it does not eliminate it altogether. Firms continue to compete with each other, but the main form of competition takes the shape of a search for new products. Innovation and technological rent are functions of the system as a whole, not just the result of attempts by small firms to break into the big time. The first three-component Technicolor film, for example, was released by RKO and the first CinemaScope picture by Twentieth-CenturyFox, both majors.

II

Economic theories can only partially explain technological innovations; economics cannot say why innovations take the form they do, only why they are an essential part of the system. Economics can explain the necessary but not the sufficient conditions for innovation. No new technology can be introduced unless the economic system requires it. But a new technology cannot be successful unless it fulfills some kind of need. The specific form of this need will be ideologically determined; in the case of cinema the ideological determinant most frequently identified has been *realism*. Whether the search for greater realism has been welcomed, as in the case of Bazin's discussion of deep focus or Charles Barr's of CinemaScope, [11] or whether realism is subjected to a fundamental critique, as in the case of writings by Comolli and Baudry, [12] theorists appear to agree that realism indeed dictates the formation of the needs which technology satisfies.

But to define "realism is no simple matter. And while we may agree that realism is dominant, it may not always be the only ideological need fulfilled by technological innovations. The history of the use of color in the cinema provides an interesting test case for the precise role of realism. The scientific principles of color, like those of sound, were known long before sound or color films became technically and commercially feasible. With color, as with sound, the delay in its introduction resulted in part from technical problems in producing a system that would work under commercial operating conditions (early color films were very prone to scratching, for example). But again as with sound there was also resistance on aesthetic grounds. Douglas Fairbanks, whose picture *THE BLACK PIRATE* (1927) was produced in two-component Technicolor, complained that color had

"always met with overwhelming objections. Not only has the process of color motion picture photography never been perfected, but there has been a grave doubt whether, even if properly developed, it could be applied, without detracting more than it added to motion picture technic. The argument has been that it would tire and distract the eye, take attention from acting, and facial expression, blur and confuse the action. In short it has been felt that it would militate against the simplicity and directness which motion pictures derive from the unobtrusive black and white." [13]

Such objections appear rather strange if one supposes that the demand

for realism in the cinema has always been merely a question of the literal rendering of appearances. We perceive the world as colored, after all, and therefore an accurate representation of it should also be colored. (Leaving aside the fact that complete accuracy is impossible since color in film only approximates the colors perceived in the real world.) But in fact it has never been a question of what is real but of what is *accepted* as real. And when it first became technically feasible, color, it seems, did not connote reality but the opposite.

This may in part be for historical reasons, since the very first uses of color involved the tinting of certain sequences in films shot in black and white. Such a usage was extremely conventional, a long way from a literal representation of the world. And as I suggest below, there may be more important reasons why color was not accepted as connoting reality. At any rate, the objections to which Fairbanks refers are clearly consistent with a realist aesthetic. Color would serve only to distract the audience from those elements in the film which carried forward the narrative: acting, facial expression, "the action." The unity of the diegesis and the primacy of the narrative are fundamental to realist cinema. If color was seen to threaten either one, it could not be accommodated.

It thus becomes possible to understand why color took so much longer to take hold than sound. The technical problems were probably no greater, nor was it simply force of habit. Audiences accustomed to silent pictures adapted to sound practically overnight. Color, on the other hand, has become universal only since the advent of color television, which lowered the relative resale (to television) value of theatrical features made in black and white. Color technology has taken so long to diffuse, we can conclude, partly because unlike sound it could not be instantly accommodated to the realist aesthetic.

Further evidence of color's "unreality" for early spectators can be found in the use actually made of it. For example, in the first few years after the introduction of three-component Technicolor (originally used in the Disney cartoon *Flowers and Trees* in 1932), the great majority of films employing the process were produced within genres not notably realistic in the sense of their being accurate representations of what "life" is "like." It can be argued, of course, that not many Hollywood pictures represent what life is like. But it nevertheless remains true that a kind of hierarchy ranks genres according to the extent to which the world they portray, fictional or not, is close to what the audience believes the world to be like. Thus at one end of the scale, we find newsreels, documentaries, war films, crime films, etc., and at the other, cartoons, musicals, westerns, costume romances, fantasies, comedies. Virtually all the early three-component Technicolor pictures are in these latter genres.

Thus by the 1930s the original objection to color, that it would detract from the narrative, had given way to the extent that color was permissible in some films, and so therefore no longer totally

incompatible with audience concentration on a story. (Of course such an objection as Fairbanks describes must always have been an extreme position since certain uses of color such as tinting became quite common very early on.) Yet it was still considered sufficiently unrealistic to be taboo for films with "realistic" subject matter. [15]

We must now return to the question of why color was not perceived as realistic. Why was its use during the 1930s restricted to unrealistic genres, whereas the use of sound was not? Color must surely have connoted something else. What that something else was could, I think, be demonstrated by an analysis of the color films produced.

But I propose instead to take a short cut and consult an industry manual published in 1957, *Elements of Color in Professional Motion Pictures*. [16] Written by a committee of film industry personnel, it distills the collective theory and practice of color photography in Hollywood up to the late 50s. By this time the use of color was no longer restricted to certain genres; by the date of publication, the authors suggest, two-thirds of all features were produced in color. Nevertheless, certain of their remarks on the relation of color to realism shed some light on why for a long time color was restricted to special uses.

For the authors of this book, one should note first of all, realism is never to be equated with naturalism, strict fidelity to the world as it appears:

"This psychological factor can be of great importance in creating an atmosphere of reality or verisimilitude on the screen. With the filming of a historical or 'period picture,' for example, research is done not only on architecture and decoration, but also on the colors in use during the particular period and in the specific country. Yet the use of the actual colors of the period or the country are very rarely employed (sic). Because of psychological factors governing the response of a modern viewing audience, far better results are achieved by the use of a desaturated tonality of the times — that is, a less saturated range or 'palette' of color and pattern, but adequately punctuated with authentic identifying colors so that the end result stands to be identified as historically accurate yet believable" (*Elements*, pp. 41-42).

The colors we accept as real are therefore a compromise between what we are accustomed to and what used to be. The need to make the audience believe in what is depicted on the screen permits, indeed demands, a distortion of what actually is, or was. Such a practice can, of course, be observed in other aspects of Hollywood filmmaking, though the practitioners are rarely so honest about what they are doing.

The authenticity of what the producers know to be false is guaranteed by the other "realities" of the film, principally the narrative. The authors of this textbook are in no doubt that it is to the narrative that color must ultimately be subordinate.

"The objective being to have color 'act' with the story, never being a separate entity to compete with or detract from the dramatic content of the picture" (*Elements*, p. 41).

Such a position is exactly what we should expect. But the book allows, interestingly, for some exceptions to this rule; other values, it seems, may conflict with the necessity of realism. First, there is the value of the star:

"The feminine star, for example, whose appearance is of paramount concern, must be given undisputed priority as to the color of makeup, hair and costume which will best complement her complexion and her figure. If her complexion limits the colors she can wear successfully, this in turn restricts the background colors which will complement her complexion and her costumes to best advantage" (*Elements*, pp. 40-41).

Thus it is not simply the appearance of the real world (modified to make it "believable") or the requirements of the narrative which dictate the use of color. The values of stardom must have their place, even if they are in conflict with the dictates of realism (which presumably might demand background colors which did not suit the star.) That the reference is to "feminine" stars alone makes it fairly clear what kind of values are in question here.

But the authors challenge realism most strikingly in their remarks on musical and fantasy pictures. In these genres, it seems, color may escape the demands of realism. It need no longer be subordinate to plot and the appearance of the real world:

"Musicals and fantasy pictures are open to unlimited opportunities in the creative use of color. Here we are not held down by reality, past or present, and our imaginations can soar. Musicals and fantasies are usually designed to provide the eye with visual pleasure in the way that music pleases the ear" (*Elements*, p. 42).

Thus these genres are privileged. Here the bonds of realism may be slipped and the audience may give itself up to "pleasure. The musical, interestingly, offers another means whereby the dictates of narrative can be avoided, for although musical numbers are often motivated by the plot, they do sometimes succeed in cutting free of narrative altogether and functioning outside it.

Color, then, need not serve realism. It may simply provide pleasure. Yet pleasure in the cinema is never a simple matter. The pleasures cinema offers — the pleasures of realism itself or other kinds — are always within ideology. What ideological forms do the purely visual pleasures of color take? On this point the manual is silent, and we must return to the films themselves.

The ideological appeal of color suggests two possibilities. First, color must signify luxury or spectacle. Whether employed in the western to enhance the beauties of nature, in the costume drama to portray the sumptuousness of the Orient or the Old South, or in musicals to render the dazzle and glamour of showbiz, color serves to embody a world other than our own, into which, for the price of a ticket, we may enter. We should not suppose, of course, that color must always signify luxury or spectacle, since such a signification depends in part upon its scarcity value and even on the mere fact of its costliness. Once color has become normal in the cinema it begins to lose these connotations. One should add, though, that in certain kinds of documentaries and even occasionally in features, black and white is still used as a guarantor of truth, which would not be possible unless their opposite, color, signified something other than truth.

Second, color in early Technicolor pictures operates as a celebration of technology: "Look how marvelous the cinema is!" Color, far from providing a recognizable portrait of the real world, lifts us out of that world, above its mundane problems and unreconcilable contradictions into a new world where the limitations of the old are swept away and its difficulties transcended. (Consider, for example, the relation between the black and white and color sequences in *THE WIZARD OF OZ*.) Early Technicolor functions as a form of self-reflexiveness, which instead of deconstructing the film and destroying the illusion effects a kind of reification of technology. Other forms of film technology function in the same way: Cinerama, 3-D, even spectacular crane or helicopter shots all having the effect, satirized in the Cole Porter song in *SILK STOCKINGS*: "glorious Technicolor and breathtaking CinemaScope and stereophonic sound." In this way, we might see color working to confirm Ernest Mandel's statement,

"Belief in the omnipotence of technology is the specific form of bourgeois ideology in late capitalism." [\[17\]](#)

That color can function to signify luxury or celebrate technology does not mean that these two uses of it are necessarily subversive of the dominant cinematic ideology. Not everything which is not realism is counter-cinema. Nevertheless, color clearly did function to an extent as a contradiction of realism. Realism, though dominant, could not provide all the things which were in demand. Realist ideology held out against color first by denying its compatibility with narrative and then by confining it to certain genres. Color, however, was able to satisfy needs which realism could not. Were this not so, it is hard to see how, given its unrealistic connotations, it could ever have been introduced at all. Since the 1930s, however, color has become progressively absorbed back into realism, with the result that the audience's need for spectacle and for technological wonders has had to be satisfied by a succession of further technological developments: wide screen, 3-D, Sensurround and so on. Even wide screen has now (though in a form less wide than the original CinemaScope) been absorbed into conventional technique. It seems at least possible that a similar fate might have befallen 3-D and other

marvels had not they been too expensive for a contracting industry.

Notes

1. *Film Reader 2* (1977).
2. Douglas Gomery, "Failure and Success: Vocafilm and RCA Innovate Sound," *Film Reader 2* (1977), 213-221.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
4. This is outlined in some detail in Gomery's doctoral thesis: "The Coming of Sound to the American Cinema: a History of the Transformation of an Industry," University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975.
5. Edwin Mansfield, *Technological Change* (New York: 1971) is a shortened version of his work *The Economics of Technological Change* (New York: 1968), which Gomery cites.
6. Mansfield, *Technological Change*, pp. 77-8.
7. Douglas Gomery, "Writing the History of the American Film Industry: Warner Bros. and Sound," *Screen*, 17, No. 1 (Spring, 1976).
8. Benjamin B. Hampton, *History of the American Film Industry* (New York: 1970) pp. 362, 357.
9. Ernest Mandel in *Late Capitalism* (London: 1975), states:

"The continuous and systematic hunt for technological innovations and the corresponding surplus profits becomes the standard hallmark of late capitalist enterprises and especially of the late capitalist large corporations" (pp. 223-224).
10. Gomery, *op. cit.*
11. André Bazin, "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" and Charles Barr, "CinemaScope: Before and After," both reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: 1974).
12. Jean-Louis Comolli, in a series of articles "Technique et Idéologie" beginning in *Cahiers du cinéma* No. 231. Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly*, 28, No 2 (Winter, 1974-75), pp. 39-47.
13. Quoted in *A Technological History of Motion Pictures and Television*, ed. Raymond Fielding (Berkeley and Los Angeles: 1967), p. 54.
14. Among the early three-component Technicolor films were: BECKY SHARP (1935), THE GARDEN OF ALLAH (1936), TRAIL OF THE

LONESOME PINE (1936), SHOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS (1937), NOTHING SACRED (1937), DRUMS (1938), THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD (1938), GOLDWYN FOLLIES (1938), SWEETHEARTS (1938), DODGE CITY (1939), GONE WITH THE WIND (1939), NORTHWEST PASSAGE (1939), THE WIZARD OF OZ (1939), JESSE JAMES (1939), THE THIEF OF BAGDAD (1939).

15. I would not wish to assert that the slow diffusion of color technology was *solely* due to ideological factors. Undoubtedly there were technical problems, possibly greater than those encountered with sound films. And because color was more expensive, there was an economic rationale for reserving its use for pictures which were expensive in other ways and which could be given special treatment by exhibitors (restricted runs in large urban theatres, etc.). GONE WITH THE WIND would be an example. My main point, however, is that economic factors never exist in isolation, and that in the case of color economics and ideology are mutually reinforcing. See the remarks about luxury and scarcity below.

16. *Elements of Color in Professional Motion Pictures* (New York: 1957).

17. Mandel, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

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His Girl Friday Screwball liberation

by Tom Powers

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Howard Hawks' film HIS GIRL FRIDAY (1940) represents one of the major paradoxes of American narrative cinema — Hollywood's ability to incorporate images of social change into films that ultimately deny and frustrate the possibility of such change. HIS GIRL FRIDAY suggests that new possibilities lie in the roles of the sexes. The film offers the alluring mirage of a sexual relationship based on equality rather than exploitation, with a woman achieving political-sexual parity through her intelligence, creative energy and economic independence. In the process of creating this relationship, however, the film mythologizes the roles of men and women. It establishes as "natural" some modes of conduct that are in fact economically and socially determined and that actually predetermine the possibilities of meaningful change.

In his collection of essays *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines myth as "depoliticized speech."

"Myth does not deny things; on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact." (1)

Barthes shows that myths operate at every level of modern life by constantly taking historical and ideologically motivated relations and denying their historicity and ideology. The semiological implications for film analysis are apparent immediately. For instance, when we see a woman running in high heels with her skirt pulled up around her knees, we recognize a certain level of signification, *woman*, through mode of dress and activity. The function of myth becomes clearer when we consider the assumptions contained in the sign: that it is natural for women to dress differently than men and for their clothes to emphasize certain parts of their anatomies; that it is natural for them to wear high heels (women tend to be shorter than men, and height is a sign of

power); that it is natural for physical activity to be less becoming for women, and that their clothing makes such activity more difficult. But beneath all these layers of appearance and activity myths teach us to regard as natural the social and economic exploitation that the myth of femininity has been created to validate.

The principal myths operating in *HIS GIRL FRIDAY* are femininity, manliness, domesticity and adventure. On the surface the film seems to be attacking these traditional values. Despite the perversity of the title, "his girl Friday" turns out to be a strong-willed, sharp-minded and talented woman reporter. The reporter's boss (and ex-husband) satirizes the romanticized violent image of men. He is equally zealous about his profession and the fanatical pursuit of his ex-wife, and his blending of the two pursuits results in humor and irony. The film as a whole presents a more open and tolerant range of sexual values than one might expect. Its irreverence occasionally borders on the risqué particularly for a film made under the Hays Code. Finally, *HIS GIRL FRIDAY* asserts that corruption and injustice are the real foes and the proper targets of democracy and a free press. Yet the illusions on the screen vanish when the lights come on. Male dominance, female inequality, the family as the basic unit of society and the ultimate impotence of political struggle come home to the audience as enduring truths.

In shaping *HIS GIRL FRIDAY*, Hawks and screenwriter Charles Lederer adapted the 1928 stage play, *The Front Page* by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. In doing so, they changed the male reporter Hildy Johnson to a female reporter, to be played by Rosalind Russell, and they complicated matters further by making Hildy the ex-wife of editor Walter Burns, played by Cary Grant. Structurally, these changes had two major effects. They permitted the rapid-fire dialogue between Burns and Johnson to incorporate the tension and feeling of a romantic situation and created a framework within which to explore the sex roles of the characters more fully. Moreover, by making Hildy a woman, the filmmakers could draw on the popularity of the wisecracking, independent screen heroine, who had emerged from the screwball comedies of the mid-30s and had been given a good measure of depth by actresses such as Barbara Stanwyck, Jean Arthur, Claudette Colbert, Bette Davis and, of course, Rosalind Russell.

I'm not suggesting there is no sexual tension in *The Front Page*. Part of the reason the Hildy Johnson character transfers so well to *HIS GIRL FRIDAY* is that Hecht and MacArthur were exploring the levels of male friendship that go beyond superficial camaraderie. The characters in the play have a forced air of masculinity that works partly as a defense mechanism against suggestions of effeminacy. When Hildy acknowledges Walter's friendship at the play's end, he becomes embarrassed and says, "Aw, Jesus, no, Walter. You make me feel like a fairy or something."⁽²⁾ Hildy recognizes the strength of their relationship even while denying its implications.

The violence of the male reporter — which is mainly verbal — transfers

easily to the female character, as does his professional competence and some of his rowdiness. (The female Hildy smokes and drinks but doesn't throw liquor bottles out the window.) Hawks always has revealed a fondness for women who can hold their own with men, but he also likes to manipulate our sexual preconceptions about these women. For instance, in both the play and the film, Hildy tells Walter,

"I'm going to walk right up to you and hammer on that monkey skull of yours until it rings like a Chinese gong."

