

**Cinema In Dispute: Audiovisual Adventures of the Political Names
'Worker', 'Factory', 'People'**

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I declare that all of the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

Political names define the symbolic organisation of what is common and are therefore a potential site of contestation. It is with this field of possibility, and the role the moving image can play within it, that this dissertation is concerned. This thesis verifies that there is a transformative relation between the political name and the cinema. The cinema is an art with the capacity to intervene in the way we see and hear a name. On the other hand, a name operates politically from the moment it agitates a practice, in this case a certain cinema, into organising a better world. This research focuses on the audiovisual dynamism of the names 'worker', 'factory' and 'people' in contemporary cinemas. It is not the purpose of the argument to nostalgically maintain these old revolutionary names, rather to explore their efficacy as names-in-dispute, as names with which a present becomes something disputable. This thesis explores this dispute in the company of theorists and audiovisual artists committed to both emancipatory politics and experimentation.

The philosophies of Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou are of significance for this thesis since they break away from the semiotic model and its symptomatic readings in order to understand the name as a political gesture. Inspired by their affirmative politics, the analysis investigates cinematic practices troubled and stimulated by the names 'worker', 'factory', 'people': the work of Peter Watkins, Wang Bing, Harun Farocki, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub. These are practices affected by their engagement with political names that generate audiovisual assemblages exceeding standard sociological representations. These practices do not adapt the names 'worker' or 'people' to modern times. These are inventive practices undoing simplistic dichotomies between the obsolete and the new and articulating images and sounds with which to resonate in the endless assemblage of the present.

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Introduction

There is today, in discourse and in practice, a proliferation of names to refer to political subjectivities: ‘people’, ‘the many’, ‘multitude’, ‘precariat’, ‘plebs’, ‘the working class’, ‘masses’, ‘proletariat’, ‘the 99 percent’, ‘the oppressed’, ‘*indignados*’, ‘workers’. This assembly of names appears disorienting and ineffective for the nostalgic dream of a time with more definitive political identifications. It includes and juxtaposes old names, pregnant with an expansive revolutionary history, and new names, borne of social movements whose life expectancy remains an open question. But, above all, this proliferation is the loud sign of an experimentation with the collective name itself, a name that is breaking the silence imposed by the neoliberal dominance of the past decades and its institution of the individual as the ultimate ground and object of politics. Alain Badiou has defined this silence as ‘linguistic terrorism’, whilst insisting on the necessity of recognising and affirming the capacity of those who find themselves oppressed by it to engage in a form of auto-symbolisation: ‘giving up on the language issue, and accepting the terror that subjectively forbids us to pronounce words that offend dominant sensibilities, is an intolerable form of oppression’.¹ The contemporary proliferation of names and speakers is not the symptom of a disease affecting the post-1989 political body; we can also understand it, with the help of Jacques Rancière, as a fundamental

¹ Badiou, Alain, *The Communist Hypothesis*, Verso, London, 2010, p.65.

contestation of the legitimacy of the neoliberal consensus, its proper names and subjects.² This thesis seeks to contribute to this proliferation and discussion by exploring the sounds and images of political names visible and audible in contemporary cinema. It aims to show that the symbolic power of the name is always open to contestation and reconfiguration, and that the moving image has the capacity to intervene in the way we see and hear a name. That is to say, it understands cinema as a field from within which it is possible to imagine and begin to organise another world.

My research is focused on present day reconfigurations of the names ‘worker’, ‘factory’ and ‘people’. These are names considered obsolete by discourses on different sides of the political spectrum. The triumph of neoliberalism has erased the couple ‘worker-factory’ from public discourse and has imposed an identificatory use of names such as ‘people’ devoid of any transformative agency. This leaves room either to a ‘plebs’ endowed with a natural capacity of resistance to the evils of the State or to a xenophobic version of populism.³ On the side of emancipatory politics, the significance of these names has also been repeatedly questioned on various fronts, a discussion that has itself made further contributions to the already extensive history of socialist polemics in which these names have circulated, a history of prime interest for this thesis. Since the sixties, feminist, postcolonial and other critical thinkers have continued to take issue with the narrow definition of the worker privileged by canonical Marxism, which tends to treat the

² See Rancière, Jacques, *The Names of History, On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1994.

³ With ‘plebs’ I am referring here to the ideas developed by the French ‘new philosophers’ heavily criticised by both Badiou and Rancière. See for instance Rancière, Jacques, ‘Joan of Arc in the Gulag’, *The Intellectual and His People*, Verso, London, 2012, pp.101-124. To explore the contemporary debate on populism see Seijdel, Jorinde (ed.), *The Populist Imagination*, OPEN Cahier on Art and the Public Domain, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2010 and Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2007.

industrial worker as the revolutionary subject par excellence.⁴ In more recent times, a branch of the radical left has argued that ‘people’ or ‘the working class’ are ruined names with a glorious past, names to be left behind in order to better read not only the present and its post-industrial mutations, but also the very future of politics.⁵ The abandonment of these names has been understood as a necessary gesture to re-new emancipatory politics after the collapse of ‘real socialism’, to respond to a post-Marxist scenario or to take account of new economical paradigms (cognitive capitalism, immaterial and affective labour).⁶

This discussion between radical thinkers and practitioners provides the critical framework within which my argument intervenes. This thesis focuses on names such as ‘worker’ or ‘people’ not to defend such terms against devaluations, nor to lay claim to the purity of their pedigree, but rather to investigate their historical efficacy as names-in-dispute. These are names on account of which the present becomes something disputable. It is in this sense that the argument of the thesis will continually be pitched against the category of the end, a category often used not only in neoliberal discourse but in contemporary

⁴ See for instance Federici, Silvia, ‘The Reproduction of Labour Power in the Global Economy and the Unfinished Feminist Revolution’, in *Revolution at Point Zero*, PM Press, Oakland CA, 2012, pp.91-111.

⁵ Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau argued in 1985 that social movements and not the working class were to bring social transformation. See Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London, 2001 [1985]. The argument about the disappearance of the working class was already at work in Gorz, André, *Farewell to the Working Class*, Pluto Press, London, 2001 [1980].

⁶ See Boutang, Yann Moulier, *Le Capitalisme Cognitif*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2007, Fumagalli; Andrea, *Bioeconomía y Capitalismo Cognitivo, Hacia un Nuevo Paradigma de Acumulación*, Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2010; Hardt, Michael, ‘Affective Labour’, *Boundary*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Summer 1999, pp.89-100; Lazzarato, Maurizio, ‘Immaterial Labour’, in Virno, Paolo; Hardt, Michael (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1996, pp. 132-146.

discussions of emancipation.⁷ In what follows emancipatory politics will not be considered a dream from which to wake up, a dream that condemns the past in the name of a now free present; it will not give rise to a prophetic call for coming resurrections and insurrections; instead it will be founded upon a more generative temporality, irreducible to the succession of births and deaths, beginnings and ends. It will explore this temporality in the company of theorists and audiovisual artists whose political engagement mediates between – not without tensions – the stubbornness of a continuing commitment and the open-to-change quality of an on-going process. My analysis articulates the singular modes in which different audiovisual practices engage with the vicissitudes of persistence and change.

According to the ideologies of the end, this thesis would be anachronistic twice over because it insists on looking at old names and it insists on the significance for the present to work with the cinema – an art whose death has been announced repeatedly in the past decades – as an imaginative field for the discussion of political subjectivities. My argument embraces anachronism not as a nostalgic move but as a means of contesting the established premises underpinning what counts as present. This research seeks to verify whether, in spite of these ill omens, the efficacy of obsolete names continues to be tested in contemporary practices of the moving image. With other words, it seeks to verify that the efficacy of cinema continues to be tested in its engagement with names such ‘worker’ or ‘people’. Together with the relevance of old political subjectivities, the relation between the cinema and the political was opened to interrogation in the decades of the

⁷ For a reading of the motif of the end as ‘politically intractable’ see Badiou, Alain, ‘Can Change Be Thought? An Interview with Badiou Conducted by Bruno Bosteels’, in Bosteels, Bruno, *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, pp. 289-317.

sixties and seventies by thinkers and practitioners alike. Apart from the idea of an art of the masses dedicated to forming political consciousness, other capacities of the moving image were experimented with. This experimentation has often been interpreted as a form of crisis, opening the door to renunciations, death sentences and melancholic interpretations.⁸ Very differently, this thesis understands it is necessary to think the positivity of these experimentations, by considering the development of singular articulations that intervene in and transform the audiovisual regime itself. I sustain the view that the *crisis* of the cinema in the sixties and seventies corresponds to the opening of a generative phase in which the moving image reinvents how it relates to the political name with experiments irreducible to the formation of standard revolutionary identities. Therefore the thesis asks: how has cinema multiplied its understanding of its capacities to intervene in the images and sounds of the world in recent decades? And what are the political lessons of this experimentation?

My analysis is focused on singular cases of audiovisual stubbornness. The thesis explores the recent audiovisual practices of filmmakers who started their careers in the sixties, who participated in the intensive questionings of those years: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Harun Farocki, and Peter Watkins. This focus on recent work emphasises their commitment to a practice that has not ceased to imagine the political significance of the image, a practice that has not ceased to be affected by political names. It also makes visible the changes that have occurred in their experimentations. Different from using these cases to proclaim the renewal or rebirth of political cinema, my argument traces

⁸ One such melancholic interpretation is implicit in Deleuze's distinction between different ages of cinema. See Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1 The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2 The Time-Image*, The Athlone Press, London, 1986 and 1989. See also Oehner, Vraath, 'What Does Political Filmmaking Mean?', *Republicart*, 2003, http://www.republicart.net/disc/representations/oehner01_en.htm (accessed: 20/05/2013).

continuities and discontinuities between their practice yesterday and today.⁹ I will therefore analyse in their work the multiple points of adherence to and departure from two key tendencies among the various audiovisual deflagrations of the sixties, the Brechtian image and the experiences of Third Cinema. The exception to this historical itinerary is the film *West of the Tracks* (2003), by Wang Bing. Its political significance as a film oxidising the motif of the end becomes apparent in the company of the other film practices analysed in the thesis. It is in the continuities and discontinuities of these obstinate practices, practices inventing critical capacities for the audiovisual against eschatological ideologies, that cinema appears as a generative field, one which undoes the restrictive temporal binary between the old and the new in the discussion of political subjectivities.

The field of investigation delineated by this thesis assembles cinemas that are customarily thought apart: an Italian literary adaptation, a German essay video, a Chinese observational documentary, a French television film. This list is not simply an exercise in eclecticism, nor is it a closed one. The analysis could continue to include, for instance, contemporary examples of 'leftist fiction'.¹⁰ My thesis analyses the cases it is focused on not in terms of genre or nationality, disciplinary categories that are insufficient to think the political capacities of the moving image, but on the basis of what I maintain is a transformative relation between the cinema and the political name. My argument defines the name as a linguistic image and therefore the cinema as an art participating in the

⁹ Contemporary political cinema has often been interpreted in terms of renewal, rebirth. See for instance O'Shaughnessy, Martin, *The New Face of Political Cinema, Commitment in French Film Since 1995*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2007.

¹⁰ In regards to 'leftist fiction' it would have been interesting to include in the analysis, for instance, the French film *Ce Vieux Rêve Qui Bouge* (*That Old Dream that Moves*, 2001) by Alain Giraudie. This film develops a singular storyline in which a factory about to close becomes the unlikely stage of queer desires between workers and management and a singular tempo that serves to render the factory a kind of Mediterranean beach.

audiovisuality of names.¹¹ More than cinematographies, this thesis deals with cinametographies, with the ways in which cinema writes names with its sounds and images. As a complex assemblage, the image makes visible the fundamental distance of any name to the named but it also articulates modes of inhabiting this distance, an inhabitation with political consequences. Cinema is an art that makes visible names as linguistic moving images whose visuality and aurality it is possible to reconfigure to make another world figure. My argument also emphasises how the very practice of cinema is affected by its engagement with the political name. With the term cinema, I not only understand a representational object that spectators look at, but more generally the process of making images and the different discourses that conceive and circulate the images before and after their projection or broadcasting. This thesis will therefore pursue an intricate analysis of differing combinations of images and sounds, but also examination of other cinematic practices such as methodologies for actors, theoretical interventions by the audiovisual artists themselves, as well as experiments in production and spectatorship. Through the weaving of these different aspects in my argument, I insist on the significance of ‘worker’, ‘factory’, ‘people’ not simply as designative terms or representational motifs, but as names with which cinema re-thinks its political capacities. This thesis puts to the test, then, the following hypothesis: a political name is a name that troubles and stimulates a determinate practice, in this case cinema, into organising a better world.

My argument investigates the work of Watkins, Wang, Farocki or Straub and Huillet as practices agitated by the names ‘worker’, ‘factory’, ‘people’, all the while intervening in the images and sounds of these names. Theirs is a paradoxical resistance to the erasure of

¹¹ On the limits of ‘disciplinary knowledge’ see Rancière, Jacques, ‘Thinking Between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge’, *Parrhesia*, No. 1, 2006, pp.1-12.

these names. There is not an attempt to adapt these names to the present times or to restore their past grandeur. The practices they are involved in invent different temporalities from which to both affirm and displace these names, temporalities not regulated by the industrial rhythms of the normative image. These are practices taking their time to struggle against what Walter Benjamin called the ‘illiteracy of the image’, against images that simply evoke ‘linguistic clichés’.¹² Away from pre-determined audiovisualities, exceeding a standard sociological validation and representation of these names, these experiments make the names they work with visible and audible as names-in-dispute. In my argument, the relation of cinema to the political is not simply thought in terms of the presence of political subjects, of validated names for struggle, in the image. It is affirmed in the capacity of a cinema practice to be affected by names as political names, and to invent audiovisual configurations where names such as ‘worker’ or ‘people’ give body to a present against an established present, where these names resonate in the endless assemblage of the present.

Moving in parallel and intersecting with these stubborn audiovisual practices, this thesis works with the ideas of thinkers of emancipation who, also since the sixties, have refused to convert to capitalo-parliamentarism and its authoritative schools of thought. The main theoretical companions in this investigation are Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou and, mainly as a counterpoint, Antonio Negri. These thinkers have in common their commitment to their experiences of the sixties and seventies, when they were engaged in different militant adventures, and their resistance against the counterrevolution beginning in the late seventies, a counterrevolution Badiou has called the Thermidorian Restoration

¹² Benjamin, Walter, quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Remontages du Temps Subi*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2010, p.107.

and Rancière has repeatedly described with his notion of consensus.¹³ Rancière and Badiou experienced in those militant years a break with the dominant tradition of Marxism. To follow the trail of this break implies for them not to break with Marx but to think emancipation at a distance from Marxist-Leninist politics. For Badiou it means to think politics beyond party politics, for Rancière to affirm equality not as an objective but as an axiom of politics. Significantly for this thesis, both Badiou and Rancière, but also Negri, accord a significant place to the concept of the name in their intellectual practice, in its commitments and its ruptures. The name appears in their writings as a fundamental concept with which to think again the sense(s) of emancipation. The work of Rancière and Badiou on the name, also in its differences with Negri's, has inspired my conceptualisation of the name as a linguistic image open to configuration and contestation.

Rancière and Badiou pay an attention to language very different from the one encouraged by Louis Althusser and the semiotic tradition in order to re-think emancipation.¹⁴ They both focus on the positivity of speech acts instead of treating names as suspicious ideological artefacts. Their break with Althusser, their teacher, was a break with symptomatic readings endlessly revealing instances of domination. Rancière reads specific names as political gestures intervening in the symbolisation of the world, while Badiou focuses on the militant consequences of the affirmation of a political name. In this sense, their work constitutes an intellectual ground different from the one developed by semiotic-inspired theory and its determination of deception as the essence of cinema and self-

¹³ See Badiou, Alain, 'What is a Thermidorian?', *Metapolitics*, Verso, London, 2005, pp.124-140.

¹⁴ See Rancière, Jacques, *Althusser's Lesson*, Continuum, London, 2011; Badiou, Alain, 'Louis Althusser (1918-1990)', *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, Verso, London, 2009, pp.54-89.

reflexivity as solution.¹⁵ In this intellectual ground, revelation and self-reflexivity do not determine the capacities of the moving image, but are part of more affirmative constellations. Rancière and Badiou have themselves begun to clear out these affirmative grounds for the image in their texts dedicated to the cinema and art in general. Rancière has particularly focused his investigations on re-reading films in a way that emphasises generative paradoxes and thwarted expectations, for instance the ones that would assume that a cowboy movie by Anthony Mann is an obvious tool for the propagation of capitalist ideology.¹⁶ Badiou, in his more sketchy approach to the moving image, has insisted on affirming cinema not only as capable of making visible other possible worlds but, compellingly, as an active commandment to think change.¹⁷ More than their particular approaches to the cinema, their texts on the moving image matter in the thesis as texts haunted by the name: the modes in which a film makes the people or the workers present often orientate the sense of their arguments. In my own approach to cinematic practices, I am more interested in the exploration of the connections between the cinema and the political name and, more importantly, I insist on the transformative dimension of their relation.

Despite their commonalities, the conceptualisation of the political name differs greatly in Badiou and Rancière, generating a discussion rich in experimental efficacies and alternative temporalities. Echoes of this discussion resonate throughout the thesis, establishing a dialogue with the various audiovisual practices in question. In the following pages, before explaining the structure of the thesis, I briefly map the work on the name of

¹⁵ See Lapsley, Robert and Michael Westlake, 'Semiotics', *Film Theory: An Introduction*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006, p.32-66.

¹⁶ Rancière, Jacques, 'Some Things to Do: the Poetics of Anthony Mann', *Film Fables*, Berg Publishers, London, 2006, pp.73-94.

¹⁷ Badiou, Alain, *Cinéma*, Nova Editions, Paris, 2010, p.327.

these philosophers and their discussion. First I focus on Negri's 'multitude', since it helps to better discern the singularity of the conceptualisations developed by Rancière and Badiou. Then I analyse the notion of 'figure of the worker' in the thought of Badiou and of his comrade Sylvain Lazarus, and finally I sketch the key questions at stake in Rancière's notion of anonymous names.

Negri and the prophetic name 'multitude'

For Negri the role of the political thinker is to name the collective subject of politics by tracking down qualities common to social subjects in a given historical moment. A political name is a 'dispositif for the apprehension of the real', 'the expression of the common quality' and, at the same time, a 'logical construction', a 'constructive projection of being into the to-come'.¹⁸ The common name, he argues, the name of the political subject, is not an identity: it belongs instead to the order of the event. For Negri a nominal event corresponds to the adequacy, the 'at the same time', between the act of naming (a decision) and the thing named (apprehended through the continual effort of experience).¹⁹ The common name in Negri's work is therefore not descriptive, but both part of an experience of the real and a wilful projection. In the act of naming there is then a prophetic dimension, a dimension Negri readily accepts and explains via the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. For Negri, political discourses should 'aspire to fulfil a

¹⁸ Negri, Antonio, *Time for Revolution*, Continuum, New York NY, p.141, 156. It is in the essay 'Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo' included in this volume that Negri defines his concept of name (pp.139-261).

¹⁹ Ibid, pp.149-150.

Spinozist prophetic function'.²⁰ Like the prophet with the people of God, the political thinker is tasked with contributing to the emergence of a political subject through the process of naming it. The name 'multitude', a name also borrowed from Spinoza, fulfils this prophetic function:

[T]he multitude is a concept that can contribute to the task of resurrecting or reforming or really reinventing the Left by naming a form of political organisation and a political project. We do not propose the concept as a political directive – form the multitude! – but rather a way of giving a name to what is already going on and grasping the existing social and political tendency. Naming such a tendency is a primary task of political theory and a powerful tool for further developing the emerging political form.²¹

For Negri (and Hardt), the prophetic name of the multitude operates through two different temporalities. It is an ontological name that has, as an inexhaustible referent, a human refusal of authority and struggle for freedom. Such refusal and struggle are 'always in the present, a perpetual present'.²² 'Multitude' is a historical name that refers to a political subject *in potentia*, one that does not exist and yet whose conditions for emergence are discernible (to the militant of politics). Negri and Hardt conceive of the multitude as inhabiting this double temporality of the 'always already' and the 'not yet'.²³

With this two-fold temporality of the multitude, Negri and Hardt seek to predict the emergence of resistance within the contemporary situation, a situation they understand as

²⁰ Negri, Antonio and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, p.66. For Spinoza on prophecy see Spinoza, Baruch, *A Theological-Political Treatise*, Dover, New York NY, 1951.

²¹ Negri, Antonio and Michael Hardt, *Multitude*, Penguin, London, 2004, p.220.

²² *Ibid.*, p.221.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.222.

being ruled by a new order (postmodern, Empire), one that has replaced the previous dominant model of sovereignty (modern, imperialist). Negri and Hardt develop the multitude as an updated ‘concept of class, race, gender and sexuality differences’, appropriate for the times of Empire.²⁴ Their work, which is mainly concerned with a socioeconomic perspective, evaluates the transformation of capitalism since the seventies largely along the lines of post-Fordist theory. What matters to them is to define a new political subject in tune with the transformations of the socioeconomic situation, to name ‘the living alternative that grows within Empire’.²⁵ To specify the singularity of this name, Negri and Hardt proceed by opposing multitude to the names of collective subjects hegemonic fostered during the prior modern order. They oppose, as Paolo Virno does, multitude to people, a name they understand as tied with and saturated by the modern concept of nation-state.²⁶ For them, ‘multitude’ is also irreducible to ‘the working class’ because it is ‘composed of all diverse figures of social production’.²⁷ They understand that the notion of the working class is both limiting, since it has been narrowed down by Marxism to signify industrial workers, and outdated, since in the context of Empire industrialisation is not the economical paradigm.²⁸ ‘Multitude’ is a name open to all those exploited by capital, it is the name of a new proletariat that includes intellectual workers, the poor, the migrant, the unwaged, the homeless. Hardt and Negri also distinguish ‘multitude’ from other group names such as ‘masses’, ‘mobs’, ‘crowds’ as these are the

²⁴ Ibid., pp.100-101.

²⁵ Ibid., p.XIII.

²⁶ Paolo Virno develops this opposition between people and multitude as two modes of thinking the political subject (confronting Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza) in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles CA, 2004. It is worth noting that multitude for Virno is less a prophetic name than the name of an ambivalent subject in terms of politics. The work of Rancière can be seen precisely as an analysis of how the name ‘people’ is not saturated, see Rancière, Jacques, ‘People ou Multitudes?’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, pp.290-297.

²⁷ Negri, Antonio; Hardt, Michael, *Multitude*, Penguin, London, 2004, p.XIV.

²⁸ See Hardt, Michael, ‘Affective Labour’, *Boundary*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Summer 1999, pp.89-100.

names of 'passive collectives that have to be led, susceptible to external manipulation'.²⁹ Through these oppositions and distinctions, Negri and Hardt define the multitude as 'an active social subject who acts on the basis of what singularities share in common'.³⁰ In their texts, the key characteristics of the multitude (mobility, flexibility, perpetual difference) coincide with the mode of being Empire elicits, so as to prophesise a direct confrontation between the two.

Rancière and Badiou vehemently distance their thought, albeit with different accents, from the work of the philosophers of the multitude, each stressing a radically different conception of politics and the role of the intellectual therein. If Negri and Hardt understand that 'Empire creates a greater potential for revolution than did the modern regimes of power because it presents us (...) with an alternative [the multitude]', Badiou and Rancière both affirm that any politics of emancipation is heterogeneous to, and at a distance from, the State, capitalism, Empire. Badiou declares himself entirely opposed to 'the thesis according to which it is presumed possible, merely by isolating that which has a constituent value, to create a space of liberty cut from the same cloth as that of the existing powers themselves'.³¹ He rejects Negri's vision as a 'dreamy hallucination' uniting figures of oppression and figures of resistance in a structural relation, a vision 'in which the multitudes are both the result of capital atomisation and the new creative initiator of a horizontal modernity'.³²

²⁹ Negri, Antonio and Michael Hardt, *Multitude*, Penguin, London, 2004, p.100.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Badiou, Alain, 'Beyond Formalisation, An Interview with Alain Badiou Conducted by Peter Hallward and Bruno Bosteels' in Bosteels, Bruno, *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, Ibid., p.335.

³² Ibid., p.337.

In a similar way, for Rancière it is crucial today ‘to reassert the radicality of the communist power of separation rather than forever predicating communism on the basis of the development of capitalism’.³³ Rancière insists that there is no political potential to be found in the de-materialisation of the economy, a becoming immaterial that he invariably questions:

Capitalism may produce more and more immateriality, yet this immateriality will never be more than the immateriality of capitalism. Capitalism only produces capitalism. If communism means something, it means something radically heterogeneous to the logic of capitalism, entirely heterogeneous to the materiality of the capitalist world.³⁴

For Rancière and Badiou the updated version of a political subject presented by the philosophy of the multitude continues a tradition of Marxist thought dominant in the second half of the twentieth century, a tradition now simply ‘painted in fashionable hues’.³⁵ For Rancière, multitude sounds like the new name of an old Marxist concept, the concept of ‘productive forces’.³⁶ And to evoke the productive forces today is ‘suspicious

³³ Rancière, Jacques, ‘On the Actuality of Communism’ in Kirn, Gal (ed.), *Post-Fordism and its Discontents*, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, 2010, p.137.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Badiou, Alain, ‘Beyond Formalisation, An Interview with Alain Badiou Conducted by Peter Hallward and Bruno Bosteels’ in Bosteels, Bruno, *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, p.335.

³⁶ The notion of ‘productive forces’ is key in Marx's thought and widely discussed within the history of Marxism. This notion encompasses all those forces necessary for the production process (means of production, knowledge, labour power). Marx uses it in works such as *The German Ideology* or *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* to explain how relations of production change over time: new relations of production emerge when old ones have ceased to ensure the development of the productive forces. Thus communism is to emerge when the capitalist relations of production cease being optimal for the development of productive forces. See Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Prometheus Books, New York NY, 1998.

because it brings to mind an expired age of the factory and the party'.³⁷ But the name 'multitude' is essentially an operation to broaden the meaning of 'productive forces'. According to Rancière, what matters to Negri and company is 'to integrate within the concept of productive forces the set of procedures that in one way or another make common' – from scientific, technical and intellectual labour to any form of resistance or refusal to the existent order.³⁸

If for Rancière multitude is an expanded version of 'productive forces', for Badiou multitude is 'a pedantic word for mass movements (and in particular petit-bourgeois movements)'.³⁹ In various interviews, Badiou understands Negri and his autonomist followers as movementists fascinated by the elastic violence of capitalism. His arguments against the philosophy of the multitude are part of what Bruno Bosteels has identified as a constant in Badiou's Maoist trajectory, his critique of pure leftist reason.⁴⁰ For Badiou leftism is a philosophical tendency that creates absolute antagonisms between state and masses; in the case of Negri it creates a dualism between Empire and multitude. Leftist thinkers (Laclau, Mouffe) recognise antagonism as being constitutive of the social field instead of thinking in terms of antagonistic contradictions, splits, divisions. Bosteels, through the work of Badiou, regards leftism as a particularly marked tendency among contemporary political thinkers. The work of radical thinkers tends to affirm 'the

³⁷ Rancière, Jacques, *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.293. My translation ('suspects de rappeler un âge périmé de l'usine et du parti').

