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OF FILM ×



CINEMA AND  
ITS FUTURES  
IN GODARD,  
KLUGE, AND  
TAHIMIK ×



CHRISTOPHER  
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# THE UTOPIA OF FILM

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# THE UTOPIA OF FILM

*CINEMA AND ITS FUTURES  
IN GODARD, KLUGE, AND TAHIMIK*



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For *Carolyn, Sophie, and Mia,*  
who smile the smile that dismisses the universe

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***Once a possibility, always a necessity!***

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**—Rick Roderick / C. Wright Mills**

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# Introduction: The Idea of Cinema

This book is about what I call the utopia of film, a term and title I borrow from Alexander Kluge's first essay on cinema, "Die Utopie Film," published in 1964. For Kluge, as one of the most interesting students of Theodor Adorno's thought and an heir to the tradition of the Frankfurt School, utopia is an inordinately rich concept possessed of complex temporal dimensions that bind the present to the past and to the future. As he defines it in "Die Utopie Film," "utopia is a conservative idea, the search for a quality about which one vaguely knows that it existed at some point in the past." The utopia of *film*, for Kluge, in its most basic formulation, is "the idea that there could be something other than this insufficient present the moment"; it is something that in film history "has been unable to unfold up to this point." By this view, the history of cinema must be understood not as the history of its grand achievements, but rather as the history of unrealized possibilities, thwarted ambitions, and disappointed hopes; the "promises that are contained in the history of film"<sup>1</sup> have not been met and are too little known, but they persist, especially for those sensitive to their call awaiting their realization.

My borrowed title indicates the degree to which this general idea of Kluge's, as well as his thought more broadly, guides this study; for as I will show at greater length in the third chapter, this utopian imperative—that this unfulfilled past will constantly press for its realization—translates into not only a prescription for a form of engaged or partisan film practice but also into a form of interpretive method—again deeply indebted to Adorno but also to the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch—which attempts to suss out and excavate, to use my favorite metaphor of Kluge's, the utopian dimensions of a cultural document. As I will argue, as true as he finds Walter Benjamin's great dictum to be, that every document of culture is a document of barbarism, so too does Kluge insist, often provocatively, that every document of culture, even the most barbarous, contains within it a utopian dimension, a promise of a better world and a better life that constitutes its truth content. One goal of the present work will be not only to examine the more explicit or conscious utopian pronouncements and representations in the work of the three filmmakers who form its focus—Jean-Luc Godard, Kidlat Tahimik, and Alexander Kluge—but also to seek out other ways in which a utopian moment is encoded less explicitly in their work at the level of form and in the terms by which they conceive of their cinematic artistic practices.

In one way or another, openly or implicitly, Godard, Tahimik, and Kluge subscribe to an idea of utopia in which the hope for and aspiration toward the establishment of a social utopia is deeply bound up with the commitment to unfolding the promises contained in the history of film. Cinema, somehow, gestures toward or prophesies the possibility, and as we will see, the consequent necessity, of utopia and seems to know the deeper nature of what utopia will be. This bond between the project of social utopia and the promise inherent to cinema constitutes what I am calling here the utopia of film. To put it most pointedly, for each of the filmmakers in this study, one could say with only slight reservation (as we will see in each chapter, each waivers in his commitment) that the two ideas are in fact one: the promises of cinema will be

realized only when the promises of emancipation that slumber uneasily in the history of humankind are also met. Each, it seems, is necessary to the other.

Kluge's own definition of utopia registers an uncertainty about the utopia of film, about whether or not such an ideal cinema which worked in concert with the movement for social revolution ever really existed; even such a devout student of early cinema as Kluge can only say he "vaguely" knows that a utopian cinema existed in the past. But it seems utterly consistent with Kluge's notion of utopia, as well as Adorno's, that this knowledge would be "vague," for utopia's place is not in the past—it has yet to exist—but in the future, and in the end the longing for such a full past is but a cipher for such fulfillment in times to come. The vague knowledge of what went on in the past is actually a presentiment of what should arrive in the future.

The origins, then, to which each of these filmmakers turn for inspiration and motivation are quasi-mythical in nature, and often explicitly acknowledged as such, be it in Kluge's reverence for early cinema or peasant society in the pre-capitalist German lands, or in Godard's turn to the history of the twentieth century as embedded and encoded in the documents of cinema history, or in Tahimik's investment in pre-colonial idylls and traditions, in handicraft modes of production, and in what he calls "the cosmos." This might appear, at first blush, as a liability for a group of filmmakers whose artistic philosophies and practices are informed by an emphatic materialism; for is not the critique of illusion and myth a minimally essential component of any perspicuous and meaningful materialism? Indeed, it is, but one must keep in mind a central lesson of Adorno's, that the consequent and rigorous—Adorno at one point calls it fanatical—critique of illusion runs the risk of undermining its ostensible goals: on the one hand, if it is successful, it leads to the utter triumph of reason, a triumph that paradoxically leads to the extermination of the subject—the very subject whom reason is to liberate—which is reduced to the status of a mere automaton of reason; on the other hand, the critique of illusion runs the risk of throwing out the "baby with the bathwater" (the title of one of Adorno's aphorisms in *Minima Moralia*) and dispensing with the utopian truth content that lies within illusion.<sup>2</sup>