With the male Hildy, the wit of the verbal imagery depends on our knowing it's a bluff. The threat is neither immediate (it's spoken into the telephone) nor real. But in *HIS GIRL FRIDAY* the words are spoken by a woman whom we already have seen kicking Walter under the table, and we certainly can imagine her pounding him over the head with her fist or a shoe. For Hawks, physicality and violence are masculine realms, so the intrusion of a woman into this territory provokes laughter — a mirthful response to the inappropriateness of the situation. (Hawks later reverses the situation and gets the same response when Walter offers to kick Butch's woman friend in the teeth.) Yet the wit and pacing of the dialogue mask this inappropriateness to some degree. We laugh at Hildy even while we root for her. Even while we recognize that her behavior is not "natural" for women, Rosalind Russell makes it seem natural for Hildy. The delusion lies in myth's reaffirmation of what is "natural" feminine behavior.

This kind of myth making seems to have been overlooked by many critics of *HIS GIRL FRIDAY*. They pluck Hildy Johnson out of the broader context of the film and label her "an image most relevant today." (3) In an excellent analysis of the film, Molly Haskell strives to find in Hildy a model for some broader perspective the film itself actively resists. In analyzing Rosalind Russell's portrayal, Haskell says she

"does not-become an imitation male; she remains true to the two sides — feminine and professional — of her nature, and as such promises to exercise a healthy influence on the hard-boiled, all-male world of criminal reporting. It is as a newspaper reporter, rather than as wife and mother, that she discovers her true 'womanliness,' which is to say, simply, herself." (4)

"You're a newspaperman," Walter Burns (Grant) tells his once and future wife, Hildy (Russell). It's a line Hildy echoes later in the film: "I'm no suburban bridge player — I'm a newspaperman." The dichotomy is already established. The world of meaningful, male activity, work, is set against the woman's world, the home. (5) "Can you picture Hildy singin' lullabies and hanging out diapers?" says one of her fellow reporters. "And swapping lies over the back fence?" adds another. No, but the questions draw on the old values even while pretending to invoke new ones. They aren't questions the all-male reporters would ask about each other, even though their activities in the courthouse pressroom are not far removed from back-fence gossiping. Hildy herself endorses this

notion of "feminine" conduct when she overhears the reporters later. She says,

"It's getting so a girl can't leave the room without being discussed by a bunch of old ladies."

Throughout the film both men and women are measured against certain standards of conduct and achievement that Hawks considers specifically masculine. The men can stray from these standards — like the reporters — or can fail to meet them completely, in which case they become objects of derision, unmanly men. Women, on the other hand are not expected to meet these standards, and only the exceptional one does. The film establishes Hildy Johnson as a woman who blends traditional notions of feminine vulnerability and attractiveness (Walter calls her "a doll-faced hick") with the masculine, Hawksian concepts of toughness and competence.

To emphasize the uniqueness of her position, the filmmakers contrast her with two stereotyped extremes of female conduct: the hysterical female, who is a victim of men, and the dominating woman, who accepts her own exploitation in order to manipulate men. Mollie Malloy (Helen Mock) is a caricature of high-strung female sensitivity who throws herself out the window in a fit of hysterics. The film version plays down any notion that Mollie is a prostitute (6), not merely to "purify" her love for condemned murderer Earl Williams but also to make her even more of a victim, the too-frail representative of the frail sex. This allows Hildy some leeway in expressing her emotions without the risk of appearing too feminine. Likewise, Hildy's toughness does not approach that of Evangeline, the blonde hooker Walter Burns employs to cause trouble for Hildy's fiancé. Evangeline has perverted the male notion of femininity. She coldly uses her sex appeal to exploit the men who would exploit her.

Perhaps the most troubling of the minor female characters is Mrs. Baldwin (Alma Kruger), Hildy's prospective mother-in-law. Her part is small and intentionally comic but important to deal with, for she is the logical extension of the "suburban bridge player" Hildy might have become. The figure of the respectable woman who dominates men — a figure the courier Pettibone's off-screen wife embodies also — is the most threatening to Hawks' notion of the balance of the sexes. She evokes the specter of male impotence and thus makes the idea of sexual equality seem precarious and dangerous, an undertaking for exceptional people only. Moreover, she strikes at the male's definition of himself — not merely his sexual identity, but the identity he achieves through what he does. Hecht and MacArthur describe Peggy, the male Hildy's fiancée in *The Front Page* in terms applicable to Mrs. Baldwin:

"As a matter of fact, Peggy belongs to that division of womanhood which dedicates itself to suppressing in its lovers or husbands the spirit of D'Artagnan, Roland, Captain Kidd, Cyrano, Don Quixote, King Arthur or any other type of the male innocent and rampant." (7)

In her unconscious and highly noble efforts to make what the female world calls 'a man' out of Hildy, Peggy has neither the sympathy nor acclaim of the authors.

In many ways the female Hildy is virtually one of the boys. When one of the reporters addresses her as "Hildegard," we realize how deep their level of acceptance runs: they can even kid her about having a woman's name. They invite her to join their poker game and read her interview with the condemned murderer in tones of awed reverence. Yet they define her possibilities in terms inapplicable to themselves:

"I still say that anybody who can write like that ain't gonna give it up permanently to sew socks for a guy in the insurance business."

Hildy's competence is not a threat to the reporters but the price of admission to their all-male world, the price she has to pay to escape the world of female entrapment in domesticity.

Yet Hildy's acceptance by the men also results in her mistreatment as a woman. Part of the film's humor lies in the frustration of Hildy's desire to be "feminine," to have men light her cigarettes and open car doors for her. In one shot Hildy gallantly holds open one swinging gate for Walter, who graciously acknowledges her gesture. He then proceeds to shut the next gate on her knees, with the tracking camera movement leaving Hildy behind as thoughtlessly as Walter does. Walter's conscious violation of the rules of chivalry — wearing his hat around Hildy, grabbing her light for his own cigarette, smirking while she struggles with a heavy suitcase — reinforces the notion that Hildy must struggle to become part of the men's world. The audience is made to root for her, particularly since the alternative is marriage to her sickeningly sweet fiancé, Bruce (Ralph Bellamy). Yet we also laugh when Walter discovers a soft spot in Hildy's facade of toughness.

Away from Walter, Hildy is much more in command, so much so that we realize her only logical partner is her ex-husband. Hildy has courage (she takes a gun away from the escaped Earl Williams and lays a flying tackle on Warden Cooley) and wit. She can talk roughly ("...shot the professor right in the classified ads") and sometimes even brutally (Louie: "You better give me a receipt"; Hildy: "I'll give you a scar"). She smokes and drinks and her actions contrast with the men who don't, particularly Bruce and Earl.

But the film never allows us to forget Hildy is a woman and must conform to certain "womanly" patterns of behavior. When she runs after Warden Cooley, her skirt pulled up around her knees and her high heels making her totter precariously, we realize to what degree the humor of the film depends on our assumptions of how women normally behave, and we realize how many conventions of femininity Hildy embraces. When the reporters kid her about her new hat, she laughs them off, but a tinge of defensiveness comes through. She says,

"I paid twelve bucks for that hat."

Clothes are a major concern of the depression-era screen heroine, one of the clearest places where economic hardship challenged male-dictated notions of fashion and femininity. (8) Hildy clings to those notions even when it hurts. She is a woman and wants to be treated like a woman, not like a frilly object and not like a fake man. At the end of the film, when she breaks down and cries, she reveals an emotional honesty none of the men is capable of, a strength of feeling that would be a weakness for them. In a way it costs her. At the end of the film she cannot be considered Walter's equal. She is a woman and a reporter, but she also is in love, an eager puppy grateful for her acceptance into a world in which she does not yet belong.

As editor Walter Burns, Cary Grant creates a depiction of manliness that in some ways is a more subtle manipulation of our preconceptions than Russell's femininity. We know how women are supposed to behave, and we recognize deviations from that behavior as either humorous or intrepid. Men have more leeway. They can be strong without being physical, passionate without being weak. Walter Burns reeks of power. In the film's terms this is economic and political power (Walter apparently controls the newspaper), but Walter seems to personalize it. People respond to his character because of who he is, not because of the position he holds. They are swept away by his wit, presence and fanatical zeal for the newspaper game. But Walter Burns also is a man in love, and his pursuit of Hildy is no less fanatical. At times he's like a juggler keeping plates spinning in the air, with Hildy on one side, the Earl Williams news story on the other, a host of lesser concerns all around him.

The effect is not to nullify any one of his passions but to give them all a sense of irony. It is a much more complex role than the very similar parts Grant plays in *THE PHILADELPHIA STORY* (1940) and *THE AWFUL TRUTH* (1937). In both those films he tries to win back an ex-wife, and in the latter he even tries to prevent her marriage to Ralph Bellamy, yet neither film clearly defines him in terms of what he does. His ardor consumes his character in these films and makes him seem one-dimensional.

In *HIS GIRL FRIDAY*, Rosalind Russell clearly is the only person in the film who comes close to matching Grant's energy and wit, and Hildy is the only reporter talented enough to write the interview Walter Burns needs. This intermeshing of personal and professional interests proves to be the battleground where Walter Burns ultimately wins back both his reporter and his wife. Hildy cannot play both games at once: she is too honest, but she also is too vulnerable. Her heart wins out in the end.

In the crucial confrontation between editor and reporter, a long tracking shot done in one continuous take, Walter restrains Hildy from running after Mrs. Baldwin and begins gently but firmly pushing her around the pressroom. She backs away from him, but he guides her as if in a dance,

prodding her, turning her, physically dominating her, all the while weaving a hypnotic spell with his ceaseless talking, his glib rendition of what Hildy stands to accomplish as a reporter, saving Earl Williams, cleaning up corruption, giving the city a chance for "the kind of government New York's having under LaGuardia," the whole rhythm of his lies expressing the singularity of his purpose: to win Hildy back to him, as reporter and as lover. "But Walter," she says, "I never figured it that way." "Nah," says Walter, "you're still a doll faced hick, that's why." By the time Hildy emerges from her delirium of professional glory and realizes how she has been manipulated, she is incapable of fighting back even on the personal level. She concedes, she cries. Walter, on the other hand, is back spinning plates, combining plans for a second honeymoon trip to Niagara Falls with the chance to cover a strike in Albany.

Walter's physical domination of Hildy is another level at which the film reinforces our assumptions. Men operate in a sphere of violence. The film begins on the eve of an execution and ends with the outbreak of a strike. In between there are shootings, kidnappings, fights, a jailbreak and a car crash. Hawks turns much of this violence into parody: the ineptness of the Sheriff and police, the bumbling earnestness of Louie the gunslinger, the glib viciousness of the mayor. Walter vacillates between childish fantasies of violence — dynamiting the four o'clock train to Albany ("Could we?"), hoping Mrs. Baldwin was killed in the auto accident ("Was she? Was she?") — to sophisticated satirizations of the tough-guy role. He wears his hat throughout the second half of the film, using it as a prop to reinforce the mugging and posturing of his hoodlum characterizations. Yet when Walter grabs Hildy's wrist, there's no question who's the stronger. Hildy may make isolated physical gestures, but they're intrusions into the male domain. It simply takes a strong man to put her in her place.

Like Hildy, Walter occupies a middle ground between two extremes of supposedly traditional behavior. He can be aggressive and physical without approaching the violence of a character like Louie (Abner Biberman) or be sensitive and sincere without seeming weak, like Bruce or Pettibone (Billy Gilbert). Yet all these men adhere to certain standards of male behavior that in turn enrich their characters. Louie may be a hood, the traditional overcompensating small man, but he also is incongruously vulnerable. He allows Walter to lift him up like a child in order to let him get a look at Bruce on the other side of a partition. He gallantly defends Evangeline's reputation ("She ain't no albino. She was born right here in this country.") He even politely introduces himself to the elderly Mrs. Baldwin before carting her off bodily. The harried Pettibone, on the other hand, is exploited constantly by everybody yet nevertheless finds the courage to resist the corrupt mayor's bribe and deliver Earl Williams' reprieve.

As Hildy's fiancé, Bruce, Ralph Bellamy gives a remarkable performance. He is the classic milquetoast, an insurance salesman from the sticks who lives with his mother and doesn't go out without his umbrella and rubbers. He is graceless in contrast to Walter's

smoothness, bumping Hildy's hat as he helps her on with her coat; full of untested bravado ("If things get rough, remember I'm here."); naïve and gullible amid the flurry of put-ons and putdowns that whiz past his head; and rather depressingly confident of his own worth and that of his profession. His very dullness stands out in contrast to the mystique of adventure that "real men" are supposed to embrace. Yet Bellamy gives his character such depth and gentleness that one can appreciate Hildy's attraction to him.

Walter does not recognize Bruce as a true rival, but he sees the need to adopt some of Bruce's sensitivity toward Hildy if he's to win her back. His smugness toward Hildy in the opening scenes gives way to tenderness at the film's conclusion. When he tells Hildy to go back to Bruce, he says,

"I'm trying to do something noble for once in my life ... I was jealous. I was sore because he can offer you the kind of life I can't give you."

It's a lie, of course, but in its own way it's also a concession. Beneath all the glibness and cynicism there lies a certain sense of loss, of incompleteness. For just a moment Walter offers Hildy his vulnerability.

It's hard to imagine Walter and Hilda maintaining the same frantic pace for the rest of their lives together. The impulse towards domesticity is a strong one. Earlier in the film Hildy declares,

"I'm gonna be a woman, not a news getting machine. I'm gonna have babies and take care of them and give 'em cod liver oil and watch their teeth grow and, and — oh dear, if I ever see one of 'em look at a newspaper again, I'm gonna brain 'em ..."

Throughout the film there are numerous references to people's families and children. People getting married and settling down and raising children appears as the natural order of things. If Walter and Hildy's unconventional behavior strikes at the dullness of this order, it nevertheless validates the conventions that define bourgeois marriage: jealousy, fidelity, monogamy, heterosexuality, the separation of home and work, and the preeminence of romantic love.

The film adopts a sophisticated pose toward sex, but the pervasiveness of traditional values makes the pose humorous. Walter pretends to be shocked when he hears that Bruce and Hildy are taking the sleeper train to Albany the night before their marriage. (Bruce assures him that Mother will be chaperone.) Later Walter and Hildy laugh over their own premarital affair. ("Yeah, we could've gone to jail for that, too, you know that"). But the activities of one sophisticated couple do not present an alternative to the "naturalness" of the established order. Wit and zaniness and frantic activity may be an antidote to boredom, but they offer no remedy for the systematic, structured inequalities that produce boring lives. All the characters' energy — and all the viewers' attention —

is misdirected. One is left with the feeling that it's possible to change one's own life but not human nature. And since the film presents domesticity as a natural state, even the possibilities of personal growth seem limited. (9)

In a world where political action is not a viable alternative, the pursuit of adventure tends to take on special significance. Hildy and Walter are journalists on a quest: for them the activity is an end in itself. City politics, Earl Williams' hanging, Mollie's attempted suicide, fires and strikes and jailbreaks are only secondary concerns. Their real interest is the adventure of being a reporter. When Hildy tells Walter that insurance is an honest profession, he laughs in her face.

"Oh, certainly it's honest. It's also adventurous, romantic."

The faded Galahads of the pressroom provide the only true alternative to the pursuit of adventure; they offer the wise and tired cynicism of men who have dealt too long with the seamy side of life and now realize how little can be done to change it. If they seem callous in asking the sheriff to move up the time of Earl Williams' hanging to meet their deadlines, they are vindicated by the fact that the hanging had been postponed twice to accommodate a citywide election campaign.

The reporters wisecrack about everything from national government ("Is this guy Egglehoffer any good?" "Figure it out for yourself. He's the guy they sent to Washington to interview the Brain Trust. He said they were sane") to local politics ("The sheriff has just put two hundred more relatives on the payroll to protect the city against the Red Army, which leaves Moscow at noon tomorrow") to Mollie's tears. ("Aw, go put on a phonograph"). Their conversation is the most blatantly sexual in the film. "Stairway Sam," who spends a good part of his time looking up women's dresses, describes a woman "with big brown eyes" — his hands outlining her torso.

Several films of the 30s nurtured this image of the cynical reporter in the popular consciousness at that time. The movies needed a figure who could combine the cynicism and street wisdom of the gangster (whose popularity in films was declining) with the more positive outlook engendered by the New Deal and endorsed by the Hays Office: someone who was on the right side but wouldn't look like a sap if righteousness didn't prevail. (10) Born amid the yellow journalism of the Hearst-Pulitzer era, given a muckraking conscience by people like Lincoln Steffens and an urbane cynicism by Mencken and the journalists of the 20s, the newspaper reporter emerged as the popular hero of the 30s. The reporter's everyday life was an adventure, and its appeal to Depression audiences was striking. (11)

The appeal was, of course, an illusion — an illusion HIS GIRL FRIDAY fosters. Labor as a meaningful activity does not exist outside the context of adventure, except as the province of fools like Bruce and Pettibone. Earl Williams (John Qualen) is the film's representative proletarian figure: "He was a bookkeeper. Starts at twenty dollars a week and after

fourteen years works his way up to seventeen-fifty." The film doesn't allow him the political conscience of the anarchist character in *The Front Page* but rather reduces him to the status of an ineffectual victim of forces outside his control and understanding. HIS GIRL FRIDAY touches on the contemporary problems of the Depression but offers its audience commiseration rather than analysis, escape rather than solutions. If alienated labor is the natural condition of humankind, then hope lies in adventure or resignation, not in economic and political change.