³⁸ Ibid., p.294. My translation ('intégrer dans le concept de forces productives l'ensemble des procédures qui d'une manière ou d'une autre font du commun').

³⁹ Badiou, Alain, 'Beyond Formalisation, An Interview with Alain Badiou Conducted by Peter Hallward and Bruno Bosteels', in Bosteels, Bruno, *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, p.335.

⁴⁰ See Bosteels, Bruno, *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, pp.284-286.

unlimited and spontaneous affirmative energy of pure communism’ and postulate ‘a direct and unmediated opposition’.⁴¹ For Badiou *left-wing communism* is politically inoperative because it does not break with the forms of power in order to think politics, it remains in a face-to-face hypnotic relation to power. For him Negri’s prophetic version of leftism simply ‘replaces politics’ with ‘the announcement of the conditions of possibility of its resurrection’.⁴² Negri makes this prophetic announcement by naming the multitude ‘while politics itself is paralysed’.⁴³ For Badiou the *multitudinism* of Negri and other Italian autonomists ‘integrates smoothly with the necessary adjustments of capital’ since ‘it does not constitute any really independent political space’.⁴⁴

Badiou, Lazarus and the figure of the worker

The concept of the name has been instrumental in the work of Badiou in the context of re-thinking politics without any State reference. The interest in this concept is shared with Sylvain Lazarus, his comrade and co-founder of the militant group *Organisation Politique*. Lazarus published in 1996 *Anthropologie du Nom* [*Anthropology of the Name*], a book re-conceptualising the name with a view to re-staging politics in the aftermath of May 68.⁴⁵ Lazarus and Badiou, it can be argued, understand the name and nomination as

⁴¹ Ibid., p.283.

⁴² Badiou, Alain, ‘Can Change Be Thought? An Interview with Alain Badiou Conducted by Bruno Bosteels’, Ibid, p.293.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Badiou, Alain, ‘Beyond Formalisation, An Interview with Alain Badiou Conducted by Peter Hallward and Bruno Bosteels’, Ibid., p.329.

⁴⁵ Lazarus, Sylvain, *Anthropologie du Nom*, Seuil, Paris, 1996.

two distinct modalities.⁴⁶ Nomination is a descriptive or expressive act, one that objectifies the named. In nomination the name appears as the result of a necessary determination, it dissolves the named into a class, a classification, a typology; it incorporates the named into the realm of determinate objectivity and knowledge. The name, on the other hand, is what resists conversion into an object, what resists stopping the process of the name-as-process. Such a name is, for them, unnameable. For Lazarus a political name is unnameable ‘because it is the name of an irreducible singularity’.⁴⁷ For Badiou, the collective is the unnameable of politics because ‘every effort to name politically a community induces a disastrous Evil’.⁴⁸ They organise a politics of the name in which the name is not abandoned but affirmed as a subtraction from nomination. Thus unnameability does not designate a redundant impossibility but rather a prescription and a possibility – the prescription and possibility of a collective subject of politics that thinks itself without an exterior nominal agency.

The name ‘worker’ (‘ouvrier’), or what they call ‘the figure of the worker’ (‘figure ouvrière’), is the name at the core of Lazarus and Badiou's thought and activist practice. For Badiou, an ‘essential question’ today is ‘to re-establish the signifier *worker* in the speech and action of politics’.⁴⁹ The main activities of *Organisation Politique* have gravitated around this figure and factory politics.⁵⁰ Badiou understands that ‘there can only be politics to the extent that one is capable of intervening on the events of which the

⁴⁶ Badiou, Alain, ‘Politics as Thought: The Work of Sylvain Lazarus’, *Metapolitics*, Verso, London, 2005, p.29.

⁴⁷ Lazarus, Sylvain, *Anthropologie du Nom*, Seuil, Paris, 1996, p.52 (‘parce que c'est celui d'une singularité irréductible’).

⁴⁸ Badiou, Alain, *Ethics*, Verso, London, 2001, p.77.

⁴⁹ Badiou, Alain, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, Verso, London, 2008, p.43.

⁵⁰ For a description and analysis of the activities of *Organisation Politique* see Hallward, Peter, *Badiou, A Subject to Truth*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MI, 2003, pp.223-242.

factory is the site'.⁵¹ *Organisation Politique* thinks the factory as a part of society that is not counted as part, as a site 'at the edge of the void'. For the militant group any politics that does not take the factory into account as the site of the workers essentially reproduces the general regime of the State.⁵² This focus on factory politics has been read as 'unfashionable' since 'the very word [worker] has an anachronistic ring to it'.⁵³ For Badiou and Lazarus, this emphasis responds to an understanding of the factory as a political site but also to what they regard as the harmful consequences of the substitution of the name 'worker' by other names, such as 'immigrant'. For the activists of *Organisation Politique* 'the hatred of the immigrants was established massively, consensually, at the level of the state, from the moment we began, in our representations of the world, to omit the workers'.⁵⁴ For Badiou, critical thought has a responsibility in the face of what he considers to be an intellectual desertion of the field of politics. The move away from the working classes of post-political thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, André Gorz or Alain Touraine 'shows that they have been won over, politically, to the established order'.⁵⁵ Badiou concludes that 'political thought has become inert, unified, in short totalitarian since the term [worker] disappeared'.⁵⁶

Badiou and Lazarus develop a generative tension with the name 'worker', between the conviction of the end of Marxism and the conviction that a political commitment is never over. 'Worker' is to be subtracted from the particular nominal objectivity in which

⁵¹ Badiou, Alain, Badiou, Alain, 'The Factory as Event Site', *PRELON, Journal for Images and Politics*, No. 8, Fall 2006, p.172.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.176.

⁵³ Hallward, Peter, *Badiou, A Subject to Truth*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MI, 2003, p.231.

⁵⁴ Badiou, Alain quoted by Hallward. *Ibid.*, p.232.

⁵⁵ Badiou, Alain quoted by Hallward. *Ibid.*, P.240.

⁵⁶ Badiou, Alain quoted by Hallward. *Ibid.*, p.232.

Marxism and Marxism-Leninism have, in differing contexts, situated this name. Badiou writes in 1991 that ‘Marxism is totally defeated, the *proletarian we* that every ideal community poses above itself as historical axiom no longer existed and had in fact been inoperative for more than twenty years’.⁵⁷ He does not reject the basics of Marx's analysis of the capitalist economy but he understands that it is necessary to go ‘beyond the idea that politics represents objective groups that can be designated as classes’, that an emancipatory politics ‘cannot be rendered immediately transitive to a scientific, objective study of how class functions in society’.⁵⁸ For Badiou, the task of the militant thinker is to contribute to an intellectual field for the name ‘worker’ different from the communist hypothesis of the nineteenth century with its idea of the proletariat as the class that will necessarily bring about the emancipation of all humanity, and different from the communist hypothesis of the twentieth century and its emphasis on the communist party as the indispensable organ of revolution.⁵⁹ The name ‘worker’ is to operate in a new intellectual field, in a specific and broad sense, as ‘the generic name for all who can withdraw themselves, in an organised way, from the realised hegemony of financial capital and its servants’.⁶⁰ According to Badiou, this new intellectual field, the field of a third period of the communist hypothesis, stands today in an ‘experimental state’.⁶¹

Badiou essentially follows in this periodisation the more detailed analysis and complex propositions developed by Lazarus in *Anthropology of the Name*. Lazarus develops his

⁵⁷ Badiou, Alain quoted by Hallward. *Ibid.*, p.41.

⁵⁸ Badiou, Alain quoted by Hallward. *Ibid.*, p.240-241.

⁵⁹ Badiou, Alain, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, Verso, London, 2008, pp.43-44. Marx describes the proletariat as the universal class of history in works such as *The German Ideology*. See Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Prometheus Books, New York NY, 1998.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

hypothesis of the relevance of the name 'worker' against the post-1989 thesis that affirms that the working class is disappearing, a thesis he qualifies as 'parliamentarian'.⁶² Lazarus argues that it is not the name 'worker' that is obsolete but the dominant intellectuality within which it has been employed, what he calls 'the classist mode'. In this classist political mode 'worker' has been objectified; it has been used to render its referent objectively nameable as a class in expressions such as 'the working class', 'workers' movement' or 'workers' party'. Lazarus understands that the classist mode develops an external representation of the name 'worker'; it names from the outside following an idea that equates politics with the expression of certain conditions or with the spontaneous reaction to certain conditions. Lazarus proposes another understanding of politics; one arguing that politics is in itself a mode of thought (and therefore needs no external discipline to think it), that the political is an unnameable name (since naming always requires an external agency). Lazarus produces two propositions tied to the name 'worker', following in the wake of his conceptualisation of politics. The first is that 'workers think' and therefore the name 'worker' is to be constituted from within (*en interiorité*).⁶³ The second proposition seeks to avoid nominalism by displacing the focus from the name to what he calls the sites of the name (*les lieux du nom*). Lazarus maintains that the site of the name 'worker' is the factory. The factory is 'the only space of consistency' of the name 'worker' and for him 'any attempt to extend this name beyond the factory entails the dissolution of this name'.⁶⁴ Very different from, if not in opposition with, the theories of the Italian autonomists and their 'factory without walls', for Lazarus it is a matter of giving consistency to the fragile name in question by coupling it with the factory. It is a matter of creating an intellectuality that works to give consistency to the

⁶² Lazarus, Sylvain, *Anthropologie du Nom*, Seuil, Paris, 1996, p.169.

⁶³ Ibid., p.170.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.172. My translation ('le seul espace de consistance', 'toute tentative d'extension hors de l'usine entraine la dissolution du mot').

pairing ‘worker-factory’ by asking ‘what do workers think of the workers at the factory?’.⁶⁵

Badiou sums up the politics of the worker proposed by *Organisation Politique* in the following way: ‘by figure of the worker we mean a political subjectivity constituted in the factory, in an ability to make declarations about the factory and the worker that are different from those of management, of unions, of the state’.⁶⁶ This politics of workers’ enunciations, taken as something absolutely subtracted from capitalist demands and from any institutional mediation (party or trade union), has raised various criticisms and doubts. Peter Hallward takes issue, for instance, with the rejection of unions as lackeys of the capitalist state by stating that ‘in today’s situation organised labour remains one of the essential components of any progressive politics, (...) it is no accident that unions are targets of *modernising* governments’.⁶⁷ *Organisation Politique* promotes the creation of groups within the factory that neither management nor unions can penetrate, groups of committed militant-workers (in this sense Badiou describes his conception of politics as aristocratic).⁶⁸ For Hallward, this insistence on a radical distance from any mediation leads the members of *Organisation Politique* to propose a ‘strictly asocial and acultural conception of politics’, which ‘simply confronts an inflated model of the state as its sole and exclusive adversary’.⁶⁹ Rancière, who acknowledges various coincidences with the work of Badiou, distances himself from these politics and its prescriptive tendencies in a

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.177. My translation (‘qu’est que les ouvriers pensent des ouvriers à l’usine?’).

⁶⁶ Quoted by Hallward, Peter in *Badiou, A Subject to Truth*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MI, 2003, p.231.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.282.

⁶⁸ See Badiou, Alain, ‘The Lessons of Jacques Rancière: Knowledge and Power after the Storm’, in Rockhill, Gabriel; Watts, Philip (eds.), *Jacques Rancière, History, Politics, Aesthetics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2009, pp.30-54.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp.279-280.

similar way. For him, there is within these propositions an ‘absolute disconnection’ of the realm of politics from the social and an ‘idea of a quasi-miraculous power of an event-like enunciation’ with which he cannot agree.⁷⁰ Rancière does agree that it is necessary to affirm a worker component in the formation of any democratic force, but doubts that the name ‘worker’ could operate today as ‘the common name we are looking for’.⁷¹ For him, this common name must have ‘both the consistency of the worker and the inconsistency of the countless’.⁷²

Rancière and the anonymous name

Since May 68, Rancière has embarked on a re-conceptualisation of the political, with the concept of the name operating as a recurrent and fundamental concern in his critical approach. Rancière understands political subjectivity as ‘an enunciative and demonstrative capacity’ through which to intervene in the distribution of the sensible, thereby reconfiguring ‘the relation between the visible and the sayable, the relation between words and bodies’.⁷³ In the order of the sensible, names are fundamental forms of symbolisation organising bodies and things, defining the common of these bodies and their modes of relation. A political name is one with which to re-distribute the order of the sensible not in

⁷⁰ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Politique at Esthétique, avec Peter Hallward’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, pp.353-354. My translation (‘une deliaison absolue’, ‘une idée de la puissance quasi miraculeuse de l’énoncé événementiel’).

⁷¹ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Construire les Lieux du Politique, avec *Le Sabot*’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.672. My translation (‘le nom commun que nous cherchons’).

⁷² Ibid. My translation (‘avoir à la fois la consistance de l’ouvrier et l’inconsistance de l’innombrable’).

⁷³ Rancière, Jacques; Panagia, David, ‘Dissenting Words, A Conversation with Jacques Rancière’, *Diacritics*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Summer 2000, p.115.

the name of a particular identity, but in the name of equality, in the name of anyone. Rancière insists on this throughout his work: political names are, in this sense, anonymous names. This insistence seeks to distance the political name from its identitarian form, the form that customarily defines political thought, and that Rancière prefers to speak of idiomatically as the police.⁷⁴ For the police, that is for the forms of power that organise a *consensual order of the world* and its legitimacy, a nomination implies the institution of a relation of evidence between a name and a social origin, a professional activity, a social position or more generally between a name and a mode of being, doing and saying. A political name breaks these relations of evidence and suspends the system of legitimacy that sustains them, by imparting the call of an anonymous equality. In *Disagreement*, Rancière speaks of the political name as an ‘operator of conflict’, as a ‘mode of subjectification superimposed on the reality of all social groups’.⁷⁵ In *On the Shores of Politics*, he understands politics as a matter of ‘improper names, *misnomers* articulating a gap and manifesting a wrong’.⁷⁶ In *Staging the People* he insists that the political name is not ‘an assemblage of social groups and identities’ but ‘a polemical form of subjectification that is drawn along particular lines of fracture’.⁷⁷

Rancière distinguishes his understanding of the political name – and the efficacy of the dissensual, non-identitarian speech act tied to it – from other critical modes similarly concerned with the distance between words and bodies. He specifically positions his own

⁷⁴ See Rancière Jacques, ‘Wrong: Politics and Police’, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1999, pp.21-42.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.83.

⁷⁶ Rancière, Jacques, *Aux Bords du Politique*, Gallimard, Paris, 2004, p.121. My translation (‘noms impropres, de *misnomers* qui articulent une faille et manifestent un tort’).

⁷⁷ Rancière, Jacques, *Staging the People, The Proletarian and His Double*, Verso, London, 2011, p.15.

affirmative approach as a response to the mode of critique developed by Althusser. For Rancière, Althusser is another representative of the school of interpretative suspicion for whom any reading is 'guided by the idea that words hide something profound below the surface', for whom critique functions 'to examine these substrata of meaning in order to get at some even more profound secret'.⁷⁸ This critical operation of revelation focuses on inadequate, improper, unsuccessful names and expressions that are read as linguistic symptoms of ideological domination and misrecognition. The work of Rancière breaks with the Althusserian-Marxist model, by determining the speech act as a political gesture that lays bare an anonymous capacity by which to reconfigure the order of the sayable and the hierarchies between legitimate and illegitimate speakers that this order supports. For Rancière, the impropriety of the political name is not a symptom with which to diagnose linguistic domination but rather evidence of the efficacy of dissensual political subjectivities that activate a dispute concerning the very symbolisation of the world.

Very different from a suspicious reading, in works such as *The Names of History* Rancière develops something like a poetics of the name, with a view to examining various historical modes of political subjectivity and their respective efficacies.⁷⁹ Very different from the Marxist vulgate, Rancière argues that the modern revolution that defeated the principle of political legitimacy is 'a revolution of paperwork', a 'revolution of the children of the Book, of the poor who are eager to write, to talk of themselves and others'.⁸⁰ Moreover, he argues that 'there is history because speakers are united and divided by names, because they name themselves and name the others with names that don't have any close relation

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.114.

⁷⁹ Rancière, Jacques, *The Names of History, On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1994.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.20.

with sets of properties'.⁸¹ The democratic revolution is for Rancière a matter of an *excess* of words and speakers, of 'all-encompassing words that occupy the terrain without designating any distinct social reality' and of 'the proliferation of speakers who are outside of their place and outside the truth'.⁸² The names of social actors ('bourgeois', 'workers', 'nobles', 'people') are particularly and irremediably deceptive. These names are the sites of anachronistic confusions, monstrous conjunctions and endless misinterpretations. These names are *gros mots*: 'big words', 'fat words' always exceeding their function of designation and also 'bad words' according to the masters of designation and classification who ceaselessly attempt to control their use and meaning.⁸³ For Rancière, the excess of words is neither a symptom to read nor a form of creativity to merely celebrate; rather it makes audible the capacity of anyone to intervene in, as Foucault would put it, 'the roar of the battle'.⁸⁴ He ascribes a political efficacy to phrases and names precisely inasmuch as they appear out of place, break with the symbolic consensus (for instance the May 68 chant 'We are all German Jews', or the declaration of Auguste Blanqui in front of a tribunal in 1832 affirming that his profession is 'proletarian'). Rancière works with names such as 'worker' or 'people' as partial, provisional, polemical linkages to the reality they denote. To work with these empty names is 'to insist on their inherent difference, on the space of dissenting invention that this difference offers'.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid., p.35.

⁸² Ibid., p.34, 20.

⁸³ See Rancière, Jacques, 'Les Gros Mots' in *Les Scènes du Peuple*, Editions Horlieu, Lyon, 2003. The play with the French expression 'gros mots' [big and bad words] has not been used in the English version of the text. See Rancière, Jacques, *Staging the People, The Proletarian and His Double*, Verso, London, 2011.

⁸⁴ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p.308.

⁸⁵ Rancière, Jacques, *Staging the People*, Verso, London, 2011, p.18.

‘Proletarian’ has been key in this re-conceptualisation of the political name. Rancière develops an archaeology of this name in works such as *The Nights of Labour*, making visible a figure very different from the one fashioned by orthodox Marxism.⁸⁶ The proletariat is not simply a sociological class in need of self-awareness but rather the name of a movement of subjectivation intervening in the symbolic organisation of society. He argues that when the term emerged as a political name it did not designate the workers but whoever ‘is outside the existing system distributing roles and capacities’.⁸⁷ He understands that ‘at the heart of the proletarian historical subjectivation there was a capacity not to represent a collective, productive, worker power but the capacity of anyone’.⁸⁸ His exploration of the history of working class thought, before Marx, consolidates Rancière's disagreement with any understanding of the workers' movement as ‘founded on the heroic affirmation of the value of the workers' labour and identity’.⁸⁹ This departure consisted of reading the texts of proletarian thinkers and poets not as manifestations of a particular condition, but rather as written inventions similar to any other invention of expression. For Rancière, this capacity of auto-symbolisation is already manifest in the very name proletarian. ‘Proletarian’ was a dead name from the times of the Roman Empire designating ‘those who simply live and multiply without ever having or

⁸⁶ Rancière, Jacques, *The Nights of Labour, The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia PE, 1989.

⁸⁷ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Xénophobie et Politique, avec Yves Sintomer’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretien*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.200 (‘en dehors du système existant du partage des parts et des capacités’).

⁸⁸ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Universaliser la Capacité de n'Importe Qui, avec Marina Garcés et al.’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretien*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.491. My translation (‘le coeur de la subjectivation historique prolétaire a été la capacité non pas de représenter la puissance collective, productive, ouvrière, mais de représenter la capacité de n'importe qui’).

⁸⁹ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Xénophobie et Politique, avec Yves Sintomer’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretien*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.205. My translation (‘fondé sur une affirmation héroïque de la valeur éminente du travail ouvrier et de l'identité ouvrière’).

being able to transmit a name'.⁹⁰ 'Proletarian', in its modern sense, is an anachronistic collage between this ancient juridical sense and the modern figure of the worker, a collage that reconfigures the relation between labour and politics by giving symbolic presence to those who are not counted as part of the political body because they are simply producers. Rancière insists that 'proletarian' is not the identitarian name of a class but rather an anonymous name, and act of declassification that undoes the order determining who is to take part in the discussion of the common.

Badiou has summed up Rancière's theory of the name and its implications for the present as follows:

Politics presupposes [in Rancière's work] the sudden appearance of a name, in which case the nothing is counted as a gap between the whole and itself. This is the case of the name proletarian. The downfall of a name as with the political significance of the name worker nowadays amounts to a termination of the politics bound to this name. Rancière will say that our time is nameless. In this respect the community as a whole declares itself effectively total or without remainder, which means it declares itself without politics.⁹¹

Badiou no doubt finds various points of agreement with Rancière, particularly his insistence on thinking equality as a condition of politics and not as a programmatic objective; and yet he disagrees with him in relation to the 'sudden appearance' of the political name. According to Badiou, Rancière confounds politics with the event of the

⁹⁰ Rancière, Jacques, *Aux Bords du Politique*, Gallimard, Paris, 2004, p.118. My translation (ceux qui simplement vivent et se reproduisent sans posséder ni transmettre un nom).

⁹¹ Badiou, Alain, 'Rancière and the Community of Equals', *Metapolitics*, Verso, London, 2005, p.115.

emergence of the political name. If, for Badiou, the event of the name makes politics possible, politics is nevertheless not to be confused with it. For him, politics is a matter of organisation and prescriptions that carry out the affirmation of the political name. For Badiou, Rancière's immersion in the historical archives of the workers' movement recovers fleeting moments but without developing a cumulative understanding to think and practice politics.⁹² The verification of the inconsistent consistency of the political name in the work of Rancière is, for Badiou, essentially a refusal to conclude. Rancière does not want to become a master of designation because of his distrust of any conclusion; but this also limits the political capacities of his work. Reading Rancière, Badiou argues, 'you will come to know what politics must not be, you will even know what it will have been and no longer is, but never what it is within the Real, and still less what one must do in order for it to exist'.⁹³ For Rancière, the efficacy of a text requires not to prescribe but to make possible new relations of knowledge by not concluding. This is a lesson he learnt from the work of his *ignorant master* Foucault, whose books, he understands, 'produce effects to the very extent that they do not say to us what we must do with them'.⁹⁴

Cinema practices and names

The thesis proceeds on the basis of a simple structure in order to explore the engagement of different cinematic practices in the audiovisuality of names, to investigate how the

⁹² See Bosteels, Bruno, *Badiou and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011, p.129.

⁹³ Badiou, Alain, 'Rancière and the Community of Equals', *Metapolitics*, Verso, London, 2005, p.111.

⁹⁴ Rancière, Jacques, 'The Difficult Legacy of Michel Foucault', *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, Continuum, London, 2010, p.128

contemporary discussion of political subjectivities agitates the cinema. Each of its three parts gravitates around a specific name ('worker', 'factory', 'people'), focusing each time on the practice of a different filmmaker.

The first part investigates the significance of the name 'worker' in the recent cinematic practice of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub. The name 'worker' is key to understanding not only the methodologies they have developed with actors, those key cinema workers, but the subject matter and experiments of their recent films, such as *Operai, Contadini* [*Workers, Peasants* (2000)], based on the novels of Elio Vittorini. Their cinema differs from a workers' cinema understood as a cinema readily identifiable with the working class, its themes and forms. The writings of Rancière, among them those that are dedicated to Straub and Huillet's cinema, are useful to understand how the name 'worker' appears in their work, the audiovisual assemblages it constitutes, the disciplined practices it embodies, and the anachronistic temporalities it discloses, all through the exercise of a fundamentally anonymous capacity.

The second part analyses the troubled relation between the cinema and the site of the factory by focusing on two very different films, Harun Farocki's *Arbeiter Verlassen die Fabrik* [*Workers Leaving the Factory* (1995)] and Wang Bing's *Tie Xi Qu* [*West of the Tracks* (2003)]. 'Factory' operates in the chapter as a name with which to perceive how the refusal of cinema to engage with this site in fact betrays an essential connection between the two; furthermore, and more importantly still, it will guide an analysis concerning how this troublesome relation at the core of cinema as an industrial art comes to animate the critical practices of Farocki and Wang. Badiou's political understanding of

the factory as a worker's site helps to better discern what is at stake in the relation factory-cinema.

Finally, in a third part, I argue that the name 'people' has aroused inventive passions in the militant image. Together with a main case, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* by Peter Watkins, I revisit different episodes of militant cinema, from early anarchist cinema to Third Cinema, in order to investigate this passion and its variants. *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is a copious film that allows the analysis to approach and interrogate different practices that have laid claim to a popular pedigree of sorts (television, re-enactment, the presentation of a collective voice).

Part One

Cinema Workers,

Active Names in the Cinema of HUILLET and STRAUB

Introduction

The films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub have been compared to ‘traces of dinosaurs’.⁹⁵ This comparison does not seek to catalogue their films as formidable relics from an extinct era of cinema, as fossils from a not so remote past. Rather, it speaks of the temporal singularity of a cinema operating against dominant systematisations of the past and the present. Their cinema, both yesterday and today, has cultivated an ancient, untimely force, a marginal éclat that refuses the validity of normative partitions between the obsolete and the contemporary. In 1968, when their colleagues were filming factories, protests in the streets, discussions around a little red book, Straub and Huillet filmed baroque executions of Johann Sebastian Bach's compositions (*Chronik Der Anna Magdalena Bach*, 1967), re-visited a play by Pierre Corneille with a complex plot of political intrigue in imperial Rome (*Othon*, 1970) and examined the conflict between monotheism and polytheism (*Moses und Aron*, 1974). In 2000, in the context of a systematic erasure of the figure of the worker from the political stage, they film the relation between a group of workers and a group of peasants, the organisation and resistance of a popular commune and the lyrical account of a worker's life (*Operai, Contadini*, 2000; *Il ritorno del figlio prodigo - Umiliati*, 2003; *Sicilia!*, 1999). The élan of this militant obsolescence has created audiovisual configurations that have never ceased to question the order of the present and its determination of proper and improper relations

⁹⁵ Tackels, Bruno quoted by Ursula Böser in *The Art Of Seeing, The Art Of Listening, The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2004, p.216.

between names, ways of speaking and visibilities. There is an anachronistic obstinacy in the practice of Straub and Huillet, more than this, an experimentation with modes of obsolescence that defy the very objectivation of time into a timetable charting the passage of historical progress.