So it is that the filmmakers in this study all must carefully tread into dangerous territory, and consciously and unconsciously cultivating a whole host of near-myths of origins of the utopian impulse of cinema to which they will return in various ways. But before this begins to appear like a ruthlessly cynical gesture, it must be asserted that the utopia of film is not *only* mythical; for every myth has its truth content, its moment of grounding in the material social context from which it emerges, and encodes not only the contradictions and antagonisms of that particular historical social formation which gave rise to it but also the demand for their resolution to those contradictions and antagonisms. And this holds true not only for myths, but for entire cultural forms—that is, in this case, for the cinema—which as both retrospectively mythical construct and as an actually existing form or medium itself embodies a utopian wish.

The filmmaker who looms perhaps largest in constructions of cinema's utopian past, no matter how contested his place within the history of political cinema, is Sergei Eisenstein, a figure who is an acknowledged touchstone for Godard and Kluge (albeit one to whom they both have a deeply ambivalent relationship), and almost unavoidably so, emerging as they both do from a European film culture where Eisenstein had been an influence since the premiere of *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in Berlin in 1926.<sup>4</sup> His influence can also be felt, if in much

more mediated form, in Tahimik's work, in particular in *I Am Furious Yellow* (1981–1991), film whose presentation of the tense events surrounding Ferdinand Marcos's fall and Corazon Aquino's rise emit strong echoes of similar scenes in *Potemkin* and *October* (1928).

Eisenstein's importance in the near-mythical origins of the utopia of film are rendered dramatically in a film to which I will later return briefly in my discussion of Godard's *Film Socialisme* (2010): I am thinking of Chris Marker's *A Grin Without a Cat* (*Le fond de l'air est rouge*, 1977/1993) and its stunning opening scene,<sup>5</sup> which is of interest for this study as it lays out the parameters of the utopia of film and the stakes involved in any attempt to sustain it at a time when both cinema and the idea of utopia itself seem under dire threat. The film begins with its famously untranslatable title, "Le fond de l'air est rouge,"<sup>6</sup> which fills the screen with an enormous red print. The voice-over, in a woman's voice (Simone Signoret in its French version), tells us:

I didn't see *Potemkin* when it first came out. I was too young. I remember the shot of the meat, definitely. With the maggots. And the little tent where the dead man was laid out, and when the first person stops in front of it. And the bit when the other sailors take aim on the bridge of the battleship.

As the voice-over unfolds, that very scene from *Potemkin* begins to play itself out, reedited and condensed by Marker: an officer's disdainful face, the sailors cowering beneath the sails, the other sailors raising their rifles, the priest slowly pounding his cross into the palm of his hand, the bow of the ship, and the officer shouting "fire!" At that moment, the narrator of *A Grin Without a Cat* says:

And just when the officer gives the order to fire, a huge sailor with a big moustache shouts out a word, which spreads itself all over the screen—"BROTHERS!"

And that title fills the screen, much as the opening title of *A Grin Without a Cat* did moments before. The music—a march—simultaneously triumphant and mournful, composed by Luciano Berio, rises on the sound track as the image track cuts to a shot, in color film stock that contrasts sharply with the tinted black and white of *Potemkin*, of a close-up of raised hands from a demonstration in the 1960s or 1970s. So begins the masterful montage for which the opening sequence of Marker's film is so well known: the sequence cuts back and forth between images from protests, demonstrations, funerals, and memorial marches from the sixties and seventies, and shots from the Odessa Steps sequence from *Potemkin*. The cuts are terse graphic-, motion-, and content-matches—a marcher in an unnamed city in South America wipes his eyes as he passes a casket, and a mournful Odessan does the same before Vakulinchuk's body on the funeral bier; raised rifles in Santiago, Chile, are matched with raised rifles in Odessa; a bloody face outside the Pentagon in 1967 is matched to the well-known image of the woman shot in the eye on the Odessa steps; and so on. In each case, in the footage from the contemporary demonstrations and the shots from Eisenstein's film, the images are of a solidarity—the image of brotherhood itself—immanent to the time being filmed, be it 1905 or 1967; but in their montage they also create a third image of solidarity stretching across the time between the Bolshevik Revolution and the uprisings of the sixties. *A Grin Without a Cat* thus repeats a symbolic gesture internal to *Potemkin*: Marker's film yokes the impulses of the sixties to those of the Bolshevik Revolution in much the same way that Eisenstein, making his film in 1925, yoked the revolutionary impulse and courage of the historical mutiny on the battleship *Potemkin* in 1905 to the needs of the Revolution

1925.