"In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves." (12)

Myth is seductive. I've seen HIS GIRL FRIDAY several times and look forward to seeing it again. I enjoy its wit and energy and am taken in by its characters. The women I know are not embarrassed or angry at Rosalind Russell's portrayal of Hildy: she's a strong and imaginative character. As Bruce says of her,

"Everybody else I've known before, well, you could always tell ahead of time what they were going to say or do. Hildy's not like that."

Hildy and Walter's relationship approaches a kind of sexual balance, with both partners moving away from the economic imbalance of the home/work separation. Yet this is the film's major deception. It suggests possibilities at the level of individual action while denying the application of such possibilities at any wider political level. It depoliticizes the individual gesture by basing our interpretation of it on the myth of sex roles.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 143, trans. Annette Lavers.
2. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1928), p. 187. This element of homosexuality, which runs throughout the play, is alluded to only once in HIS GIRL FRIDAY, when Hildy tells the reporter Bensinger she might let him be her bridesmaid.
3. Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (New York: Avon Books, 1973), p. 214.
4. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Baltimore, Md.: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 135.

[5.](#) In the play, the male Hildy says, "I'm no stuffed shirt writing peanut ads ... God damn it — I'm a newspaperman." (p. 138). For him the choice has other implications.

[6.](#) In the play she is described as "a North Clark Street tart ... She is a soiled and gaudy houri of the pavement" (p. 78).

[7.](#) Hecht and MacArthur, p. 78.

[8.](#) MARKED WOMAN, GOLDDIGGERS OF 1933 and STAGE DOOR all deal with the importance of clothes in terms of women's self-conceptions and economic possibilities.

[9.](#) The Polish filmmaker Andrzej Zulawski explores the futility of this good-humored approach to domestic-relations in the 1973 film L'IMPORTANT C'EST D'AIMER (THAT MOST IMPORTANT THING ... LOVE).

[10.](#) For further material along this line see Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

[11.](#) For an extensive listing of newspaper films of the thirties see Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane," *The Citizen Kane Book* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971), p. 20.

[12.](#) Barthes, p. 143.

Brecht and the politics of self-reflexive cinema

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In a 1940s Bugs Bunny cartoon, Elmer Fudd, once again forced by destiny and by narrative to chase Bugs, fires several times at his fleeing nemesis. The bullets fail to have their desired effect. Of course, the lack of deadliness is a typical quality of Warners cartoon bullets, but this time Bugs stops and comments to the audience:

"Folks, those bullets are fake; we're saving the real ones for the boys overseas."

For me, this moment aptly demonstrates the attitudes an artwork can adopt towards the material world and the dynamics of history. [1] First, a distance from worldly reality, a distance inherent in art and which makes it art. This is a distance of codes and of constructions — a distance which, if it allows the work to be a form of knowledge, does so only in a mediated or in a nonscientific fashion. [2] The cartoon is first of all a cartoon and not something else. Second, a distance in which the work turns in on itself and speaks about its own artistic conventions and presuppositions. This is an attitude of self-reflexivity, of the text making strange its own formal devices. For example, at the moment in question, the cartoon explicitly signals its cartoonness. Finally, there is a third attitude which the cartoon brings to the foreground at this moment: a movement out of the self-enclosed world of the artwork toward a real world which the mediations of art usually leave behind. The cartoon reminds us of an activity — killing — which cartoons normally distort. These attitudes — the inherent one which makes art art and not something else, and the forced ones which appear as a conjunction of or a conflict between self-reflexivity and social awareness — form the primary concerns of this essay.

To me, the two most important signs, if we may call them that, in my title are the question mark and the word "towards." For a skepticism motivates this paper, a discontent which manifests itself as a set of tentative forays into an overcharted region. To raise the question of the

politics — intrinsic or otherwise — of self-reflexive film is to re-invoke issues of central importance in the history of film theory, if not art theory in general. How does film relate to a reality? To an audience? What is form? What is content? How are they political? If they are not political, how can they be made so? Here I don't pretend to be able to answer such awesome questions but merely to propose some movements towards their investigation, movements towards a politics of self-reflexive film.

In their recent manifestation, debates on these issues have generally come to revolve around a single object of inquiry: viewing. What does it mean to view a film? What happens ideologically when we view a world on a screen before us. At first glance, the activity of viewing may seem to be simple, both in its workings and in its ability to be understood. Yet the surface simplicity obscures a deeper intricacy. In *Reading Capital*, French philosopher Louis Althusser suggests that the great achievement of the modern age — an achievement which describes that age's break with the past — has been the

"discovery and training in the meaning of the 'simplest' acts of existence: seeing, listening, speaking, reading..."

Freud, he suggests, pinpointed the dimensions of speaking, Marx those of reading. Similarly, recent criticism of the visual arts — such as that criticism of painting by Pierre Francastel and John Berger or of film by recent writers in *Screen* — he is attempting, I would suggest, to understand ways of seeing.

Indeed, recent film theory's "critique of illusionism" derives from the same theoretical impulse as the critique of empiricism put forward by Althusser and others. To these theorists, empiricism or illusionism depends upon a conception of the subject-object duality as easily bridged. [3] The world manifests truth, and all one has to do is contemplate the world or its identical embodiment in human activity — texts — to gain insights into that meaning.

Clearly, André Bazin epitomizes the film version of this optimistic theory of the possibilities of meaning. With such notions as the close-up as window to the soul, as the destructiveness of conscious artistic intervention, and film as the revelation of the spiritual life (*vie interieure*) of the world, Bazin becomes the target for many, if not most, newer theories which see film as a production of meaning, as a site of work in the viewer's consciousness.

Narrative, and its ostensible canonization in Hollywood, also becomes a target. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes clearly sees the hermeneutic and the proairetic codes (the codes of suspense and of the logic of actions, respectively) as the most determined and determining codes of fiction. Similarly, Noel Burch in an interview in *Women and Film* (No. 5/6) declares linearity — i.e., narrative — to be an inherent code of what he calls the "dominant cinema." Against narrative and against transparency, critics and artists suggest a whole range of deconstructive

devices. Many of these strategies are based on a notion of work. Empiricism, it is claimed, invites passivity; all one has to do is contemplate and texts will deliver up their meaning. Subjects — be they viewing subjects, reading subjects, or historical subjects — will unite automatically with objects and with the knowledge of objects. To counter the encouragement of passivity, many recent critics push for a difficult art, an art that forces its audience into an active interpretive response. The problem of passivity further provides the impetus for a rediscovery of Brecht, who, for recent critics, has become the master of deconstruction, the champion of formal subversion. Burch, for example in *Theory of Film Practice*, adopts Brecht's theory but only after declaring it necessary to eliminate Brecht's concern for content. A new Brecht — Brecht the formalist — arises.

But there is also, and foremost, Brecht the realist. And it is this Brecht who will provide my perspective here. I believe that radical aesthetics — including film aesthetics — is falling prey to the rise of a new ahistorical formalism. This formalism is present in attacks on particular types of cinema practice and cinema structure — the practices, as I have mentioned, of narrative and of representation.

But more recently, with the French and British rediscovery of Freud through Jacques Lacan, the attack on representation has become even more pronounced. Whereas formerly a certain type of film practice which was alone in effecting a particular audience response (namely, passivity) was singled out for attack, now the very practice of representation undergoes criticism as being ideologically reactionary. In this view, the very structure of film viewing — audiences sitting before a screen and watching from a particular viewpoint (or perspective) — contributes to the constitution of the subject as a viewing subject — that is, a subject safely elevated by self-confidence to a privileged, unchallenged position vis-à-vis the screen world. Thus in an article on television in a recent issue of *Screen* (Summer, 1977), Gillian Skirrow and Stephen Heath go so far as to declare that "there is a generality of ideological position." Certainly, the recent critics often differ as to the sorts of films which contribute most to this non-challenge to the supposed passivity of viewing. But at its limit, this psychological model suggests that the very (f)act of seeing a film, regardless of the film story, turns spectators into non-acting subjects. In his essay on "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," (*Screen*, Summer, 1974), Roland Barthes banishes content from art and declares that

"representation is not defined directly by imitation: even if one gets rid of notions of the 'real,' of the 'vraisemblable,' of the copy, there will still be representation for so long as a subject casts his gaze towards a horizon on which he cuts out an apex..."

Barthes is thereby able to declare that Brecht and Eisenstein are pre-political artists since they don't break out of a presentational model. Jean-Pierre Oudart's examination of the influence of classical

perspective on film and Jean Louis Baudry's description of the ideological effects of the basic cinematographic apparatus also move in the same direction. [4] This rejection of representation suggests not only a subversion from within but also from without. Critics and artists push for new artistic experiences which will call the traditional boundaries of the arts into question. But the overriding question remains: Is this sort of aesthetic undermining the political?

In part, an answer depends on what we mean by political. To give a definition obviously open to disagreement, I would suggest that the political concerns itself with analyzing and then proposing answers to the contradictions of a particular historical situation. Obviously, the recent formalistic critics might contend that the formal innovations of works which challenge viewing experiences serve as such an investigation of historical contradictions. For example, in the 1972 postscript to *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Peter Wollen declares that a new art would cause the spectator to

"produce fissures and gaps in the space of his own consciousness (*fissures and gaps which exist in reality but which are repressed by an ideology, characteristic of bourgeois society, which insists on the 'wholeness' and integrity of each individual consciousness*)" (p. 162, my emphasis).

Wollen partially covers his own tracks by declaring that such a repression is characteristic of and not intrinsic to bourgeois society, but that disclaimer is itself uncharacteristic of the radical formalist approach where a rigid either/or divides the progressive from the reactionary. The new aesthetic, if I may reductively sum it up, bases itself on a belief that texts repress, that they lead to a domination of their subjects by placing those subjects in a particular position, physically, formally, perhaps ideologically. A text, in this sense, is an ensemble of codes which rationalize a particular way of relating to the world. And they make this rationalization attractive by not interfering with the fetishistic or voyeuristic perspective of the viewing subject. In his essay, "The Politics of Separation" (*Screen*, Winter 75/76), Colin McCabe goes so far as to call this seduction "the bribe of identity," thereby situating textual persuasion in the realm of crime.

It seems to be though that his sort of position leaves a lot of points unanswered or at least ambiguous. Before we can examine the validity of certain subversive strategies as answers, we need to make sure that the problem has been correctly understood. We need to examine the notion of textual domination.

Such a notion, especially as a critique of representation, rests upon a great number of assumptions. I would like to concentrate on two of these: that texts confirm the world and blind us to contradictions, and that submission to a text means submission to its ideology. The belief in a bribe of identity sees the texts as a complicity of codes, a rhetoric

which hides its own rhetorical nature. Thus, critics like McCabe see the text as a force of domination over spectators. However, we need to rigorously investigate such an argument. What does domination, in terms of a work of art, mean?

All texts dominate. Without a degree of code-sharing between art makers and art receivers, the artwork becomes a noise. To alter McCabe's economic metaphor (which he obviously does not mean as a metaphor), texts aren't bribes; they are contracts in which spectators or readers willingly agree to relate to codes in a certain way and, I would contend, with knowledge usually of the workings of many of these codes. The signs of the contract appear throughout the texts; they may become familiar to us but precisely because they are signs, we have to learn them to be able to read or to view. And yet submission to a contractual promise is only one side of the working of a text. Information theory emphasizes not only that information ceases without a common code but also that it ceases if a transgression of codes does not appear, a transgression actually inherent in the system and which expands it.

Art, all art, bases itself not just on confirmation but also on contradiction. Literary critic Frank Kermode has alternatively described this interplay as one between credulity and skepticism (in *The Sense of an Ending*) or between recognition and deception ("Novels: Recognition and Deception," *Critical Inquiry*, No. 1). To a large extent, what we refer to as self-reflexivity represents one more strategy in the interplay of a technique intrinsic to and *actually defining the process of art*. One sort of pleasure comes from precisely this interplay of credulity and skepticism (which may explain why detective fiction — which in many ways ideally embodies many of the workings of the code of suspense — is so popular). Self-reflexive art appeals in part because it heightens this intrinsic interplay.

If we survey the development of the literary and dramatic arts, we continually come across examples of art which signal awareness of their own artifice. Literary critics often point to Laurence Sterne's 18th Century novel *Tristram Shandy* as a special highpoint of conscious artistic artifice; in a revealing comment, Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky called it "the most typical novel in world literature." Yet in the same literary period, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* goes as far as Sterne's book in uncovering the codes which a reading of literature depends upon. Fielding, for example, explicitly invokes the model of a contract by comparing the novel to a meal where there is a certain interplay between the fixed order of courses and the changing identities of the foods within that order. But the difference between *Tristram Shandy* and *Tom Jones* is one of degree, not a break. Similarly, both texts are no more than a *logical* culmination of a tendency and a characteristic of art. But the recent formal aesthetic has little awareness of degrees. Roland Barthes, for example, has declared that modernism was not really a possibility for art until 1850; he thereby ignores the fact that every artistic period is an interplay between tradition and artistic revolution. We need to examine different types and degrees of artifice and relate them both to the history

of their production and of their reception.

Standard humanist literary and art criticism has long been able to accommodate transgressions of the rules. The usual schema is to see such transgressions as necessary to a progress that otherwise would stultify. Obviously this accommodation could be considered an instance of coopting but only that which can be coopted can be coopted. Critics have long been able to situate modernism in a non-revolutionary aesthetic. One could cite many examples of this accommodation. Recently two books of literary criticism (Robert Alter's *Partial Magic* and Albert Guerard's *The Triumph of the Novel*) have celebrated what both authors call "the Great Other Tradition," thereby expanding the establishment, the canon, the Great Books of the Western World, beyond the limits proscribed by F.R. Leavis. [5] Both critics (and there are many others) turn aesthetic disturbances into positive, humanist values. To be more precise, they recognize literary, formal innovation for what it is: a non-threatening, typical component of art. Guerard, for example, refers to the novel's powers of "illuminating and imaginative distortion": literature can introduce an imbalance for the precise purpose of establishing a higher balance. Today's revolution is tomorrow's handservant of the established order. In its literal sense, the term *avant-garde* suggests nothing more than an advance force, a forward branch of the establishment.

The Russian Formalist Viktor Shlovsky argued for art as *ostranenie*: a making strange of the world. And indeed if art confirms, it also makes strange the normal order of things. Suspension of belief accompanies suspension of disbelief. But recent criticism would like to obscure this condition. Hollywood has been declared a paradigm of a fundamental lack of irony, of a celebration of art as transparency. The heritage of recent film critics from literary critical models with their high art/popular art distinction is obvious. Recent radical literary criticism has committed historical and theoretical errors by adhering to a conception of the novel based on 19th century forms. In fact, the 19th century novel is only one type of literature — and one that is itself not without its ironies and formal subversions. Similarly, there is no one type of Hollywood film; indeed, very few actual Hollywood productions would fit the abstract category of transparency which recent criticism has instituted as the Hollywood paradigm.

With the new formalistic critics a particular conception of Hollywood cinema is made to monolithically serve as the type of all classical films. A few exceptions crop up: the nonconformist auteurs like Nick Ray or Sam Fuller. But Hollywood itself is defined as conformist, as the ultimate briber, the ultimate concealer of codes.

All art is distanced. This is as true of Hollywood as of Laurence Sterne or Aristophanes. We learn to read through this distance from material reality, but we also learn to want new distances. Hollywood not only presents unreality as reality; it also openly acknowledges its unreality. In his book *America in the Movies*, Michael Wood even suggests that

unreality can become formulaic. Campiness is not only a subgenre of films but a tendency of most if not all Hollywood films, and Wood suggests that this distance represents one cause of Hollywood's appeal. As he exclaims, Hollywood is "the only place in the world where anyone says, 'Santa Maria, it had slipped my mind.'"

For example, the Hollywood cartoon — a staple of Hollywood production — embodies many of the formal techniques claimed to be deconstructive. And yet, if any *political* concern can be attributed to these cartoons, that is so only in the etymological sense of political: that which deals with the *polis*, with the universal relations of people to each other and to the world. To modify my initial comments, films demonstrate not three attitudes *but two*. Films differ significantly not so much in their degrees of formal complexity as in their political attitude, their sense of the changing and changeable nature of the world. I would suggest that what I initially described as a separate category of attitude — namely, conscious and deliberate self-reflexivity — may be nothing other than an expansion and making manifest of inherent qualities of art.

This difference of attitude — between textual artifice (forced or not) and social attitude — is the difference between art and political art. Let's take a closer look at a Hollywood cartoon for an example. DUCK AMUCK (1953) is a virtual culmination of the experimental possibilities of the Hollywood cartoon. [6] The subject of the cartoon is the nature of animation technique itself. In DUCK AMUCK, Daffy Duck undergoes victimization at the hand of his animator, ultimately revealed to be none other than Bugs Bunny. Bugs tortures Daffy by playing with such film coordinates as framing, background, sound, and color. In an article on DUCK AMUCK in *Film Comment*, Richard Thompson rightly notes that the film manifests a high degree of emphasized formal complexity:

"The film is extremely conscious of itself as an act of cinema, as is much of Jones' work ... DUCK AMUCK is a good example of Noel Burch's dialectic idea of film elements: foreground and background, space and action, character and environment, image and soundtrack are all in conflict with one another..."

Yet Burch's dialectic idea, as he himself notes, is far from political and so is DUCK AMUCK. If DUCK AMUCK is a metaphor for the confusions of life (as Thompson suggests), it is a disengaged metaphor at best, for it fails to examine confusion through a politicized perspective. Indeed, the source of Daffy Duck's *angst* reveals itself to be none of the agents of social domination in the real world, but merely Bugs Bunny — another fictive character, whose power is tautological in origin. The film opens up a formal space and not a political one in viewer consciousness. DUCK AMUCK closes in on itself, fiction leads to and springs from fiction, the text becomes a loop which effaces social analysis. This is the project of all nonpolitical art, realist or modernist.