The variations in their practice concerned with separating the present from its conventional presentation complicate the habitual inclusion of their films within the Brechtian canon. According to Barton Byg, their identification 'as Brechtian filmmakers is certainly important, but it has led to the narrowing of the interpretative framework applied to their work'.⁹⁶ This is certainly true of the existing literature in English dedicated to their work. Their films are treated in the writings of Peter Wollen or Martin Walsh as paradigmatic applications of Brechtian Epic theatre, and thus as classics of cine-political modernism.⁹⁷ Their films, most often lumped together with Jean-Luc Godard's, are in this literature exemplary containers of 'disidentificatory practices'.⁹⁸ Interruptions of the film flow, disjunctions of the visual and the auditory are the appropriate techniques of a self-reflexive, anti-narrative, anti-illusionist cinema. These critical studies, decades old, are naturally focused primarily on the first part of their filmography.⁹⁹ Yet their films from the

⁹⁶ Byg, Barton, *Landscapes of Resistance – The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1995, p.25.

⁹⁷ D.N. Rodowick defines *political modernism* as 'the expression of a desire to combine semiotic and ideological analysis with the development of an avant-garde aesthetic practice dedicated to the production of radical social effects'. See Rodowick, D.N., *The Crisis of Political Modernism*, University of Illinois Press, Champaign IL, 1988, pp.1-2.

⁹⁸ I borrow the expression 'disidentificatory practices' from Griselda Pollock who uses it in 'Screening the seventies: sexuality and representation', *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*, Routledge, London, 1988. For exemplary texts about Straub and Huillet's Brechtianism see Wollen, Peter, *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-strategies*, Verso and NLB, London, 1982 and Walsh, Martin, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 1981.

⁹⁹ The current lack of attention to their most recent films in the English-speaking world is partly explained by the resistance of Huillet and Straub to subtitle in English. The last

last two decades are key to understanding both the fidelities and changes that their cinema has experimented with— with and beyond Brecht. Straub and Huillet, on their part, have continuously maintained their affiliation to the figure of Brecht, while at the same time distancing their work from any standard Brechtianism. This fidelity is of significance in the context of what they identify as an anti-Brecht consensus, a consensus that, in Badiou's words, regards Brecht as 'the ultimate example of a monstrosity: militant art'.¹⁰⁰ Straub insists on his fidelity to Brecht's practical dictum of 'making things strange'. According to Straub, such strangeness delineates a political horizon for filmmaking: 'to make every second of the film strange' is 'telling people we do not necessarily live in the best of all possible worlds', 'to show that things can be different, that things should be different'.¹⁰¹

Beyond a simplistic opposition between *with Brecht* and *without Brecht*, my argument situates the work of Straub and Huillet within a multiplicity of connections and resonances, including, but not simply privileging, the Brechtian reference. For this purpose, the recent work by Jacques Rancière on their cinema constitutes a significant

book dedicated to their work published in English, from 2004, does not address, for instance, their Italian films inspired by the novels of Elio Vittorini (*Sicilia!*, 1999; *Operai, Contadini*, 2000; *Il Ritorno del Figlio Prodigo – Umiliati*, 2003). See Böser, Ursula, *The Art Of Seeing, The Art Of Listening, The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Biet, Christian and Olivier Neveux (eds.), *Une Histoire du Spectacle Militant (1966-1988)*, L'Entretemps Editions, Vic La Gardiole, 2007, p.11. My translation ('Brecht apparaît comme l'ultime exemple incontesté de cette monstruosité: l'art militant'). In this volume, Badiou also insists on the need to recuperate the work of Brecht to oppose the dominant theatre today that celebrates the democratic moral consensus (pp. 175-187).

¹⁰¹ Straub, Jean-Marie in Lafosse, Philippe (ed), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.10. My translation ('De leur dire qu'on ne vit pas nécessairement dans le meilleur des mondes possible', 'faire sentir à chaque seconde d'un film que les choses sont étranges, qu'elles pourraient être autrement, qu'elles devraient être autrement').

contribution.¹⁰² In his essays, Rancière distinguishes between two moments in their filmography: a first period of affiliation to Brecht (*'dispositif dialectique'*), and a second period of affiliation to the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (*'dispositif lyrique'*).¹⁰³ The first period would correspond to a cinema of conflict where images, bodies and texts oppose each other. These oppositions function to reveal the state of the world and the manipulations of the powerful. The second period corresponds to a lyrical cinema where texts, bodies and voices resonate in unison. It is a cinema where audiovisual assemblages manifest the sensible intensity of a timeless communism. Rancière situates their film *Dalla Nube Alla Resistenza* [*From the Clouds to Resistance*, 1979], produced the year that marked 'the end of the leftist decade', as the pivotal film of this transition towards a 'post-Brechtian form'.¹⁰⁴ For Rancière, this transition exceeds the oeuvre of Straub and Huillet. *From the Clouds to Resistance* epitomises a general transformation of the grounds from where cinema articulates its relation to the political; from a politics of revelation to a politics focused on 'the examination of the impasses of emancipation'.¹⁰⁵ But Rancière does not simply divide the cinema of Huillet and Straub into two hermetic periods for interpretation, guided by the application of different formulas. Rather, the genealogies of efficacy Rancière elaborates insist on the incalculability of the relation between the

¹⁰² See Rancière, Jacques 'L'Etrange Tribunal', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, April, 8th, 2003, p.28; 'La Parole Sensible, à Propos d'Ouvriers, Paysans', *La Revue Cinéma*, Paris, May 2003, pp.68-78; 'Straub et Quelques Autres' in *Les Ecartés du Cinéma*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2011, pp.111-136. An interesting discussion between Rancière and a cinema audience on the cinema of Straub and Huillet has been transcribed and included in Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, pp.140-159.

¹⁰³ Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.142.

¹⁰⁴ Rancière, Jacques, *Les Ecartés du Cinéma*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2011, p.112. My translation ('la fin de la décennie gauchiste', 'une forme post-brechtienne').

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.113. My translation ('l'examen des apories de l'émancipation').

efficacy of art and the political.¹⁰⁶ His texts explore the ambiguities of efficacy in the cinema of Straub and Huillet, its oscillations between Brecht, Hölderlin and other companions.

These oscillations configure a constellation of multiple references making the names ‘worker’, ‘peasant’ and ‘people’ audible and visible to the point of intensity. The strange uranography that is this cinema constitutes a singular case with which to explore the main hypotheses of this thesis, to explore how contemporary cinema sonorises and visualises old political names as names-in-dispute, and how an audiovisual practice is affected and stimulated by its engagement with names as political names. ‘Worker’, ‘peasant’ and ‘people’ are continually present (also present *in absentia*) in the work of Huillet and Straub, in the filming process itself and in their discussions about their practice. The singularity of their audiovisual politics of the name lies in the fact that this cinema both affirms and renders anonymous these names at one and the same time. The audiovisual assemblages at work in their films – the way a name like ‘worker’ operates in their practice, for example – break the social harmony between the names in question and pre-defined capacities, configuring universes of reference where these names resonate in multiple conjunctions. The singular ambivalence of this nominal militancy occurs by intensifying the practice of the sensible into an explosion.¹⁰⁷ Their practice of *nominal dynamite* opens the names ‘worker’, ‘peasant’ and ‘people’ to groundless constructions of

¹⁰⁶ For a genealogical analysis of how art has constructed in different ways its political efficacy see Rancière, Jacques, ‘Les Paradoxes de l’Art Politique’ in *Le Spectateur Emancipé*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2008, pp.56-92.

¹⁰⁷ The sense(s) of Straub and Huillet’s militancy is still the subject of controversy for authors with an orthodox definition of *militant cinema*. See Albera, François, ‘Le Cinéma des Straub Milite-t-il?’, in Christian, Neveux and Olivier Neveux (eds.), *Une Histoire du Spectacle Militant (1966-1988)*, L’Entretemps Editions, Vic La Gardiole, 2007, pp.201-215.

capacity. Their films are not part of a *workers' cinema* – if this is understood as a cinema establishing the conditions for a form of worker identity. Straub, Huillet and other participants in the film process are cinema workers *dynamiting* any objective definition of the name ‘worker’. It is a cinema that dynamites who a name does or does not refer to, what a name can or cannot do – in one word, it dynamites the ‘constrain of nomination’.¹⁰⁸ This detonation does not erase ‘worker’, ‘peasant’ and ‘people’, but rather affirms them by uncoupling them from pre-determined capacities or incapacities, by undoing any pre-determined correspondence between these names and a mode of speaking or a mode of being visible. The dynamite that is this cinema creates conjunctions where ‘worker’, ‘peasant’ and ‘people’ pass through an open ended series of forms: a baroque cantata, a field, a red star, a forest, a poem, the wind in the trees, a theatrical assembly.

To see and listen to these intense detonations, I will first investigate a fundamental aspect of their practice, their work with those workers specific to cinema, the actors. Straub and Huillet have developed a methodology to work with a wide-ranging spectrum of people – a methodology that engages in a singular way with ‘worker’ as a political name. There is necessarily a form of anonymity at play in the acting process they set in motion, predicated upon the capacity of anyone to break with a pre-defined present, a present-as-destiny, so as to reconfigure the relation between a name and an action. In a second chapter, I will address their singular activation of obsolete names by focusing on their Italian film *Operai, Contadini* [*Workers, Peasants* (2000)], in order to argue that this film offers a paradoxical resistance to the contemporary condemnation of the names in question. *Workers, Peasants* activates these designations not by following normative

¹⁰⁸ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Histoire des Mots, Mots de l’Histoire’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretien*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.87. My translation (‘la contrainte de la nomination’).

protocols of action and modernisation, but through the operations of a temporal intensification that stubbornly defies consensual versions of the present.

Chapter 1: Workers, Peasants, Actors (the acting process in the cinema of Huillet and Straub)

Normative cinemas – cinemas that, as Noël Burch has put it, work within the Institutional Mode of Representation – operate almost exclusively with professional actors.¹⁰⁹ In the case of the Hollywood industry, post-Stanisлавskian methodologies continue to produce the most valued actors, the ‘method actors’.¹¹⁰ In normative cinemas, in any of its variants, the use of non-professional actors is exceptional and in any case confined to secondary roles. The term ‘non-professional actor’ describes different circumstances: amateurs who do not regularly work, actors who have received no proper training, actors who come from a world outside the culture industries, and so on. On the other hand, from the neorealist movement to avant-garde filmmaking (Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, John Waters, and so on), a different use of non-professional actors makes the distinction between critical cinemas and normative cinemas possible. This difference between critical and normative cinema in the work conducted with non-professional actors is not only the consequence of

¹⁰⁹ Noël Burch explores in *Life to Those Shadows* the formation of the Institutional Mode of Representation – an audiovisual language that passes as the natural way, and not one language amongst others, of making moving images. Burch, Noël, *Life to Those Shadows*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1990.

¹¹⁰ *Method acting* is a technique based on the system of acting developed by Konstantin Stanislavski. Method actors use emotions or reactions from their own life to immerse themselves in the characters they portray. Method acting was developed in the United States of America in different ways by actors/teachers such as Lee Strasberg or Stella Adler. For an analysis of Stanislavski’s impact in American acting see Gordon, Mel, *Stanislavski in America – An Actor’s Workbook*, Routledge, New York NY, 2010. For an analysis of Stanislavski’s system of acting see Stanislavski, Konstantin, *An Actor Prepares*, Methuen, London, 1988.

financial constraints (the costs of hiring a star). Working with non-professional actors is also a practice that legitimates the capacity of cinema to operate critically, its capacity to resist the normative framework of instructed acting. However, to sustain this stance, critical cinemas have often constructed and naturalised a hierarchical opposition, both discursive and practical, between professional and non-professional actors. In this opposition, professional acting is equated with an expert, lifeless artificiality and non-professional acting with either spontaneity or self-conscious artificiality (bad acting). This firmly established opposition values non-professional actors, but it also reduces the potential of non-professional acting to dislocate the consensual relation between acting and a legitimating technique, experience or qualification.

Apart from rejecting Stanislavski's methods as dull bourgeois realism, in his essays on theatre Brecht distinguishes between different kinds of non-professional acting.¹¹¹ He speaks of 'amateurs', 'semi-amateurs' and 'proletarian actors'. In the short text 'One Or Two Points About Proletarian Actors' he sketches a significant description of *proletarian acting* – a description that illustrates the ambiguous status of non-professional acting in his theoretical work. In this essay, Brecht defends enthusiastically the development in the thirties of a working-class theatre 'in the cities of Europe, Asia and America which have not been struck down by Fascism.'¹¹² He identifies the proletarian actor as someone 'who has not gone through a bourgeois acting school and does not belong to a professional association'.¹¹³ According to this definition, the proletarian actor is whoever has no formal title to act and yet he or she does so. This remarkable definition, with which 'One Or Two

¹¹¹ See Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964.

¹¹² Brecht, Bertolt, 'Two Essays on Non-Professional Acting' in *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964, p.148.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Points About Proletarian Actors' opens, breaks in a single blow the system that validates acting as the result of a professional qualification. It echoes, in theatrical terms, Jacques Rancière's reading of 'proletariat' as a name implicated in a process of declassification, undoing dominant equations in the capitalist regime between determined names and action or passivity (as noted earlier in the introduction). Thus defined, proletarian acting becomes a means of undoing the protocols of instruction, bourgeois or other, by which it is determined who is and is not an actor.

However, for Brecht, the political dimension of the proletarian actor lies elsewhere. Right after announcing the disruptive *whoeverness* of proletarian actors, he circumscribes their capacity to act within the unintentional reproduction on stage of the working and living conditions of the proletariat within capitalism. Proletarian acting does not constitute for him an opportunity to declare that anyone can act but rather an instance to confirm the existing conditions and capacities of the class that bears this name. Proletarian acting is worthy of attention, primarily, because it is what the proletariat is: 'simple'.¹¹⁴ The best proletarian actors would be, for Brecht, the ones whose acting corresponds exactly to being their simple selves: tired, uneducated, poor, and so forth. These are the attributes of proletarian reality, of proletarian theatre, of 'proletariat' as a proper name. Without any apparent ironical undertone, Brecht follows this logic to the point of reading these attributes as the unintentional qualities of the proletarian performance. He understands that 'the way these people act does to some extent betray their lack of surplus energy'.¹¹⁵ The acting of the proletarian actor cannot help but convey the fatigue of these workers who work in the factory during the day, and try to act on stage during the night. Such

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

exhaustion is, for Brecht, one of the main acting skills of the proletarian actors whose performance thus unintentionally reveals, through their fatigued presence on stage, the capitalist class division of time and energy. The main virtues of working-class theatre (exhaustion, its impoverished means and the lack of education of its members) see working-class theatre avoid the sophisticated simulations of ‘great individual emotions’ and the ‘psychological make-up’ of bourgeois theatre.¹¹⁶ Brecht transforms the conditions he assigns to the proletariat into one of the acting ‘techniques to alienate the actions and remarks of the characters being portrayed’ for an Epic performance.¹¹⁷ But these virtues of proletarian acting are unintentional abilities. These are not techniques the proletarians act with, but conditions proletarian actors live in. According to this reading – a reading that is characteristic of how the valorisation of non-professional actor in critical understandings is often caught in a problematic expertise/spontaneity division – proletarian actors cannot be other than themselves. They cannot enact anything else but their living conditions, to which they are then irrevocably tied. With this ontological condemnation, Brecht cannot but maintain a hierarchical difference between professional and proletarian actors that is not simply external to the ideology of bourgeois theatre. Professionals act, proletarians are. While celebrating the ‘small and struggling theatres of the workers’, Brecht does not appreciate proletarian actors as actors but rather as the fatigued living bodies rehearsing the theatrical organisation of capitalism.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p.149.

¹¹⁷ Brecht, Bertolt, ‘Short Description of a New Technique of Acting’, in *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964, p.138.

¹¹⁸ Brecht, Bertolt, ‘Two Essays on Non-Professional Acting’, in *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964, p.149.

Brecht's experiments with acting are considered his most significant influence on the cinema of Huillet and Straub.¹¹⁹ Particularly, Straub and Huillet have commented on their curiosity for his experiments with different spectra of diction, with different modes of speaking that distinguish different characters and show 'the connection between certain ways of acting and their means of expression'.¹²⁰ However, the work of Straub and Huillet with non-professional actors is very far from the sociological logic at the heart of the valorisation of fatigued proletarians in a text such as 'One Or Two Points About Proletarian Actors'. Very differently, the practice of Straub and Huillet with actors renders the opposition between professional and non-professional inoperative. Their practice produces different proximities and dislocations between acting and competence, processes within which the least trace of intellectual condescension for *le petit peuple*, positive or negative, is radically absent. The reconfiguration in their cinema of the capacity to act, and of what is taken to be a competent exercise of this capacity, calls into question the properness of the name 'actor' in other cinematic theories and practices that think of themselves as being critical, opposed in some way to the Institutional Mode of Representation. The radical process of anonymity and affirmation at work in the cinema of Huillet and Straub makes visible paternalistic tendencies at play in the valorisation of non-professional actors in other critical practices, from Brecht to the neorealist movement.¹²¹

A glimpse at the castings of Huillet and Straub's films shows their interest in working with actors of different backgrounds for different projects: in *Chronik Der Anna Magdalena*

¹¹⁹ Byg, Barton, *Landscapes of Resistance – The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1995, p.24.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ I explore further this question of the valorisation of the popular, from a different perspective, in the third part of this thesis, when analysing Peter Watkins' *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*.

Bach [*The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, 1967] they use non-professional actors who are professional musicians, in *Klassenverhältnisse* [*Class Relations*, 1983] a mixed cast of professional and non-professional actors are employed; in *Il Ritorno Del Figlio Prodigio – Umiliati* [*Humiliated*, 2003] they work with people of different professional backgrounds with no previous contact with cinema. Danièle Huillet, talking about the work with this variety of actors, explains:

One must always start clearing away. With professional actors it always takes a little longer than with the others, but non-professionals have their own clichés and, at the end, the work is not so different (...) at the end it is the same.¹²²

The *sameness* of this work with professional and non-professional actors operates at the heart of the acting methodology that Straub and Huillet have developed. In this methodology, the differences between professional and non-professional actors are not simply erased, but any essentialist opposition is short-circuited. Very different from Brecht's text and other theories of acting, to act is constructed as the anonymous capacity of anyone to develop a discipline to work with a text and relate in different ways a name with an inappropriate breathing, unqualified gestures and an affirmative performance. I have identified the three main dimensions at play in Straub and Huillet's acting method – dimensions I will now proceed to analyse. These are: the organisation of paradoxical encounters between readers and unreadable texts, the construction of grammars according

¹²² Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.84. My translation ('Il faut toujours commencer par débayer. Evidemment, avec des acteurs professionnels, ça dure un petit peu plus longtemps qu'avec les autres, mais les non-professionnels ont aussi des clichés, et, en fin de compte, le travail n'est pas tres différent').

to singular breathings and the militant discipline that detonates the opposition between proper and improper acting.

The Ignorant Encounter

The literature on the films of Straub and Huillet has insistently defined their cinema as ‘a generalised practice of disjunction.’¹²³ For a majority of critics, their cinema strictly agrees with Brecht's diagnosis on the illusionism produced by the bourgeois fusion of the arts and with the reasonable remedy Brecht concocts: to radically separate words, gestures, music. This analysis constructs a logical order where separation is valorised as an active art, while fusion, union and identification are relegated to its passive opposite.

Brecht condemned integration and defended separation with the following words:

The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production can simply be bypassed by radically separating the elements. So long as the expression ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ means that the integration is a fruit salad, so long as the arts are supposed to be fused together, the various elements will all be equally degraded and each will act as a mere ‘feed’ to the rest. The process of fusion extends to the spectator who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part.¹²⁴

Within this logic, the actors are to develop *alienating techniques* to separate themselves from the characters they play. The actors have to construct a distance: they have to show,

¹²³ Daney, Serge quoted by Ursula Böser in *The Art Of Seeing, The Art Of Listening, The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2004, p.23.

¹²⁴ Brecht, Bertolt quoted by Ursula Böser. *Ibid.*, p.24.

quote, reproduce and not become the character.¹²⁵ This art of separation is intended to produce a parallel effect on the spectators. It is the *raison d'être* of the performance technique of *distanciation*: to produce a reasoning space for the spectators to think and not to get lost within the seductive narrative of the spectacle. As we have seen in 'One Or Two Points About Proletarian Actors', Brecht grants the capacity to produce separation to professional actors and not to proletarian actors. Or, more precisely, in this text, professional actors are active agents of separation, while proletarian actors are beings producing, inadvertently, the effects of alienation. Proletarian actors have then a double role in this logic of separation: they are passive like the spectators of bourgeois spectacle, but they are unintentionally active, like the actors of the Epic theatre. They are both victims and critics of the capitalist theatrics.

Straub and Huillet continuously distance their cinema from the logic imposed by rigorous militants of separation. Their practice re-articulates the notion of distance instead of blindly following the order that prescribes separation as an antidote to passivity. Straub, quite bluntly, affirms: 'We want people to lose themselves in our films. All this talk about *distanciation* is bullshit.'¹²⁶ Different from the vocabulary of separation, Straub and Huillet repeatedly use the term 'encounter' to describe the different tensions and accords at work in their cinema. For them, a film is primarily 'an encounter with a place',¹²⁷ the

¹²⁵ See Brecht, Bertolt, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect' in *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964, pp.136-147.

¹²⁶ Straub, Jean-Marie quoted by Tag Gallagher in 'Lacrimae Rerum Materialized', *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 37, October 2005. Available at: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/straubs/> (accessed: 15/03/2013).

¹²⁷ Straub, Jean-Marie quoted by Barton Byg in *Landscapes of Resistance – The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1995, p.20.

subjects of their films are ‘chance encounters’,¹²⁸ their work is to organise ‘encounters between actors and texts’.¹²⁹ In their discourse, the term encounter implies distance, difference but also the occasion of a coming together, of framing foreign bodies together. Encounter here involves a separation, but a separation understood as a terrain to construct different proximities between strangers, and not as the opposite of passive identification. The logic of separation relies on alienation ‘to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism’.¹³⁰ Alienation is the means for one end, to activate the ignorant spectators into detached analysis and evaluation. With the term ‘encounter’, Straub and Huillet emphasise their distance from the logic that operates within a hierarchical partition between active alienation and passive identification and anticipates its effects. Straub and Huillet do not understand their practice as a formula to solve the separation between a text and an actor, a body and a tree, a voice and an image through either distancing or identification. In the discourse that accompanies their cinema, the term ‘encounter’ indicates that their work is to articulate a space for different proximities to happen, proximities that are more or less identificatory, more or less strange. Their work is not about dismantling the conventions of bourgeois cinema through separation, but it is rather involved with distances and proximities that reciprocally mediate the unexpectedness of different encounters.

¹²⁸ Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.13. My translation (‘Nous choisissons toujours nos sujets par affinités électives. Ce sont des rencontres de hasard’).

¹²⁹ Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.81. My translation (‘des rencontres entre des acteurs et des textes’).

¹³⁰ Brecht, Bertolt, ‘A Short Description Of A New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect’ in *Brecht On Theatre, The Development of An Aesthetics*, Methuen Drama, London, p.136.

One privileged terrain upon which Straub and Huillet experiment with constructions of proximity is the acting process itself. They understand the work with actors as a constructed encounter that re-articulates the given determinations of distance and ignorance. They organise what could be called an ignorant spatiality for the actors to work, concerning the distance separating the actors and the texts that the films are based on. The cinema of Straub and Huillet is based on complex, *unreadable* texts from European authors – and by complex and unreadable I mean texts that are not exhausted by the interpretive schemas to which they are subject, texts that ensure a part of themselves remains withdrawn from legibility. There is Franz Kafka, Cesare Pavese, Marguerite Duras, Friedrich Engels, and so on. In their methodology, the actors are first of all readers. More importantly, they are readers who do not know how to read the texts in their hands. This not knowing is not a question of educational deficiency: these are texts encountered as unreadable for anyone. This is the ignorant and paradoxical encounter around which this cinema is organised, an encounter wherein ignorant readers read unreadable texts. Huillet and Straub describe this distance and its generative potential as follows:

Huillet: ...one learns a lot more about people when they say a text that is not theirs, a text that is annoying them.

Straub: A text that is rebellious at the beginning.

Huillet: Someone who tells you his/her life reveals less and hides more. This is different when they say a text that is really strange to them.¹³¹

¹³¹ Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.42. My translation ('Huillet: ... on apprend beaucoup plus sur quelqu'un s'il dit un texte qui n'est pas lui, qui le dérange / Straub: qui lui est même rebelle au départ / Huillet: Quelqu'un qui vous raconte sa vie se révèle beaucoup moins et se cache beaucoup plus, tandis que s'il dit un texte qui lui est vraiment étranger').

Huillet and Straub explore this relation between ignorant readers and texts in different ways. They cast actors, for instance, precisely because they do not speak the language the text is written in, or, as is the case with their Vittorini films, they cast Italian actors for whom the Italian texts being worked with are unfamiliar territory.¹³² Thus, the actress Laura Betti, who had worked with Pier Paolo Pasolini in films such as *La Ricotta* (1963) or *Teorema* (1968), recites her role in *Class Relations* in German, a language that is not her own. The actors of *Schwarze Sünde* [*Black Desire*, 1988] are not German speakers and yet they have to learn and recite an intricate text by the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. The Italian actors of the Vittorini films have to deal with the complex prose of Vittorini (its use of different dialects and poetical language). In these different cases, Straub and Huillet understand that there is a common relation of foreignness to language *as such*, a relation not dependent on the actors' mother tongue. These encounters with texts thus make apparent the fact that a so-called maternal language 'is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable'.¹³³ As Derrida recounts in *Monolingualism of the Other*, there is 'an essential alienation in language' where language remains 'deserted like a desert in which one must grow, make things grow, build, and project up to the idea of a route'.¹³⁴ In the practice of Straub and Huillet, language is experienced as a common desert wherein every actor (professional, non-professional, proletarian or amateur) struggles to open up a distance *from* – yet a distance marked *within* – language itself, making of this language something other than their own.

¹³² I call *Vittorini films* their films based on texts by the Italian writer Elio Vittorini: *Operai, Contadini* [*Workers, Peasants*, 2001], *Il Ritorno Del Figlio Prodigo - Umiliati* [*The Return of the Prodigal Son – Humiliated*, 2003], *Sicilia!* [*Sicily!*, 1999].