The images of solidarity in *Potemkin*, however, as well as of the successful revolt against the ship's officers and the subsequent (provisional) victory against the Black Sea Fleet, are accompanied by images of defeat, suffering, brutality, and repression, which Eisenstein's montage and shot composition emphasize and "dynamize," to use one of his favored terms. These fictional images—of the Odessans being cut down ruthlessly by the Cossacks on the steps—find their uncanny echoes in Marker's contemporary documentary footage from Europe, the United States, and Latin America. Indeed, after *A Grain Without a Cat*'s inspirational opening moment, embodied in Vakulinchuk's appeal of "BROTHERS!," the dominant effect of the subsequent montage is to convey the continuity of the experience of defeat across almost fifty years of time. And in retrospect, from the perspective of the contemporary documentary footage, what in *Potemkin* was initially portrayed as the heroic sacrifice of a people in a march toward ultimate victory—even if that victory would be deferred until the Bolshevik Revolution—now appears as one more step along the path toward ultimate and inevitable defeat. The poignancy of the opening of *A Grain Without a Cat*, captured and heightened so well in Berio's music, arises in this tension between the utopian call to collective solidarity and its repeated denial, its seemingly ineluctable trajectory toward failure.

Marker has said, almost accusingly, that in *Potemkin* Eisenstein was unknowingly "staging the imagination of several generations."<sup>7</sup> It is generally assumed that Marker was speaking of the way people imagined politics and the way people imagined the project of human emancipation with its dual call to brotherhood and spectacular revolt, and that Eisenstein, in his masterful film with its stirring editing, provided the images and sentiments appropriate to such a politics. Marker's accusation, though, seems to be also that this form of politics was misguided, an error, and that Eisenstein had led us astray. *A Grain Without a Cat*, then, is Marker's leave-taking (a notion that will return again and again in the course of this book) from the form of politics *Potemkin* stages for us, a leave-taking most clearly articulated in the film's critique of the charismatic figure of Che Guevara, who comes to stand for a commitment to a near-inhuman revolutionary logic that only leads to barbarism and defeat.<sup>8</sup>

But in *Potemkin*, Eisenstein stages, as a *metteur en scène*, not only the imagination of a kind of political practice—the sorts of revolt that the Odessa Steps sequence initially and the documentary footage in *A Grain Without a Cat* subsequently portrays, and the proper attitudes and gestures that denote and connote brotherhood and rebellion, such as the raised hands and clenched fists—but also the imagination of a kind of committed artistic practice, of a kind of committed *filmmaking practice* in particular. Eisenstein's film, as well as the polemical and theoretical writings that he composed around it, articulates a notion of cinema that in itself is deeply utopian. It is utopian in its universal appeal to the great collectives who comprise its audience and in its ability to speak to them across the divides of language and the barriers of illiteracy. It is utopian not only in its commitment to the project of revolution and the constitution of a new society but also in its status as the most modern of the arts, one suited to the task of revolution and one appropriate to the modern technical age of industrialization as he articulates in his famous call for the "tractorization" of the arts.<sup>9</sup> It is utopian in its capacity to move and inspire unlike any other art, and in its ability to subsume all forms that have come before it, much as the advent of communism is to supersede all prior forms of society.

It is thus significant that the voice-over of *A Grain Without a Cat* begins with neither a



account of revolution—neither that of 1905 nor of 1917—nor an account of the revolts of the sixties and seventies, but with the recollection of seeing a *film*, a film about—and an active part of—the Bolshevik Revolution, and with the careful remembrance of the particular images that so profoundly affected the narrator: the meat, the maggots, and of course the title card “BROTHERS!” In beginning like this, Marker follows in a long tradition of the recollection of formative, personal cinematic experiences, a tradition that is particularly rich in accounts of seeing *Potemkin* dating back to the earliest reports from its tour-de-force premiere in Berlin. But *A Grain Without a Cat's* account of *Potemkin* goes beyond mere recounting and recollection to achieve a sort of transformative mimesis at the level of form, reediting *Potemkin's* images and imitating its montage at the same time, repeating its basic gestures (graphic matches, jarring directional and graphic contrasts, etc.) while incorporating Eisenstein's film itself as filmic material. The effect is uncanny, at once registering the sheer distance in time and context between the “red decade” of 1967 to 1977 and the Bolshevik Revolution, a distance reinforced by the shift to color in the documentary footage, as well as marking the enduring continuity forged in struggle and defeat.