We may approach this issue from another direction if we examine those

theories that deal with classical or traditional art's supposed function vis-à-vis the daily workings of the material world. The recent critics contend, as the earlier quote from Peter Wollen suggests, that bourgeois art works to instill a complacency in the viewer, a complacency both about the art object itself and about the world outside of art. *But there is nothing necessarily consoling or optimistic about conventional art. Similarly, bourgeois life is not necessarily one of complacency and isolation from an awareness of contradiction.* It depends on what kind of contradiction we're talking about. That our day-to-day expectations can be thwarted is a normal and accepted possibility of everyday life. The conventional work of art does not banish contradiction; rather, it works by divorcing contradiction from its social causes. Bourgeois existence is often little more than a continual succession of disappointments, of subversions, all of which fissure our self unity and social unity as acting subjects. Art doesn't deny this malaise; it merely hides and denies its bases in historical forces. This is why contemporary culture can accommodate formally subversive art.

As long as such an art does not connect its formal subversion to an analysis of social situations, such art becomes little more than a further example of the disturbances that go on as we live through a day. And a work of art which defeats formal expectations does not lead to protest against a culture that deals continually in the defeating of expectations. This, I would suggest, explains much of the appeal of MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN. It may also help to explain the morbid underside of fan fascination with Hollywood — an underside of scandal magazines and, ultimately, of the elevation of such trashy books as Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* into coffee table respectability. We are used to having our realities deconstructed and so too it does not bother us to see the reality of the movie screen world deconstructed. In an article on MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN in *Socialist Revolution* (No. 30), Barbara Ehrenreich suggests that the TV series represents the triumph of contradiction: a show which attacks the consumer world is sponsored to sell the very sort of products its content disdains. And it succeeds. Ehrenreich presents this plenitude of contradictions as a stumbling block to socialist theories of popular culture. If it were merely a question of art inspiring blind optimism, criticism would be easy. Shows like MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN have made pessimism, discontent, and irony marketable. We need to deal with this realm of contradiction which obscures political contradiction.

And here we return to Brecht. Brecht also sees a distance between art and political art. Art automatically embodies a distancing, a making strange. But there's nothing yet political about that. To be political, art has to be made so. In his essay, "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre," Brecht uses the example of opera to present his conception of art as possessing *intrinsic* qualities of distance from reality to which the artist can add a sense of political engagement. As is well known, Brecht's theory of art reception emphasizes conscious knowledge over intuition. So does his theory of art creation. Like his teacher, Erwin Piscator, Brecht sees art

as filling a *programmed* function. This implies conscious attention to form and to content.

This emphasis on conscious intention probably most separates Brecht from the Hungarian Marxist critic Georg Lukács. Lukács' approach to literary creation seems to fall quite often into an intuitionist theory of creation:

"Lasting typologies based on a perspective of this sort [i.e., based on the "selection of the essential and the subtraction of the inessential"] owe their effectiveness not to the artist's understanding of day-to-day events but to his *unconscious* possession of a perspective independent of and reaching beyond his understanding of the contemporary scene" (*Realism in Our Time*, my emphasis).

This belief on Lukács' part in unconscious awareness leads Brecht to call him a formalist, for it is precisely a belief like Lukács' that the 19th Century masters had the answers *and* that these answers are still relevant to the 20th Century which signals a refusal to situate literary production within the actual workings of history.

In fact, Brecht's aesthetic suggests that we need to expand and clarify the notion of realism. Significantly, Brecht referred to his own artistic project as a realism. Realism is no more (and no less) than a type of attitude to the world and to art. Realism is not a natural quality; it is a social quality. Brecht's theory most significantly distinguishes between realism — which he saw as the overriding impulse of his art — and unrealism, the setting up of false or limited or reified attitudes toward the world and worldly possibilities. In "Against Gyorg Lukács," he defines realism as

"discovering the causal complexes of society/unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who rule it."

Realism, thus, is a form of knowledge, a picturing of reality. To judge the efficacy of a particular realism,

"one must compare the depiction of life in a work with the life that is being depicted."

Like the Lacanian theories of the subject which recent critics draw upon, Brecht's theory depends on a notion of positioning, of the subject's place in the circuit of communication. But Brecht diverges from these critics in an essential way. For Brecht the attitudinal position of the viewing subject springs from an attitudinal position in the work — the political artwork embodies a difference between the way things are and the way they can be. Brecht's formal experimentation depends on content in two ways. First, form must change to reflect changing realities; otherwise, the formalism of a Lukács may result. Second, Brecht's political theatre is a theatre of possibility — a theatre showing that life doesn't only have to take on the forms it generally does. Political art compares an image of

human beings as "unalterable" to one of them as "alterable and able to alter" (quoted from "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre"). As such, the new theatre shows that formal arrangements of life can change. We can do things we never thought possible. But the partial grounding in Brecht of groups like the Living Theatre — groups which disconnect the potentials of activism from its social(ist) responsibility — suggests that qualifications need to be placed on the sorts of possibilities that a Brechtian political art would encourage. Not all possibilities are equally valid; Brecht chooses validity on the basis of a socialist perspective. Hence, content once again makes its entrance. It is what the work says about the real world that matters. The artist must pay close attention to the world of possibility his/her work promises. [7]

For Brecht, political art plays off a political redefinition of credulity and skepticism. To avoid the new world of possibility appearing as nothing but noise, the artwork must also make use of the old world as a standard. Meaning, and its realization in action, comes from the differences between the two world views. Political art defamiliarizes the world. But it does so by playing off our connections to that world.

This reading of Brecht has two important implications for our discussion. First of all, if the political text invites production from the spectator, this production is a source of pleasure. Obviously, Brecht sees the theatre as a site of learning, but that learning — that accession to knowledge — brings and is immersed in pleasure. The spectator finds joy in comparing a worldview which he or she now realizes is a strangling one to a worldview of possibilities. Pleasure comes from knowing the world can be remade. Pleasure, as Brecht says in Note 2 of "A Short Organum for the Theatre" is "the noblest function that we have found for the 'theatre.'" Or as he says later in the *Organum*, the audience

"must be entertained with the wisdom that comes from the solution of problems, with the anger that is a practical expression of sympathy with the underdog, with the respect due to those who respect humanity... *in short, with whatever delights those who are producing something*" (my emphasis).

Second, insofar as Brecht's political art includes the presence of the familiar world and yet presents a more attractive world, Brechtian art is an art of identification. In examining Brecht's theories, critics have too often declared that the theories allow no place for identification. In fact, Brecht's theory of art embodies two identifications: one empathetic and unquestioning — the one connected to the reified vision of the world — and a critical one — a new perspective of knowledge from which the old way is scrutinized. In his essay on "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," Brecht is emphatic about the need for identification in political theatre:

"The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on."

We need to carefully examine questions of art's relation to an audience and to the production of pleasure. Pleasure and the importance of artistic popularity come under attack in much of the new radical criticism. I would suggest that we are witnessing the rise of a break or gap between criticism and popular reception. This has several causes, among them the growth of a new, difficult art which demands strenuous audience participation. Recent criticism's emphasis on theory rather than practice (as in Althusser's elevation of philosophizing into a sort of practice), and the resulting romanticism of the intellectual, also contributes to this new esthete-ism. Aesthetic theory seems to be falling prey to a new elitism in which a select group of critics claim for themselves an exclusive knowledge of the workings of literary production. In his review of Charles Grivel's *Production de l'interet romanesque* (in *Diacritics* 6:1), Jean Alter calls this new totalitarian approach "terrorist semiotics," and he pinpoints many of its strategies of clique inclusion and popular exclusion: a scientific mode of writing, neologisms, haughtiness, and an obscure range of references. Obviously a similar charge is being argued out in what we might call "the *Screen* resignation debate," where several editors resigned from *Screen* because of its intellectual elitism and subsequent disdain for the day-to-day needs of *Screen Education*.

Paradoxically, although the new critics situate themselves in opposition to humanist criticism, they invoke a division of taste parallel to the high culture/ mass culture distinction so beloved in humanist criticism. From Ortega y Gasset's dehumanization of art to Susan Sontag's erotics of art to Roland Barthes' distinction between pleasure and bliss, there is little change in the elitism of the critical endeavor. Recent critics see themselves as possessing a heightened approach to literary appreciation (an approach which Barthes and others refer to as the "freeing of the signifier") while mass audiences supposedly stumble along in realist naïveté. At worst, this approach refuses history. It regards a certain popular sort of viewing practice as debased, quotidian, and so it dismisses that practice, refusing to examine its social dimensions: how texts have been received, how they have mattered. When, for example, Peter Wollen suggests in "Semiotics and *Citizen Kane*" that "it is now possible to read there in the film an entirely different film, one which Welles probably never intended," I believe that Wollen blurs the more important issue: to analyze how the film has been read, to examine its influence on audiences who don't see an entirely different KANE.

Terrorist esthetics feeds into and feeds from the precise sort of formalism which turns Brecht's theory into a theory of work, which downgrades realism, disdains identification, and condemns pleasure. In fact, we need to pay a more open attention to *degrees* of identification and pleasure.

At the very least, we can distinguish three possible forms of pleasure in a work of art. There is the pleasure of familiarity. This is the pleasure of uncritical, reified realism. Then there is pleasure which comes from art's

dehumanization or from forced self-reflexivity. This is the pleasure of art as form, as aesthetic emotion, as Kant suggested. This is a pleasure which, as Barthes contends in *The Pleasure of the Text*, derives its force by shying away from history, by trying to be outside ideology (although such an attempt is itself ideological). Then there is the pleasure elaborated by Brecht, the pleasure of an art which finally realizes the dream of the Roman poet Horace in his *Ars Poetica* (to which Brecht continually refers): to please and instruct. To please through instruction. To instruct through pleasure. An art whose content is a combination of the world and a better version of the world.

We also need to examine instances of defamiliarization in popular art, in a valuable article on audience response in *Jump Cut*, No. 4, Chuck Kleinhans distinguishes between self-reflexive and self-critical films, the latter being films which directly examine both their form and their content. If, as I have claimed, all films embody a self-reflexivity, then we need to go on to examine differing uses and degrees of self-criticism. Of course, such self-criticism is not necessarily in itself political. We need to go back to Brecht's notion of conscious political criticism, but we also need to be more receptive to the *possibility* that such a critical mode may be operative in films of the so-called "dominant cinema." This whole realm of investigation seems a promising one. But only if we can get beyond the dismissive attitude currently in fashion and move toward a knowledge important not only because it is knowledge but also because it matters.

Notes

[1.](#) I originally presented this paper at a panel on self-reflexive films at the annual conference of the Society for Cinema Studies in March, 1977. I have modified it somewhat for publication.

[2.](#) Coming from Kant who saw practical reason and imagination as distinct regions of the human mind, 19th Century Romanticism tended to privilege the artwork as a special and superior activity of the creative portion of the intellect. In contrast, a politically aware criticism places an emphasis on seeing artworks as results of practical human activity rather than a transcendent creative talent above and beyond social responsibility. Thus, the use of terms like *code* and *text* to refer to aspects of an artwork has a deliberate and polemical intent behind it. Such usage stresses that artworks are constructions, that they are objects produced by people and for people in particular social situations.

The text is the configuration of elements in a single work of art. Unlike Romanticism's theory of Organicism which treats the artwork as a unified (organic) whole, the notion of the text concentrates on the individual elements and how they go together. For example, *Cahiers du cinéma*'s famous analysis of YOUNG MR. LINCOLN extracts two elements from the text — its attitudes toward sexuality and politics — to examine how the film's ostensible unity actually conceals a set of divergent and even contradictory impulses.

"Codes are rules of communication whose application appears from text to text. Effective communication can only occur when senders and receivers share knowledge of the codes. The notion of the code is important in the examination of artistic media since it raises questions about the very extent to which we can consider an artistic text as an act of communication, and about the extent to which convention and rules govern the traditions and transgressions in art production and reception."
(32)

3. The subject-object distinction has been one of the central concerns of philosophy throughout its history. The distinction concerns human beings (conscious subjects) and the possible ways in which they can come to know about and perhaps understand the world around them. Marx, for example, suggests that people can best live in the world not as passive observers but as active participants. Those film critics who attack film illusionism and its notion of film as a window on the world generally direct their attack against two targets. First, they criticize the passivity which illusionist film seems to force spectators into. Second, they attack the impression which illusionist film seems to convey of a world which one can understand simply by viewing it.

4. Oudart and Baudry are two French critics who argue that the very technology of filmmaking — for example, the lens used — reproduces the ideological perspective of Western civilization. A useful introduction to this argument is Baudry's essay "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly*, 28:2 (Winter 1974-1975).

5. In his study of English literature, *The Great Tradition*, moralist literary critic F.R. Leavis declared that the privilege of being part of *the* great tradition belonged exclusively to Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad. Thus he excluded writers ranging from Dickens whom he felt was too popular in appeal to James Joyce whose experiments he believed represented a "dead end." Many of the literary scholars who have criticized Leavis have done so simply to argue for the writers he leaves out rather than to question the very notion of a great tradition no matter who its members might be.

6. The screenplay for DUCK AMUCK has appeared in Richard Thompson's article on the film in *Film Comment*, 11, No. 1 (January-February, 1975), pp. 42-3.

7. Brecht's qualification here is an important one. In suggesting the need to awaken people to new life possibilities, so many works of art fail to distinguish adequately between valid and invalid experiences, and so they promote an art which holds valuable aspects of human life in contempt. For example, the cult of cruelty in art often glorifies the violation of the human body. The ostensible suggestion is that this opens up new artistic experiences: violence is a source of heightened aesthetic pleasure. That such art (which ranges from A CLOCKWORK ORANGE to *The Story of O* to "punk rock") often singles out women as the target

of violence suggests one (and only one) of the dangers of such an approach. For only one example (there are many!) of this defense of violence as a source of higher consciousness, see Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination," *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Delta Books, 1969). Sontag calls for an "erotics of art;" given the fascism this can lead to, Brecht would not have favored such an art.

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The political program of *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1969-1977

by William Guynn

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The French journal, *Cahiers du cinéma*, has had an enormous impact in Marxist film criticism. Film scholars and cultural militants on the American left have followed, with considerable awe, the development of the *Cahiers* group's conception of the Marxist theory of culture and have applied its critical methodology. Curiously, these same scholars and militants have thus far not attempted to come to terms with *Cahiers du cinéma* in a specifically political fashion, that is, to question the underlying political assumptions on which its theory is based and which guide its work in practice. In France, discussion of *Cahiers du cinéma*'s political program by the intellectual left has been vociferous, but often marred by political or professional rivalry. [1] Many of the central questions concerning the political nature of *Cahiers du cinéma* remain to be raised: What has been the political history of the journal? What is its program for culture? What are the political roots which have determined the development of its cultural theory? What kind of Marxism does *Cahiers du cinéma* in fact represent?

The political history of the *Cahiers* group describes the long march it made from the elitist intellectualism of the New Wave to the crude ideology and class-determinism of Socialist Realism. In its Marxist period *Cahiers du cinéma* has been torn between two contradictory forces. (1) It received as its heritage the formalist tendencies of New Wave intellectualism, which became a "politics" of form, grounded in the avant-gardist theory of the early Soviet filmmakers. (2) It looked for political leadership to the French Communist Party, then to Maoism, and ultimately had to embrace Socialist Realism and contend with the hostility of that doctrine to formal concerns in art, for Socialist Realism is the cultural doctrine common to both Maoism and old line Stalinist parties.

The political transformation of *Cahiers du cinéma* was an extended process during which the *Cahiers* group struggled to maintain a contradictory fusion between its formalist impulses and the cultural

policies prescribed by the "party." At no point in its history has *Cahiers du cinéma* been able to resolve definitively its contradictions. What appears on the surface as political movement is in fact vacillation, and, if one compares the review's "Marxist" period in the late Sixties with its most recent issues, one would be tempted to say that *Cahiers du cinéma* has come full circle. It is nonetheless of great interest to Marxists to follow *Cahiers du cinéma's* political development through its two major phases: first, the period of its orientation toward the French Communist Party (late 1969-late 1971); second, the period of its consolidation as a Maoist grouping (late 1971-present). [2] In the following paragraphs I will attempt to characterize the major features of these two phases and discuss the political theories which sustain them.