¹³³ Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1998, p.58.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

There are, at least, two ways of understanding and working with this paradox of readers entertaining unreadable texts, two ways of practicing ignorance. Firstly, there is the *modus operandi* that intensifies the distance between readers and texts to the point that it breaks out in conflict. This is how the *Brechtian Corporation* habitually manoeuvres.¹³⁵ Estrangement operates as a conflict that exposes, with a view to denouncing, the social reality that works to separate a specific reader from a specific text. A proletarian actor struggling to read a text by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin is the occasion to analyse the class distribution of the production and reception of culture. The difficulties encountered by the proletarian actor reading Hölderlin are the vocalised symptoms of a social reality, the impoverished intellectual capacity of the proletariat as a class. To make this difficulty legible, to bring it out into the light, is to expose the cultural hierarchy at work within capitalism. This emphasis is problematic because it implicitly underwrites the essential condemnation of the proletarian actor: in this model, the proletariat is and must remain ignorant. Another possibility is to understand the affect of strangeness between reader and text as a necessary spatiality by which to articulate different approximations between foreign bodies. This second understanding does not work to accentuate differences in the social space nor to produce a healing epiphany of identification with a name rendered proper, but instead treats distance as a space to articulate different audiovisual rhythms out of ignorant, unexpected readings. In the methodology of Straub and Huillet, the ignorance of the actors is neither simply confirmed by accentuation nor understood as a lack of knowledge that the acting process is going to correct and resolve. Ignorance is the distance across which every reader must navigate. It is the stage upon which the particular idiom of a performance can emerge.

¹³⁵ I borrow the expression *Brechtian Corporation* from Jacques Rancière who uses it in 'Le Gai Savoir de Bertolt Brecht', *Politique de La Littérature*, pp.113-143. With this expression Rancière distinguishes between the work of Brecht and its canonisation by an industrial Brechtianism.

The Brechtian Corporation and its declared enemy, bourgeois theatre, have in common the production of qualified readers. Despite their differences, they both share the *mise-en-place* of acting methods considered essential to the proper reading of the text. Being a member of the Brechtian Corporation implies reducing the potential of strangeness to a protocol of calculable, pre-determined effects. In the practice of Straub and Huillet, the strange encounter between reader and text is not a distance between an ignorant reader and a professional reading, but rather the distance that questions the very legitimacy of the distinction between proper and improper readings. That is to say, as Straub affirms, there is no proper reading of a text: ‘a text is like a clearing in a forest, there are many ways out’.¹³⁶ Huillet and Straub's work with actors seeks not to explain a text, to read it once and for all, but to identify and organise the different paths that the actor-readers chance upon, having found themselves cast within this dense textual forest. Without a pre-determined method of negotiating its territory, neither a labyrinth nor a recreational park, this forest demands what Jacques Rancière calls, following the pedagogue Joseph Jacotot, ‘a practice of intellectual emancipation’.¹³⁷ Rancière has described this practice as a situation wherein the master/teacher ‘does not teach his pupils *his* knowledge but orders them to venture into the *forest* of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen’.¹³⁸ This practice of intellectual emancipation is altogether different from those pedagogical relations within which the distance between

¹³⁶ Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.22. My translation (‘Un texte, c'est comme une clairière dans la forêt, il y a beaucoup de chemins pour en sortir. Si on impose une issue, ce n'est plus le texte, c'est un mode d'emploi’).

¹³⁷ See Rancière, Jacques, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto CA, 1991

¹³⁸ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London, 2009, p.11 (my italics).

ignorance and knowledge is transformed 'into a radical gulf that can only be bridged by an expert'.¹³⁹ Rancière understands 'distance' very differently: 'every distance is a factual distance and each intellectual path is a path traced between a form of ignorance and a form of knowledge, a path that constantly abolishes any fixity and hierarchy of positions'.¹⁴⁰

In Huillet and Straub's cinema, acting is a process by which actors walk *through the forest of their ignorance*, forging a path that has knowledge not at its end point, but at each of its successive stages. The relations between Straub, Huillet and the actors and spectators are at no point relations of instruction. Huillet and Straub do not simply impart to the actors a pre-determined technique with which read the text in question. The acting process does not therefore culminate when the reader-actor becomes a qualified instructor, teaching the spectators in turn to establish a critical distance to reality. Against the straightjacketing of the textual landscape, it opens up the possibility of contingent encounters between words, actors and spectators. It is a process of textual appropriation and translation that does not produce a proper reading, be it strange or identificatory. Acting is not validated by a know-how that separates or identifies readers and texts. Instead, it functions as an anonymous capacity to read, to perform a 'poetic labour of translation'.¹⁴¹ Different actor-readers construct, rhythmically trace out and spatialise in all manner of ways this ignorant distance. They do what they do not know how to do: they speak, memorise and perform a language in which they have no footing, a text of which they are ignorant. This practice verifies the capacity of anyone to read the unreadable, which means to read a literary text without exhausting it but creating singular itineraries with its words, sentences and punctuation.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p.11.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p.10.

Breathing grammars

Danièle Huillet observed in the early nineties, in unison with other practitioners and theorists, that experimentation with sound and speech is much less acceptable than visual experimentation.¹⁴² Michel Chion, for instance, suggests in his 1990 book *Audio-Vision* that ‘theories of cinema until now have tended to elude the issue of sound, either by completely ignoring it or by relegating it to a minor status’.¹⁴³ Kaja Silverman has remarked that in most cinema theories the soundtrack has been ‘notoriously passed over in favour of the image’ and that the status of the voice has remained unquestioned and simply identified with a ‘guarantee of presence’.¹⁴⁴ In the last decades, the primacy of the visual as the essence of cinema, often making of the soundtrack a mere appendage or even a pollutant, has been increasingly challenged with film sound becoming the subject of numerous film studies investigations.¹⁴⁵ In the case of Straub and Huillet, there are two particular experiments with sound and speech that have played a fundamental role in their cinema and in its *unacceptability*. Since the beginning of their filmography, they have been strong advocates of direct sound, rejecting the dictatorship of dubbing.¹⁴⁶ But what

¹⁴² Reported by Barton Byg in *Landscapes of Resistance – The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1995, p.201.

¹⁴³ Chion, Michel, *Audio-Vision Sound on Screen*, Columbia University Press, New York NY, 1994, p.XXV. The French version of this book appeared in 1990.

¹⁴⁴ Silverman, Kaja, *The Acoustic Mirror, The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis IN, 1988, pp.42-43.

¹⁴⁵ Apart from the work of Michel Chion and Kaja Silverman, it is worth mentioning the work of Rick Altman. See Altman, Rick (ed.), *Sound Theory / Sound Practice*, Routledge, New York, 1992 and *Silent Film Sound*, Columbia University Press, New York NY, 2004.

¹⁴⁶ Straub's stance against dubbing is unequivocal: ‘dubbing is not only a technique; it's also an ideology. In a dubbed film, there is not the least rapport between what you see and what you hear. The dubbed cinema is the cinema of lies, mental laziness, and violence, because it gives no space to the viewer and makes him still more deaf and insensitive’.

interests me here is their experimentation with the different breathing capacities of the actors they work with.

The vocal delivery of the actors in their films has been criticised or praised for being *anti-natural*. In most of the critical writings devoted to their cinema, it has been automatically understood as the direct application of a Brechtian manual.¹⁴⁷ The various critical treatments of this question, whether the latter is weighted positively or negatively, have tended to hear the voices of the actors as inexpressive, neutral and toneless. Very differently, Straub and Huillet affirm that the voices they hear in their films are sensuous, powerful and polyphonic. They negate with vehemence the thesis that suggests their intention is to produce a neutral, anti-naturalistic voice. Straub and Huillet, who frequently assisted to the projections of their films *to continue their cinema*, have repeatedly answered questions from the public about the anti-natural way the actors speak in their films. For instance, in this exchange after the projection of the film *Antigone* (1992):

Member of the public: Why have you chosen such an anti-natural diction?

Straub: Because I find horrendous whatever seems natural in art. Because we do not need to do *Dallas* all over again, it has intoxicated enough people already, and in any case it looks natural but it is not.

Member of the public: *Dallas*, you do not find natural?

Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet, 'Direct Sound: An Interview with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet', in Weiss, E. and J. Belton (eds.), *Film Sound, Theory and Practice*, Columbia University Press, New York NY, 1985, p.152.

¹⁴⁷ For instance Thomas Elsaesser understands that 'Straub (...) explicitly fashioned the acting style and verbal delivery of his protagonists after Brechtian precepts'. See Elsaesser, Thomas, 'Political Filmmaking after Brecht: Harun Farocki for Example', in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, pp.133-15.

Straub: Not at all.

Member of the public: Ok, but I speak German and I was really bothered by the way the sentences in your film were cut where they should not have been cut.

Huillet: What do you mean by *where they should not have been cut*? I have heard a girl in the street saying *Beisst...* [she holds her breath] *der Hund*?

Straub: It bites ... [he holds his breath] the dog?

Huillet: And that was in the street!

Straub: Yes, it was a young girl we met at the harbour of Hamburg.¹⁴⁸

In this exchange, Huillet and Straub clarify their repulsion for what appears to be natural but at the same time that the work they undertake with the actors is not necessarily in search of an anti-naturalistic manner of speaking. For them, what they do happens ‘in the street’. The practice of Straub and Huillet is to a certain extent in agreement with that of Brecht, who criticised naturalism in theatre for creating a superficial image of reality that obfuscates complex social contradictions (*Dallas*). Brecht and his actors practiced a variety of techniques to vocally and verbally counter naturalist theatre: quotations, transpositions of the text into the past or into the third person, saying the stage directions aloud, and so on. These techniques were to function as ‘new effects’ with a view to both attracting and instructing the spectator who was ‘exhausted with his [*sic*] rationalised day

¹⁴⁸ Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.80. My translation (‘Le Public: Pourquoi avez-vous choisi cette diction antinaturelle? / Straub: Parce que j'ai horreur de ce qui a l'air naturel en matière artistique. Parce qu'il n'y a pas besoin de recommencer *Dallas*, ça a intoxiqué assez de monde, et puis de toute façon, ça fait semblant d'être naturel et ça ne l'est pas / Le Public: *Dallas*, vous ne trouvez pas ça naturel? / Straub: Non ce n'est pas naturel du tout / Le Public: Oui mais moi je connais l'allemand et j'ai été très gênée par le fait que les phrases étaient coupées là où il ne fallait pas / Huillet: Qu'est ce que ça veut dire là où il ne fallait pas? Moi j'ai entendu une gosse dans la rue qui disait *Beisst...* [après deux temps de respiration] *der Hund*? / Straub: Il mord... [après deux temps de respiration] le chien? / Huillet: Et ça, c'était dans la rue! / Straub: C'était une petite gosse dans le port de Hambourg’).

labour'.¹⁴⁹ These verbal improprieties allow the Brechtian actor to expose the tensions of social reality with 'a clash between tones of voice' and 'the alienation of the text'.¹⁵⁰

However, the voice of the actors in the cinema of Huillet and Straub shows other timbres of significance. The experimentation with the voice is not simply about revealing the noisy interior underneath the surface of naturalist performances, with the actors acting as advanced instructors by focusing on 'a reality obscured by habitual norms of perception, by habitual modes of identification with human problems'.¹⁵¹ In the cinema of Straub and Huillet, are first speakers who construct affirmative readings of complex texts. From the operatic declamation of the baritone Günther Reich in *Moses und Aron* (1975) to the commanding pronunciation of the non-professional actress Angela Nugara in *Sicilia!* (1999) the voices of Straub and Huillet's cinema are fundamentally powerful affirmations of a declarative capacity. These are not 'ephemeral', 'transient', 'incorporeal', 'precarious', 'ethereal' voices, but categorical demonstrations of the capacity of the actors to articulate and re-articulate, to give rhythm and tone to the encounter with a text.¹⁵² The voices in Straub and Huillet's cinema have a formidable weight. The solidity of the vocal performances, refuting the conventional equation of voice with incorporeality, verifies the presence of an essential capacity to read and speak a text in singular ways.

¹⁴⁹ Brecht, Bertolt, 'On the Experimental Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1961, p.3. In this text Brecht criticises naturalism for being an example of 'the assimilation of art to science' and he advocates a theatre that is both entertaining and instructive.

¹⁵⁰ Brecht, Bertolt, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect' in *Brecht On Theatre, The Development of An Aesthetics*, Methuen Drama, London, p.136.

¹⁵¹ Wollen, Peter, 'Ontology and Materialism in Film', *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-strategies*, Versoin and NLB, London, 1982, p.201.

¹⁵² I borrow these adjectives from Mladen Dolar who repeatedly uses them to characterise the voice in his book *A Voice And Nothing More*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2006.

In this cinema, the vocal performance of actors first of all concerns the capacity to breathe. In their initial readings, the actors stumble along with the complex texts in their hands, guided less by understanding than by breath, leaving in their wake a new score that delineates their passage through the material, its stops and starts, its difficulties and accidents. In the first rehearsals, Straub and Huillet listen with to the vicissitudes of respiration laid bare by the process of reading. They analyse ‘how the breath of each actor works, what is the magnitude of their respiration, where they are physically forced to stop to breathe’.¹⁵³ Working on the breathing capacity of the performers is habitual in acting methodologies.¹⁵⁴ What is peculiar about the work of Huillet and Straub is that they are not interested in training the breath of the readers-actors so that the latter can properly come to terms with, or even depart from, the rhythms of the text. For them what matters is that this exercise in respiration leads to singularly different encounters between text and actor. They understand the hesitations, pauses and accelerations of ignorant readers as *resistant materials of enunciation* with which to work. These readings fashion their own grammars, their own tempos. Straub explains this process as follows:

We make people read the texts, we are all sitting around a table, and then at a certain moment we say Look that was interesting, when you breathed at that point, it is interesting for the phrase, the syntax, the grammar, it is interesting for the meaning, we should keep it, and they say It is not possible, they protest,

¹⁵³ Straub, Jean-Marie; Huillet, Danièle; Raymond, Jean-Louis, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p. 23. My translation (‘découvrir comment fonctionne leur respiration, quelle en est l'ampleur et où ils sont obligés de s'arrêter’).

¹⁵⁴ For an analysis of the significance of breathing in different acting methodologies see Hampton, Marion; Acker, Barbara (eds.), *The Vocal Vision, Views on Voice by 24 Leading Teachers, Coaches and Directors*, Applause Books, New York, 1997.

we say Try it again anyway when we start again. And it becomes a structure, a score. It becomes a construction.¹⁵⁵

This construction begins with the destruction of the pre-existing semantic and metrical scaffold of the text. In this first encounter with a text, punctuation is dynamited, to use Straub and Huillet's expression. Their resistance to the text disarticulates the presumed correspondence between respiration and punctuation. The reader's breathing ceases to harmoniously coincide with the full stops and commas of the text in question, the two fall out of sync. Ignorant readers do not breathe where the punctuation tells them to breathe: with this stop a long pause, with this comma a shorter one. Straub and Huillet's work with the actors is not about synchronising this break between breath and punctuation, vanquishing the resistance to the text. Very differently, it is about organising the break as the *resistant material* at the base of singular performance-readings. As Gilles Deleuze has noticed, in the cinema of Straub and Huillet 'the act of speech' is 'itself a resistance, an act of resistance'.¹⁵⁶ The modulation of the text by the ignorant breath of the readers starts to resist precisely when it dynamites the punctuation. For Straub, there is a direct political reason to refuse following a pre-determined punctuation:

¹⁵⁵ Straub, Jean-Marie in Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.136. My translation ('On fait lire des textes aux gens, on est assis à une table, et puis à certains moments on leur dit Tiens tu as respiré là et c'est intéressant dans la phrase, dans la syntaxe, dans la grammaire, c'est intéressant pour le sens, on peut le garder, ils disent Pas possible, ils protestant, on leur dit Essaye quand même recommence. Et ça devient une structure, une partition. Ça devient une construction').

¹⁵⁶ Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2 The Time-Image*, The Athlone Press, London, 1989, p.254. See also Deleuze, Gilles, 'Having an Idea in Cinema (On the Cinema of Straub-Huillet)' in Kaufman, Eleanor and Jon Kevin Heller, *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy and Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1998, p.19.

We must not forget that in the Middle Ages the monks who copied Greek literature did not use commas and stops. Who put those commas and stops? It is the Prussian bureaucracy! It is Bismarck who invented the commas and the stops! And a little while after him, it was the Westminster banks!¹⁵⁷

To dynamite the punctuation is, as Straub reveals here with Brechtian brio, a refusal to obey a specific martial order of reading and speaking. It is a refusal to read and speak properly according to the grammar of a dominant military-economic complex. According to Straub, this cadence has been naturalised: martial punctuation has produced the natural way of speaking and listening. To dynamite this natural way is to resist the standardisation of speech and its cadence.

Huillet and Straub repeatedly insist in their interviews on the fact that their objective is not to do away with grammar altogether, because 'language is like life: it cannot be shapeless'.¹⁵⁸ The acting process consists of constructing other grammars in accordance with the inflections expressed through the taking of breath and the coming to terms with the text. There is a double process at play here. On the one hand, there are readers who inadvertently disintegrate with their hesitant breath the martial cadence produced by classical punctuation. On the other hand, and this is the difference from the unintentional qualities Brecht reads in proletarian acting, there is a process by which another rhythm is constructed in the wake of the disintegration of properly punctuated readings. In the practice of Straub and Huillet, to act implies a process that disintegrates a martial way of

¹⁵⁷ Straub, Jean-Marie in Lafosse, Philippe, *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.136. My translation ('Il ne faut pas oublier qu'au Moyen Age, les moines qui ont recopié la littérature grecque n'ont jamais mis un point ni une virgule. Qui a mis des points et des virgules? C'est la bureaucratie prussienne! C'est Bismarck qui a inventé les points et les virgules! Et, un peu après lui, les banques de Westminster!').

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. My translation ('Le langage c'est comme la vie: ça ne peut pas être informé').

reading and speaking, but in such a way that the resulting fragments form a rhythmic arrangement from out of the disintegration itself. The breaking down of martial grammar gives rise to other tempos, other associations between breathing and meaning.

The acting process in the cinema of Straub and Huillet is not simply a (re)appropriation of the text, the installation of a new rule concerning what the latter means, how it sounds or the associations it lends itself to. Rather, it confounds the very opposition between a proper and improper reading. In the process of reading and speaking, the actors produce their own rhythms to read and speak; but this *own* is not legitimated by a technical savoir-faire that would confirm the distinction between professional and non-professional actors. This *own* is an unqualified capacity, a grammar that verifies the capacity of anyone to make audible the possibility of different associations, approximations and distances. The acting processes in the cinema of Straub and Huillet determine the encounters between actors and texts as something anonymous; as though what was shown here is ‘the anonymity of language’ itself.¹⁵⁹ In his text ‘The Thought of the Outside’, Foucault describes with these words his experience reading the novels of Maurice Blanchot. He describes, somewhat enigmatically, the anonymity of language as a ‘boundlessness’ where language is not constrained by the authority of names.¹⁶⁰ Foucault understands that the boundless is not a void of silence, but ‘a murmuring space’ where other ‘possible beginnings’ between names and words are laid bare.¹⁶¹ Straub and Huillet's practice with actors and texts does not insist on the boundlessness of language to completely efface the speaker. Their cinema practices the anonymity of language as the occasion to construct

¹⁵⁹ Foucault, Michel, ‘La Pensée du Dehors’, *Dits et Ecrits I*, Gallimard, Paris, 2001, p.565. My translation (‘cet anonymat du langage’).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p.566. My translation (‘absence de limite’).

¹⁶¹ Ibid. My translation (‘espace murmurant’, ‘leur recommencement possible’).

singular readings that affirm as a common the capacity of anyone, professional or other, to breath, rhythm and act out a text.

For Foucault, the sound of the anonymous is not a mere silence but a murmur. Foucault uses this term often in his work to make audible in different contexts the tension and possible reconfiguration of the relation between the anonymous and the name.¹⁶² Listening to the cinema of Straub and Huillet is to experience the voices of the different actors, literally and poetically, as a powerful, intense murmur. Writing about the film *Der Tod des Empedokles* [*The Death of Empedocles*, 1987], Barton Byg notices how ‘the speed of the recitation makes it impossible for the audience to always comprehend the text’.¹⁶³ An anonymous member of an audience that has just seen *Antigone* explains to Straub and Huillet: ‘I could not follow the text very well, but different sentences arrested me’.¹⁶⁴ Straub admits that in their work with actors ‘the text indeed escapes’.¹⁶⁵ The disintegration in the acting process of the martial order of reading and speaking produces an analogous disintegration on the side of those listening, the audience. This phenomenon of murmuring, however, is not to be understood as a mere loss of intelligibility. Very differently, the murmur that disintegrates the martial cadence makes audible different possibilities of conjunction between speakers and listeners, words and ears. The

¹⁶² John Mowitt has noticed that ‘the murmur’ is a recurrent motif in Foucault’s work. He describes ‘murmuring’ as a ‘sound problem’ and a ‘discipline provocation’ with which Foucault designates where philosophy cannot think. See Mowitt, John, ‘Like a Whisper’, *differences*, Vol. 22, No. 2-3, 2011, pp.168-189.

¹⁶³ Byg, Barton, *Landscapes of Resistance – The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1995, p.200. Barton Byg played a small part in Straub and Huillet’s film *Class Relations*.

¹⁶⁴ In Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L’Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.79 (Le Public: ‘Plusieurs phrases m’ont arrêté’).

¹⁶⁵ Straub, Jean-Marie in Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.21. My translation (‘Le texte échappe en effet’).

retardations and accelerations, emphases, accentuations or pauses of hesitant readers punctuate the text with a murmuring that discloses different listening possibilities. The verbal performances demonstrate the capacity of anyone to either produce or listen to a murmur, that is, to resist the military rhythms of signification. The acting process in the cinema of Straub and Huillet does not culminate in readers obtaining *their proper voice* and spectators *their proper ear*. Very differently, these murmuring voices construct a sonic space to be heard and unheard, to be understood and misunderstood, to leave speech articulated or disarticulated. In this space murmuring dynamites the fixation of a communicative situation with proper and improper speakers and listeners. It dynamites the fixation of the ignorance/knowledge opposition and its attendant hierarchies of legitimate and illegitimate names, making the cavities of the mouth and the ear tremble with inexhaustible reverberations of signification.

A Discipline To Act

The acting method developed by Robert Bresson, a filmmaker Straub and Huillet refer to, half-humorously, as ‘papa’, offers a generative counterpoint to think further the singularity of the actor in Straub and Huillet's cinema.¹⁶⁶ After his first film, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), Bresson worked only with non-professional actors and amateurs. For him, working with non-professional actors is preferable because they are a ‘completely

¹⁶⁶ Bresson and his cinema were important references for Huillet and Straub when they decided to make cinema. See Raymond, Jean-Louis; Zanotti, Servane, ‘Entretien avec Jean-Marie Straub’ in *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, pp.83-109. For the significance of Bresson in the work of Huillet and Straub see Roud, Richard, *Straub*, Martin Secker and Warburg, London, 1971, pp.19-23.

malleable material'.¹⁶⁷ Bresson avoids professional actors because they know how to act. The voices and gestures of non-professionals are easier to mould according to the desires of the filmmaker-author because they ignore the tricks and habits of the profession. The actress Anne Wiazemsky has described in *Jeune Fille*, a chronicle of her experience filming with Bresson *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), the abandonment and docility that Bresson, who she describes as 'a fascinating tyrant', required from his actors.¹⁶⁸ Significantly, Bresson avoids using the term actor, preferring to use *model*, a term with connotations of passivity and submissiveness. In his writings, Bresson understands his models as enigmatic beings, beings who are at the same time 'flattened bodies' and 'unique, inimitable'.¹⁶⁹ Models are 'a mysterious appearance', i.e. a non-acting appearance that simply is.¹⁷⁰ Bresson maintains that his models 'are instead of simulating to be'.¹⁷¹ Very differently, non-professional actors in the cinema of Straub and Huillet are disciplined actors engaged in the patient construction of a singular relation to a text. As Rancière puts it: 'Straub and Huillet do not want to use the bodies of the actors as instruments but to create a new relation between ordinary beings and a text'.¹⁷² For Rancière, where Straub and Huillet work to propitiate an encounter with a text in order to affirm the acting capacity of every 'ordinary being', of anyone, to act, Bresson abuses his models as raw materials to mould at will. Where Straub and Huillet work to establish

¹⁶⁷ Jacques Rancière in Lafosse, Philippe, *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.157 ('Bresson voulait une matière entièrement malléable').

¹⁶⁸ Wiazemsky, Anne, *Jeune Fille*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, p. 48 ('Robert est un tyran fascinant').

¹⁶⁹ Bresson, Robert, *Notes On The Cinematographer*, Quartet Books, London, 1986, p.49.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

¹⁷² Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe, *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.157. My translation ('l'objectif n'est pas d'instrumenter les corps mais d'essayer de créer un rapport nouveau entre les êtres ordinaires et les textes').

every member of the cast as an active agent, Bresson's passive model conceptualises non-professional actors as enigmatic non-acting bodies.

The insistence on the enigma of being against the simulation of acting supports the dominant theoretical logic behind the utilisation of non-professional actors in cinema. This logic understands non-professional actors as spontaneous creatures incapable of acting, incapable of representing anything other than themselves and their natural incapacity. For this prevailing logic, non-professional actors are extemporaneous bodies with two main effects, realistic and/or comic. Critical cinemas have not been an exception to the normative valorisation of non-professional actors as spontaneous bodies. On the contrary, critical cinemas have most often thrived on this logic that distinguishes professional and non-professional actors in accordance with the opposition between the simulated and the real, the serious and the comical. Already Brecht, with brutal panache, valued amateur actors because of their 'rudimentary, distorted, spontaneous efforts'.¹⁷³ The use of non-professional actors has become a standard procedure to portray *life as it is*. Within the poetics of neorealist cinema, for instance, non-professional actors have a double part to play in the portrayal of the simple complexity of *life as it is*. Their accents, their vocabulary, their faces without make up are signifiers called upon to constitute the reality effect of the film.¹⁷⁴ Non-professional actors are seen as a source of an authentic reality, that is, of its ambiguity and contradictions. For the theoreticians of neorealism, non-professional actors contribute to the mystery of reality precisely because they do not act. They are a pure, non-acting, mysterious presence. According to André Bazin, in neorealist

¹⁷³ Brecht, Bertolt, 'Is It Worth Speaking of the Amateur Theatre?' in *Brecht On Theatre, The Development of An Aesthetics*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964, p.149.

¹⁷⁴ Roberto Rossellini, for instance, changed the scripts of his films according to the non-professional actors' manners of speaking but also according to their life experiences. See Brunette, Peter, *Roberto Rossellini*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1996.

performances ‘it calls upon the actor to be before expressing himself [*sic*].’¹⁷⁵ He understands that in neorealist cinema non-professional actors do not act but are instead ‘a silhouette, a face, a way of walking’.¹⁷⁶ Non-professional actors are ‘living creatures’ that echo with their voices and movements ‘the ontological ambiguity of reality’.¹⁷⁷ A congratulatory Bazin notes in passing ‘how much the cinema owes to a love for living creatures’.¹⁷⁸ But this love for living creatures cannot but reduce the non-professional actor to a non-actor, to being one incapable of action.