What is compelling in this opening scene of *A Grain Without a Cat* then, beyond the obvious (for who cannot help but be moved by this sequence that so poignantly sums up the hopes and disappointments of political struggle in the last century), is that *A Grain Without a Cat* not only establishes the relationship across time between the event of the Bolshevik Revolution and the event of “Sixty-eight,” to use Alain Badiou's philosophical concept of the event, but also assays the long-resounding consequences of what I would like to call the event of *cinema*.

We can think about the event of cinema precisely in the terms Badiou has used in his most succinct formulation of the concept of the event: “an event is not the realization/variation of a possibility that resides inside the situation. An event is the creation of a new possibility. An event changes not only the real, but also the possible.”<sup>10</sup> For example, Badiou contends that the event of the French Revolution introduced the new possibility into the world of radical and universal equality and human emancipation. But accompanying the event, an idea also emerges, an idea that sums up the possibilities that the event generates as well as providing a symbolic form through which subjects are called to participate in the event. To continue the example, from the event of the French Revolution, what Badiou calls the “idea” or “hypothesis” of communism emerges, the conviction that universal emancipation is both possible and desirable.<sup>11</sup> This idea then serves two major functions, one regulatory and one interpellative. As a regulatory idea it stands as an ideal against which social progress or change must be measured. As an interpellative idea, it serves a function not unlike that described by Louis Althusser as the function of ideology more generally: the idea “calls subjects into being, constituting them in the appeal to devote themselves to a cause—devotion Badiou terms “fidelity”—a notion to which I will return in a moment.

Just as *A Grain Without a Cat* dramatically shows how the event of the Bolshevik Revolution drew on and further produced the hypothesis or idea of communism, so too does Marker's film illustrate something like the hypothesis or idea of cinema: the conviction that cinema has expanded the realm of possibilities for art, that cinema has the possibility of a truly universal vocation or calling, that it cannot be content to exist as a minor art or as a commodity slated for mere consumption by one class so that another might be enriched, but instead that it must engage in the universal project of human emancipation. What *A Grain Without a Cat* s

effectively portrays is this event and idea of cinema in their intimate linkage with the two great political events of the twentieth century that lie at the heart of the film, those of 1917 and 1968. The possibility of cinema, in other words, is one with the possibility of emancipation that those events engendered, and all of cinema's subsequent efforts, all of its ambitions, and all that it creates must henceforth be assessed in reference to this ideal, to this new possibility to what Badiou has called the "possibility of a possibility," and to what I am calling in this book the utopia of film.

It is also fitting that Marker chooses *Potemkin* as his reference point for the twin events of 1917 and the cinema, for beyond the film's place within the imaginary of generations of filmmakers and political artists, the film itself is not only about the possibility of communism—and an active attempt to realize that possibility—but also, as we have seen, about the failure of communist revolt. The possibility introduced by an event implies the risk of its failure to be realized, and the real experience of both the idea of communism and the idea of cinema has been one of dashed hopes and repeated failure, a reality of which each filmmaker in this study is acutely aware. Not only do the images of the beatings and the blood on the Odessa steps anticipate the subsequent history of similar repression throughout the twentieth century—and here Marker's film comes very close to expressing Godard's conviction that the cinema can predict the future—so powerfully revealed in Marker's montage, as I have already argued; but the battleship *Potemkin*'s revolt itself was a failure, a failure that *Potemkin* refuses to represent, as Eisenstein readily admitted at the time of its release in the short essay from 1926, "Constanta (Whither 'The Battleship Potemkin')." The essay, tellingly, begins with the question: "But where does the *Potemkin* go?" That is a question that very many viewers ask. They met, they waved, they passed, but where did they go?" The film, however, does not offer the answer to that question; instead, Eisenstein writes: "We stop this event at the point where it had become an 'asset' of the Revolution. But the agony goes on."<sup>12</sup> In truth, the ship was eventually returned to the Russian navy, some sailors went into exile in Romania, and numerous others were executed as mutineers; and the idea embodied in the sailors' struggle had to wait another dozen years for a renewed attempt at realization.

"The agony goes on, but we stop the film when it had become an 'asset' to the Revolution": *Potemkin* is thus a model reflection on how to come to terms with the failure of an event, and as such a reflection it is an important touchstone in the history of leftist film. The model put forth by the film proposes that one does not narrate a failed event in its fullness by constructing a richly detailed, "realistic" portrayal of the buildup to the event, the various causes and influences that unleashed it, and then offering an objective breakdown of what happened. Instead, the film suggests that one must extract from the event its essential—its useful—core; one must pinpoint and portray that which makes it an "asset" for the present, in this case what makes it an asset for the Revolution. That is, from the perspective of the present of 1925, when *Potemkin* was made, in the midst of the ongoing social transformation of the Soviet Union, one must look back to the event of 1905—the *Potemkin* mutiny—and find in it what speaks to the present, what energy or principle or possibility inheres in the event from 1905 and awaits its realization *now*.