The critics of *Cahiers du cinéma*, like most left-leaning French intellectuals, were taken unawares by the massive revolutionary upsurge of May-June 1968. The revolutionary fervor of the French working class infused filmmakers, actors, technicians and students of cinema with rebellious enthusiasm. The *Cahiers* group gives an excellent account in its August 1968 issue (No. 203), "Estates General of Cinema." With the dissolution of the May-June movement, which had been effected by July, *Cahiers du cinéma* turned for political leadership to the French Communist Party (PCF). From this point forward, the *Cahiers* group's Marxism was characterized by its uncritical — albeit passive — acceptance of the political line of the party. Despite the fresh betrayals carried out by the PCF during the events of May-June 1968 — it called in fact for the striking French working class to return to work — *Cahiers du cinéma* remained oblivious to the lessons of history. It is difficult to believe that these critics, who, as activists during the May-June events, were themselves betrayed by the PCF, could acknowledge in retrospect:

"...the PCF appeared to us, at that point, after the decomposition of the May 68 movement, as the only force which had a coherent strategy in opposition to the bourgeoisie." (No. 234-235, December 1971-January/February 1972)

Such a statement reflects the political consciousness of *Cahiers du cinéma* in this period: the overriding concerns of these critics were extraordinarily parochial. Their interest in Marxism was largely limited to its application as a critical methodology to literature and art. There is doubtless some truth to the allegation made by *Cinéthique* that it was the appearance of *Cinéthique* in January 1969 as a "Marxist-Leninist" journal that forced *Cahiers du cinéma* into what *Cinéthique* called the "red turn." (*Cinéthique* 6, January-February 1970) Whether it was motivated by rivalry with *Cinéthique* or by the "need for a clear theoretical base to which to relate [its] practice," *Cahiers du cinéma*, in October and November 1969 (*CduC* 216 and 217) put forward for the first time the general lines of its political program. Significantly, in the famous articles entitled "Cinema! Ideology/Criticism," [3] the *Cahiers* group takes no political position at all with regard to the French left — its political program is limited to the sphere of "ideological" struggle as

applied to film theory. As it admitted in retrospect, *Cahiers du cinéma* quite simply endorsed the French Communist Party's political line in order to be done with the question of political struggle:

“The intervention of Marxism-Leninism in the journal ... implied not only the adoption of historical and dialectical materialism in the specific work of *Cahiers* (elaboration of a materialist theory of cinema, ideological struggle in the field of cinema) but, posing the question of the articulation of this work with the political struggles in progress, demanded an analysis of these struggles. This analysis was not produced. Or rather, it was put off, in the name of an erroneous conception of the priority given to ideological struggle in its relative autonomy in relation to political struggle... ["Politics and ideological class struggle," *CduC* 234-234, December 1971-January/February 1972].

In brief, the political program of *Cahiers du cinéma* during its early "Marxist" phase (late 1969-late 1971) has two aspects. (1) In order to liquidate the question of political struggle, it embraced uncritically the political line of the French Communist Party. (2) It concentrated its energies on "ideological struggle," that is, it put forward a theory of "politicized" formalism, which was grafted onto the PCF's political line.

The *Cahiers* group's critical methodology in this period can best be understood by examining one of its major political documents. The classic expression of *Cahiers du cinéma*'s cultural politics is to be found in its collective analysis of Jean Renoir's film, *LA VIE EST À NOUS* (*CduC* 218, March 1970). *LA VIE EST À NOUS* was made at the behest of the French Communist Party for the electoral campaign of May 1936. In the period of rising fascism, the PCF espoused the strategy of the Popular Front. Abandoning the communist stand of class against class, it advocated political "unity" between the parties of the working class and the "liberal" wing of the French bourgeoisie for a frontal attack against fascism. *LA VIE EST À NOUS* is a piece of Popular Front propaganda in which Renoir exploits several cinematic genres: a documentary sequence describing the riches of France; fictionalized scenes of the conversion of workers, petty bourgeois and small farmers to the PCF program; the in-studio filming of a PCF politician's speech. It was the intention of the *Cahiers* group to rehabilitate this neglected film and propose it to militant filmmakers as a landmark in revolutionary filmmaking. More important, it was a significant political gesture: the *Cahiers* group asserted its political endorsement of the PCF by embracing that party's political history.

The article, "LA VIE EST À NOUS, Militant Film," follows the format developed by the *Cahiers* group, a format which reflects the two aspects — political dogmatism and formalist analysis — which characterize its critical methodology.

(1) The first part of the article purports to describe the film's "situation," i.e., its historical-social-political-economic context. In point of fact, the

Cahiers group gives us no concrete analysis of the political situation in France in 1936, but simply reiterates Bulgarian party leader Georgi Dimitrov's position — the position held by all Communist Parties under Stalin:

"At the present hour the working masses may no longer choose between bourgeois democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat but only between democracy and fascism."

This bow to Dimitrov constitutes the *Cahiers* group's endorsement of the strategy of the Popular Front. In their collective political analysis, the *Cahiers* critics thus forego a discussion of the still crucial questions posed by Renoir's film: What is the class nature of the Popular Front? Whose class interest does such a front represent? Instead, the *Cahiers* group dogmatically affirm that *LA VIE EST À NOUS* is the cultural reflection of a correct political line.

(2) The second part of the article is an analysis of the formal structure of the film in the context of the identified "situation." Through their analysis, the *Cahiers* critics seek to establish Renoir in the lineage of revolutionary filmmakers (Eisenstein, Vertov, Godard, Straub) who attack bourgeois ideology by criticizing and subverting the "codes" by which it is communicated. According to the *Cahiers* group's reading of the text, in *LA VIE EST À NOUS* Renoir "deconstructs" the bourgeois documentary through an original interplay between "acted" and "non-acted" sequences. A strategic "gliding" between documentary and fictional elements disrupts the normal ideological discourse associated with bourgeois documentary, and the viewers undergoing these "displacements" are thereby incited to question the entire bourgeois outlook on the world. The assumption on the part of the *Cahiers* critics is that the working class and petty bourgeois audiences to which the film is addressed are to be educated, not so much by the "revolutionary" content of the film, as by its revolutionary *technique*.

"*LA VIE EST À NOUS*, Militant Film" is what *Cahiers du cinéma* counterposes to fragmented bourgeois criticism. It sees this article as an example of a historically specific, dialectical understanding of the functioning of art in political life. Unfortunately, whatever cohesiveness there is in this reading of Renoir's film is due to the *Cahiers* group's dogmatism rather than to its understanding of events in the world. The only political analysis these critics offer is that *LA VIE EST À NOUS*, commissioned by the French Communist Party, reflects a political line of that party and that the films' structure resembles, point for point, PCF Secretary-General Maurice Thorez's speech at the 8th Party Congress (January 1936). This is hardly surprising. What is striking, and characteristic, about this article is that the formal considerations — despite the attempt to politicize them — obscure and circumvent the central political questions posed by the film itself. Ironically, the *Cahiers* group was to repudiate this article and the Popular Front strategy, demolishing its own intellectual house of cards, in the criticism/self-criticism that inaugurated its transformation into a Maoist collective. In

a peculiar telegraphic style, the *Cahiers* critics assail their past:

"Therefore, rapprochement with the PCF, the culmination of which is marked by a collective analysis of LA VIE EST À NOUS (*CduC* 218), repeating word for word in non-critical fashion, the thesis of the film (the theses of the PCF on the period of the Popular Front and, today, on the Popular Front)" (*CduC* 234-235, December 1971-January/February 1972, p. 6)

The irony is double, for the *Cahiers* group is apparently oblivious to the fact that Maoism embraces and defends the history of the Popular Front. [4]

By its own admission, the *Cahiers* group was only able to maintain its orientation toward the French Communist Party by embracing that party politically while rejecting its policies on culture. By effecting such a separation between political line and cultural line, the *Cahiers* critics were able to continue to pursue their formalist theory in a relatively independent fashion. What they had developed since the experiences of May 1968 was a thoroughly undialectical and unmarxist conception of form in art, which asserted that *technique* in and of itself is political. According to their theory, the signifying practices, in this case the historically developed technique of filmmaking, largely determine the ideology embodied in a given work of art. Bourgeois form necessarily refers to bourgeois class content. Therefore, as a first priority, a revolutionary film must expose the workings of its own technique, since this technique is ideological by its very nature. If we accept this argument, it follows that the study of form is not a way of avoiding discussion of political content, but, on the contrary, plunges to the heart of it.

The *Cahiers* groups formalism culminated in a series of articles by Jean Louis Comolli, entitled "Technique and Ideology, (*CduC* 229, 230, 231, 233, 234-235, May 1971-February 1972), which sought to lay the theoretical and historical basis for the politics" of form. At bottom, these articles asserted that the photographic apparatus and associated cinematographic processes, seen in their totality as technique, are simple ideological products of the development of bourgeois art since the early Italian Renaissance:

"It is to the reciprocal redoubling of the ideological demand (to see life as it is) and the economic demand (to make profits from it) that cinema owes its existence." (*CduC* 229, May-June 1971, p. 15)

This reductionist view of cultural history leads logically to its conclusion: Brought into being by the ideological and economic demands of the bourgeoisie, film technique, in the very process by which it reproduces an image of the world, inescapably reproduces the bourgeois world outlook. It is clear that, conceived in this fashion, a Marxist understanding of art demands formal analysis above all else, for

technique is at the very root of ideology. This is not, as I will attempt to demonstrate, a Marxist conception.

As I have suggested, *Cahiers du cinéma* represents an anomaly, insofar as its preoccupation with aesthetic theory and formal analysis coexisted — if not peacefully — with the political dogmatism and cultural class-determinism which characterize Socialist Realism. If the relationship that the *Cahiers* critics discerned between revolutionary form and revolutionary content is not Socialist Realist, neither is it authentic Marxism. Rather, it represents a third current, which emerged most forcefully in the avant-gardist movement in the Soviet Union after the revolution. This tendency found its main organizational form in the Proletkult and its principal theoretician in A.A. Bogdanov, long-time political adversary of Lenin. [5] Although the Proletkult itself dissolved in the early '20s, the essential tenets, largely all the iconoclast tendencies, continued to exert considerable influence over the Soviet avant-gardes, and, in certain aspects, had an impact on the formulation of the doctrine of Socialist Realism.

The avant-gardists in Russian art had maintained, even prior to the revolution, an extreme hostility to tradition. From their petty-bourgeois, bohemian and anarchistic perspective, these avant-gardists declared war on Western culture and, at their most extreme, advocated the indiscriminate destruction of the consecrated arts, which gave, they asserted, a passive, mausoleum-like reflection of the bourgeois world. To a limited extent, the avant-gardists incorporated elements of a social program for culture into their own perspective and greeted the revolution as an attack against the illegitimate hegemony of the ruling classes in artistic matters. Primarily, however, these artists and intellectuals proclaimed solidarity with the October Revolution for other reasons. The antagonism they felt toward landowners and the bourgeoisie was based not on larger social grounds, but on the persecution of their artistic movement. They had not yet obtained — as avant-gardists in the past and their counterparts in Europe would in the future — admission to the sanctity of bourgeois culture.

It was, more or less, an historic accident that artistic revolt and social revolution coincided. Unaware of the dialectical movement which characterizes both social and cultural change, the avant-gardists saw the Russian Revolution as the total destruction of the past, in its social and cultural dimensions. The left theorists, Bukharin among them, asserted that bourgeois culture, like the bourgeois state, had to be smashed. The historical coincidence, which seemed to unite art and revolution, became the theoretical basis for the Proletkult's conception that revolution in artistic technique is part and parcel of social revolution. Constructivist artist Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin, with overwhelming pride, stated:

“The events of 1917 in the social field were already brought about in our art in 1914....” [6]

What asserts itself in the Proletkult conception and reemerges once

again in the early 1970s in the cultural theory of *Cahiers du cinéma* is the impulse on the part of artists and intellectuals who have been won to Marxism to designate their own sphere of activity as a primary arena for class struggle. This necessarily involves a distortion of Marxist theory, and resulted, in the case of the Proletkult, in a new theory of ideological struggle — the notion of the “cultural front.” In his preface to *The Peasant War in Germany*, Engels, describing the German situation in 1874, clearly points out the importance of ideological struggle:

“For the first time since a workers’ movement has existed, the struggle is being waged pursuant to its three sides — the theoretical, the political and the economical-practical (resistance to the capitalists) — in harmony and in its interconnections, and in a systematic way. It is precisely in this, as it were concentric, attack that the strength and invincibility of the German movement lies.”[\[7\]](#)

Lenin later used Engels’ formulation concerning the central importance of ideological struggle to attack economism in *What Is To Be Done?* [\[8\]](#) He asserted that without revolutionary theory there can be no revolution, i.e., that the working class could not attain socialist consciousness and undertake its revolutionary tasks without the intervention of the vanguard party, armed with proletarian ideology. To Marxists, ideological struggle is the struggle to develop the revolutionary tool of scientific socialism. Much to Lenin's dismay, the Proletkult redefined ideological struggle to mean the “struggle” to develop proletarian class culture. Hence art became an arm in the class struggle, and the Proletkult was able to proclaim in one of its manifestoes:

“Art is a social product, conditioned by the social environment. It is also a means of organizing labour ... The Proletariat must have its own class art in order to organize its forces in the struggle for socialism...” [\[9\]](#)

Lenin polemicized consistently and hotly against the Proletkult’s political deviations. Although he had no personal taste for the work of the left artists, Lenin did not question the Proletkult members’ or any left artists’ right to freedom of expression within the cultural field. He attacked the Proletkult ideologically because it had elaborated a theory of ideological struggle which supported its bid for autonomy as an organizational force separate from the Soviet state's Commissariat of Education. The Proletkult sought to dictate in cultural matters for the Soviet state, to be recognized as an autonomous political organization and to implement a proletarianization of the Soviet arts. All of its aims were in direct contradiction with the policies of the Soviet state. Lenin held that there was no cultural road to socialism and that all artists, including the traditionalist fellow-travelers, were to receive equal treatment. He intervened consistently on the behalf of the old institutions of bourgeois culture — the Bolshoi, the Moscow Art Theatre — in order to protect them against the assaults of the “left” artists. [\[10\]](#) There was to be no cultural dictatorship under Lenin.

It is difficult to assess in specific terms the influence the Soviet avant-garde exerted on the *Cahiers'* political formalism. The *Cahiers* group undertook a lengthy study of avant-garde theory, particularly in numbers 220-221 (June 1970), devoted to Russia in the '20s, and numbers 226-227 (January-February 1971), devoted to Eisenstein. Faced with the incredible heterogeneity of the avant-garde camps in the Soviet Union in the '20s, *Cahiers* prefers not to take sides, nor does it analyze the decisive impact that Stalin's bureaucratic regime had on Soviet filmmakers and avant-garde theory in the subsequent period.

What the *Cahiers* group does assert is that the early Soviet texts are "our immediate past" and also "our present," (220-221: "Editorial") that is, that the Soviet avant-garde theory is the point of departure for the *Cahiers'* own conception of the cultural vanguard. The texts drawn from the '20s — the most important being Eisenstein's "On the Question of a Materialist Approach to Form" — reflect the ideas of the "left" avant-garde and center on the question of revolutionary ideology and revolutionary form. In his essay, Eisenstein designates STRIKE as an "*ideological victory in the area of form.*" (*CduC* 220-221, p. 33, italics in original) In the same issue Bernard Eisenschitz, in an article entitled "The Proletkult, Eisenstein," attempts to dissociate Eisenstein from the Proletkult camp, where he in fact did his early work. What Eisenschitz ignores is that the organizational death of the Proletkult in the early '20s did not bring about the demise of the Proletkult theory of "ideological" struggle in the arts. Early Soviet film theory is infused with this conception. And, clearly, it is to the Soviet avant-garde that the *Cahiers* group looks for political direction. In their programmatic statement, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" (*CduC* 216), the *Cahiers* critics assert:

"To us the only possible line of advance seems to be to use the theoretical writing of the Russian filmmakers of the twenties (Eisenstein above all) to elaborate and apply a critical theory of cinema, a specific method of apprehending rigorously defined objects, in direct reference to the method of dialectical materialism." [\[11\]](#)

In essence, the *Cahiers* theoreticians embrace the Proletkult corruption of the Marxist conception of ideological struggle. Like the Proletkultists, they believe that they can participate in the revolutionary transformation of society in their capacity as cultural critics. They subscribe to the idealist notion that they can awaken revolutionary consciousness in the working class and arm it ideologically by exposing the treachery of bourgeois form and by proposing new formal models which constitute the basis of proletarian culture. Through this critical exposure of certain facets of the capitalist superstructure, the *Cahiers* group believes it can undermine the whole foundation of bourgeois society.

It is, in fact, the purest idealism to suggest that the proletariat is capable, under the conditions of capitalist rule, of creating its own autonomous culture. Such a conception denies the historical conditions

in which the proletariat has developed as a class. The bourgeoisie emerged as a class within feudal society, consolidated its economic power and developed a class culture of extraordinary richness before it actually seized state power. In contrast, the proletariat, possessing nothing, exploited and oppressed, systematically denied education and access to cultural life in general, must seize state power as a precondition to its cultural development. If one analyzes the experience of the early Soviet state, it is clear that the revolutionary programs of education and cultural development for the working masses, conceived, even as they were, under conditions of crisis and poverty, are unthinkable under capitalism.

During the period of its orientation toward the PCF, the *Cahiers* group, whose interest in Marxism was primarily academic, avoided facing political realities — this would have jeopardized the *Cahiers* theoretical enterprise and exposed the emptiness of its formal games. In its Maoist phase, as I will indicate, *Cahiers du cinéma* came to reject much of its aestheticism and severed, if too hastily, its ties with intellectual avant-gardism. It did so in order to conform to cultural Maoism, i.e., to the doctrines of Socialist Realism. The *Cahiers* critics did not, however, abandon the avant-garde's "cultural front" conception. For the Proletkult's "cultural front" with its notion of "proletarian culture," survived the onslaught of Stalinism, and, in fact, as Camilla Gray points out, became one of the fundamental tenets of Socialist Realism. [12] But, whereas the Proletkult demanded organizational autonomy for the "cultural road to socialism," the Socialist Realists demanded that all cultural work be done at the dictates of the Party and reflect the Party line.

If the *Cahiers* group's early Marxism is complex and contradictory, its Maoist theory is consistent in all its aspects. The whole of *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s Maoist program for culture can be found in Mao's "Talks at Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art," 1942, the key text to which *Cahiers* articles continually refer. [13] Significantly, Mao's formulations were a response to criticisms of elitism and sexism which had been raised by party members, most notably woman writer Ting Ling, against the party bureaucracy at Yen-an. In a piece entitled "Thoughts on March 8," Ting Ling expressed her profound disillusionment at the fate of women at Yen-an, who were, presumably, emancipated. [14] In his "Talks at Yen-an Forum," Mao intended to "rectify" critical party elements by stifling freedom of criticism and laying down the theoretical basis for his policy of artistic repression in the tradition of Socialist Realism. It is this program that *Cahiers du cinéma* adopts beginning with issue 234-235 (December 1971—January/February 1972). I will discuss the elements of this program to show how it deviates from Marxism.