Pier Paolo Pasolini offers another version of neorealist politics– one agitated by a *passion for the people* more than a humanistic love. This passion is expressed in terms of an impulse at once lyrical and documentarian. In preparation for a film like *Accatone* (1961), Pasolini obsessively explored the neighbourhoods of the Roman lumpenproletariat, in what he describes as ‘the most beautiful days of my life’.¹⁷⁹ He took hundreds of photographs of faces, bodies, streets ‘creating a true photographic atlas of his social material’.¹⁸⁰ This popular passion also determines the conditions of the acting process at play in his cinema. The performance becomes a field of interaction between the being of the non-professional actor, the acting of the professional, and the playing capacity of both, a playing that transforms performing into a joyful game.¹⁸¹ This field of play creates a common platform for professional and non-professional actors alike. Furthermore,

¹⁷⁵ Bazin, André, *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1971, p.65.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.66.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p.72.

¹⁷⁹ Pasolini, Pier Paolo quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2012, p.200 (‘les plus beaux jours de ma vie’).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. My translation (‘réalisant un véritable atlas photographique de son matériau social’).

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p.201.

Pasolini looks for a similar defiance in any actor, whether professional and non-professional. In any actor he pursues those gestures and words that have survived the regularisation of the body and of language dictated by the development of capitalism. In *gli anni del boom economico*, Pasolini wants to capture the ‘beauty of a survival’, a ‘beauty of resistance’ in ways of moving and speaking condemned to obsolescence as abnormal, or nostalgically sung as having disappeared.¹⁸² To observe the gestures of the actors playing in Pasolini's cinema is to understand, as Didi-Huberman has observed, ‘the narrowness of history’ and ‘the immensity of the peasant world, which is a temporal immensity’.¹⁸³ The political capacity of cinema resides here in giving a new actuality to immemorial gestures, to words without origin. Pasolini writes that observing Anna Magnani during an elegant soirée he realised that he was not in front of a cinema star but of a peasant.¹⁸⁴ In her upright sitting position and silence Pasolini sees Magnani's grandmother, a peasant from the Ciociara region. Granddaughter and grandmother appear in his eyes ‘reunited in the instant of an attitude’, the attitude of a peasant defying ‘the bourgeois world that tries to forget her’.¹⁸⁵

The practice of Straub and Huillet with non-professional actors, if we can still use this category, is different from any ontological love opposing enigmatic beings and the deceptive art of the film star, but also different from the *game of resistance* at play in the cinema of Pasolini. For Straub and Huillet, acting, to resist in acting, is to submit to a

¹⁸² Ibid., p.211. My translation (‘beauté de survie’, ‘beauté de résistance’).

¹⁸³ Ibid., p.219. My translation (l’étroitesse de l’histoire’, ‘l’immensité du monde paysan, qui est une immensité temporelle).

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p.210.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. My translation (réunies l’instant d’une seule attitude’, ‘au monde bourgeois qui tente de l’oublier’).

disciplinary process.¹⁸⁶ This insistence on acting as a discipline is an understanding they share with their *papa* Bresson. Both the production of a Bressonian model and the production of a Straub-Huilletian affirmative actor are directed by a strict discipline. To organise a discipline to work with non-professional actors is significant because it is extremely rare in cinema. Non-professional actors regularly work within an economy of improvisation. In the case of Bresson's cinema, Anne Wiazemsky has explained the meticulous work involved in becoming a 'flat model'. She describes long reading sessions where Bresson listened attentively to non-professional actors not simply to erase any expressivity from their intonation, as it is often explained, but rather to produce a dry expressivity ('drier, drier' he used to ask his models during rehearsals).¹⁸⁷ In the work of Bresson, there is an ambivalent use of non-professional actors: they are required not to act while at the same time a discipline is developed in the service of this purpose. These *models*, and this complicates the habitual interpretation of Bresson's theoretical reveries, therefore act. In the cinema of Bresson, the acting 'seems blank or neutral but in fact it involves a great deal of artifice'.¹⁸⁸

In the case of Straub and Huillet, the work with the actors also starts with the reading of a text, more precisely with, as we have seen, an unreadable text. This unreadability calls for a disciplined reader. As Straub asks and answers:

¹⁸⁶ For an example of the meticulous work and discipline Straub and Huillet develop with the actors see the documentary film by Harun Farocki *Arbeiten zu Klassenverhältnisse von Danièle Huillet und Jean-Marie Straub* [*Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet at Work on Franz Kafka's 'Amerika'*, 1983].

¹⁸⁷ Wiazemsky, Anne, *Jeune Fille*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, p.12. My translation ('On faisait les choses comme on le pensait et il nous demandait plus sec, plus sec').

¹⁸⁸ See Brooke, Michael, 'Robert Bresson: Alias Grace', *Sight and Sound*, November 2007. Available at: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49407> (accessed: 15/09/2013).

Who is able to read a text? No one, none of us. To read a text one has to live with it for three, four months, and that is the work with the actors. One has to listen to them reading, re-reading, learning by heart, reciting well or badly to finally know how to discover a text we were not able to discover at the starting point.¹⁸⁹

These lines clarify that for Straub and Huillet discipline is not a matter of properly appropriating a text, but a matter of constructing the idiomatic relation by which a text is read. It is not a discipline to learn a technique of acting in order to fuse or distance actor/character/text. Discipline works in the cinema of Huillet and Straub as a tool to construct multiple appropriations, proximities and distances for ignorant readers struggling with complex texts. It is not simply a discipline of instruction; it is a non-military discipline to affirm a capacity to struggle (with the text) and a capacity to act (with the text). Alain Badiou understands that the invention of non-military forms of discipline is a crucial task for any political practice. In his political system, these modes of discipline are to offer alternatives to the militarist model of the Leninist Party:

The problem for emancipatory politics today, however, is to invent a non-military model of discipline. We need a popular discipline. I would say, as I have many times, that *those who have nothing have only their discipline*. The poor, those with no financial or military means, those with no power – all they have is their discipline, their capacity to act together. This discipline can be

¹⁸⁹ Straub, Jean-Marie in Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.87. My translation ('Qui est capable de lire un texte? Personne, aucun d'entre nous. Allons. Pour lire un texte il faut vivre avec lui pendant trois mois, quatre mois et ça c'est le travail avec les acteurs. Il faut entendre lire, relire, apprendre par coeur, réciter bien ou mal, et pour, à la fin, savoir découvrir vraiment le texte que l'on n'était pas capable de découvrir au point de départ et dont on savait vaguement l'importance qu'il avait, mais c'est tout').

reduced to a military model, the model that dominated the first part of the twentieth century. How can we find, invent or experiment with a non-military discipline?¹⁹⁰

In the practice of Huillet and Straub, there is no military conquest of the impossible text, rendering the unreadable finally readable. The actor is not an expert armed with a technique for readability. To act is instead a matter of disciplining the distances between actors-readers and a text. It is a process whereby discipline generates further distances; or rather it generates murmurs for further distances and approximations between readers and texts, words and sounds, actors and spectators. As Straub explains: 'After so much rehearsal the actors understand what they are speaking so well that they no longer need to understand the sense of each word: the sense (meaning) becomes bodies that think and breathe'.¹⁹¹ Discipline does not simply evaporate meaning but makes audible the murmur of its possible reconfiguration in the actors' performance, in their expirations and postures. Discipline, memorisation, rehearsals create moments 'where actors simply explode. But not by blowing up like fireworks – which has nothing to do with the text. But rather the text itself becomes an explosion'.¹⁹² Discipline is not a technique to properly or improperly read a text by Marguerite Duras, Elio Vittorini or Friedrich Hölderlin in good or bad French, Italian, German.¹⁹³ Discipline works as a process through which actors

¹⁹⁰ Badiou, Alain, 'We Need a Popular Discipline: Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative, an Interview by by Filippo del Lucchese and Jason Smith', *Critical Inquiry*, No. 34, 2008, p.650.

¹⁹¹ Straub, Jean-Marie quoted by Barton Byg in *Landscapes of Resistance – The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1995, p.211.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Jacques Derrida analyses in *Monolingualism of the Other* his 'hyperbolic taste' for speaking and writing 'in good French'. This *good* is not a proper but rather 'the dream to make something happen to this language'. See Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1998, pp.48-51.

detonate the proper/improper relation into a murmur; a murmur that discloses singular assemblages between voices, images, bodies.

For the tradition of critical realism, non-professional actors do not need discipline because, quite simply, they do not act. Their ignorance of theatrical techniques is ‘a guarantee against the expressionism of traditional acting’.¹⁹⁴ Discipline could only corrupt the ‘simple appearance of beings’.¹⁹⁵ The argument in favour of the ontological truthfulness of non-professional actors against the deceptiveness of professional actors manifests the anti-theatrical stance inherent to many critical cinemas and theories, which obstinately determine the specificity of cinema against that of the theatre. This matter is not only a question of cinema's autonomy. The equation of acting with deception is yet another avatar of the malaise the verb ‘to act’ continuously provokes in modern Western culture. To oppose the purity of being to the impurity of acting does not resolve this malaise, and more often than not leads to paranoid conclusions about cinema. Professional actors are suspicious because they instantiate a separation between the spectators and reality by expressing and simulating something other than what they are themselves. To act is understood as a deceptive operation, creating and concealing distance, mediation and representation. The role of critique is then understood as the unveiling of such deception. Non-professional actors are therefore valued not for constructing, not for creating, not for acting but for being extemporaneous bodies that abolish this evil distance, the distance of representation. Thus Bazin can admire *Ladri di Biciclette* [*The Bicycle Thief*, 1948] as an

¹⁹⁴ Bazin, André, *What is Cinema?, Volume 2*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA 1971, p.65.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

example of 'pure cinema', pure because in it there are 'no more actors, no more story, no more sets'.¹⁹⁶ For Bazin pure cinema is, enigmatically, 'no more cinema'.¹⁹⁷

From Bazin to the avant-gardes, the critical tradition of denouncing cinema as representation has regularly flirted with poetical dissolutions of cinema or with provocative prophesies about its imminent death. As the lettrist filmmaker Isidore Isou states in his film *Traité de Bave et d'Éternité* [*Venom and Eternity*, 1951]:

I believe first that cinema is too rich. It is obese. Cinema has reached its limits, its maximum. With the first movement of widening which it will outline, the cinema will burst! Under the blow of congestion, this greased pig will tear into a thousand pieces. I announce the destruction of cinema, the first apocalyptic sign of disjunction, of rupture, of this corpulent and bloated organization that calls itself film.¹⁹⁸

Very different from these prophetic revelations announcing the end of cinema, in the practice of Straub and Huillet the detonation of the proper/improper distinction determines acting as a capacity that can be exercised by anyone. Acting in their cinema does not abolish the distance of representation through the supposed immediacy of non-acting but organises disciplines with which to read, breathe, and punctuate this distance. The insistence on mere being as the signature of authenticity turns non-professional actors into

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p.60.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ In a similar manner an anonymous voice states in Guy Debord's lettrist film *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade* [*Howls for Sade*, 1952]: 'There is no film. Cinema is dead. No more films are possible. If you wish, we can move on to a discussion'. Quoted by Ken Knabb in *Guy Debord, Complete Cinematic Works*, AK Press, Oakland CA, 2003, p.2. In Cannes in April 1952 Debord and other *lettrists* covered the posters of the film festival with the slogan: 'Le cinéma est mort' ['Cinema is dead']. See Debord, Guy, *Oeuvres*, Gallimard, Paris, 2006, p.59.

incapable non-actors, whereas the insistence on singular disciplines turns acting into an affirmation of capability. *Making acting strange*, to adapt Brecht's dictum, is to question the consensus equating professional actors with artificiality and non-professional actors with authenticity. To act in the cinema of Straub and Huillet does not take the form of professional specialisation. It is practiced as the anonymous discipline of *those who have nothing and those who have something*, the discipline of fellow strugglers. Far from end time scenarios, in this cinema workers, actors, musicians, peasants, students, intellectuals, filmmakers are brought together as actors, in action.

Chapter 2: Dateless Names (workers, peasants of the film *Workers, Peasants*)

In the film *Operai, Contadini* [*Workers, Peasants*, 2000], Huillet and Straub work with characters, constellations and texts from the novel *Le Donne di Messina* [*Women of Messina*] written by Elio Vittorini, an author recognised as the major literary inspiration of the Italian neorealist movement.¹⁹⁹ Huillet and Straub focus the film on one of the various narratives that this complex novel develops: the story of a group of workers and peasants from the North and South of Italy who, at the end of the second World War, come together to reconstruct a village. The twelve actors who interpret these workers and peasants (Enrico Achilli, Rosalba Curatola, Martina Gionfriddo, etc.) are non-professional. Many of them had had some amateur acting experience in the theatre Francesco di Bartolo from the small town of Buti, near Pisa.²⁰⁰ Rancière has observed that Straub and Huillet work in their Vittorini films ‘not only with actors who are non-professionals but with people who are outside the academic and cultural worlds’.²⁰¹ This observation, although needing some nuance, points to the singularity of the acting in *Workers, Peasants*. According to

¹⁹⁹ There are two versions of *Women of Messina*, the first published in 1949 and the second in 1964.

²⁰⁰ Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet, *Ecrits*, Independencia Editions, Paris, 2011, p.142.

²⁰¹ Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.157. My translation (‘Ce qui les intéresse c'est de travailler avec des acteurs qui non seulement ne sont pas professionnels mais qui sont aussi extérieurs au monde de l'université et de la culture’). As we have seen Straub and Huillet have worked with other non-professional actors (students, filmmakers, writers).

Rancière, the actors in Huillet and Straub's Vittorini films are two times unqualified, two times illegitimate actors: as non-professionals and as outsiders to the cultural world.

At first glance, there appears to be a coincidence between the actors-outsiders and the roles they play in the film, workers and peasants creating a commune at the margins of post-war Italian society. But, how does this coincidence work in the film? A sociological interpretation would understand that it authenticates the representation, nothing more appropriate than a worker interpreting a worker, a peasant a peasant. But doesn't the cinema of Straub and Huillet short-circuit such interpretation treating this coincidence, and Vittorini's 'hunger for reality', in accordance with a different aesthetics?²⁰² The coincidence between the actors-outsiders and the workers, peasants of the novel does not validate a truthful representation or a more or less mysterious incarnation; instead it intensifies the representation as a field with which to break with sociological destinies, constructing other relations between names and capacities. Through the relation of actors to roles, the film gives visibility to a pre-sociological coincidence. The aesthetics of the film do not restore, truthfully or nostalgically, the names 'worker' and 'peasant', but make them resonate again through an *active obsolescence*. The singular politics at work in *Workers, Peasants* resides in making visible and audible 'worker' and 'peasant' as names in the present not by re-newing them, but by affirming them as *dateless names*.

²⁰² See Shiel, Mark, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*, Wallflower Press, London, 2006, p.46.

The cinema of Straub and Huillet is a rare example of ‘peasant cinema’; a cinema that works to be ‘anchored in the lived experience, the space-time of peasants’.²⁰³ More precisely, since *Too Early, Too Late* (1982) – a diptych contrasting the deserted-planet aspect of the contemporary French countryside with the very inhabited landscapes of Egypt – their cinema has been engaged in what could be called an immemorial communism. This is a communism that rejects the hierarchical distinction between workers and peasants operating in canonical Marxism. Very different from the Soviet faith in the laws of history and progress, Straub and Huillet manifest in their work the power of a communism ‘not as a future objective, not as an episode from the past, but as still present, in a way as always already present’.²⁰⁴ Their work since the eighties has consistently investigated the material world of the nature with profound attentiveness, from ‘the fate of insects’ to ‘the wind in the trees’, discovering and visualising another temporality, an anti-progressive experience of time, in the service of revolutionary politics.²⁰⁵ This other time involves breaking with many customs and traditions of cinema, the latter an art that, as Serge Daney has pointed out, ‘belongs to the city’.²⁰⁶ Timeless Marxists, as Badiou calls them, Huillet and Straub are not preoccupied with the

²⁰³ Daney, Serge, ‘Cinéméorologie’, *Libération*, Paris, 20-21 February, 1982. Available at: <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=21944> (accessed: 15/03/2013).

²⁰⁴ Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.143.

²⁰⁵ Straub is fond of quoting D.W. Griffith (‘What modern movies lack is the wind in the trees’) and Rosa Luxemburg (‘The fate of insects is not less important than the revolution’). See Rosenbaum, Jonathan, ‘Intense Materialism: Too Soon, Too Late’ in *Film: The Front Line 1983*, Arden, Denver CO, 1983.

²⁰⁶ Daney, Serge, ‘Cinéméorologie’, *Libération*, Paris, 20-21 February, 1982. Available at: <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=21944> (accessed: 15/03/2013). Michel Cieutat, a film critic for *Positif*, understands that watching *Workers, Peasants* ‘one has the right to ask oneself, where is the cinema in all this?’. See Seguin, Louis, *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris, 2007, p.279.

communicative modes of revolutionary agitation but with inventing cinematic forms that make perceptible the class struggle as a telluric phenomenon.²⁰⁷

In *Workers, Peasants* the names 'worker' and 'peasant' are re-worked to affirm the communist people Vittorini imagined as present.²⁰⁸ Defying canonical models of the political name, Straub and Huillet intensify the obsolescence of these names to make them resonate together. There is no activation of the peasants to equate them with the workers but a reconfiguration of the image and sound borne by each name. 'Worker' and 'peasant' are immersed in intense audiovisual conjunctions, wherein these names are affirmed together and against each other, in agreement and in difference: a montage dividing and uniting them, non-professional actors versifying Vittorini's prose, workers and peasants poeticising their everyday conflicts and joys. These associations and disassociations do not activate these names by adapting them to the demands of a communicative present. Rather, it makes them visible and audible in an intense *visual murmur* that relates these names to the strict formalities of a parliament in a forest, to a commanding presence, to a powerful language that does not separate song and prose. It is an intensification that defies normative models of the present and the active by making these names timeless and anonymous, open to anyone and any time.

²⁰⁷ Badiou understands that for Huillet and Straub 'the question of power, class relations, is much older [and] much more powerfully structured than [the militant left's] agitation believed'. Badiou, Alain, 'Penser le Surgissement de l'Événement', *Cahiers du Cinéma (hors-série): Cinéma 68*, 1998, p.14.

²⁰⁸ Deleuze argued that Straub and Huillet are the greatest political filmmakers in the West because 'they know how to show how the people are what is missing, what is not there'. I argue here that in the last two decades of their career, it is very precisely the people as present that concerns them. Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2 The Time-Image*, The Athlone Press, London, 1989 [1986], p.216.

In order to see and listen to this singular activation of ‘worker’ and ‘peasant’, I will draw a distinction, in a first section, between two modes of narrating the relation that exists between workers and peasants: the narrative that orthodox Marxisms have insisted upon whereby the peasant is to be subordinated to the worker, and the narrative of equality between workers and peasants elucidated in the novel *Women of Messina*.²⁰⁹ Then, in a second and third sections, I will explore the intense audiovisual conjunctions that the film develops. From an analysis of the opening scene to a study of the formal and lyrical capacities of the actors, I explore the singular intensification of the names ‘worker’, ‘peasant’ at play in the film.

1- Narratives of Workers and Peasants

Guido Bonsaver has somewhat too hastily described the novel *Women of Messina* and its narrative about the commune of workers and peasants as a ‘Marxist *Robinson Crusoe*’ and a ‘utopian microcosm’.²¹⁰ In his description of the novel in question, Bonsaver equates with rather broad brushstrokes Marxism and utopianism. The relation between workers and peasants in *Women of Messina* does not subscribe to the conventional narratives that

²⁰⁹ Etienne Balibar has defined ‘orthodox Marxism’ as follows: ‘the tradition (...) which developed at the end of the nineteenth century and was institutionalized by the Communist state-parties after 1931 and 1945’. See Balibar, Etienne, *The Philosophy of Marx*, Verso, London, 2007, p.1. The relation between the countryside and the city is one of the ‘big contradictions’ that have agitated Marxism. See Lazarus, Sylvain, *Anthropologie du Nom*, Seuil, Paris, 1996, p.34.

²¹⁰ Bonsaver, Guido, *Elio Vittorini, The Writer and The Written*, Northern Universities Press, Leeds, 2000, p.163. Bonsaver borrows the expression ‘a Marxist *Robinson Crusoe*’ from the literary scholar Donald Heiny.

deal with this pairing as constructed by orthodox Marxism.²¹¹ The visual culture developed by Communist state-parties has most often glorified both the figure of the worker and the peasant as the two protagonists of revolutionary politics. And yet, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued in *Multitudes*, the major lines of Marxist



Figure 1. Vera Mukhina, *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* (1937)

²¹¹ For an account of how orthodox Marxists have read the relation between workers and peasants see ‘The Twilight of the Peasant World’ in Negri, Antonio, Hardt, Michael, *Multitudes, War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, The Penguin Press, New York NY, 2004, pp.115-127. There are instances within the history of emancipatory politics, such as within Maoism, in which the figure of the peasant has had a different significance. See for instance Mao, Tse-Tung, ‘Preface and Postscript to the Rural Surveys’, March and April 1941, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung*, Vol. 3. Available at: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_01.htm (accessed: 12/05/2013). For an interesting Maoist echo in Europe see Union des Communistes de France Marxistes-Léninistes, *Le Livre des Paysans Pauvres*, Editions Maspero, Paris, 1976.

thought have repeatedly constructed the relation between workers and peasants as a hierarchical division. This hierarchical relation is founded on the understanding that ‘proletariat’ is a proper name— a name that entitles the workers to act as professional actors in the drama against capitalism. The lack of a proper name on the other side of this division therefore relegates the peasant backstage in these narratives. How then is this proper/improper distinction sustained? After studying French peasant communities, Marx arrived in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* at the often quoted and much discussed conclusion that:

Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interest *in their own name*, whether through a parliament or through convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.²¹²

In these lines, the distinction between communication and isolation functions to posit the distinction between a political name and a non-political name. Hardt and Negri have argued that for Marx political subjectivity is ‘fundamentally’ a matter of ‘internal

²¹² Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York International Publishers, New York NY, 1963, p.124 (my underlining). This paragraph has been interpreted in a myriad of ways. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance, reads in it an ironical dimension: ‘that passage that has been quoted by so many respected, and justifiably respected, radical critics as the sign of Marx's implacable racism, or classism, or whatever the hell it is, is such a profoundly ironic passage as it is used by Marx. I am surprised that critics of stature have not taken the trouble to read all of that complicated essay, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, carefully enough to know that one does not fault Marx on that one.’ See Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, ‘Subaltern Talk, Interview with the Editors’ in Landra, Donna and Gerald MacLean (eds.), *The Spivak Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1996, p.307.

communication'.²¹³ In the context examined in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx understands that the name 'peasant' does not function as a political name because the peasants are isolated, because there are no collective relations to sustain the political ground of the name 'peasant'. 'Proletariat' functions as a political name because the Parisian workers cooperate and communicate with each other, a relational bond that allows them to become a collective subject of action. In this sense, Marx posits communicability here as the ultimate criterion with which to distinguish between political and non-political names, between the professional actor of politics and the extra. For Marx, the logical consequence of this distinction is that in their isolation the French peasants are to 'find their natural ally and leader in the urban proletariat'.²¹⁴

Hardt and Negri understand that the major lines of Marxist thought have essentialised the subordination of the peasant to the worker described by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. They have reproduced again and again its hierarchical narrative. For them, the 'rich debate' between different Marxist readings around the figure of the peasant has consistently 'conceived of the peasantry as a class that could have revolutionary potential only by following the urban industrial proletariat'.²¹⁵ The figure of the peasant has been situated in these debates not simply outside but at the periphery of the political. 'Peasant' has functioned as a name without a proper referent, as an ambiguous name that can designate on demand either a class or a non-class to be represented, or not, by a professional, communicative name ('proletariat', 'industrial worker', 'worker'). The figure

²¹³ See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in *Multitudes, War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, The Penguin Press, New York NY, 2004, p.123.

²¹⁴ Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York International Publishers, New York NY, 1963, p.128.

²¹⁵ See Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in *Multitudes, War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, The Penguin Press, New York NY, 2004, p.123.

of the isolated peasant signals the limits of the dominant readings of Marx that equate the political with the capacity of the communicative men of action. The isolation of the peasant therefore calls for further examination and debate.²¹⁶

The work of Antonio Gramsci, a vital part of the intellectual landscape of Vittorini, offers a significant geography of this Marxist narrative with its division of Italy between the industrial North and the peasant South.²¹⁷ In his writings, Gramsci insists that in the Italian context of the twenties and thirties ‘factory workers and poor peasants are the two driving forces of the proletarian revolution’.²¹⁸ The factory worker is to lead an alliance with the peasantry in order to oust the bourgeoisie. Beyond this canonical schema, the texts of Gramsci emphasise not only the necessity of this revolutionary alliance, but also its difficulty. The first step is to struggle against ‘certain prejudices and conquer certain forms of egoism which can and do subsist within the working class’.²¹⁹ The workers, if they are to lead the peasants, will have to overcome and combat the anti-Southern propaganda disseminated by the bourgeoisie that has transformed the inhabitants of the

²¹⁶ The critique of Hardt and Negri devoted to ‘the major readings of Marxist thought’ does not question the basic distinction between isolated peasants and communicative workers. They see the subordination of the peasant as a ‘tragic story’ that demonstrates ‘the injustice and dire consequences of one subject speaking for a subordinated other’. And yet, in their quest for a ‘common labouring substance’, a substance they call ‘multitude’, they reproduce the very logic of subordination of the peasant that they otherwise denounce: ‘the figure of the peasant that emerges from its passive and isolated state, like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, discovers itself to be part of the multitude’. *Ibid.*, pp.123-125.

²¹⁷ Vittorini had complex relations with the Italian Communist Party, which he abandoned in 1951 following a disagreement about the role of the intellectual with Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Party who succeeded Gramsci. See Drake, Richard, *Apostles and Agitators: Italy's Marxist Revolutionary Tradition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2003.

²¹⁸ Gramsci, Antonio, ‘Workers and Peasants’ in Forgacs, David (ed.), *The Gramsci Reader*, University of New York Press, New York NY, 2000, p.116.

²¹⁹ Gramsci, Antonio, ‘Some Aspects of the Southern Question’ in Forgacs, David (ed.), *The Gramsci Reader*, University of New York Press, New York NY, 2000, p.171.

South into 'biologically inferior beings', 'semi-barbarians or totally barbarians', 'backward', 'lazy, incapable, criminal'.²²⁰ Gramsci then denounces the way in which this ideology has even been painted with socialist colours by authors seeking to justify it scientifically in the name of 'the science of the proletariat'.²²¹

In *Women of Messina* Vittorini works with this division that is at once geographical, ideological and socio-economical. However in his narrative, there is no subordination of the figure of the peasant. Very differently, peasants and workers are the names of two actors discussing the reconstruction of a village and the government of the common (the cultivation of the land, the production of electricity, the distribution and making of food). *Women of Messina* stages a scene of equality between workers and peasants that Straub and Huillet will seek to intensify, cinematically, in *Workers, Peasants*. The film focuses on four specific chapters (chapters XLIV, XLV, XLVI and XLVII). These four chapters are significant within the structure of the novel because in them each character, peasant or worker, takes the time to narrate the events that occurred in the commune during the hard winter of an unspecified year. The chorus of different characters displaces the voice of the narrator. In these chapters, the narrator only intervenes to introduce the different narratives with the following lines:

The things that happened there until February (...) are told by the village's inhabitants during the long summer evenings, to refresh their memories or to

²²⁰ Ibid., p.173.