In a sense, this is an obvious point: if 1905 had been successful, there would be no need for *Potemkin* in 1925; in such a case Eisenstein could have made a historical document that commemorated the event, relegating it definitively to the past, incorporating it into the official historiography of the Revolution. But instead, there is still something *useful* in the

event, something that demands revivification—or “reactivation” as Badiou would put it—because it has gone unrealized. Or, in Slavoj Žižek’s terminology, there is something in the event that demands *repetition*.<sup>13</sup> And in one way or another, this summarizes a central problematic addressed by each filmmaker in this study, a central function or vocation that cinema is obligated to assume: to uncover just what in history—in the history of attempts at liberation and in the history of cinema—demands repetition.

For Eisenstein, then, the proper way to deal with failure is not only to ask, “What did we do wrong?”—that is, to ask what strategic and tactical errors were committed, what should have been done differently, and so on—though of course one must ask those questions; more importantly, one must ask “what, in failure, did we do *right*?” That is, one must ask just what element of the event was its truly universal aspect, the part that persists across time and can still be, to switch to the language of Benjamin and Adorno, *redeemed*. As I argue in [chapter 2](#), the early Marx had already articulated this stance toward failure in the famous lines from a letter to Arnold Ruge, lines which can be read as the watchword of Kluge’s entire project and as a guiding idea of this book as well, when he said: “it will transpire that the world has long been dreaming of something that it can acquire if only it becomes conscious of it. It will transpire that it is not a matter of drawing a great dividing line between past and future, but of carrying out the thoughts of the past. And finally, it will transpire that mankind begins no *new* work, but is consciously putting into effect its old work.”<sup>14</sup>

This explains why, in a sense, despite its grandeur and eloquence, and despite Marker’s personal reputation as a committed filmmaker, *A Grin Without a Cat* is itself something of a failure: after the initial promise of the title card “BROTHERS!,” the film devolves primarily into a reflection on what the Left did wrong, with little reflection on the ideal of brotherhood that begins the film, aside from the heartbreaking sequence on Salvador Allende. Or, to put it another way, should that judgment seem too harsh, it is difficult to rescue from the film’s perspective on the red decade that is *useful* for the present, be it for the present of 1973 when Marker first made the film, or the moment of 1993, when he reedited it and composed a new narration in response to the changed situation following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Toward the end of that final version the voice-over declares, in rather defeatist lockstep with the voices of the mainstream media of the time, that “the communist dream is dead.” All the film can then rescue, at its very end, is an image of bare survival for opponents of what Marker calls the “almost abstract power”<sup>15</sup> that reigns over the earth: to images of wolves being hunted from a helicopter, their bodies bursting under the impact of the high-powered bullets that slay them, we hear: “There will always be wolves.” This gesture toward an absolute minimum residue of resistance, I would suggest, is a far cry from Vakulinchuk’s appeal to his comrades at the beginning of *Potemkin*.

Nonetheless, *A Grin Without a Cat* generates an affective charge through its opening montage (and often enough throughout the film), a sort of impact that recalls the effect *Potemkin* had on the narrator. To return again to Badiou’s philosophy of the event, we can understand this appeal to the spectator as precisely the sort of call that an event puts forth to an individual: when at the beginning of the film the narrator recounts her first viewing of *Potemkin* and how the word “BROTHERS!” “spreads itself all over the screen,” she effectively recounts a moment of what Badiou calls “subjectivation,” the moment when an individual is called into being as a subject faithful to a cause. It is the recounting of a moment when a subject’s fidelity to an event is founded. As should be clear now, the subject whose creation

*Grin Without a Cat* narrates is one who is called simultaneously to the idea of communism and to the idea of cinema as she commits herself to the continued propagation of the utopia of film.

This account of the opening of *A Grin Without a Cat* provides, I believe, a fresh way to think about a problematic that lies at the heart of *The Utopia of Film* in various forms, and one which Marker's film stages beginning with its opening lines: the relationship of the political cinema since the Second World War to earlier political cinema, particularly that of interwar modernism. The particular aesthetic problematic is, of course, representative of the larger problematic of the relationship between contemporary Left politics and the traditions from which its various forms emerge, especially at a time when many of the old coordinates of Left politics seem to have evaporated, most significantly the hope for the defeat of capitalism, and when so many of the tropes and figures of Left discourse seem no longer to have much purchase. The problematic is an important and vital one, which each filmmaker returns to almost obsessively in his work; and each provides different, provisional, and at times obscure resolutions or solutions for it.

I should be clear: to posit that Godard, Tahimik, and Kluge share a fidelity to the duress of the event of cinema and liberation is not to say that their work together comprises, or emerges from, a *tradition* in any conventional sense of the term, as one can reasonably assert, for example, that Kluge works within the tradition of the Frankfurt School. Instead, it is to assert a shared engagement with a problematic, namely how one sustains a commitment or a fidelity to a cause or an idea even in the face of that cause's failure. In each of these filmmakers one finds unique, though resonant, attempts to work through the failures of the project of liberation and of cinema as an art form.