The basic tenet of the Maoist conception of culture is that a work of art is the exclusive possession of one class or another. To quote Mao:

"In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to

definite classes and are geared to definite political lines"
(Mao, p. 25).

That is, art is either "proletarian" or it is "bourgeois." Mao's assumption is that art is, and is nothing more than, class ideology, defined in its narrowest sense, and that ideology is always *directly* determined by its relation to the material base of society. Certainly Marx is clear in his assertion that art and intellectual life in general are part of the superstructure of society and constitute one of the arenas in which the ideologies of the contending classes are elaborated and in which class contradictions are clarified and fought out. Marxists hold that art does not function independently of the material base of society but is decisively affected by it. It is, in fact, the task of the Marxist critic to explain the historic demands which call works of art into being and which provoke revolution in artistic form. However, Marx and Engels defined the relationship between material base and superstructure in the following way:

"Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc. development is based on economic development. But all these react upon one another and also upon the economic base. It is not that the economic situation is *cause, solely active*, while everything else is only passive effect. There is, rather, interaction on the basis of economic necessity, which asserts itself [emphasis in the original]." [15]

Marx not only insists on the historical complexity which generates culture but also asserts that there is a dimension to art which cannot be fully explained by reference to historical development and existing relations of production:

"It is well known that certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton structure of its organization." [16]

The determination of the class stand of individual artists and writers, or the class values embodied in their works, poses very complex problems. As Engels points out, in the work of Goethe there is considerable ambivalence. And in Balzac there is absolute contradiction between the avowed class stand of the artist — royalist and Catholic — and the image he actually gives us of that dying class:

"Well, Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work as a constant elegy on the irretrievable decay of good society; his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply — the nobles. [17]

The rest of the Maoist program flows from its mechanical conception of art as simple ideology. Art is conceived as only utilitarian and class-

serving, in the most immediate sense, and becomes irretrievably confused with propaganda:

"A thing is good only when it brings real benefit to the masses of the people" (Mao, p. 24).

The political task of the artist is to "serve the people, give them fuel in snowy weather," through the propagation of utopian cheerfulness — not exposing the dark, but "extolling" the "light." Above all, art must be produced under the dictate of the party and "geared" to the party line.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The political program of *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1969-1977

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Mao justifies his policy on culture through a distorted reading of Lenin's 1905 article, "Party Organization and Party Literature, in which Lenin argues that all literature printed by the party must reflect the party line. As Vyacheslav Polonsky, founder and editor of Bolshevik journal *Press and Revolution*, indicates in his analysis of the period, Lenin wrote this article at the point at which the Bolshevik Party had just emerged from the underground. [18] Until 1905, all legal communist activity had been non-party, and it was Lenin's task to struggle against non-partyism in this new period and to forge the literary instruments of legal struggle. Lenin is not discussing, as Mao would have it, literature as a general cultural phenomenon — this was not an arena in which the Leninist party intervened, either before or after the revolution. He refers rather to the specifically ideological writing within the revolutionary party, organized according to the principles of democratic centralism:

"...we are discussing party literature and its subordination to party control. Everyone is free to write and say whatever he likes, without restriction. But every voluntary association (including the party) is also free to expel members who use the name of the party to advocate anti-party views." [19]

Mao therefore asserts, on the supposed authority of Lenin, that art and literature must become "cogs and wheels" in the revolutionary machine or perish in the quagmire of bourgeois ideology. All "revolutionary" artists and writers are to create under party scrutiny, and all that they produce must reflect the party line.

The Socialist-Realist dogma of subordination of the arts to party control, propounded by Stalin and adopted by Mao, is in direct opposition to the Bolshevik policy, explicit in Lenin's work before the revolution and adopted by the Soviet state after October. Artists and writers were to enjoy complete freedom of expression, provided their work was not specifically counterrevolutionary. As Sheila Fitzpatrick points out in *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, Anatol V. Lunacharsky, as head of Narkompros (The Commissariat of Education) in the first twelve years of the Soviet state, carried out the policy of free creative development in science and art. There was no official "socialist" art, no preference

indicated by the state for any artistic grouping, despite the attempts of the Proletkult avant-gardists to achieve artistic monopoly and be recognized as the cultural arm of the revolution. In his preface to the futurist *Rzhanoe slovo* (1918), published by the state, Lunacharsky asserted:

"And of course the state must make it a rule to give the mass reader access to all that is new and fresh. It is better to make a mistake and offer the people something which is not now capable of arousing their sympathy than to leave a work which is rich with future possibilities hidden, because it is not to — somebody's taste. Let the worker hear and evaluate everything, the old and the new. We will not impose anything on him; we will show him everything." [\[20\]](#)

What is "original" in Mao's conception of "cultural work," although implicit in Socialist Realist doctrine, is his theory of the "mass line." The "cultural workers," like their political counterparts, must "go among the people." According to the "mass line," knowledge, be it political or cultural, is not derived from the Marxist study of the dialectics of history, or from the application of scientific socialism to concrete reality, or from the political work of the revolutionary, as Lenin described it in *What Is To Be Done?*

For Mao, knowledge is "knowledge of the people," in the narrowest sense. "Cultural workers" must remold and proletarianize themselves, but not in the Leninist sense of revolutionaries steeled in proletarian ideology; rather, Mao admonishes party members to "merge" with the masses. At Yenan Mao asserts what is undeniably true — that intellectuals have been contaminated by their bourgeois education and by their petty bourgeois class origins. But in this historical context, as in others, Mao used the charge of "class deviation" to bludgeon his political opposition: impulses to criticize party policy can be traced to party members' failure to remold themselves. Mao incites writers and artists to relearn language, because they do not know the "rich, lively language" of what Mao calls the "clean people." They must study peasant songs and folk-tales, read wall-newspapers, as models of "proletarian" art.

And they must reject as 'poisonous' the content of bourgeois art, art from the past, "foreign" art, which has value only in its technique. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, extremely repressive measures were taken against any manifestation of culture which might be hostile to Maoist thought: Beethoven and Bach were banned as "bourgeois revisionists," and Goethe and Shakespeare as "royalists." Under the guise of struggle against petty-bourgeois class deviations, Mao's dicta on art and literature, from Yenan to the Cultural Revolution, sought to suppress freedom of expression in all areas of cultural work and thereby suppress the ideological basis for any currents in opposition to the ruling bureaucracy.

The actual implementation of the Maoist program was bound to create crises in the *Cahiers* organization. In all fairness to the *Cahiers* group,

its movement toward Maoism was, on a subjective level, a leftward movement. Many of the criticisms it raised concerning the French Communist Party were correct, if late in coming, and were grounded in the conviction that the party had "lost" all revolutionary potential. However, the major problem created by the *Cahiers* group's new-found leftism was not political in character. The French Communist Party, in response to the traditionally intellectual French "left" milieu, has at times been rather tolerant of intellectual formalism, as long as theorizing remained formal and never put into question the political program of the Party. [21] In the case of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, it would doubtless have preferred to cajole that group into remaining within the party orbit, and, in fact, made attempts in that direction.

For its part, *Cahiers du cinéma* was heavily laden with intellectualism. It had emerged from the self-consciously intellectual New Wave and had assumed the banner of the Soviet cinematic avant-garde. On the one hand, conversion to Maoism resulted in the *Cahiers* group's blind adherence to the fluctuations of the Chinese Communist political line — this constituted a simple transference of loyalty from one bureaucracy to another and was easily accomplished. *Cahiers du cinéma* immediately assimilated China's position on the "social imperialist" USSR revisionism" and "capitalist restoration" — and used it as a political arm in its attacks against the PCF cultural organ, *La Nouvelle Critique*. On the other hand, on the "cultural front," the *Cahiers* group was confronted with Mao's "mass line" policy and its concomitant hostility to intellectual formalism.

Cahiers du cinéma continued for some months to balance between formalism and the crude determinism of the "mass line" — producing in the process a number of issues of review filled with incongruity. In issue 236-237 (March-April 1972) for example, *Cahiers du cinéma* reprints an article from *Chinese Literature*, an official Chinese publication, describing THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN as "a striking victory of the revolutionary proletarian line of Chairman Mao in literary and artistic matters." (p. 81) The analysis presented clearly falls into the most simplistic tradition of Socialist Realism: all aspects of culture are "class determined." Hence, THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN is judged solely on its merits as an embodiment of Mao's "proletarian" line. In the same issue, we find *Cahiers* criticism of a highly sophisticated character: Pascal Bonitzer's and Serge Daney's analysis of "continuity" and "transparence" in Bazin's conception of cinema; and a study of Bresson's FOUR NIGHTS OF A DREAMER, revealing the "fictional and historic contradictions of the New Wave."

Resolution of this conflict came with an agonizing criticism/self-criticism, in which the *Cahiers* critics acknowledged their intellectual elitism, their individualistic aspirations and their self-serving leanings — in short, their "revisionism." They confessed their divorce from reality, their lack of knowledge of the people. They were, as Mao says, like fish out of water — and admitted the

"unreadability of *Cahiers*, not only for the masses, but for the cadre militants as well. Thenceforth their goal was to liquidate definitively the former objective which was to cultivate the art of film criticism for the profit of the French, and even international, intellectual tribe." (*CduC* 242-243, November/December 1972-January 1973, p. 6)

Although the *Cahiers* critics capitulation to Maoist-style cultural action was in certain respects regrettable, many of the criticisms they leveled against their own functioning in the past were entirely correct. They took to task their former aestheticism and their neglect of political content:

"Placing the equal sign between aesthetic criterium and political criticism. Saying: every lack on the formal level necessarily refers to a lack on the political level and, under the pretext of recalling to those who forget too easily the non-neutrality of forms, neglecting to carry out a closer examination of the context with which these forms were laden, forgetting to specify this content in political terms, leaving this task to others." (*CduC* 248, undated, p. 39)

Further, the *Cahiers* critics abjured the entire theoretical basis for their formalist approach, and decried the excesses in which they had indulged in their efforts to describe how "bourgeois art imposes its vision of the world:

"...we have long had the tendency to look for this how where no one, except a mystical ultraleftist, would look for it: in the *appareil de base* [the camera and attendant technical processes], or in the structure of all fiction, or in the configuration of the movie theatre and the seating it determines." (*CduC* 248, p. 40)

Having made the leap to full-blown Maoism, the *Cahiers* group was confronted with the practical and theoretical problems of implementing the mass line. The essential dilemma was this — how to carry out the mass line" and merge with the masses as a small group of intellectuals isolated from the proletariat. They couldn't "go home to the masses," that is, undertake mass work, without abandoning "theory," in the form of the journal, and the masses were obviously not coming to them. Thus, the *Cahiers* critics developed a strategy for cultural work which would allow them to maintain close contact with the masses without abandoning their theoretical tasks.

The key to the functioning of their strategy was what the *Cahiers* group called the "*elements relais*," which can best be rendered in English as "relay runners." (*CduC* 242-243) These relay runners, who would be "cultural militants," were to "go to the masses," work among them, gather raw material, and run back to the *Cahiers*. The *Cahiers* group would take this raw material from the masses, raise it to a higher level (as Mao would say), and the relay runners, armed with this new

theoretical distillation, would return to the masses in the schools and *cinéclubs* and use *Cahiers* theory to carry out correct cultural work. This conception of the revolutionary as dismembered — the *Cahiers* group functioning as the head separated from the body, the militants — was not destined to cull favor with potential militant conscripts. Moreover, the *Cahiers* group's attempted "mass" intervention in the class struggle reveals the weakness of the "cultural front" strategy: "Cultural militants" could intersect the proletariat only in peripheral ways — in high schools, film clubs, and *foyers* — and not at the strategic heart of the organized working class, the trade union movement, where the question of revolutionary leadership is posed in the most urgent fashion. [22]

The second dilemma posed by the *Cahiers* group's adoption of the Maoist program was its obligatory subservience to the political direction of the vanguard party. As the *Cahiers* group affirms in its program:

"...there is no cultural line outside of a political line; the cultural line is the application, on a specific front, of the general political line." (*CduC* 242243, November/December 1972-January 1973, p. 8)

And yet no vanguard Marxist party could be singled out from among the myriad of Maoist groupings in France. The dilemma — how do you serve the party when there is no party? — called for further theorizing. The resolution was found in the following formulation:

"Aware of the problem, but considering that no organization has emerged on the national level in the service of which we can place ourselves, we have adopted the attitude which we think most correct: it consists in defining ourselves as an embryo of the general political line capable of guiding our practice." (*CduC* 242-243, p. 8)

Thus, armed with Mao's mass line and containing the embryo of the vanguard party, the *Cahiers* group was ready to do ideological battle. The battle lines are those drawn by Mao: there is bourgeois culture on one side and proletarian culture on the other. The task of *Cahiers du cinéma* is twofold: (1) expose and destroy bourgeois culture, (2) uncover and nurture the culture of the proletariat. Unfortunately for the proletariat, the culture which can be identified as "proletarian," or even "progressive," is limited to a few "vanguard" elements (most notably, Godard and Straub), "progressive" films from national liberation struggles, and the work of a few militant propagandists. The only vestiges of mass culture the *Cahiers* group discerns are those of the oppressed nationals of Brittany, Corsica, Pays Basque and Occitanie, who give us the "most living forms of peoples' culture." In vain, the *Cahiers* critics search for the roots of mass culture in the working class in order to "encourage, arouse these initiatives and offer them political and technical support." (*CduC* 248, p. 9) On these extraordinarily meager foundations, the *Cahiers* group would like to construct "proletarian" culture.

In espousing such a program for culture, the *Cahiers* group ignores what is for Marxists a material fact: that the working class, even in the most developed Western "democracies," has been deliberately deprived of education and the leisure to create, and that only the socialist revolution can ultimately release that creativity. As part of a revolutionary program, Marxists call for the defense and preservation of oppressed national cultures and decry the victimization by capitalism of revolutionary artists. But these cultures and artists do not constitute a political arm of the revolutionary party, nor are they seen as the exclusive constituent elements of an evolving proletarian culture. It was clear to Lenin after the October Revolution that the ersatz "workers' culture," first elaborated by the iconoclast Proletkult, sprang from the utopian idealism of enthusiastic intellectuals and that it had no material basis in reality. In his "On Proletarian Culture," Lenin defends the Marxist view of cultural history and describes the function of culture under the dictatorship of the proletariat:

"Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture. Only further work on this basis and in this direction, inspired by the practical experience of the proletarian dictatorship as the final stage in the struggle against every form of exploitation, can be recognized as the development of a genuine proletarian culture." [23]

Lenin's conception of the democratization of culture was not that culture should be brought to the level of ignorance imposed on the masses by the ruling class, but that the masses should be given access, through a revolutionary program of education, to the heritage of the past and to the Marxist assessment of human history. Such is the material basis that Marx saw for the evolution of a new culture.

The political history of *Cahiers du cinéma* sheds light on the problems facing contemporary Marxist criticism. It reveals the major distortions of the Marxist approach to culture — formalism and Socialist Realism — which characterize much critical theory being written today. As Marxists, we must reject the attempts on the part of contemporary critics to recast formalism in "political" molds. Such attempts are political charlatanism and have little to do with a Marxist attitude toward culture. We must also reject Socialist Realism with its distorted conception of the relations between art and politics and its insistence on the subservience of art to the dictates of a party. In their work, revolutionary artists, under decadent capitalism, reflect the insoluble contradictions of class society and give expression to the need to liberate intellectual creation from capitalist servitude. However, Marxists do not hold that artists and critics are charged with intervening in the class struggle in a *programmatically* way. Intervention in the working class with a political program is, as Lenin insisted, properly the task of a

disciplined revolutionary party.

It is significant that *Cahiers du cinéma* in the most recent period is in silent retreat from the consequences of a full-blown Socialist Realist program. In historical terms, this "new" period corresponds to a lull in working class militancy and is widely echoed in the French intellectual "left" milieu. There is an apparent de-escalation of "ideological" struggle and a new emphasis placed on other methodologies, most notably psychoanalysis. The *Cahiers* retreat from its hardline position is characterized by the relative absence of cultural activism, a new turn toward formal analysis (much of which is only obscurely political), and a perceptible softening of its crude class-determinist perspective on culture. This new vacillation is a clear, if unacknowledged, admission that Socialist Realism is a dead end, both intellectually and politically. The lesson to be drawn from the political history of *Cahiers du cinéma* is that the entire body of current "Marxist" theory must be reexamined in the light of the original Marxist texts and the experience of the early Soviet state. Only on this basis can Marxist criticism contribute to a materialist understanding of culture.

Notes

[1.](#) For a perspective on these polemics, see: "Du bon usage de la valeur d'échange (Les *Cahiers du cinéma* et le Marxisme Leninisme)," editors, *Cinéthique* #6, January-February 1970. Marcelin Pleynet, "Le point aveugle," *Cinéthique* #6. Jean-Patrick Lebel, "Cinéma et Idéologie I," *La Nouvelle Critique* #34, April 1970. Michel Ciment and Louis Seguin, "Sur une petite bataille d'Othon," *Positif* #122, December 1970.

[2.](#) The political evolution of *Cahiers du cinéma* has been a process, and these dates are of course approximate. However, the two political periods, as I will indicate, are clearly marked off by major political statements by the *Cahiers* group and constitute abrupt shifts in the orientation of the journal's work.

[3.](#) Translations appear in *Screen*, 12:1 and 12:2, Summer and Fall 1971.