²²¹ Ibid., p.174.

inform now one and now another, a friend or a new acquaintance who asks about what went on.²²²

These four chapters juxtapose without further explanation the different narratives, each intervention always preceded by the proper name or nickname of the character speaking: Widow Bilotti, Elvira La Farina, Whistle, and so on. The multiple voices construct a fragmented narrative about the differences that separate workers and peasants. In Vittorini's text, there is an oppositional dynamic framing the relation between these personae. Their conflicts around milk and defection, energy and goats, the cold winter and love stories lay bare an opposition concerning two distinct socio-economic groups. The different voices corroborate a sociological distinction between workers and peasants: everything in their lifestyles separates them. Different characters explain that workers and peasants inhabit different temporalities: peasants do not work during the winter; workers do not work on Sundays. Other characters describe differences in temperament: peasants are melancholic, workers are enterprising. Workers are the energetic people of the machine and peasants are the invariable people of the land. The text formalises the opposition: the different narratives are punctuated by the use of formulas such as 'we, the peasants' and 'we, the workers'.²²³

And yet, at the same time, this scrupulous opposition constructs a formal equality between workers and peasants; an equality to discuss what has happened in the commune. Furthermore, it is an opposition constantly de-centred by different versions and excurses,

²²² Vittorini, Elio, *Women of Messina*, New Directions Books, New York NY, 1973, p.132.

²²³ In the English version of *Women of Messina* 'contadino' has been translated with 'farmer' instead of 'peasant'.

individual anecdotes, repetitions and poetical images. There is an opposition between equals but also non-attributable visualities and musicalities at play in the words spoken by workers and peasants respectively. In *Workers, Peasants*, Straub and Huillet will intensify the opposition between the two parties, but intensify so as to produce a form of commonality between the visualities and musicalities of their voices and poetic registers. As Rancière has remarked, Straub and Huillet construct through this intensification of the sensible a *consistency* for the dialogue between workers and peasants in the film:

The debates between workers and peasants (...) are not dramas of division (...) these conflicts are not factors of dissociation; on the contrary for the Straubs these are factors of consistency. This communist people exists, it exists in its division and because of its capacity to affirm this division.²²⁴

In *Workers, Peasants*, the division between workers and peasants is intensified as a solid yet tense form of relation. The discussion in *Workers, Peasants* is not so much a space of communication, but rather an opportunity to affirm a common audiovisual capacity of workers and peasants, making these two names all of a sudden resonate together, across material conditions in which they otherwise appear to be separated.

2. *The Opening Scene: the title, the red star, the aria, the birds, the wind in the trees*

²²⁴ Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.144. My translation ('Ces débats entre ouvriers et paysans (...) ne sont pas des drames déchirants à la manière de Commoli pour qui ces conflits sont des éléments de dissociation: chez les Straubs, ce sont au contraire des éléments de consistance. Ce peuple communiste existe dans sa division même et, au fond, par sa capacité à affirmer la division').

A title, as a proper name, guarantees the unity of an oeuvre. Titles have the capacity to hold together, sum up, stand for and register an oeuvre as oeuvre, countering the threat of dispersion or disorganisation. Different authors have interrogated this authority and opened up a distance between title and work that questions their presumed equivalence and unification. Adorno, for instance, pursues in various texts a crusade against the conformist titles of the culture industry.²²⁵ He favoured titles ‘so close to the work that they respect its hiddenness’, titles ‘into which ideas immigrate and then disappear, having become unrecognisable’.²²⁶ Roland Barthes, from a different perspective, also made visible the strange distances separating title and oeuvre. Barthes explored generative distances where the proper name does not exhaust the named, or, more precisely, where the relation between titles and titled can function as a terrain to play with the expectations of nominal identification.



Figure 2. Cy Twombly, *Arcadia* (1958)

²²⁵ See ‘Titles, Paraphrases of Lessing’, ‘A Title’, ‘Unrat and Angel’, in Adorno, T. W., *Notes to Literature*, Volume Two, Columbia University Press, New York NY, 1994.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4, 6.

In his essay 'Sagesse de l'Art', Barthes analyses the work of the American painter Cy Twombly and observes that there is no immediate correspondence between titles and paintings. According to Barthes, Twombly's titles have a 'labyrinthine function'.²²⁷ Between the titles and the paintings there is not a direct relation (nor a mere non-relation) but a labyrinth for the spectators to produce different connections between the name and what there is to see on the canvas. In this labyrinth titles function as 'the bait of a signification'.²²⁸ Titles and their nominal authority to signify are the lure; the spectators in pursuit of meaning are the prey. The apparent distance between classical titles such as *Arcadia*, *The Italians*, *Phaedrus* and the calligraphic abstraction of the paintings frustrates definitive correspondences between name and named. For Barthes, the trap of the title as a univocal signification is transformed into a labyrinth wherein the spectator is able to 'walk', 'go back', 'set off again'.²²⁹ Barthes does not simply negate the authority of the title but uses it to open a distance where different proximities between word and figure can happen. This labyrinth is for him something like the condition for the birth of the viewer.

But, apart from making of Twombly another case for the vicissitudes of death and birth that preside over the production and transmission of meaning, Barthes marvels in his essay at the extraordinary stickiness of titles, at their adhesive resistance to separation. He insists on the phantasmagorical capacity of Twombly's titles to stick to the paintings: 'something

²²⁷ Barthes, Roland, 'Sagesse de l'Art', *L'Obvie et l'Obtus, Essais Critiques III*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1982, p.170. My translation ('une fonction labyrinthique').

²²⁸ Ibid. p.169. My translation ('l'appât d'une signification').

²²⁹ Ibid. p.170. My translation ('Les titres de Twombly ont une fonction labyrinthique: ayant parcouru l'idée qu'ils lancent, on est obligé de revenir en arrière pour repartir ailleurs').

remains, of their ghost, and impregnates all the canvas'.²³⁰ Titles share the fundamental characteristic of the ghost: its inability to depart. Ghosts simply won't go away, they stick around. The spectrality of titles attaches them to the titled even when they appear to be completely foreign to each other. Barthes admires the viscous resistance of the name, its refusal to be washed away in the multitudinous flow of the anonymous. The name does not exhaust the named but obstinately haunts it, allowing it to take different shapes across different readings. Between name and named, an improper relation continuously sketches emergent fields for possible reconfiguration.

Huillet and Straub also experiment with the stickiness of the title in their cinematic practice with names, images and sounds. If their films are always based on literary works, they never borrow their titles from the material they work with. This refusal to establish an eponymous relation between the titles of the film and the text it is based on is partly explained by the filmmakers' refusal of the genre of literary adaptation. The film is the evidential assemblage of an encounter with a text, not its dependent audiovisual conversion. As Straub insists: 'One cannot adapt a literary work. Television does it, and it is like fabricating sausages. The film only exists if there is an encounter between the text and the author of the film'.²³¹ The non-eponymous titles of the films do not only translate their commitment to an open, anonymous encounter with a text. The nominal power of the title constitutes an occasion to intervene and re-draw the line of evidence between a name and the named, the distances and proximities between a title and a film.

²³⁰ Ibid. My translation ('quelque chose reste, de leur fantôme, et imprègne la toile').

²³¹ In Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.13. My translation ('On n'adapte pas une oeuvre littéraire. La télévision le fait, mais alors c'est fabriquer des saucissons. Le film n'existe que s'il y a une rencontre entre le texte de départ et l'auteur du film').

Straub and Huillet often make use of a ‘classical’ language, the language of classical Marxism, for example. Titles such as *Class Relations* or *Workers, Peasants* give rise to a certain set of expectations of signification concerning what they signify. But, more than a play with the authority of the name, their practice makes of the title an opportunity to intervene in the significance of the denominations in question. Interestingly, with *Class Relations* and *Workers, Peasants*, Huillet and Straub develop two different strategies of intervention, each mirroring the other, and thereby demonstrating the complex affiliations developed by their cinema. With *Class Relations* they render the relation between title and film strange (a strategy of dissociation), whereas in *Workers, Peasants* the title makes an explicit reference to the content of the film (a strategy of association).

Class Relations is based on Franz Kafka's novel *Amerika*. This unfinished, posthumously published work was given the aforementioned title by Kafka's literary executor, Max Brod. In fact in his diary Kafka would refer to the text under the title *Der Verschollene* [*The One Who Was Never Heard of Again*].²³² Straub and Huillet decided to call their film *Class Relations* – a title that makes, according to Straub, a conscientiously ‘brutal’ reference to Marxism.²³³ However, the content of the film cannot be directly explained as a Marxist reading of Kafka's unfinished novel. As Straub comments about the title: ‘If the film would talk ostensibly of class relations I would not have called it like that. The title is

²³² See Adorno, T.W., ‘Titles, Paraphrasing Lessing’, *Notes to Literature*, Volume Two, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p.7.

²³³ Böser, Ursula, *The Art Of Seeing, The Art Of Listening, The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2004, p.116.

good because this is precisely what the film does not do'.²³⁴ How is one to understand this economy distancing the title and what the film does?

The critics and theorists who have written about *Class Relations*, altogether few in number, have most often understood that between title and film there is a radical separation. We are to take the abyss between film and title as a more or less empty Brechtian shock, a frustrating void. Götz Grossklaus laments that 'the reading of Kafka's text which the title announces is not realised'.²³⁵ Huillet and Straub have deceived us by calling a film *Class Relations* that has nothing to do with the subject announced. For Grossklaus, the concept of class relations has a univocal meaning and, correspondingly, an appropriate representation. Another author, Ursula Böser, understands that the 'mismatch' between title and film demonstrates that 'Straub/Huillet remain strikingly reticent about matters of politics'.²³⁶ For Böser, between the ostensibly political title *Class Relations* and the film there is absolutely no relation. There is only an unbridgeable void that demonstrates a supposed reserve towards the political in Straub and Huillet's cinema. With these interpretations, Grossklaus and Böser demonstrate their critical competence: they have not swallowed the title's deception, the bait of signification lying in wait.

And yet, as Barthes suggests, the title haunts and sticks to the titled. The strange disjunction or even apparent non-relation here does not simply signify an empty void. The distance between title and film opens up a gap that allows filmmakers and spectators alike to articulate different approximations between names, images and sounds. In the case of

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid. p.117.

²³⁶ Ibid., p.116.

Class Relations, the distance and resonance at play between title and film allows the spectator to question the transparency of their nominative relation. To open up this distance and thereby re-articulate the relation between the designation 'class relations' and its representation is not politically reticent, as Böser assumes, but on the contrary, an entirely loquacious gesture on the part of Huillet and Straub. A political relation between name and named re-stages the distance-proximity, the strangeness-familiarity of the two terms to different views and ears. Huillet and Straub perforate the line of evidence between title and film, by exposing the authoritative act of naming to an instance of fundamental ambiguity.

The title *Class Relations* does not give a dogmatic description of the film, but nor is it an entirely figurative determination. The relation of strangeness between the title and the film (strange precisely because it sticks) questions the possibility of establishing a conclusive definition of the concept 'class relation'. One could say that the distance broken open and sustained here calls into question the propriety of the name 'class relation' – a propriety that both Grossklaus and Böser assume. Between *Class Relations* and *class relations*, the film becomes the field of a re-articulation concerning the stated name and its associated representations. The construction of a gap between title and film works as an operative distance with which to re-articulate the potential of the concept of class relation in terms of what we will go on to see and hear in the film. The latter makes visible and audible 'class relation' as an active name, a name potentially tied to potentially endless visualities and auralities.

In *Workers, Peasants*, the reactivation of the name follows an opposite strategy. In this case, there is a straightforward relation between the title of the film and its content, a blunt accord with no trace of mismatch. Straub and Huillet consider this their ‘frankest title’.²³⁷ The title *Workers, Peasants* not only names the respective classes that the characters in the film each belong to. With the comma that separates and associates the two terms, the title also visually acts out the relation these two classes will have in the film. *Workers, Peasants* graphically performs, from the opening frame of the title, a circumstance that at once separates and yet constructs a shared space of enunciation between these classes as they appear in *Women of Messina*. Here the title works in clear accordance with the film (its narrative, its construction, its politics). There are no cracks in the relation between the title and the film, which submits its terms to a perfectly plain unification. This coincidence encompasses the names ‘worker’ and ‘peasant’ without ceremony. And yet, in addition to didactically announcing the content of the film, the way in which the title is inserted within the film’s opening credits starts to affect the names ‘worker’ and ‘peasant’ with a strange resonance.

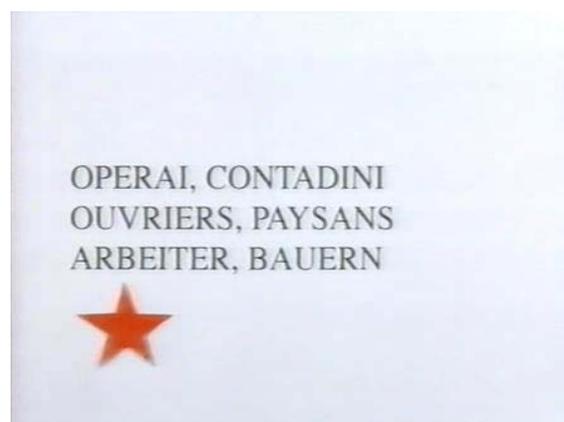


Figure 3. The opening frame of the film *Workers, Peasants* (Straub and Huillet, 2002)

²³⁷ In Straub, Jean-Marie, Huillet, Danièle, Vittorini, Elio, *Ouvriers, Paysans*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2001, p.174. My translation (‘[le titre] le plus franc et le plus parlant’).

The opening stages of the work announce the double movement at play in the film and in the title *Workers, Peasants*: the affirmation but also the re-arrangement of the audio-visuality of the names in question. The first frame of the film presents the text of the title: *Operai, Contadini*. The inclusion of the French and German translations of workers, peasants (*Ouvriers, Paysans; Arbeiter, Bauern*) insists on the internationalist significance of these names. Straub and Huillet underline the importance of these names further by making this first frame last thirty seconds. For thirty seconds we look at what could easily be the cover of a Marxist book discussing the roles of these two social classes (the protagonist role of the workers who come first and the secondary role of the peasants in Revolution). Underneath the text of the title, there is a red star that further emphasises the Marxist context.²³⁸ This star is a cryptic reference to a left-wing party recently prohibited in Italy – however the general symbolism at stake here cannot but exceed such a specific allusion.²³⁹ Every element in this first frame of the film seems to announce a canonical Marxist reading of ‘worker’ and ‘peasant’. However, after ten seconds, the aria of a cantata by Johann Sebastian Bach starts to play (BWV 125-4, Aria duetto). Two voices sing a text with clear religious connotations: ‘Es schallet kräftig fort und fort / Ein höchst erwünscht Verheissungswort: / Wer glaubt, soll selig werden’ (‘There echoes powerfully on and on / A word of promise most desired: / Whoever believes shall be blessed’). This

²³⁸ Straub and Huillet have made three versions of *Workers, Peasants*. There are minimal differences between each versions (questions of lights, positions of the actors), in one of them there is no red star accompanying the title. See Bursi, Giulio, ‘*Ouvriers, Paysans et la Pratique des Différentes Editions dans le Cinéma de Straub-Huillet*’, *Cinéma & Cie*, Vol. IX, No. 13, Fall 2009, pp.51-60.

²³⁹ See ‘Le Cinéma des Straub Milite-t-il?’ in Biet, Christian, Neveux, Olivier (eds.), *Une Histoire du Spectacle Militant (1966-1988)*, L’Entretemps Editions, Vic La Gardiole, 2007, pp. 201-215.

cantata is hardly the official soundtrack of the proletariat and the peasantry. From the first 'worker' and 'peasant' sound out differently.

How is one to see and listen to this juxtaposition of a Marxist iconography and baroque religious music? Huillet and Straub do not simply organise in these initial moments of the film a shock between the image of the title and the music, between the names 'worker', 'peasant' and the aria. It is not a shock exposing, in a strict Brechtian élan, the social contradictions that establish a hierarchical gap between the working class (and the peasantry) and the noble art of classical music. The aria they have chosen is a duo, two masculine voices singing the same text. However, these two voices have different tones and timbers; these are the voices of a countertenor and a bass. Their singing happens at different intervals, coinciding and separating so as to create the effect, in the best operatic tradition, of two voices asking and answering each other, of two voices in dialogue. Between the title and the aria, more than a shock, Straub and Huillet suggest a similar conflictive duality. The partition worker-peasant announced in the title is reflected in the partition between the two operatic voices of the cantata. Between the Marxist duo worker-peasant and the Bachian duo tenor-bass, a coincidence gives to the names 'worker' and 'peasant' a lyrical intensity that agitates their standard Marxist audiovisuality. It is a radical accord that disrupts sociological partitions between high art and social class, religious music and emancipatory politics.

Bach's cantata continues for the rest of the opening credits. It stops abruptly with the first sequence of the film, a 180-degree shot of the space where the action is going to take place, a forest interior. This shot lasts around three minutes: we see the forest, the light

filtered through the trees. We hear an auditory close-up of running water and in the background birds singing. This long sequence of the forest contrasts with the opening credits (the Marxist title, the cantata), a contrast between nature and culture, and continues to disrupt any expectation of a canonical Marxist exaltation of the names 'worker' and 'peasant' in the film. The first frame with the title given in three different languages, the red star, the cantata with two different voices singing the same text, the violins, the birds chirping, the running water: all these are audiovisual elements that coincide and contrast, run parallel to each other and intersect, coming together to form an intense audiovisual conjunction. This effervescent opening resolutely affirms the persistence of the names 'worker' and 'peasant' while corroding the socio-political definition that binds them to a pre-defined audiovisuality.

3. *A Stubborn Common*

The chapters from *Women of Messina* used by Straub and Huillet for *Workers, Peasants* juxtapose different narratives from different characters. This juxtaposition of voices has been compared to a series of interviews that produce 'a kind of collective self-presentation'.²⁴⁰ In *Workers, Peasants* these multiple voices appear not so much as a collection of interviews but as a formal discussion between two opposing groups. The different stories 'told by the village's inhabitants during the long summer evenings' are transformed into the formal speeches of lyrical orators.²⁴¹ The formality of the discussion

²⁴⁰ Bonsaver, Guido, *Elio Vittorini, The Writer and The Written*, Northern Universities Press, Leeds, 2000, p.165.

²⁴¹ Vittorini, Elio, *Women of Messina*, New Directions Books, New York NY, 1973, p.132.

insists on the division between workers and peasants, and at the same time on their shared capacity to dignify and poeticise their separation and conflicts, aspirations and joys. Huillet, Straub and the actors transform the dispute into a formal and poetic discussion that takes place in a pre-modern parliament.

It is an open-air parliament, situated in a dateless forest. Together with the formal declarations, birds chirp, water runs, leaves shake, insects buzz. Workers and peasants are orators illuminated by the impressionistic sunlight filtrated by the trees. The murmurs of the forest do not simply contrast with the formality of the discussion, disrupting the transparency of communication, distracting the listener; they also coincide with the affirmation of a capacity common to workers and peasants alike: to speak beyond the codes of modern parliamentary politics. For Straub and Huillet, the noises of the forest are not unwanted accidents, distortions to be controlled or eliminated through sound engineering. Straub understands that ‘if you have decided to make films with direct sound, the locations that you choose have to be right not only in terms of images but also in terms of sound’.²⁴² More than right, the forest of Buti (Pisa) where they filmed *Workers, Peasants* is an endless source of wonder. As Louis Seguin has specified in the cinema of Straub and Huillet,

... the song of the rooster and the lizard, the breath of the wind and the light variations are not, as a certain habit of perfection regrets, obstacles, scoria, objects of remorse, but the unexpected trace of substance. Matter is not a

²⁴² Straub, Jean-Marie quoted by Burlin Barr, ‘Too Close, Too Far: Cultural Composition in Straub and Huillet’s *Too Early, Too Late*’, *Camera Obscura*, 53, Vol. 18, No. 2, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2003.

victim anymore, a subject to slaughter, to submit or exploit. It opens itself to whoever knows how to welcome it.²⁴³

This attention to and admiration for the spaces they film, their visual and sonic richness, has led Straub and Huillet to develop, since the eighties, different versions of each film they have made (three in the case of *Workers, Peasants*). It is in order to welcome the unexpected accidents of the forest, but also the city, that Straub and Huillet edit the same film using different takes. Minimal differences distinguish these versions: a rooster sings or not, a nut falls from a tree or not, an insect buzzes or not, the light recedes or not, depending on a cloud passing.²⁴⁴

Huillet and Straub do not understand the spaces in which they film as sets. In *Workers, Peasants* the forest is not a background from where workers and peasants speak, but the sonorous common ground of their disagreements. Between the lyrical exchange and the sounds of the forest there are continuous passages and isolations, visual accords, overflows and obstructions. This multiplicity is very different from the order of proper parliamentary communication and its audiovisual politics. The different discourses in play

²⁴³ Seguin, Louis, *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Petite Bibliothèque des Cahiers du Cinéma, Paris, 2007, p.147. My translation ('Le chant du coq et le lézard, le soufflé du vent et les variations de la lumière ne sont plus, comme le déplore l'habitude d'une certaine perfection, des obstacles, des scories et des remords, mais la marque imprévue de la substance. (...) La matière n'est plus une victime, un sujet qu'il faudrait abattre, soumettre ou exploiter. Elle s'ouvre à qui sait l'accueillir').

²⁴⁴ For Straub this practice of multiple versions of the same film has its political dimension. He understands it as an attack 'against the reproducibility of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (each version of the film is unique) but also 'against the uniqueness of the oeuvre' (the film is in itself not one but many). See Straub, Jean-Marie, 'Un Attentat Contre la Reproductibilité de l'Oeuvre d'Art', in Straub, Huillet, *Ecrits*, Independencia Editions, Paris, 2011, p.112. My translation ('un attentat contre la reproductibilité de l'oeuvre d'art à l'époque de la technique, mais aussi un attentat contre l'unicité de l'oeuvre d'art').

are audible not simply as the statements of a worker or a peasant, but as lyrical speeches equally crowded by the murmurs of the forest. The density of this assemblage makes it difficult to determine the direct, intended relation between one audiovisual strategy and one specific effect. For *Workers, Peasants*, Straub and Huillet do not simply draw upon strategies from the existing catalogue of political cinema, Brechtian or other, but rather they construct a murmuring intensity, a strange common space, a forest, within which workers and peasants stand.

A formal division

In *Workers, Peasants* Huillet and Straub visually choreograph the division between workers and peasants at work in Vittorini's text. The audiovisual organisation of the film emphasises the opposition that the different voices of the text articulate. The oppositional narratives and their audiovisual organisation strictly coincide in the film. The coincidence underlines the division that the workers and peasants will talk about whilst at the same time instituting their audiovisual equality. The equality of workers and peasants is not represented as a result of their discussion, the result of a compromise, for example. It is an equality already there, from the first frame of the film, in the blunt coincidence between the text and the audiovisual distribution of workers and peasants. The formalisation of the discussion constructs a parliament not so much for workers and peasants to exchange ideas and reach agreements, but rather a parliament to demonstrate sensuously and structurally their equality in the acts of enunciation. The formalisation of the discussion is worked through in the film across at least three levels, which I will proceed to analyse

now: the oppositional framing of the bodies, the postures these bodies adopt, and the mode of speaking that issues from them.



Figure 4. The group of peasants in *Workers, Peasants* (Straub and Huillet, 2002)



Figure 5. The group of workers in *Workers, Peasants* (Straub and Huillet, 2002)

Straub and Huillet do not frame workers and peasants together. They frame two clearly distinct groups. Workers occupy the frame only with workers, and peasants with peasants.

In the first movement of the film, when a worker or a peasant starts to speak, he or she does it, in the first place, as the member of a visually distinct group. The peasant Pompeo Manera speaks first in the name of the peasants, the worker Cataldo Chiesa speaks first in the name of the workers. For the major lines of Marxist thought, to continue to use Hardt and Negri's terminology, this opposition constructs a hierarchical relation between the capacities of communication of the active worker and the isolation of the passive peasant. Classically, this opposition is drawn with a view to transforming the peasants into communicable subjects. The oppositional logic at work in *Workers, Peasants*, very differently, institutes a structural equality in the form of a quasi-symmetrical representation of workers and peasants. In the first movement of the film, the group of workers is comprised of three figures (two standing, one sitting down) over and against which is a group of peasants symmetrically arranged. Between the two groups there is also an equitable distribution of the use of speech. The characters/groups occupy the frame and say their lines in strict turns, following a formal rotation. They are represented in a structural equilibrium, equals in the oppositional configuration presented.

The postures of the bodies are cast in accordance with the formality of the discussion. In the first half of the film, the actors representing the workers and peasants are perfectly straight and almost immobile. Furthermore, the characters are positioned facing the camera. There are no profiles in the first movements of the film. Frontality is an ancient convention used in the representation of kings, emperors and gods. It customarily conveys the idea of a commanding presence. The script repeatedly describes this frontality as follows: 'they [the actors] look in front of them and speak: to a judge? To the spectator?

To God?'.²⁴⁵ There is a double effect created by the rectitude of the bodies and their frontal representation. The division between workers and peasants is again emphasised. They do not look at each other but across the space in front of them towards a third, invisible party. The different speeches are visually organised as monologues. And yet, at the same time, the narratives nevertheless respond to each other. The division determines the acts of speech imparted here as both monologue and dialogue, isolation and communication. On the other hand, the frontality and the rectitude it represents is employed in the same manner for both workers and peasants, determining them as honourable and powerful presences. It is not simply a matter of appropriating the ancient visual language of power – the straight, frontal position of the King's body. Straub and Huillet are not only interested in creating a contrast between workers and peasants, who are wearing casual clothes, and the conventional visual code of absolute, premodern power. The bearing and position of the body function here not so much an act of usurpation, but rather as the manifestation of the common capacity of workers and peasants to stand and face a judge, the spectator, God. And the exercise of this capacity begins to contest the historical incapacitation of these names.

Besides, in the film, the actors not only say but also read their lines. Reading does not function here simply as a tool to help the actors recall their lines. Reading is a perfectly choreographed gesture, a gesture indicated in the script. It does not indicate a moment of hesitation; on the contrary it is a principal part of the performance and its formalisation. Furthermore, the actors do not simply narrate, more or less convincingly, what has happened in the commune during the past winter. The disciplined performances transform

²⁴⁵ Straub, Jean-Marie and Danièle Huillet and Elio Vittorini, *Ouvriers, Paysans*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2001, p.35. My translation ('regardent devant et parlent à un juge, au spectateur, à Dieu?').

the narratives into formal declarations; the actors ‘read the text as a protocol, as if in front of a judge’.²⁴⁶ The emphasis on the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘we’, the careful diction and the formidable weight of the voices act to formalise the different narratives and construct them as declarations in the present. As Rancière has remarked, in *Workers, Peasants* ‘every narrative becomes live speech’, ‘the film is always in the present’.²⁴⁷ The formalisation of the text through this performance is therefore twofold. The declarative quality of the latter formalises the distance between workers and peasants, and at the same time it represents as present their capacity to declare this division.