I think Fredric Jameson's concept of "late modernism" is useful in understanding this problematic, and in thinking about the tension that arises in the period after World War II between a fidelity to older political and aesthetic ideas from the period of interwar modernism and a set of new historical circumstances that are not necessarily welcoming to those ideas. While in Jameson's usage, as developed above all in *A Singular Modernity*,<sup>16</sup> the concept of late modernism refers specifically to a conservative and depoliticized version of modernism arising after WWII, primarily in the United States, the term can be productively applied to the *cinéma engagé* that emerges in the 1950s and 1960s in Europe (as exemplified in this book in Godard's and Kluge's work) and North America, and across the globe as well, perhaps most notably in the form of Third Cinema, which in Solanas and Getino's formulation has Godard's "Second Cinema" as a reference point,<sup>17</sup> and other variants of Third World film. It can usefully highlight the particular problematic of a durable subjective commitment (again in Badiou's notion of fidelity) to a political sequence or to an idea (in Badiou's sense) in a moment when that sequence is on the wane and has become residual, and when the idea begins to appear unseasonable. One can think of this tension in terms of base and superstructure, recalling Benjamin's important (and seldom discussed) lesson from his essay on the "Work of Art," namely that the development of superstructural forms can lag significantly behind the development of the base. From this perspective, the problem with late political modernism as an aesthetic practice, to bring together Jameson's concept with D. N. Rodowick's concept of political modernism,<sup>18</sup> is that its efforts are constantly rearguard, as its commitments are constantly outflanked by the development of political relations "on the

ground.” (Indeed, we will see in [chapters 2](#) and [3](#) how Tahimik and Kluge try to turn the situation into a virtue when they argue that the proper stance for an aesthetic and political avant-garde is to be *behind the times*: as Kluge puts it, the aim of the *arriere-garde* is not to “establish the new” but instead to “bring everything forward” from the past).<sup>19</sup> As a periodizing concept, then, the term designates a transitional aesthetic phase between the earlier moments of political modernism, when the political commitments of the modernists corresponded more fully to the political possibilities of the time, and a later postmodernism, when the forms of earlier political modernism have been drained of their seemingly necessary or transparent political significance and are open to appropriation and reuse at all levels of culture, appearing in even the most commodified and depoliticized cultural artifacts in a new dominant mode, what Jameson has famously labeled “pastiche.”<sup>20</sup>

To understand the value of the idea of late modernism as a periodizing concept, we can map it off against a model of earlier modernism. To do this, I would like to turn to Perry Anderson’s famous theorization of modernism in his essay “Modernity and Revolution,” where he presents a tripartite “conjunctural” theory to explain modernism’s emergence, positing that it must be understood as a force field “triangulated amongst three primary determinants.” The first of these determinants was “the codification of a highly formalized *academicism*,... which itself was institutionalized within official regimes of states and society still massively pervaded, often dominated, by aristocratic or landowning classes,” classes which were “in one sense economically ‘superseded.’” This supersession was indicative (and the cause) of the possible frailty of that academicism, which had shown signs of crumbling at the turn of the century, and as such constituted an opening onto the possibility of modernism. A second determinant is found in the “still incipient, hence essentially *novel*, emergence within these societies of the key technologies or inventions of the second industrial revolution: telephone, radio, automobile, aircraft and so on,” to which I would add the technology of cinema and the “attraction” that it offered in its early phase, to use Tom Gunning’s term. And the final, and for my purpose here the most intriguing, determinant Anderson identifies is “the imaginative proximity of social revolution,” a prospect that inspired a hope or apprehension that was “in the air” throughout much of Europe in the Belle Epoque and by the 1920s in Asia as well.<sup>21</sup>

While this is hardly an exhaustive enumeration of the determinants of modernism (and I would hasten to include, following Jameson, a broader set of determinations linking the emergence of modernism to the installation of the imperialist mode of production, the second in Jameson’s tripartite scheme of periodizing the history of capitalism and its attendant cultural “logics”), Anderson’s model is helpful in formulating the distinction between the modernist and late modernist moments I am outlining here. We can think how each of these three coordinates had changed or been replaced by the early 1960s, when Godard and Kluge, the oldest of the three filmmakers in this study, were in the early phases of their filmmaking careers, and when Tahimik was just beginning to emerge from his “cocoon of American dreams.” For late modernism, a formalized academicism can be seen to be replaced by the classical Hollywood form and the institution of American cinema, what Godard has acerbically called the “American invasion” and which, as Anderson says about the earlier institutionalized and formalized academicism, provides “a critical range of cultural values against which insurgent forms of art could measure themselves, but also in terms of which they could partly articulate themselves.”<sup>22</sup> This new, if not academicism, then classicism, as it is often called in scholarly studies of the cinema, is associated not with an economically superseded class, but

with the class that secured prominence in the period of modernism. This classicism, though was not monumental and was unstable in the period of late modernism, beginning to come apart under the pressure of competing forms such as television, as well as the various legal and political challenges to its monopoly.<sup>23</sup> Hollywood, as both inspiration and enemy, is a palpable presence in the work of all three filmmakers in this book, just as it was a palpable presence in every new wave in the fifties and sixties, and in every film-producing region on the globe, all of which in one way or another had to come to terms with it.