[4.](#) For documentation on the Chinese Communist Party's participation in the formulation of the Popular Front, see: *Seventh Congress of the Communist International: Abridged Stenographic Report of the Proceedings*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1939.

[5.](#) Cf. Lenin, *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, 1908.

[6.](#) Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1970, p. 219.

[7.](#) Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, volume 2. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969, p. 170.

[8.](#) Political opportunism characterized by the limitation of revolutionary activity to simple trade-unionism.

[9.](#) Camilla Gray, p. 245.

[10.](#) For an excellent account of Lenin's interventions in cultural matters, see: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

[11.](#) Translation in *Screen*, 12:1, p. 35.

[12.](#) Camilla Gray, p. 245.

[13.](#) Mao Tse-Tung, *Mao Tse-tung on Literature and Art*. Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967.

[14.](#) For an account of the events, see bourgeois scholar Merle Goldman's *Literary Dissent in Communist China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, pp. 18-50.

[15.](#) Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, volume 3, p. 502.

[16.](#) From Marx's *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, eds., *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*. St. Louis/Milwaukee: Telos Press, 1973, p. 134.

[17.](#) Baxandall and Morawski, p. 115.

[18.](#) Vyacheslav Polonsky, "Lenin's Views of Art and Culture," in Max Eastman, *Artists in Uniform*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1972, pp. 217-252.

[19.](#) Lenin, *Collected Works*, volume 10. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966, p. 47.

[20.](#) Sheila Fitzpatrick, p. 134.

[21.](#) See bourgeois historian David Cauter's *Communism and the French Intellectual, 1914-1960*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1964.

[22.](#) The crucial questions to be answered are the following: Where does workers' power in fact lie? Where do communists choose to intervene, particularly in a period of crisis of leadership? Revolutionaries do not shun foyers and cineclubs, but foyers and cineclubs do not constitute one of the three fronts of class struggle, as Engels defined them.

[23.](#) Lenin, *Collected Works*, volume 31, pp. 316-317.

Critical dialogue: No tundra theory, please

by Bill Nichols

from *Jump Cut*, no. 17, April 1978, p. 36

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JUMP CUT NO. 16 has arrived up here in Canada at last. It's a very impressive issue. The Special Section on gay films marks an important step forward for political film criticism and hopefully will become a regular aspect of JUMP CUT's ongoing work.

There's just one little problem. Not with the Special Section. With one of the "Theory" articles, namely [William Van Wert's analysis of Robin Wood's criticism](#). There's a wee tinge of the urban provincial or the Yankee chauvinist peeping through what is an otherwise reasonable spelling out of Wood's conservative aesthetic. It seems to be directed at Canada.

Canadian film criticism needs no defense, especially in an issue which openly acknowledges that it is alive and well (pp. 2, 13, 39), which counts Canadian critics among its contributors. And yet, Van Wert believes Wood's troubles stem, in part, from being out in the tundra too long: "one wonders uneasily if the quote has anything to do with Wood's going off to Canada for three years" (p. 34). Why "one"/Van Wert wonders — about Wood's reference to Yeats and the apocalypse in relation to a Canadian "exile — is as difficult to fathom as Wood's original reference, if not more so.

Van Wert goes on, describing Wood's attacks on modernists (Godard) by recourse to the past (George Eliot). Once again he wonders,

"I really didn't understand where he was coming from (apart from three years in Canada listening to Schubert's 'Wintereise' for breakfast, while cooking, while gardening)."

Something of an "out-of-it-up-north" complex seems to be developing here. It leads Van Wert to take another stab at a tundra-theory of conservative criticism. Like Ian Cameron and Andrew Sarris, Van Wert's Robin Wood would not take kindly to *Screen's* dominance of British film criticism. Unlike Cameron and Sarris, though, Wood at least has an

excuse:

"It's as if, like Rip Van Winkle, Wood emerged from three years in Canada to find that he'd become an anachronism."

"One wonders" how Martin Walsh remained so vital and political a critic despite five years in Canada, given Van Wert's strange proclivity toward geographic determinism. Not all of us are so fortunate as Van Wert to live smack up against the heartbeat of theoretical/political criticism in Philadelphia, but not all of us have turned completely into reactionary pods either. Perhaps when Van Wert finishes his child's checkup, he can pop up to Canada and bestow his diagnostic skills upon the rest of the Canadian film community. I for one would eagerly welcome such a visit: I've recently begun to develop an interest in Schubert's "Wintereise," though I still prefer Eric Clapton while gardening.

We apologize to our Canadian readers for an obvious lapse in vigilance.

— The Editors

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Critical dialogue Twelve frames per second

by Chuck Kleinhans

from *Jump Cut*, no. 17, April 1978, p. 36

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[William Guynn's article on *Cahiers du cinema*](#) in this issue (pp 32-35) provides an important argument in the on-going analysis and evaluation of the last ten years of French film criticism. In the past decade French critics and filmmakers have done more — quantitatively and qualitatively — to debate and develop Marxist film theory and practice than any group has done since the Soviet 20s. We in the English speaking world have much to learn from this ferment: from the mistakes and from the positive achievements. Guynn's article raises the major and key questions: what were (and are) the *politics* of the *Cahiers* critics, and were those good politics?

I believe Guynn only tells half the story. His conclusions are severely compromised by a reductionist and simplistic approach. Therefore I want to present some points as comment and corrective, at the same time hoping others will join in an ongoing discussion of recent French criticism and filmmaking and the political issues involved.

CAHIERS' INFLUENCE.

Guynn claims *Cahiers* has been followed with considerable awe in the U.S. This isn't true. The general attitude of U.S. film scholars and critics has been to regret *Cahiers'* left turn. Mention of post-'68 *Cahiers* by Sarris, for example, is always coupled with a hearty sneer. The same attitude from a left position characterizes *Cinéaste's* treatment of *Cahiers*. In fact, the basic attitude among U.S. left critics has been to ignore, or dismiss without extensive examination, the work of *Cahiers*, *Cinéthique*, etc.

A distinct minority of U.S. left film people have followed *Cahiers* closely, and then they've usually been critical. Furthermore, that part of *Cahiers* which has been translated and discussed in England and North America has tended to be early-phase material ("Cinema/ Ideology/ Criticism," and the YOUNG MR. LINCOLN analysis especially). The articles of the

more militant and more Maoist *Cahiers* period, dominated by direct political argument, are *never* discussed by those critics who have been most forceful in promoting recent French film thought — especially the group around *Screen*. (Due to CP influence on *Screen*?) When *Cahiers* and *Cinéthique* became more overtly Marxist-Leninist, Anglo-North American followers by and large shifted their attention to the "non-political" (i.e., formalist) work of *Communications* (Barthes, Metz, Bellour, etc.), *Ça*, etc. In fact very little is known or discussed of the most clearly Marxist French work of the past decade.

SOCIALIST REALISM AND MAO.

Guynn substitutes prejudice for fact in discussing Mao's position on art and issues of Socialist Realism. I invite readers to read Mao's writings on art and culture for themselves before accepting Guynn's interpretation. As for Socialist Realism, attacking it has become a banality of current left cultural thought. Can anyone be found to defend it anymore, save perhaps China's "unrepentant capitalist roaders," the Gang of Four? Yet, while no one will defend the doctrine, neither will anyone equally dismiss its finest U.S. film product, *SALT OF THE EARTH* (see article in *JC* 10/11). I would suggest that to balance Guynn's views readers look at Stefan Morawski's discussion of Socialist Realism (chapter 7) in his *Inquiries into the Fundamentals of Aesthetics*.

REDUCTIONISM.

Guynn's statement, that *Cahiers* never has "been able to resolve definitively its contradictions," reveals the underlying weakness of his analysis throughout the article. As Guynn should know, contradictions cannot be "resolved definitively" in any political project because new conditions create new contradictions. Since he proceeds without an adequate understanding of dialectics, Guynn sees no problem with his reductionist exercise. Thus he makes a handful of articles in *Cahiers* stand for a decade's output. Historical development and change is obliterated in a model of two homogenous stages: first PCF, then Maoist. However any adequate understanding of *Cahiers* (even by bourgeois standards of analysis) would have to deal with the complicated relation of *Cahiers* to the left positions advocated by *Positif*, *Cinéthique*, *La Nouvelle Critique*, and *Tel Quel*, just to mention the most obvious publications. Guynn has nothing to say about the influence of Althusser's politics, Lacan's psychoanalysis, Metz's semiology, or Brecht's aesthetics, yet every issue of *Cahiers* in the period shows these theories' impact on the magazine, usually overtly. Somehow Guynn discusses *Cahiers* without ever really discussing its film criticism specifically — a rather revealing gap. As a result, Guynn's article comes close to being a conspiracy theory. We need a much better basis on which to construct a political critique of *Cahiers*.

THE "AUTONOMY" OF ART.

Guynn's presentation of Lenin's views and the Bolshevik '20s is highly

selective at best, and distinctly misleading for the most part. Because every socialist state, past and future, takes over an economy organized for the benefit of a few rather than the masses of people, it must face a period of scarcity while organizing production for socialism. The arts are no exception. The revolutionary party, through the state, has to set priorities in the arts. During the Russian Civil War an acute paper shortage restricted all publishing, for example, so hard decisions had to be made about who and what got published. Lenin himself intervened in such matters, criticizing Lunacharsky for printing 5,000 copies of a Mayakovsky poem (Letter of May 6, 1921). I think any unprejudiced reading of Lenin (see his *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress, 1970) shows that Lenin was at least of two minds about party control of art — sometimes favoring it, sometimes not.

Certainly, throughout his career, Lenin thought Marxists had something to offer artists. Guynn apparently does not share this view, for he ridicules *Cahiers'* attempt to develop their cultural politics. Yet U.S. cultural workers face a problem similar to *Cahiers'* situation. There is no revolutionary left party with both a politics correct enough to rally a significant portion of the existing left and deep roots in the working class. What then should radical culture workers do? *Cahiers'* solutions, such as its "relay runners," were awkward, perhaps silly, certainly naïve, but they were genuine attempts to deal with a real situation. In sharp contrast, Guynn can only ridicule the very effort to do anything. That's political purism taken to the point of despair.

Although I have many differences with Guynn's version of things, I think he asks the essential questions: What are the politics of *Cahiers*, and are those good politics? These questions are studiously evaded by most of those who profess the importance of recent French film thought and filmmaking. Such avoidance is even practiced by the *Cahiers* crowd. In a recent interview, Serge Daney, staff member since 1964 and current co-editor-in-chief, carefully sidesteps political discussion of the past decade ("Les *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 1968-1977: interview with Serge Daney," *The Thousand Eyes*, no. 2, 1977, 18-31). Daney's evasion must be challenged: What have been and are *Cahiers'* politics? Are those good politics? The questions won't go away.

Finally, even asking those questions, and answering them, is insufficient. The creation of a Marxist film theory and film practice adequate to the political and social realities of our time remains a task before us. However awkwardly, *Cahiers* contributed to that job, and deserves our critical attention.

Report on a conference not attended The scalpel beneath the suture

by B. Ruby Rich, Chuck Kleinhans,
and Julia Lesage

from *Jump Cut*, no. 17, April 1978, pp. 37-38

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There is an old story about the medical profession — that being someone's "colleague" means not telling when you find their scalpel inside your ailing patient. We refuse to be colleagues. There is a scalpel beneath this suture. We have seen it.

This past winter the normally sleepy world of academic film studies witnessed a considerable brouhaha surrounding a conference organized for 20th Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, by British theorist Stephen Heath. Acting out of political conviction and a strong sense of self-respect, a number of people, including some JUMP CUT staff members, joined in a protest of the conference's elitism and sexism. This criticism reflects a growing sentiment against the "business as usual" and "boy's club" atmosphere of cinema studies.

In a previous JUMP CUT report ("The Signifier that Failed to Make Milwaukee Famous," JC 10/11), Chuck Kleinhans criticized an earlier UW-M film conference. Since this year's conference leader, Stephen Heath, was aware of radical and liberal skepticism about Milwaukee events in the past, in spring 1977 he announced that the February 1978 meeting would be different: Six to eight months in advance, an overview position paper outlining the central topic ("The Cinematic Apparatus: Technology as Historical and Ideological Form") and a detailed bibliography of pertinent readings would be sent out, allowing people to prepare for the event. This way the conference would provide a learning situation rather than the usual closed dialogue. Heath added that the perspective of the conference would be Marxist. Further information, however, never came — nor the promised papers. Finally, in mid-October an extensive promotional mailing went out to the U.S. film studies community announcing the conference, four major speakers (Heath; French film semiotician Christian Metz; British theorist and filmmaker Peter Wollen; and Jean-Louis Comolli, filmmaker and *Cahiers du cinéma* critic), and two major films (RIDDLES OF THE

SPHINX by Laura Mulvey and Wollen, and Comolli's LA CECILIA — reviewed in JC 2/13). The announcement and a cover letter invited participation

At this juncture a number of people, including JUMP CUT staff, criticized the exclusive selection of men as conference all-stars which overlooked many qualified women. As conference plans became clearer, the number, variety, and intensity of criticisms increased, focusing especially on issues of sexism, elitism, the narrowness of the topic, and the selection process for the 75 participants. As final plans for the conference were set in mid-December, a number of people came to the conclusion that their criticisms, given in good faith, had no meaningful effect. From an initial suspicion that the conference was just poorly planned and could be corrected, many of us came to the conclusion that the final form of the meeting was Heath and those working with him to validate their own special line — Lacanian psychoanalysis — and that the conference structure would be even more sexist and elitist than the average academic conference. Consequently, the Chicago JUMP CUT group, asked to make a presentation, turned down the offer and circulated a one-page statement criticizing the conference. The following is a detailed presentation of JUMP CUT's criticisms of the conference.

The extraordinary elitism of the conference appeared most clearly in two ways: the process of selecting the participants and the form of the meeting itself. The selection process was overlaid with a peculiar double message. While the event was to be limited to a select 75, the basis for choosing participants and papers was never made clear. At the same time, national publicity for the meeting interested many people in the conference who were later excluded. The effect of this publicity was to give widespread notice of exclusion, tantalizing the many to ensure a very high profile for a select few. Such manipulation serves largely to inflate the self-importance of the organizers. Even the recent ultra-bourgeois, ultra-academic Harvard conference on "Bergman and Dreams," which also restricted numbers, clearly announced a deadline date and a first-come, first-serve admissions policy.

Just the opposite with Milwaukee: its flyer carefully stated the conference would be selective, but it gave no criteria for selection. It turned out that invitations were issued largely on a personal basis via long distance phone calls from the conference organizers, triggered by personal suggestions from their own contacts. The clear assumption of such an "invitational" procedure is that all intelligent, interested potential attendees are already known by the organizers, and that virtually all the important serious work is being done by high profile white male academics who are friendly to the French psychoanalytic line of Jacques Lacan.

No women were invited to speak at the conference until criticism of this policy was made in the most vehement terms by JUMP CUT staffers. Students could attend only if sponsored by invited faculty and then only three per select teacher. No preliminary notice was given that

filmmakers and their work would be welcome. And the organizers made no attempt to contact the broad range of experimental filmmakers whose films might have a direct bearing on the conference topic. Instead, Heath went so far as to accept a film that was not even completed when accepted, apparently on the sole basis that one of the makers was a close friend. Other details confirm the conclusion that the true basis for selection came almost exclusively from whom you knew, not what you knew.

Attempts to work cooperatively with Heath were constantly thwarted by his intransigence. For example, in July, Northwestern University film faculty decided to coordinate a graduate seminar with the conference topic. Preliminary inquiries were made then about the topic, the bibliography, position paper, and student attendance. Heath evaded giving any straight answers to repeated inquiries until Saturday, December 17. At that time Chuck Kleinhans, who was to teach the seminar, was told that he could only bring three students and that he must name them by Monday. Kleinhans explained that the NU quarter had ended, that students had left the campus, that any selection would have to be made in consultation with other faculty and students, and that those who had registered for the seminar would not be known until the first day of class, January 3, at which time names could be provided. Not good enough, he was told by conference associate director, Teresa de Lauretis — the conference schedule and participant list had to be fixed immediately. On Monday, Kleinhans explained again the impossibility of providing three names and asked that three spaces be held for NU students, explaining as well JUMP CUT's decision to not attend the meeting. In reaction to JUMP CUT's withdrawal, the NU students were excluded from the conference. (Subsequent efforts by NU faculty to negotiate a solution were met with the Bureaucratic Shuffle — the students concerned were put on a "waiting list" and never admitted).

At this point the conference organizers must have realized that they would finally be held accountable for their irresponsible planning and elitist organization, for they attempted to obscure the fundamental nature of the event with several cosmetic adjustments. Last minute invitations were made to leftists and women — some of whom had never even applied to attend. The preliminary program that was sent out in January gave the superficial appearance of female participation but in reality almost all the key spots were held by men. Nevertheless, many saw through these fancy maneuvers. Charles F. Altman, associate professor of French at Iowa decided not to attend, noting that those excluded feel — and have every right to feel — that they have been dealt with insensitively and undemocratically. Indeed they have every reason to think — and here lies the conference's constitutive paradox — that they have been treated according to an autocratic lecturing/listening mode by the very group supposedly supporting a democratic participation-oriented ethos. How can equality of status be maintained in a conference which pays a limited number of foreign lecturers to attend, while exacting from all others, including local lecturers, a stiff registration fee? How can the gesture of exclusion, as practiced by the

organizers of this year's conference, avoid establishing a class system within the academic film establishment? In short, the techniques for organizing, publicizing, and delimiting the conference undermine the very goals which the organizers had originally announced.