This construction of a parliament in *Workers, Peasants* differs significantly from familiar critical narratives of communication and their habitual procedures of formalisation. Firstly, the discussion is not simply constructed as a balanced space of communication where workers and peasants exchange information and reach an agreement about the commune. The structural opposition of workers and peasants does not simply work as a formula to construct a pleasing geometry of representation. The quasi-symmetrical opposition functions to emphasise relations of equality before the division. Secondly, the strict formality of the discussion between workers and peasants does not operate as a critique of the limitations to which their communication is subject. In a very different film, *Triple Agent* (2004) by Eric Rohmer, there is a similar formalisation of political discussion. The use of speech is equitably distributed between the different characters and their conflicting argumentations. But, in the case of *Triple Agent*, the formalities of the discussion are used to manifest the lack of real communication between the different

²⁴⁶ Straub and Huillet, *Ecrits*, Independencia Editions, Paris, 2011, p.191. My translation (‘lire le text comme un protocole, comme s’ils étaient devant un juge’).

²⁴⁷ Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L’Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.151. My translation (‘tout ce qui était récit devient de la parole directe’, ‘le film est toujours au présent’).

characters. The respectful rotation in the discussion is the occasion to ironically underline the limits of the formal discussion, the limits of democratic etiquette. In *Workers, Peasants* the formalities of the discussion do not caricature the parliament of workers and peasants as a system of incommunicability but function to obstinately construct and represent a scene of division and equality.

The structural equilibrium of the representation, the honourable posture of the bodies and the declarative tone of the voices, are not then dissonant strategies; they construct a powerfully coherent representation that registers the common ground across which the division of workers and peasants is drawn. Formal bodies express their formal division through a formal voice. For the social programme set out by orthodox Marxism, these two collectives are separated by a lack of common ground. Thus the film defies the sociological arrangement that would separate systematically and hopelessly workers from peasants, thereby creating a hierarchy between capacitated and incapacitated names, between actors and extras. The audiovisual division between workers and peasants functions not as customary form of representation that confirms their separation but as the visualisation of their common capacity to declare, stand and face. In *Workers, Peasants*, these dispositions do not belong to the sociological typologies associated with the name 'worker' or the name 'peasant', they are instead constructed as anonymous capacities obstinately defying such social compartmentalisation, and above all the naturalised form of the latter.

Lyrical declamations

The prose style of *Women of Messina* has been criticised for its combination of colloquial and poetic diction. In his monograph about Vittorini, Guido Bonsaver corroborates the argumentation behind the negative critical response the novel received when first published in 1949. Bonsaver argues that the amalgamation of colloquial and poetic registers contributes to the novel's 'relative failure'.²⁴⁸ The use of poetic images and the repetition of words explain the novel's 'overall artificial tone'.²⁴⁹ For Bonsaver, the use of colloquialisms is appropriate for a novel that narrates the story of a group of workers and peasants, but to amalgamate *the way workers and peasants speak* with poetry can only result in a confusing and false representation. Straub and Huillet's reading of *Women of Messina* breaks away from this linguistic sociology that equates certain names with certain ways of speaking.

In the chapters from *Women of Messina* used for *Workers, Peasants*, the different characters often use an elegant, poetical language to narrate their everyday life. Pompeo Manera describes the dispute between workers and peasants as follows: 'Now I took offence, and that is how the ill will there had been during the past month between us peasants on the one hand and the various workers on the other grew into open discord'.²⁵⁰

Or Siracusa remembers a night she and her lover slept in the open with the following

²⁴⁸ See Bonsaver, Guido, 'Le Donne di Messina as a Failure in Progress', *Elio Vittorini, The Writer and The Written*, Northern Universities Press, Leeds, 2000, pp. 161 – 173.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. p.167.

²⁵⁰ My translation using the text in Vittorini, Elio, *Le Opere Narrative*, Vol. 2, Mondadori, Vicenza, 1974, p.147. The English version of *Le Donne di Messina* reduces considerably the formal elegance of the language used by Vittorini. In this case Pompeo Manera's sentence is translated as follows: 'I felt put down, and that's how the ill will there had been during the past month between us farmers on the one hand and the various workers on the other grew into open discord'. Vittorini, Elio, *Women of Messina*, New Directions Books, New York NY, 1973, p.133.

imagery: ‘We saw lights above us. The sky was free and the lights were stars twinkling in a faraway wind’.²⁵¹ The language the workers and peasants use in these chapters is not a vernacular proper, but a language laden with colloquialisms, formalities, repetitions and poetic metaphors. Jacques Rancière has observed that in *Workers, Peasants* there is ‘a passage from the dramatic content of the quarrel to a lyrical puissance, a puissance workers and peasants share, affirming the community as such’.²⁵² *Workers, Peasants* does not seek to correct the poetical artifice. Through the actors' performances Huillet and Straub intensify the lyrical register at play in Vittorini's prose.

The actors of *Workers, Peasants* re-work the narratives in question by transforming prose into verse. Following the customary practice of Huillet and Straub's working method, the submission of Vittorini's prose to a process of versification begins with the detonation of the punctuation that originally orders the text. As Huillet asserts in the following passage, the practice of detonation is always marked by a movement through language that fluctuates between ‘love or aggression’:

There is nothing complicated about this [their work with the texts]: it is the same kind of thing that poets do with language. They take a language which has become rigid, that has become a system of habits, almost a dead language

²⁵¹ My translation using the text in Vittorini, Elio, *Le Opere Narrative*, Vol. 2, Mondadori, Vicenza, 1974, p.177. The English version of *Le Donne di Messina* reduces considerably the poetical dimension of the prose. Siracusa's sentence is translated as follows: ‘We saw lights above us. The sky was clear and the lights were stars twinkling in the wind’. Vittorini, Elio, *Women of Messina*, New Directions Books, New York NY, 1973, p.155.

²⁵² Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe, *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.144. My translation (‘on passe du contenu dramatique – au sens de l'échange de l'argument et de la querelle – à une puissance lyrique commune de paroles qui affirment la communauté comme telle).

and they suddenly try to do things that have not been done before or have long been forgotten.²⁵³

The detonation of the original punctuation allows the actors to musicalise with another rhythm latent within the text. There is then a correspondence between the way in which the characters of *Women of Messina* poeticise their narratives and the way in which the actors of *Workers, Peasants* intone or rather *de-tone* the prose with which they work.

That the workers and peasants of the novel speak a language that is formal *and* poetic, a circumstance the first critics of Vittorini received with confusion, is reiterated by the actors' *detonation* of their lines into verses. The film traces a form of resonance between the lyrical capacities of workers and peasants as they appear in the novel and the non-professional actors who subsequently interpret them. This is not the sign of a sociologically sanctioned convergence, validating the use of non-professional actors as those most suited to authentically portraying the workers and peasants of the film. It is the correspondence of two lyrical transformations that invalidates the very basis of the opposition between the *being* of non-professional actors, peasants, workers and the *acting* of proper actors. It is a correspondence that discloses a common capacity of the names 'worker', 'peasant' (and, indeed, 'non-professional actor') to trouble the determination of

²⁵³ Huillet, Danièle quoted by Ursula Böser in *The Art Of Seeing, The Art Of Listening, The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2004, p.213. Jacques Derrida thinks that his practice with language, what he calls *writing*, can be interpreted 'as an impulse of love or aggression toward the body of any given language'. Derrida defines this impulse as a practice of 'caressing with claws'; I understand that something similar is at work in the practice of Straub and Huillet. See Derrida, Jacques, Derrida, Jacques, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1998, p.66.

the existing social assignations tied to these terms, their vocabularies, enunciations and actions.

Furthermore, in *Workers, Peasants* the actors will *de-tone* the text with an intonation that is at the same time formal and lyrical. The actors do not simply narrate, more or less convincingly, what has happened in the commune. The actors perform their lines as declarative verses, through a use of language that accentuates the formal and poetic dimensions of the text. They do not speak with the tired voice of the proletarian actor, as noted and appreciated by Brecht. On the contrary, the intonation is energetic and grandiloquent. It transforms the narratives of workers and peasants into a passionate oratory, and it is this that distinguishes them from a mere colloquial conversation.

The grandiloquent intonation operates at the same time as declamation and operatic aria. It is an intonation with recurring modulations. Each character delivers the verses following a repetitive rhythm, like a regular *ritournelle*. Rancière has noticed that there is ‘a kind of overarticulation’ in the way the actors deliver their lines-verses.²⁵⁴ Each word is pronounced with extreme precision. Each syllable is accentuated and given a dramatic magnitude. Meticulous articulation usually works in a dialogue as a technique to ensure clarity, a procedure to make sure that what is being said is understandable to those listening. But the overarticulation at work here gives words another rhythm, exploding their self-evident signification. It functions as a glorification of each syllable, as an exaltation *à la lettre* that goes beyond the needs of communication and intelligibility. The

²⁵⁴ Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe, *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.143. My translation (‘une espèce de surarticulation’).

overarticulation of each syllable produces at once a potent eloquence and a solemn incomprehensibility.

The use of a lyrical register in this parliament of workers and peasants contradicts the conventions concerning what is considered to be the appropriate language for political debate and communication. Prose is, conventionally, ‘the language of discursive, positive, scientific reason, the language of everything that is opposed to Art’.²⁵⁵ Prose is the appropriate, natural language for negotiation, debate and deliberation. ‘Prose’ – from the Latin *prosa*, meaning ‘straightforward’ – is the language workers and peasants should use to come to terms with *the fact* of their difference. But Huillet and Straub are less interested in articulating an audiovisuality that would allow the differences between workers and peasants to be debated and solved, than in constructing their mode of appearing and declaring as a common capacity. And it is here, at the moment when communicative speech appears to falter, that a singular form of language emerges, ‘a language that does not separate prosaic speech and chant’.²⁵⁶

The language of workers and peasants does not oppose poetry, the language of sentiment, of mystery and nature, and prose, the language of argumentation and debate. Félix Guattari has observed that the privileging of prose in politics ‘always comes back to the idea that if you abandon the discourse of reason, you fall into the black night of passions,

²⁵⁵ Laurenti, Jean-Noël, ‘La Notion d'Ecart à Travers la Déclamation et le Chant Français des XVII et XVIII Siècles’ in Durosier, Georgie (ed.), *Parler, Dire, Chanter*, Presses de L'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, 2000, p.35. My translation (‘langage de la raison discursive, positive, scientifique, bref de tout ce qui est opposé à l'Art’).

²⁵⁶ Rancière, Jacques in Lafosse, Philippe (ed.), *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.148. My translation (‘une langue qui ne séparerait pas la parole prosaïque du chant’).

of murder, and the dissolution of all social life'.²⁵⁷ In the case of *Workers, Peasants*, there is a formal and lyrical practice of language that breaks with this logic and its hierarchical structure. Here it is not so much that workers and peasants appropriate a language that is not theirs, the language and intonation of the poets, but that their use of the lyrical disrupts the logic of distinct modes, genres and registers that ordinarily determines the use of language. The lyrical is not so much employed here as a register but practiced as a common power with a view to undoing the equation between on the one hand a certain vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax, and communicative purpose, and on the other a specific social name. The lyrical power used in common by peasants and workers sees language fall away from its recognisable registers, granting it a possibility otherwise denied it.

Having defined prose, poetry and song as the three distinct states of language, the poet and essayist Paul Valéry shows a similar preference for the lyrical. In his text 'On Speaking Verse' he writes:

In short we note that in song the words tend to lose their importance as meaning, that they do most frequently lose it, whereas at the other extreme, in everyday prose, it is the musical value that tends to disappear; so much so that song on the one side and prose on the other are placed, as it were, symmetrically in relation to verse, which holds an admirable and very delicate balance between the sensual and intellectual forces of language.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Guattari, Félix, 'Desire is Power / Power is Desire' in *Chaosology*, Semiotext(e), New York NY, 2009, p.244.

²⁵⁸ Valéry, Paul, 'On Speaking Verse' in Mathews, Jackson (ed.), *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, Vol. 7, Pantheon Books, New York NY, 1958, p.164.

In this summary of his thesis Valéry organises a gradation between prose, poetry and song in relation to signification. Poetry is the privileged register of this gradation. For Valéry, prose, everyday speech and ordinary discourse are not without musicality, but the latter is subdued by the imperative towards communication and signification. Song would function inversely: signification almost disappears; words tend to lose their meaning and function simply as ‘the carriers of *flatus vocis*’.²⁵⁹ Valéry therefore assigns to poetry the role of mediation between these two oppositional tendencies, signification and non-signification. It is interesting to note that this gradation operates a clear-cut distinction between these three states of language (he talks of extremes), while at the same time propounding a certain degree of ambiguity (he talks of the fragility of the distinction). In this sense poetry is the privileged and yet fragile state of language that has achieved a momentary equilibrium between signification and music. It testifies to the negotiation of an agreement [‘a compromis’].²⁶⁰

The lyrical in the practice of Huillet, Straub and the actors of *Workers, Peasants* does not simply follow this prosaic gradation between various levels of signification. Their cinema is not guided by a politics of negotiation, but stubbornly pursues the construction of other possible assemblages between language, names and capacities. In *Workers, Peasants* it is the stubbornness of a series of performances verbalising an unreasonable correlation between a declarative prose and a singing intonation. This strange language does not simply communicate a message. It makes audible and visible the configuration of another order between speakers, a strange language, both lyrical and formal, that foregoes the protection of a proper name.

²⁵⁹ See Françoise Escal, ‘Valéry et le compromis poétique’ in Durosoir, Georgie (ed.), *Parler, Dire, Chanter*, Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, 2000, p.59.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

The vocal exchange about the commune is neither a process where workers and peasants learn how to communicate properly through the prosaic language of politics, nor a process where workers and peasants avoid the traps of signification through the musical effacement of the text. It is not, furthermore, the negotiation of these two strategies. The formal and lyrical performances make audible and visible the strange power of workers and peasants to act out through a language that is at the same time sensuous and intellectual. The performances leave in their wake the obstinate coincidence of lyrical and formal capacities that will have ignored the logic of the *clear and distinct* communication to which the subject of action ordinarily appeals. To listen to the vocal performances of the actors in *Workers, Peasants* is to listen to an affirmative murmur bustling with contrasting equations between linguistic registers, rhythms, noises from a forest, a cacophony that does simply exclude or suspend signification and communication. In this murmuring forest, 'worker' and 'peasant' are not the names of revolutionary subjects promised by a five-year plan of modernisation, they are not updated into the names of communicative actors participating in a parliamentary discussion. Rather they are activated as the anonymous names of actors defying the logic of their sociological definition with a common, imposing, resonant, dateless language.

Part Two

Factory Trouble,

Post-Fordist Cinema and Industrial Dispute

Introduction

The factory or, more precisely, the *factory-of-the-workers*, the factory not as a mere space of production but as a site where workers work, is not a recurrent theme or question in the history of cinema. The cinema is, in this sense, complicit with the system of non-presentation of the factory as a workers' site; a system that Alain Badiou and Sylvain Lazarus have identified as a key characteristic of any normative order.²⁶¹ Badiou and Lazarus' insistence on thinking politically the factory as a workers' site and not as a mere productive entity is useful to look back at the history of the relation between the moving image and the factory and re-evaluate cinema's political capacities. In spite of its scarcity, there are sufficient visualisations of the factory in the history of the moving image to complicate the relation cinema-factory-worker beyond a mere question of lack or absence, or rather to complicate the sense(s) of the invisibility of the factory-of-the-workers. This second part of the thesis is a step forward to study this complex relation and its political significance.

²⁶¹ What matters to Badiou and Lazarus in their analyses of the worker-factory pair are historical instances in which the factory has been a factory-of-the-workers and not a place of production where the workers 'are absolutely un-presented'. See Badiou, Alain, 'The Factory as Event Site', *PRELOM, Journal for Images and Politics*, No. 8, Fall 2006, p.173. Lazarus argues, against a long Marxist tradition, that there have been very few instances of factories as political sites, that is as workers' site, and only since the Chinese Cultural Revolution. See Lazarus, Sylvain, *Anthropologie du Nom*, Seuil, Paris, 1996, p.172.

The existing images of the factory make it possible to distinguish between three cinematic approaches to the factory in the twentieth century: Fordist, militant and post-Fordist.²⁶²

These are general categories, useful to start to orientate and refine the analysis of the invisibility of the factory-of-the-workers across the history of the moving image:

1. There is a cinema that makes visible the developments of the industrial world, its technological innovations, and its powers to transform nature, its efficient organisation and scale. This approach can be called *Fordist cinema* not simply because its most significant examples coincide in time with the expansion of the Fordist factory model (the assembly line, the use of electro-mechanic machines, and so on). More importantly, the worker functions in these images as another mechanic component to be filmed, a body involved in the process of mass production. Moreover, the moving image has directly contributed, in its scientific version, to the efficacy of the Fordist model.²⁶³ The time-and-motion studies of Frank Gilbreth designed to eliminate *waste* and promote *efficiency* in the workers' movements are telling examples of how the moving image technology was used to attempt to industrialise the body of the worker.²⁶⁴ Fordist cinema is also often at the service of private marketing and advertisement (industrial and corporate films) or of

²⁶² The categories 'pre-Fordist', 'Fordist' and 'post-Fordist' are today widely used, not without debate, as general tools that are necessary to study paradigmatic shifts within the history of modern industrial relations and to understand the singularity of present working conditions. Authors such as Badiou or Rancière do not use this terminology. For a general overview of this terminology and the discussions it has provoked see Kirn, Gal (ed.), *Post-Fordism and its Discontents*, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, 2010.

²⁶³ For an analysis of how the Ford Motor Company used film to develop mass production and worker control see Grieveson, Lee, 'The Work of Film in the Age of Fordist Mechanisation', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3, Spring 2012, pp.25-51.

²⁶⁴ See Curtis, Scott, 'Images of Efficiency, The Films of Frank B. Gilbreth', in Hediger, Vinzenz and Patrick Vonderau (eds.), *Films that Work, Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008, pp.86-99.

national marketing.²⁶⁵ We can include within Fordist cinema different factory symphonies glorifying industrial progress, depicting the workers as devoted anonymous bodies making possible the realisation of a historical-political ideal. This is the ambiguous position of the worker in several cases of early Soviet cinema. A film like *Factory-Kitchen* (1930) directed by Roman Karmen and Mikhail Sloutski transforms the production processes of a steel factory into an epic visualisation of Soviet industrial development.²⁶⁶ There is a cinema fascinated, like other visual arts at the time, with the aesthetics of the body-as-machine, such as in the case of Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm* (1931).

2. The cinema concerned with the struggles of the workers constitutes a second approach to the factory.²⁶⁷ It is a *militant cinema* that makes visible exploitative working conditions and the brutality of industrial transformations (closures, relocations, abusive relations, and so on). From this cinema, different questions about workers' representation and participation have emerged. It is best understood as a cinema developing different strategies, more or less effective, to make visible and audible the figure of the worker. The 1960s and 1970s were particularly fertile in militant images, when the intensity of industrial conflict coincided with new cinema technologies that made filming conditions easier. This cinema of denunciation includes fiction films (Marin Karmitz's *Coup pour Coup*, 1972), documentaries supporting and contributing to the workers' struggles (Chris

²⁶⁵ For a history of industrial film (government-produced and industrially sponsored films) see Hediger, Vinzenz and Patrick Vonderau (eds.), *Films that Work, Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008.

²⁶⁶ See Barbéris, Patrick and Dominique Chapuis, *Roman Karmen, Une Légende Rouge*, Seuil, Paris, 2002, pp.46-49.

²⁶⁷ See Pérez Romero, Enrique and José Manuel Gonzalez-Fierro (eds.), *La Lucha Obrera en el Cine*, Arkadin Ediciones, Madrid, 2011; Calamita, Umberto and Giuseppe Zanlungo, *La Classe Operaia Non Va in Paradiso, Il Cinema di Lotta e di Protesta*, Edizione Falsopiano, Alessandria, 2010

Marker and Mario Marret's *Be Seeing You Soon*, 1968; Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County U.S.A.*, 1977) or cinematic experiences that were part of workers' self-management projects (Joaquim Jordà's *Numax Presenta*, 1979). The emergence of a *workers' cinema*, with workers making films, such as the case of the Medvedkine Groups, can be read as a ramification of this militant visualisation of the factory as a site of struggle.²⁶⁸ Apart from the cinema of those militant decades, there are examples of critical depictions of factory work within classic cinema; just to mention a few striking examples: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926), Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), René Clair's *A Nous la Liberté* (1931). Apart from Chaplin's film, it is worth mentioning Hollywood workers' dramas such as Martin Ritt's *Norma Rae* (1979) or singular films such as Stanley Donen's musical comedy *The Pajama Game* (1957), in which Doris Day plays a trade unionist fighting against her love interest for better salaries in a pyjama factory. Contemporary cinema has continued to visualise factory struggles and the human cost of industrial transformations in this diversity of formats: workers' dramas (Laurent Cantet's *Ressources Humaines*, 2000), workers' comedies (Riccardo Milani's *Il Posto dell'Anima*, 2003), denunciation films (Micha Peled's *China Blue*, 2005), documentary films (Surabhi Sharma's *Jari Mari: Of Cloth and Other Stories*, 2001).²⁶⁹

3- *Post-Fordist cinema* constitutes a third approach to the factory. I propose to use the adjective post-Fordist for a certain cinema that has emerged since the crisis of the Fordist model in the 1970s. More than defining this cinema with regard to a historical period, or a

²⁶⁸ See 'Groupe Medvedkine', *L'Image, le Monde*, No. 3, Editions Léon Scheer, Autumn 2002, pp.25-59. Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska have explored the cinema created in factory-sponsored film workshops in socialist Poland: see Cummings, Neil and Marysia Lewandowska (eds.), *Enthusiasm, Films of Love, Longing and Labour*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 2005.

²⁶⁹ For an overview of 'militant cinema' in the French context see Gauthier, Guy (ed.), *Le Cinéma Militant Reprend le Travail*, *CinémAction*, No. 110, 2004.

specific thematic (precarisation of labour, tertiarisation of the economy, and so on), with this category I seek to group together moving images that are critical both of the factory as a site of exploitation and of cinema itself as a medium of audiovisual exploitation. Beyond industrial enthusiasm, these are films that approach the factory critically, in the spirit of militant cinema. But also, the encounter with the factory, and indeed with the sphere of work in general, fascinates this cinema into re-evaluating its conventions, intentions and capacities. This is a cinema that questions itself and experiments with its forms and protocols (an experimental spirit similar to some examples of Fordist cinema) in order to address and intervene in the visualisation of industrial disputes and mutations. This is a cinema re-drawing the boundaries between film genres and modes of production, as well as the boundaries between cinema and other arts. It is a cinema opening up avenues for a political understanding of cinema beyond the question of class-consciousness and the faith in making visible as a weapon to change the world. Self-reflexive fiction films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout Va Bien* (1972), art films such as Sharon Lockhart's *Lunch Break* (2009), or essay films by, for instance, Hartmut Bitomsky (*The VW Complex*, 1990), are all multiform operations that examine not only the anti-worker logic of the capitalist factory but cinema itself as a problematic medium through which to make the factory-of-the-workers appear and count. These films articulate questions about the relation between the factory and the cinema with a view to instantiating a non-exploitative visualisation of the factory-of-the-workers.

My intention in proposing these general schemata is not to establish a strict periodisation of cinematic themes, genres and styles across the history of film but rather to sketch some preliminary ideas for the study of the relation between the cinema and the factory. The distinction between Fordist, militant and post-Fordist cinema underlines that there is an

intricate correspondence to be analysed between the history of the moving image and the industrial history of the twentieth century.²⁷⁰ It is a parallel history defined by difficulties, insufficiencies and inventions. This general outline, although very far from being exhaustive in the examples given, shows the complexity of a relation punctuated by problematic and intense encounters between the camera and the space of the factory. To become aware of this complexity is to understand that it will be necessary to re-organise the categories I have just sketched; further categories and sub-categories will be necessary to continue the study. A film like Otar Iosseliani's *Chugun* (1964) is a visual poem fascinated by the lights, shadows and sounds of a Georgian foundry factory and also a film preoccupied with difficult working conditions. Hartmut Bitomsky's *The VW Komplex* is both a critical meditation on the history of the Volkswagen car company, from its Nazi origins to its contemporary high productivity, while integrating the assembly line into its cinematic form. The cinema of the Medvedkine Groups is not only preoccupied with representing the working conditions of the workers but is also an experimental cinema exploring international events, making music videos and experimental shorts. Many of the films mentioned already resist a strict understanding of the distinction between Fordist, militant and post-Fordist cinema.

What interests me most in this outline for this part of the thesis is that it helps to emphasise the deep *impurity* of what I am calling post-Fordist cinema. These are films that render this impurity operational, allowing it to combine and re-organise the logics associated with distinct modes of representation. These films are part of a cinema affected

²⁷⁰ Antonio Negri has developed in his essay 'Metamorphoses, Art and Immaterial Labour' an interesting correspondence between different art historical periods and forms of capitalist production and organisation of labour. See Negri, Antonio, *Art and Multitude*, Polity, Cambridge, 2011, pp.101-123.

by the troubles of the factory, irrevocably impure because it remains at the same time fascinated by the speed of industrial mutations, critical of it and self-reflective. The name 'factory' does not appear in these films simply as the name of a modern marvel or of a site of struggle to visualise. 'Factory' appears as a *name-in-transformation* that makes the cinema doubt its own capacities as a political medium. These are films affected by the distressing inadequacies of representation, by the uncertainties of filmmakers with the factory space and the dissatisfaction of workers with audiovisual media. The post-Fordist cinema that interests me here is one whose audiovisual arrangements continually intersect with these frustrations. This troubled cinema does not simply accept the consensual narrative of the end of the industrial age, nor does it simply hold on to a nostalgic viewpoint of Fordism. Rather it makes 'factory' visible and audible as a strange yet determinate name with which cinema can once again investigate how its own operations intervene within the current visual landscape. These films allow us to re-think cinema's capacities to participate in the processes by which the workers' site and its mutations figure today.