Second, by the onset of the sixties—we could say by the appearance of *Breathless (à bout de souffle)*, 1960—the “mass consumption industries” Anderson points to were fully established, the technologies of cinema were no longer novel, and if anything the second industrial revolution was playing itself out or already had, at least in Europe, but increasing so in the Third World as well.<sup>24</sup> Godard’s early cinema, as I mention in [chapter 1](#), represents these facts comprehensively, perhaps most notably in *Two or Three Things I Know About Her (Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle)*, 1967, which shows how the consumption industries are now not only familiar, but have established themselves as fully unfolded second nature; not more do they purvey desired new things and exceptional luxury goods for a small consumer class, but fully unfolded, they have achieved the status of inescapable *needs* for the broadest of social classes. This fact poses a significant challenge to the politicization of the populace, a challenge aptly registered by Godard in the famous intertitle in *Masculine Feminine* (1966) about the “children of Marx and Coca-Cola.”

This, of course, leads to the transformation in Anderson’s third coordinate of modernism: determinants, the imaginative proximity of social revolution. Each of the filmmakers in *The Utopia of Film* engage a moment, or event, when social revolution was sensed as both possible and proximate on an international scale. For Godard and Kluge, the Sixties—here written with a capital “S”—either in the First or Third Worlds, represented that moment; for Tahimik, this moment was deferred until the 1980s and the rise of Corazon Aquino’s “People Power” movement, a point to which I will return in due course. In any case, as in Anderson’s vision of earlier modernism, the “haze of social revolution drifting across the horizon of the epoch” animated late political modernism as well, providing not only a generalized sense of social dynamism in which it could participate but also the fantasy of a possible *effectivity* for an engaged cinema, a field in which its transformative effects could be felt immediately. The apparent proximity of social revolution gave to engaged cinema an imagined purpose and an imagined audience, and with that an imagined function for art, at a time when the function of art had been utterly co-opted by the classicism of commodified cinema. So when that social revolution failed, when the proximity of revolution was revealed as *imaginative*, the crisis that ensued was not only one for politics but also for cinema, as well as for the individual fidelities each filmmaker held to the political idea that animated this seemingly revolutionary moment. Each filmmaker in this study must negotiate this crisis in some way, and *The Utopia of Film* seeks out the effects of this negotiation in the form of the films and the conceptions of cinema that arise in its wake.

These three coordinates, then, provide the points of orientation by which we can begin to map the utopia of film’s new place in the world, a world that is by all accounts hostile to it from every corner: cinema’s dream of being a universal art is taken away by the triumph of Hollywood and the sheer scale of its own commodification; its novelty is worn away, having become seamlessly incorporated into the landscape of the consumption industries, to such a

extent that one can no longer, perhaps, sustain its revolutionary élan; furthermore, it is no longer dominant, television having usurped that status by the 1960s, soon to be followed by the New Media and digital culture; and finally, the proximity of social revolution, and the social agent—be it the revolutionary proletariat, Third World insurgents fighting for independence, or the revolutionary students and workers of '68—who was to bring this revolution to pass and provide cinema its audience and ground upon which to do its work, have also apparently fragmented or faded away (though, as I suggest in the conclusion, one wonders if the nascent movements around the world, against dictatorships in the Middle East, or against Wall Street in the United States, do not promise a future social regeneration, and with it, an optimistic future for a revolutionary art). Despite all of this, none of the filmmakers in this study have abandoned their fidelity to the utopia of film.

One of the goals of *The Utopia of Film* is to think of cinema as a form of thought. This ambition is not unique,<sup>25</sup> and takes its cue from Eisenstein's notion of "intellectual montage" as well as from the clear and open attempts by Godard and Kluge to raise cinema to a level of discourse equivalent to that of philosophy or theory.<sup>26</sup> Which is why I hope that this book will not be looked at only as a work in film studies but also as a work on critical theory, one that both explores the origins of the cinematic thought of Godard, Tahimik, and Kluge in the dual event and idea of cinema and revolution, and also assays how it contributes to the continued development of a dialectical tradition of radical thinking.