The high-handed mode of selection was reinforced by the very form of the conference. A set of interlocking factors exhibited a deep elitism. While the meeting was supposed to discuss very complex theory in a high-level way, the organizers left the topic deliberately vague so that people had to read between the lines to figure out what the conference was about. Clearly it was not about technology — the announced title. That topic cloaked the considerably more controversial one of contemporary French psychoanalytic criticism. Because of this vagueness many potential contributors — particularly ones who might challenge the Lacanian orthodoxy — did not try to participate, ensuring that the inner circle would dominate the event. While initially it seemed that poor organization was the main reason the promised position paper and bibliography were not sent out in advance, in retrospect it appears that this material would have revealed the organizers' bias and provided the opportunity for others to refute it — something they clearly did not want. The promise that guest speakers would send out their papers in advance was not kept, while the bibliography was meager and very late (after attendance was closed). Thus people who could have made good contributions had no opportunity to prepare thought-out positions.

The conference was clearly set up not only to validate its "heavies" but also to actively discourage other points of view. Clearly, to have 75 people in one room listen for the first time to a prepared paper on high level theory and then to debate it without adequate study does not promote learning or the genuine exchange of ideas. Without papers in advance and small group discussion — at least as a supplement (suggestions JUMP CUT repeatedly made before withdrawing) — the situation encourages extreme aggressivity rather than deliberate and considered thought. The Milwaukee conference was designed to validate Lacanian psychoanalysis. Its net result was to reinforce the status quo of the big shots, to footnote their established positions, to expand the discipleship of True Believers, and to block any opposition, contradiction, or even innocently divergent opinions. According to post-conference reports, the very form of the meeting substituted for "dialogue" the choice of patting each other on the back or slapping each other across the face. Only 20 people talked at the event with any regularity or frequency. Clearly the event could have been staged for those 20 — or it could have been opened to 500 to listen to those 20.

The absence of women from the promulgated list of major speakers doubtless served as warning to many women who might have gone. Repeated criticisms of this by JUMP CUT staffers and others had little effect on the organizers. (Heath even took pride in telling Kleinhans that he, Heath, was "above tokenism" and saw no problem at all with an all-male program.) When it became clear that JUMP CUT was going to blow the whistle on these antics, a fast back-peddling took place. Some

women were invited to the conference who had expressed no previous interest; a flurry of phone calls inserted females into the program; and although papers submitted by women were rejected, a few women were given tertiary positions in the patriarchal order. Professor T. Kaori Kitao, chairperson of the Art Department at Swarthmore, recognized what was happening and withdrew from the conference, explaining in a letter to JUMP CUT:

"In the end I decided to withdraw; it is patent that the position of moderator is a subservient one. I could not envision it in any other way than secretarial, gratuitous, and humiliating. It is rather likely that the moderator will only introduce the speakers, receive questions from the floor, and summarize the arguments; but he/she will have little opportunity to comment, analyze, and retort. And it does indeed seem women have been typecast to this position at this conference."

Thus, despite the presence of individual women, there was an absence of strong feminist politics at the conference itself. Structure and pre-selection inhibited any collective female action to counteract the patriarchal order. The conference repeated the mechanisms of academic paternalism described by Adrienne Rich in her essay "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women" (*Heresies* 3):

"Many women have known the figure of the male 'mentor' who guides and protects his female student or colleague, tenderly opening doors for her into the common world of men. He seems willing to share his power, to conspire with her in stealing what Celia Gilbert names ... 'the sacred fire' of work. Yet what can he really bestow but the illusion of power, a power stolen, in any case, from the mass of women, over centuries, by men? He can teach her to name her experience that may allow her to live, work, perhaps succeed in the common world of men. But he has no key to the powers she might share with other women."

The conference organizers know very well that the strongest and most consistent challenge to Lacanian psychoanalysis has come from American radical feminists (see, for example, Julia Lesage's critique of *Screen's* psychoanalytic sexism, "The Human Subject — You, He, or Me? or The Case of the Missing Penis," JC 4; "Reply," by Heath, Colin McCabe, and Ben Brewster, JC 9; and Kleinhans, "A Ventriloquist Psychoanalysis," JC 9). To preserve the sanctity of their hidden agenda, the conference organizers maneuvered to ensure that a strong united feminist voice could not be heard, just as they did not include the promised Marxist perspective. This is not so surprising, for feminism and Marxism are antithetical to elitism.

One of the most bankrupt aspects of the conference, and one that serves to explain why some of the aforementioned antics took place, was that before the mid-October publicity ever went out calling for participation,

the proceedings were substantially decided in advance so that they could be published in book form. The institutional, monetary reason for this kind of decision reveals a bond which grows ever tighter between the liberal arts and the state in the USA. In this century, the sciences such as physics and biology have funded much of their programs from grants, but only recently have liberal arts conferences also brought in big bucks to the university. Now both the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts have sections in their funding apparatus specifically for conferences. University administrators, especially hard-pressed liberal arts deans, want the large "overhead" that is tacked on to any grant proposal to accrue to their institution. The NEA and the NEH demand that all proposals demonstrate their "spin-off" value — i.e., a major contribution must be made to an academic, artistic, or scientific field. And in the true spirit of social science empiricism, that contribution has to be demonstrated tangibly by means of post-conference attitude surveys, published articles, or, even better, a book. Over the last two years, papers from previous Milwaukee conferences have been published in periodicals.

For the director of the program, Michel Benamou, the fact of a book, irrespective of its worth, will offer more tangible proof to the deans and the National Endowment bureaucrats that these conferences indeed provide "substantial contributions to the field." The book, then, by its very existence, can become the basis upon which the program can demand further funding for future events. Heath worked out the major direction of the conference and the book over the summer with Professor David Bordwell of the Wisconsin-Madison campus. Thus the October call for participation was essentially phony. Legitimate submitted papers were rejected by this secret structure. The final shape of the volume will be dominated by the four "name" speakers and the U. of Wisconsin coterie. The real "product" of the conference is not a high level exchange of ideas but a prearranged film book. A new "authority" will now be encased in a book, which will, in turn, be held up for validation of future positions. This parody of scholarly inquiry affirms that the entire conference — from conception to final publication of the "proceedings" was unnecessary. Such is the end result of a conference that could not be honest about its intentions.

Because the conference as it shaped up was even worse than the average academic meeting in terms of elitism and sexism, JUMP CUT withdrew from participation. We had spent several months of trying to change things through constructive criticism, assuming that the errors resulted from ignorance or neglect rather than design. "Working from within" just didn't work. Our initial criticisms were met with resistance, then with cosmetic changes, but the basic structure remained the same. Our initial action had some minor effect, and our withdrawal brought about further last minute changes. Although women were hurriedly added, the issue is clear for feminists. Because of feminist agitation, women are being offered a place in the patriarchy but only on the patriarchy's own terms — assimilation by invitation — and always, always, one at a time — the personal phone call certifying one's exceptionality, a touch of the

scepter bestowing a little phallic power withheld from others of one's kind. The conference was so clearly compromised that editorial board members of JUMP CUT saw participation as collusion. Such conferences depend in some part on a token diversity. In this case a few radicals and feminists for local color validate the conference as "open" and "pluralistic."

Certainly there are situations when working from within can be an important tactic. But when the presumed audience for such an action is so thoroughly pre-packaged, and the agenda is so limited, only nonparticipation marks a sufficiently forceful and non-cooptable action. JUMP CUT's non-participation does not mean that we are 'anti-theory' or "anti-psychoanalysis." Anyone who reads JUMP CUT can see its commitment to developing theory and its willingness to present and discuss psychoanalytic work (we were, after a11, the first English language publication to run a detailed report on Metz's work on psychoanalysis and film — John Finn, "Metz's New Directions" JC 6). But we refuse to get on the Lacanian bandwagon, to follow the latest fad, and to surrender basic political questions to enter the inner sanctum of psychoanalytic formalism without asking some fundamental questions. What basis is there for combining psychoanalysis and Marxism? Why is Lacan preferable to other revisionists of Freud? How can one account for and deal with the sexist basis of Freud's work? of Lacan's? What of the clear homophobia in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis? What is science, and in what way is psychoanalysis scientific? How do people change, especially in a deliberate way? We think these are open questions, and we welcome discussion and debate of them — from all sides — in the pages of JUMP CUT.

In contrast, the Milwaukee conference attempted to establish a hegemony for psychoanalysis in film theory without asking basic questions. In the closing session, doubts were expressed about Heath's hidden agenda. For most participants the conference's net result seemed to be a flight from politics because the discussion tried to go on outside of history, outside of society, outside of politics, outside of discussing the politics of the conference itself. But conferences end, and history and politics go on. The questions remain: What are the class politics and feminist politics of those people promoting French psychoanalysis? What kind of conferences do they run? Who is invited and who is excluded? Who does the talking and who doesn't? What is being said, and what is being hidden? Let Heath and the others come forward and explain their politics — if it wouldn't be too embarrassing for them. Our pages are open, even if their conferences are closed.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word The politics of editing, part 2

by the editors

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In the first editorial in this series, in JUMP CUT 15, we discussed the material conditions — our financial and human resources — which shape JUMP CUT. The internal organization and functioning of the staff exercises another major influence on our finished product, the JUMP CUT you hold in your hands. The way in which any group organizes itself and functions has a genuine political dimension, whether it is consciously worked out or not. Here we want to describe our internal organization in its basic form. In future editorials we will elaborate these concerns in terms of our process of internal education and criticism and our relations with writers and readers.

There are any number of ways of running a film magazine. A publication can be structured around the idea of accepting the conventional best of its declared range of interest. The editor, in this case, simply acts as a judge who passes on the quality of whatever comes in. In a very different vein, one individual may run the publication on the basis on his/her personal vision. Such a model has the flaws and virtues of its leader. The result can be daring, bizarre, original, offbeat, or just plain awful. Further, a more or less unified group of people with a specific program can run the publication together. This model tends to represent the opinions of a closely associated core group with outsiders contributing if they fit in with what is going on. Such a model for internal organization can develop considerable depth and a general "line," but it also relies on people being geographically concentrated.

JUMP CUT has a different kind of organization, based on both political considerations and on the material conditions we discussed in issue 15. The primary political consideration shaping JUMP CUT's staff organization can be expressed in terms of our political unity: Our first basis of agreement is to put out a magazine basically like JUMP CUT — one that defines itself as nonsectarian left, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and anti-sexist. To some that might sound forbidding, to others it might sound vague. We've been called both utopian and

arrogant for proclaiming these politics openly in a film magazine. But these politics have genuine implications for the actual practice of JUMP CUT and reflect a deeper political analysis, much of which has been described in previous editorials.

We believe that given the present state of the U.S left, it is important for cultural work to proceed on the basis of uniting as many people as possible, allowing political differences to emerge and to be actively debated so as to educate all the participants as well as our readers. Thus we are open to people of various tendencies on the left and reach out to people who share our critique of capitalism, especially women, lesbians and gays, blacks and other third world people, who most sharply feel their special oppression. Others of our readers may be sympathetic to a left critique of capitalism but might not have yet developed a political analysis of that oppression and the social formation that causes and uses it. In this context, we think it is very important to present a clear left alternative for people to confront, debate, and decide about.

Although a collective structure would best fit our political philosophy and needs, we are not a collective — for several reasons. First, in simply pragmatic terms, we cannot operate as a collective because we can't and don't all meet together regularly due to geographic dispersion. In fact, the whole editorial board (the associate editors and the two co-editors) have never met, and that seems even less likely as the board continues to grow. Most editors don't know half of the other editors. Even if we could afford the job-time loss, it would cost a great deal of money simply to fly everyone to one place for a meeting (a major problem of organizing a nationally based, left project). Although we lose a lot of mutual support, reinforcement, stimulation, political dialogue, and friendship from this dispersion, we gain a tremendous breadth and variety, which prevents provincialism and inbreeding.

Another reason we are not a collective is that we were not initially formed as one. The two co-editors, John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans, had the most time to put in initially, and the three initial associate editors (Judy Hess, Julia Lesage, and Bill Van Wert) wanted only an advisory role. Since then we have added other members and grown. Some people have joined by direct appointment to the editorial board after working closely with JUMP CUT, but more often people have worked on JUMP CUT by getting involved with one of the local groups (in the Bay Area, Chicago, and now New York City). In the past 18 months, many new people have begun working on JUMP CUT, and the structuring of power and responsibility is gradually changing in response to new conditions and new ideas. At present the organization of JUMP CUT is in a process of development, spurred by political discussion. Thus, while we can describe our organizational structure in spring, 1978, here, we fully expect that a year from now the pattern will be different, and in spring, 1980, different again. This change is not haphazard, but it is not predictable. The outcome depends on political principles, such as trying to achieve group democracy, and at the same time on our dealing with practical limits such as geographic dispersion, different skills, and

different amounts of time and commitment, while trying to keep the day-to-day operation going. In short, we learn, we grow, we change.

JUMP CUT presently has two co-editors who mutually make policy and final editorial decisions and do much of the on-going work of putting out JUMP CUT. The magazine does not pay for itself, and the co-editors contribute most of the subsidy. Because of the time that the co-editors (John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans) put into JUMP CUT and the commitment they have to it, they are the most significant powers in shaping it. Each can veto a decision of the other (though in practice this has never happened; differences have been worked out in discussion). Living in separate places, they communicate by letter, tape recordings, telephone, and visits to each other about twice a year. The actual workload shifts from time to time onto one or the other editor, depending on the exigencies of earning a living.

Three JUMP CUT work groups exist. The first was formed in Chicago, where all layout and distribution was originally done. The second, in Berkeley, now has taken over much of the material process of layout and all of the distribution and business work. In the fall of 1977, a third group began meeting in New York. Each group reads and comments on manuscripts, handles bookstore distribution in their area, and has taken on as a task the handling of one or more special sections.

John and Chuck bring all significant policy decisions to the three work groups and the editorial board members (some of whom live in other places). While only advisory, the board actually exercises great influence in raising issues and deciding on policy changes, and most importantly in evaluating manuscripts. Every incoming manuscript is read by several members of the editorial board. Who reads what depends on areas of interest and specialization, time available, and so forth. Evaluations, comments, and suggested revisions are collected. In cases of clear differences on the board in evaluating an article, other board members read the manuscript in order to help make the final decision. Once these evaluations are gathered in Chicago or Berkeley, an editor responds to the writer.

We circulate articles and reviews written by anyone working on JUMP CUT to as many staff members as possible for input and decision-making. Because what editors write for the magazine has the effect of giving direction, setting policy, supplying leadership to readers and possible contributors, it is important to involve everyone on the board in the process. This policy has additional importance as a way of holding the co-editors accountable for what they write for JUMP CUT. We find that writing for publication functions as a learning process. Discussion of each other's work contributes to the political and intellectual growth of all of us.

Since becoming JUMP CUT's book review editor, Jerry Peary has occupied a special position with regard to that area, since he keeps track of new books, contacts writers, does the initial editing, and corresponds with writers. Similarly, Ernie Larsen has just taken on responsibility for

getting reviews of current commercial films. Both are part of the new New York group. In addition, different editors are coordinating upcoming special sections. Julianne Burton is working on one on Cuban cinema, and the women on the editorial board are working on a special section on lesbians and film. Bob Stam is coordinating a section on Brazilian film. Other sections are planned on video and broadcast TV.

The people listed as assistant editors occupy a kind of "trial" position, having worked on JUMP CUT for three months. After another four months and the recommendation of a co-editor, they will also become associate editors. We also have some people listed as helpers on each issue. Some regularly participate in the Berkeley, Chicago, or New York group and are becoming assistant editors. Other folks occasionally help out with various tasks, but don't participate in decision-making. The only people who receive money for their labor are our typists, who prepare articles for printing, and our printers.

JUMP CUT defines itself as a political project and all the people working on it see this work as political activity. The primary reward we get for this work is the satisfaction of participating in political struggle in an area — culture — that is important to us. By being involved in such a project, we learn skills, grow intellectually and politically, and gain confidence in ourselves. People learn how to do layout, edit copy, discuss manuscripts politically, write to contributors, operate a magazine like JUMP CUT, and, perhaps most important, how to work politically with each other.

Because of the editors' dispersion, our various levels of political experience, our different political positions, anything approaching a JUMP CUT "line" is impossible. We balance uncomfortably between wanting the clarity of a unified approach to films (Tanner yes or no, Hollywood great or horrible, independent films important or not) and recognizing the pluralism that the nature of our editorial board and the needs of the times necessitate. We recognize, too, that contradictions are inevitable in any political structure or activity and that it is best to deal with them openly rather than try to hide them. Thus tension and diversity are very much part of JUMP CUT and underlie its creativity, growth, and variety. As it should be, JUMP CUT is an arena of political struggle.

Because of the diversity of views, personalities, and work styles, because geographic dispersion makes close personal ties difficult to establish and maintain, relations on JUMP CUT are sometimes stormy. In a group situation (in Berkeley, Chicago, New York) or with the relations between isolated editors and Chuck and John, political disagreements are dealt with openly, often with consultation with the other work groups. However distressing conflict may be personally, we feel that raising and dealing with contradictions is an essential part of any viable political project. We have tried to bring some of these debates into the pages of the magazine. For example, in JUMP CUT 15 we printed two views of Tanner's JONAH which brought out some distinct political differences

in the staff. Other contrasting articles and reviews, and the ongoing discussion in Critical Dialogue, demonstrate the kind of diversity we favor.

JUMP CUT does not, as some people have assumed, present *the* Marxist film criticism. In fact, not all the editors are Marxists and many of our writers are not. We also have to recognize disagreements among Marxists and other radicals in many areas of culture and politics. Because we try to deal with differences and diversity in as open and politically principled a way as possible, JUMP CUT continues to change, grow, and improve.

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