Such a project—to make cinema into thought—is beset by enormous difficulties, not the least of which is to overcome the perceived opposition between the aesthetic and the conceptual that dates back to at least Kant, an opposition that can be seen operating at the most divergent ends of the aesthetic spectrum. For Godard and Kluge the resistance of high art to the concept, to philosophical or theoretical articulation, was one of its great strengths and indeed, as Adorno argued, one of the sources of its utopian power, so the transmutation of art into thought runs the risk of evacuating the very utopian core of art that one wants to preserve. And of course mass culture, the place to which so much critical theory has relegated cinema, has traditionally been seen as the absolute opposite of critical thought, a realm of the purest and most regressive ideology from which not only thinking is banished but also where the aesthetic itself has become utterly corrupted and degraded. All three of the filmmakers contend with this particular difficulty, each engaging the challenges and legacies bequeathed to them by the omnipresence of mass culture and its seemingly inescapable and scurrilous association with cinema, primarily in the form of Hollywood film.

The other, related, obstacle each filmmaker faces is one articulated most forcefully by Adorno, with whom Godard, Tahimik, and Kluge share real affinities (even if it is not possible to trace direct influence on them, with the obvious and notable exception of Kluge):<sup>27</sup> this is what Adorno notoriously specified as the inherent and absolute opposition between conceptual thought and the despised pretense of "thinking in images," most famously codified in his notion of the *Bilderverbot*—the ban on graven images—within the realm of philosophical thinking.<sup>28</sup> A near-instinctive, and at times explicit, suspicion of the tendency of images to freeze over into positive, reified verities that undermine thought, which must always sustain its commitment to a negative dialectic, operates in each of the filmmakers considered here. This can explain, in part, their common reliance on two techniques or formal tendencies: the first of course the ubiquity, in multiple guises, of montage, which has the dual capacity to both

undermine the indexical and iconic power of each individual image as well as to elevate images to the level of thought through their combination (here Eisenstein's influence is again palpable). The second is what Bertolt Brecht, in the realm of theater, once termed the technique of "literarization,"<sup>29</sup> which in cinema manifests itself in the radical and effusive proliferation of *text*: in the form of titles, in the form of filmed text from the profilmic world (images of books, Godard's famous use of advertisements and billboards, a motif clearly imitatively deployed by Tahimik as well), and in the form of talking—sometimes endless talking—be it in the form of heady dialogue or an abundant variety of voice-over techniques.

In its organization, *The Utopia of Film* can be seen to follow a roughly dialectical progression, recapitulating the famous antagonism between Adorno and Brecht already implicitly alluded to here. Though this way of thinking about the structure of the book simplifies matters somewhat, it is a useful way to map out in broad strokes how my argument moves forward.<sup>30</sup> In [chapter 1](#), the late Godard is presented as a practitioner of high—or autonomous—art as well as the bearer of a deep-seated cultural pessimism (which I do however, in the end, qualify), and he thus functions as a stand-in of sorts for Adorno. In the second chapter Tahimik appears very much as a Brechtian didact, fully engaged in cultural-political struggle and constantly seeking out ways to even further embed his artwork in the immediate context in which he lives and works, while simultaneously seeking to estrange our understanding of that context. And in the concluding chapter, Kluge's work is presented as the long-running attempt to reconcile these two divergent impulses by combining Brecht's revolutionary didacticism with Adorno's skepticism and his method of the negative dialectic, a reconciliation captured in the various seemingly paradoxical claims one can make about Kluge—among other things, that he is a filmmaker who adheres to Adorno's *Bilderverbot*, that he is an avant-gardist who seems to dwell in the past, that he is an Enlightenment thinker who celebrates the unforeseeable and seemingly irrational consequences of rational human activity, and that he embodies and extols the virtues of energetic human productivity but works assiduously to bring about what William Morris so beautifully called the "epoch of rest."

As a consequence of my approach, to take cinema seriously as a mode of thinking, my tendency has also been to think of these filmmakers as thinkers and to consider their works as coherent, if at times discontinuous and contradictory, bodies of thought; or, to put it another way, I believe these filmmakers' works create and form recognizable ideas, even if one has to patiently, and with some effort, work to divine what those ideas might be, thus translating them back from the realm of cinema proper into the discursive form of criticism (and thereby as well inescapably subjecting them to a form of symbolic or discursive violence). This aim explains in large part the apparent auteurist bias in the organization of the book into chapters devoted to individual filmmakers.<sup>31</sup> Such an organization is somewhat at odds with the idea of the utopia of film, which avers that cinema is possessed of an intention to collectivity, to paraphrase Georg Lukács's old notion of the intention to totality. The tension between these two poles of the individual and the collective is irreducible; it is, to return to Badiou again, marked in the fraught relationship between the universality of an event's collective significance and the unavoidably individual sense of fidelity that a subject exercises toward that event. It is a tension, as well, that each filmmaker in this book contends with directly and indirectly, and I would also say, productively, as they stage in their work the risks and fears inherent in any individual's devotion to a cause larger and more important than him or herself.



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