This part is focused on two different examples of post-Fordist cinema in two different chapters: Harun Farocki's *Arbeiter Verlassen die Fabrik* (*Workers Leaving the Factory*, 1995) and Wang Bing's *Tie Xi Qu* (*West of the Tracks*, 2003). *Workers Leaving the Factory* is a historical analysis of the invisibility of the factory in cinematic representations. *West of the Tracks* documents the dismantling of an industrial complex in Northeast China. Apart from focusing on two different types of factories (the first is interested in the factory as a cinematic theme, the second as an industrial case), these films belong to two distinct tendencies of contemporary cinema: the essay film and the observational documentary. These traditions are frequently pitched against one another,

their separation presupposed. The essay film proceeds 'via argumentation rather than by constructing a fictional narrative or practicing modes of interactive, personal or observational documentary'.²⁷¹ According to Ursula Biemann, 'essayist work does not aim at documenting realities but at organising complexities'.²⁷² The observational can be distinguished from other documentary forms because of the immersion of the filmmaker in the filmed events. Despite their differences, the advocates of the essay film and of the observational documentary often claim an ethical standing for each of these forms, and they do so from something of a shared ground. The essay film is a *free form*, a form without a definite form, which 'strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint'.²⁷³ The observational documentary seeks to free the representation by relinquishing an authorial perspective 'in favour of an openness to being shaped by particular situations and relationships'.²⁷⁴ In my view the singular audiovisual operations of *Workers Leaving the Factory* and *West of the Tracks* complicate in different ways any simple understanding of these film forms as *liberated* forms, but also any simple understanding of what an 'observational documentary' and an 'essay film' is and does.

If I have chosen an essay film and an observational documentary as examples of post-Fordist cinema it is because they offer different perspectives on the relation cinema-factory and both trouble in different ways their respective representational protocols. It is

²⁷¹ Elsaesser, Thomas, 'Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.26.

²⁷² Biemann, Ursula, 'The Video Essay in the Digital Age' in Biemann, Ursula (ed.), *Stuff It, the Video Essay in the Digital Age*, Institute for Theory of Art and Design, Zürich, 2003, p.10.

²⁷³ Alter, Nora M., 'The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's Images of the World and the Inscription of War', *New German Critique*, No. 68, Spring-Summer, 1996, p.171.

²⁷⁴ Grimshaw, Anna and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2009.

also to insist that the post-Fordist cinema I have in mind is not a film style but rather a cinema that has in common a generative malaise, a *factory trouble*, when engaging with the factory-of-the-workers. Farocki and Wang have described very precisely their encounter with the factory as an unsatisfactory experience that both stimulated and challenged their film work. The description Wang Bing gives of what attracted him to the industrial complex of Tie Xi in Shenyang, the principal setting of *West of the Tracks*, is evocative of this discontent:

When I was a student, my university was next to Tie Xi Qu. My personal relation with this site has always been of a nostalgic nature. I did not know the place very well; I often visited it, to see, to have a walk. I do not know why I started to take photographs of it. There were all these gigantic factories, all these workers. It was immense and empty. There, one felt lost. One did not know what to do. It was a very cold place.²⁷⁵

Wang industriously filmed during two years three hundred hours of footage in these factories threatened by closure. In a similar way, Farocki describes his film work for *Workers Leaving the Factory* as a process exceptionally complicated and productive. In his account, his established way of working with pre-existent film materials, his archivist work, is insufficient to engage with the cinema-factory pair:

²⁷⁵ Païni, Dominique, 'La Traversée de la Chine, un entretien avec Wang Bing', in Wang Bing, *West of the Tracks* [DVD], MK2 Editions, Paris, 2004. My translation ('Quand j'étais étudiant, mon université était à côté de Tie Xi Qu. Personnellement part rapport a cet endroit j'étais toujours un peu nostalgique. Je ne connaissais pas très bien ce lieu, j'allais souvent pour voir, pour me promener. En fait, sans savoir pourquoi, je me suis mis à le photographier. Il y avait plein d'usines énormes, des tas d'ouvriers. C'était immense et vide. Quand on était là-bas, on se sentait perdu. On ne savait pas quoi faire. C'était un endroit très froid').

I watched every scene that might be useful for the *Workers Leaving the Factory* project several times – more often than I would have usually done, because I could not see how they were relevant. According to which criteria should I arrange the scenes, and what should the order reveal? During a montage process there usually always comes the moment in which I recognise the basic principle of a project, and this is the key to every necessary decision. But during this project this moment never occurred, so obviously I looked for it afterwards. First I wrote a few newspaper articles about *Workers Leaving the Factory*. I presented the film several times together with additional material, which I had not or had only partly used, and commented on it. I gave one of these presentations in Cologne and it was transcribed and published. A year later *Workers Leaving the Factory* became the starting point for an entire conference, about which an entire book was made.²⁷⁶

That the factory leaves Wang *not knowing what to do*, that the factory scene leads Farocki *to proceed in a different way, without a clear object*: all this speaks of the generative processes of these film works. Far from condemning the name ‘factory’ to obsolescence, then, these films engage with the factory as a site-in-transformation that puts cinema's protocols of efficacy to the test. The encounter with the factory articulated by these films provides an occasion for the cinema to experiment with its powers, above all allowing the name ‘factory’ to resonate therein as a name-in-dispute.

²⁷⁶ Farocki, Harun, ‘Written Trailers’ in Ehmann, Antje and Eshun, Kodwo (ed.), *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, König Books & Raven Row, London, 2009, p.230.

Chapter 3: Ghost Factory (on Harun Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory*)

The archival practice of Harun Farocki is engaged in making public the censored, the forbidden, the forgotten image. As Georges Didi-Huberman has noted, his cinema is fundamentally involved in the restitution of such images to the public realm and in constructing montages for their re-presentation.²⁷⁷ He is an archivist making available – which means to make once more readable – those images confiscated by various institutions, withdrawn from public view. Farocki understands that ‘images constitute a common good’.²⁷⁸ His cinema struggles to make every image part of the common audiovisual landscape, every *institutionalised image* is to be reinstated as ‘the place of the common’.²⁷⁹ Farocki has never clearly explained how he gains access to the audiovisual archives of the institutions he targets, although he has mentioned that it is often the case that these institutions or corporations find the *technical images* he requests as having no particular interest.²⁸⁰ The fundamental gesture of this cinema is less to appropriate than to emancipate these supposedly harmless images, taking them out of their institutional or private *prison* and re-deploying them so as to make visible their intrinsic violence.

²⁷⁷ See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Remontages du Temps Subi*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2010, p.165.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. . My translation (‘Les images constituent un bien commun’).

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p.180. My translation (‘le lieu du commun’).

²⁸⁰ Ibid., p.159.

Workers Leaving the Factory is a singular case with regard to the general politics of Farocki's emancipatory cinema, as if the encounter with the factory obliged the filmmaker to re-think the sense of its audiovisual politics. In this video work, Farocki does not simply reconstitute industrial images to the public domain, but reveals as absolute the absence of factory images in the history of cinema. 'Factory' appears in this audiovisual assemblage called *Workers Leaving the Factory* as a *ghost name*. It is a ghost name not because its referent is declared invisible, because the cinema is declared to be incapable of representing the factory, because the factory is mourned over as something non-representable. 'Factory' is a ghost name that stimulates the re-evaluation of the cinema itself. Farocki makes visible the cinematic invisibility of the factory and reveals 'factory' as the name that will have troubled cinema since its first moving image.

Farocki sets to work in this film as if there were no images *inside the factory* to reconstitute, no industrial archive to pillage. Farocki, a cunning archivist, could no doubt have found footage with which to work in this context, bringing the factory into public purview. By focusing on the recurrence of a single visual motif within the history of cinema – the motif bluntly enunciated by the title 'workers leaving the factory' – Farocki lingers at the threshold of the space in question, at the factory gate. To remain outside, to radicalise the invisibility of the factory is the way Farocki has to deal with his difficulties to organise the audiovisual material he has gathered into a coherent thesis. To radicalise the invisibility of the factory allows him to construct a critical field of experimentation from where to better question cinema's factory trouble. The film thus operates as an audiovisual field of examination that may yield a potential means through which to contest the order of the world in its present state, that would inculcate within the spectator a will to submit this order to change.

The archival work developed in the film corresponds to what Farocki calls *visual motif research*; a methodology for assembling images that Farocki has employed in various films, for instance *Der Ausdruck der Hände* [*The Expression of Hands*, 1997] or *Gefängnisbilder* [*Prison Images*, 2001]. He understands these research films as visual studies participating in a ‘new image archaeology’ that would set about exploring the very organisation of the seeable.²⁸¹ It is an archaeology preoccupied not only with the institutionalisation of images but with the reproduction of visual motifs. These research films are engaged in an analysis of the relative frequency or scarcity of specific visual motifs. For Farocki, these films are intended to contribute to the assemblage of ‘a cinematographic Thesaurus of filmic expressions’ that catalogues existing images according to a common motif to make them visible again in new constellations.²⁸² For him, this re-assemblage has the potential to disrupt the normative taxonomies of the audiovisual regime that governs our common world. The common motif becomes a *leitmotiv*, literally a ‘guiding motif’, guiding Farocki, and the spectator, into the vicinity of questions such as: what does the recurrence of a visual motif make scarce? What does the recurrence of a motif either say or leave in silence about the history of the world we live in? What does the recurrence of ‘workers leaving the factory’ tell us of the factory and of the cinema? To reiterate: the category of the motif is the condition of pursuing such questions in his practice.

²⁸¹ Farocki, Harun and Wolfgang Ernst, ‘Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts’ in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.262.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, pp.273-276.

This work with visual motifs relates Farocki's cinema to a specific epistemic mode: that of the 'atlas of images'.²⁸³ More precisely, Farocki's archivist practice has often been compared, a comparison that is far from being exhausted, to Aby Warburg's 'nameless science', a science that uses and deconstructs the tradition of the 'atlas of images'.²⁸⁴ With his *Mnemosyne* atlas, Warburg inaugurated a mode of working with visual motifs that endlessly re-organised the history of visual expression, dynamiting the borders of art history and its image hierarchies. In Warburg's and Farocki's practices, the visual motif appears as a vital historical element to confront the past and to make visible ruptures and resistances in the archive. Warburg is primarily fascinated by what he understands as the posthumous life, the resistant survival of a motif across the history of the arts (the serpent, the nymph).²⁸⁵ Farocki's revision is not so much concerned with obscure motifs but with images produced *every day*. He is interested in *technical images* produced by institutions and private companies, banal images charged with the organisation of life, with the determination of life as something organisable. The images Farocki re-appropriates are *blind images* in more than one sense. He works with images that circulate beyond the realm of public vision (surveillance, military footage), but also with those everyday images we know so well that we are unable to see. That is to say, Farocki is not only concerned with the confinement of certain images but also with *sight itself*, with everyday

²⁸³ Didi-Huberman explains that the 'atlas of images' is an epistemic genre known since the Renaissance. Mainly used in cartography, the use of the atlas expanded to encompass other fields of knowledge, particularly the 'sciences of culture' in the nineteenth century. See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Atlas, ¿Cómo llevar el Mundo a Cuestas?*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2010, p.60.

²⁸⁴ For an analysis of Warburg's 'nameless science' see Agamben, Giorgio, 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science', *Potentialities*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999, pp.89-103. Christa Blümlinger, for instance, understands that 'Warburg's conviction that repetition, resumption, and metamorphosis of the past encode certain forms of suffering and passion (...) is at the very heart of Farocki's montages'. See Blümlinger, Christa, 'Harun Farocki: Critical Perspectives' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.320.

²⁸⁵ See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *L'Image Survivante: Histoire de l'Art et Temps des Fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2002.

habits of seeing and not seeing, and hence with a symptomatology of vision that reveals several sites of ideological oversight and blindness.²⁸⁶ In Farocki's hands the recurrence/scarcity of a motif becomes the symptom of a violence in the world that excites thought and political anger.

For Farocki, this visual motif research constitutes a pedagogical process with the image as its object, a process through which to learn to see again the invisible and the patent. Starting with the selection of a visual motif, Farocki then proceeds to the research stage, singling out scenes, sequences and frames from different visual sources. For *Workers Leaving the Factory* he explains that he set himself the task 'of tracking down the theme of this film in as many variants as possible'.²⁸⁷ He gathered images from documentaries, newsreels, sponsored videos, propaganda films, Hollywood and European fiction films. The non-hierarchical variety of sources and the exclusive use of pre-existent materials are frequent tactics of the film-essayist and, as Adorno would put it, 'of a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others have already done'.²⁸⁸ Finally, Farocki compares the gathered images, noting their similarities and differences, making them resonate in complex constellations. In *Workers Leaving the Factory*, the motif of 'workers

²⁸⁶ In her study of Farocki's cinema and the pathologies of seeing, the film scholar Nora M. Alter has included a mysterious quotation from Louis Althusser that nevertheless elucidates the problem of the *blind image*: 'what classical political economy does not see, is not what it does not see, it is *what it sees*; it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is *what it does not lack*; it is not what it misses, on the contrary, it is *what it does not miss*. This oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but *the sight itself*'. Alter, Nora M., 'The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's Images of the World and the Inscription of War', *New German Critique*, No. 68, Spring - Summer, 1996, p.165.

²⁸⁷ Farocki, Harun, 'Workers Leaving the Factory', in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.237.

²⁸⁸ Adorno, T. W., 'The Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, No. 32, Spring - Summer, 1984, p.152.

leaving the factory' is subdivided in turn into submotifs, giving way to further refinements such as 'the military aesthetics of factory work', 'the outside of the factory as a battleground', 'woman waiting outside the factory gates', 'the heterosexual couple of workers leaving the factory'. This organisation, as it were, in chapters is not an attempt to make a complete taxonomy of a visual motif. Between the submotifs there are constant repetitions, collisions and digressions that emphasise the possibility of still further taxonomies to come concerning the overarching leitmotif in question.²⁸⁹

Workers Leaving the Factory is a compilation video – one which shows little ambition to exhaust the 'workers leaving the factory' motif by gathering and ordering every available or unavailable moving image associated with this context.²⁹⁰ It is at the same time an essay video – one that makes Farocki's learning and thinking process with the images itself visible and audible. In this way Farocki develops here a double militancy of visualisation: the revelation of the hidden, forbidden and forgotten and the development of an essayistic pedagogy whose subject is seeing and seeing again. As we have begun to intimate, his films create the conditions for spectators/learners to look at institutionalised and blind images, to perceive hidden constellations of meaning and to question in general the organisation of the seeable and our capacity to see. *Workers Leaving the Factory* discloses multiple layers of signification concerning the visual motif in question and in doing so delineates the troubled (non)relation between the cinema and the factory. There is also a pedagogy at work in Farocki's cinema that makes visible the operations of his

²⁸⁹ It is worth insisting on the fact that the project of *Workers Leaving the Factory* did not stop with the production of the film; it is a project that has subsequently re-emerged in different versions as a text, a book and a video installation (*Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades*, 2006).

²⁹⁰ Jay Leyda would call it a 'compilation film', which he understands as 'a film of idea' in which 'the work begins at the cutting table, with already existing film shots'. See Leyda, Jay, *Films Beget Films*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1964, p.9.

subjective learning process with regard to the images he re-assembles. His films often develop an essayistic format that does not simply legitimate the deductions of the filmmaker but affirms these latter only insofar as it hollows them out at the same time, inviting the spectators to essay-with-images other arguments. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun have located the critical capacities of his cinema in these pedagogical dimensions. According to them, the pedagogical structure of Farocki's images work to counter current understandings of the visual arts and their function:

The education image is the ultimate bad object of the contemporary art world; to say an image is didactic or pedagogic is the worst thing you can say; much worse than stating that an image is pornographic. This verdict is reversed in the work of HF [Harun Farocki].²⁹¹

In this chapter, my analysis is focused on the double militancy of this cinema, on accounting for its essayism and its revelatory operations. Such a conjunction makes this film a singular field from which to verify the capacity of cinema to visualise a dissensual landscape for the name 'factory'. The coexistence in *Workers Leaving the Factory* of a muscular politics of revelation and a repertoire of essayistic dramatics makes the critical act resonate and tremble with a contagious intensity. I argue that the powers of Farocki's post-Fordist cinema lie in its capacity to make the voice of the film-essayist and its revelations not more hesitant and less authoritative but rather to make it sound strangely affirmative. The strange affirmations of this pedagogic voice open up, in *Workers Leaving the Factory*, critical possibilities with which to displace the vantage point from where to see and listen to the history of the pair cinema-factory.

²⁹¹ Ehmman, Antje and Eshun, Kodwo, 'A to Z of HF or: 26 Introductions to HF' in Ehmman, Antje and Eshun, Kodwo (eds.), *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, Konig Books & Raven Row, London, 2009, p.206.

To see and listen to the powers of this voice, I explore, in a first section, Farocki's archaeological method, his skill at unearthing the latent meanings buried within the blind images that pertain to the site under interrogation. I re-affirm Farocki's haunting revelations about the relation of the cinema to the factory, and the persuasive didacticism through which this relation is staged. Then, in a second section, I analyse the essayistic conjunctions at stake in *Workers Leaving the Factory*. But I do not oppose the essayistic attributes of the film to the strong politics of revelation Farocki develops therein. On the contrary, I argue that the essayistic operates as the unstable format that at once sustains and displaces the critical efficacy of revelation. The political significance of Farocki's cinema does not simply rely on its capacity to expose the hidden, to name the ghost; it concerns a singular articulation of an audiovisual distance between cinema and its capacity of revelation from where the ghost name ('factory') can affect anyone (the filmmaker, the spectator).

1- REVEALED: the cinema has not represented the factory because the cinema is a factory.

One tradition of classical film theory has asserted the singularity of cinema in the name of its capacities of revelation.²⁹² For this tradition, the most significant property of the

²⁹² See Turvey, Malcolm, *Doubting Vision, Film and the Revelationist Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York NY, 2008. Turvey understands the revelationist tradition as an alternative to the dominant ones of modernism and realism, and names as its key advocates Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Siegfried Kracauer and Béla Balázs.

moving image technology is that it extends our perceptual access to the natural universe around us, enabling us 'to better explain, predict and control the natural universe'.²⁹³ Siegfried Kracauer affirmed in *Theory of Film* that the two basic functions of the cinema are to record and to reveal. For him, the cine-camera is fundamentally a device that makes perceptible the imperceptible.²⁹⁴ Dziga Vertov, a filmmaker with whom Farocki has been often associated, developed a politicised version of this affirmation of the revelatory powers of the cinema, of its capacities to do away 'with all the weaknesses of the human eye'.²⁹⁵ Cinema makes possible to see the true nature of social reality: 'the eyes of children and adults, the educated as well as the uneducated, are opening, as it were, for the first time (...) millions of workers, having recovered their sight'.²⁹⁶ For Vertov, cinema 'enables the communist decoding of the world'.²⁹⁷ Farocki's work develops another politicised version of this enthusiasm about the possibilities to transform the world for the better with the help of the revelatory powers of the cinema – one which problematises cinema's power 'to better explain, predict and control the natural universe'. *Workers Leaving the Factory* reveals the ideological strata organising the recurrence/scarcity of a visual motif and examines the role cinema has played in the invisibility of the factory, its functions of exposure and concealment.

²⁹³ Ibid., p.6.

²⁹⁴ Kracauer theorises and divides cinema's function of revelation into three sections: 'things normally unseen', 'phenomena overwhelming consciousness' and 'special modes of reality'. See Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film, The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1997, pp.41-59.

²⁹⁵ Vertov, Dziga, 'Resolution of the Council of the Three 10/IV – 1923', in Adams Stiney, P. (ed.), *The Avant-Garde Film, A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, Anthology Film Archives, New York, p.3. See Tomas, David, 'Les Futurs de l'Oeil: Vertov/Farocki sur la Vision Machine' in Thériault, M. (ed.), *Harun Farocki: One Image Doesn't Take the Place of the Previous One*, ABC Art Books Canada Distribution, Montréal, pp.187-206.

²⁹⁶ Vertov quoted by Malcolm Turvey. Turvey, Malcolm, *Doubting Vision, Film and the Revelationist Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York NY, 2008, p.7.

²⁹⁷ Vertov, Dziga quoted by Malcolm Turvey. Ibid., p.32.

'Workers leaving the factory' is not any cinematic motif. It is the visual motif and title of the film conventionally regarded as the inaugural scene of cinema, the Lumière Brothers' *La Sortie de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* [*Workers Leaving the Factory*, 1895]. Farocki both emphasises and questions the value of this beginning; he re-occupies this original scene and pursues the passage of its recurrence in the history of cinema. *Workers Leaving the Factory* was developed in 1995, in the context of the celebrations devoted to cinema's centenary, the one hundred years since the production of the Lumière brothers' homonymous film. The centenary was the occasion for theorists and practitioners of the visual to re-think their position within a rapidly changing mediascape. Laura Mulvey has affirmed that in the midst of these commemorations 'suddenly, the cinema seemed to age'.²⁹⁸ From this anthropomorphic diagnosis at least three different treatments were prescribed to take care of the elderly patient.

One interpretation, best represented by Susan Sontag's text 'The Decay of the Cinema', laid claim to the idealised image of a youthful past, when 'there were new masterpieces every month'.²⁹⁹ The logic informing this nostalgic view is clear: it serves to confirm the conceit of the present decay of the cinema, its 'irreversible decline'.³⁰⁰ A further response simply certified cinema's imminent death in the wake of a multi-coloured digital dawn. For Lev Manovich, for instance, the development of digital technologies has provoked a

²⁹⁸ Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x a Second, Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion, London, 2006, p.17.

²⁹⁹ Sontag, Susan, 'The Decay of Cinema', *The New York Times*, February 25 1996, New York.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

'crisis of cinema's identity'.³⁰¹ In the wake of this crisis, cinema 'can no longer be distinguished from animation'; it is reduced to 'a sub-genre of painting'.³⁰² A third kind of response moved away from these *deadly* interpretations in order to re-evaluate the aging process of cinema, giving critical import to characteristics commonly associated with old age: slowness, wisdom, and so on.³⁰³ Mulvey has emphasised the critical significance of these capacities in the context of the tendency towards acceleration imposed by post-Fordist capitalism:

The question of how history acquires pattern and shape has political significance and the rush of new technology towards the future, its indifference to the past, may fall into step with the new conservatism. In this context, the cinema, rather than simply reaching the end of its era, can come to embody a new compulsion to look backwards, to pause and make a gesture to delay the combined forces of politics, economics and technology.³⁰⁴

Farocki's practice of a 'new image archaeology' resulting in a film work such as *Workers Leaving the Factory*, or Jean-Luc Godard's re-writing of the history of the moving image in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988-1998) can be read as different versions of the counter-compulsion Mulvey imagines: to slow down and re-deploy the powers of cinema by

³⁰¹ Manovich, Lev, 'What is Digital Cinema?' in Lunenfeld, Peter (ed.), *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*, MIT, London and Cambridge MA, 2000, p.175.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Nicole Brenez has also offered a different take on the recurrent motif of 'the death of cinema'. According to Brenez 'the death of cinema' is a 'neat formula', 'a lovely theme' in which 'no one believed (...) for moment'. For her this formula 'merely represented a grand melancholy theme that certain filmmakers needed in order to make their films'. See Brenez, Nicole, 'From Nicole Brenez (Paris)', *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Autumn 1998, p. 48.

³⁰⁴ Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x a Second, Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion, London, 2006, p.24.

looking back across its immense archive of moving images.³⁰⁵ Each of these cases is animated by the critical impetus that seeks to re-work, re-rhythm and re-activate the various images taken up once more from the history of cinema. Godard and Farocki do not look back nostalgically at one hundred years of history; their films are operations which identify and recuperate possibilities that lie abandoned and unrealised within this history. In their similarities and differences both films can be understood as powerful devices re-affirming the singular capacity of cinema to stray beyond its own present and return in a future one, as though it were haunting the latter.

In *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* and *Workers Leaving the Factory*, Godard and Farocki confront the preceding one hundred years of cinema head on. The two films develop a similar dispositif that resembles a trial or a court hearing, to which cinema has been summoned and in which it will be judged. Both films can be understood as audiovisual cases where cinema faces the tribunal of History. And yet these tribunals are somewhat strange, in that they do not set out to convince the gallery of cinema's culpability or innocence. Both films instead proceed on the basis of a *fait accompli*, a verdict already delivered: the cinema is summoned and in the same stroke condemned, before any deliberation, before any argumentation, condemned without extenuating circumstances, from its first image and breath. The cinema is evidently guilty because it has failed to make present a specific place in the audiovisual landscape of the twentieth century. For Godard, this site is that of the death camps of the Second World War. For Farocki, it is that of the factory. It is precisely through this absolute condemnation that these films endeavour to re-think and re-deploy the capacities of cinema. In the case of *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, the

³⁰⁵ Badiou develops a similar strategy in the field of philosophy in his critical discussion of the sense(s) of the twentieth century. See Badiou, Alain, *The Century*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007.

condemnation is redemptive: the images of the absolutely guilty art of cinema are ultimately revealed to be absolutely innocent. Godard treats cinema images with a view to making visible 'their icon quality, their primordial virginity, their own splendor'.³⁰⁶ Godard fragments, cuts, slows down cinema frames to make each shot visible, exposing it to a frozen time, which reveals in turn an incandescent, raw material wherein the history of the twentieth century is inscribed. In *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*, Godard does not simply narrate a history of ghosts but relates to the image as a site, or better still, as the short-lived flesh of this same history.

The cinema of Farocki is very far from this spiritualism of the image. In the case of *Workers Leaving the Factory*, the condemnation of the cinema is fundamentally agnostically pedagogical; the prosecution of the cinema constitutes a learning process with a view to re-encountering the images of cinema's ignominious history. Very different from Godard's strange icons, Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory* re-works the protocols of revelation that are habitually employed by visual critique.³⁰⁷ To remove the dust from the cinematic archive is not for Farocki to make images shine in their own ephemeral light, to flesh out these moving ghosts, but to make them appear clear and clean, to clarify their power in the visual organisation of the world. In his words, it is by 'cleaning the detritus

³⁰⁶ Rancière, Jacques, *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.309 ('son caractère d'icône, sa virginité première et sa splendeur propre').

³⁰⁷ For an analysis of what I am calling Godard's strategy of the icon see Rancière, Jacques, 'The Saint and the Heiress', *Discourse*, 24-1, 2002, pp.113-119. For a critique of the dominant protocols of revelation in Western thought see Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading Or You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2003, pp.123-151.

of the image' that 'stifled meanings emerge'.³⁰⁸ Cleaning these images and putting them together, Farocki paves the way for their re-appearance, for their *apparition*. To look again at past images implicates in his cinema a re-organisation of visual strata. Farocki weaves with this re-organisation a solid fabric of revelations that acts to slow down the orderly march of cinema history. To look back implies a re-vision that reveals unknown layers of complicity between known images and various socio-political orders. As we will see, Farocki's process of re-visioning reveals the way in which even ostensibly opposed socio-political orders have submitted the factory to the same regime of invisibility: 'factory' appears as a ghost name in capitalism and communism, as well as for democratic parliamentarism.

In *Workers Leaving the Factory*, Farocki sets about dusting well-known images, the inaugural sequence of cinema no less, its first apparition. These images have receded from sight, precisely on account of the convention that has come to treat them as cinema's origin. Farocki does not only name his film after the Lumière Brothers' film, he structures his own work around the forty-six second sequence of workers walking through the gates of the Lumière factory in Lyon. These forty-six seconds come into view four times in *Workers Leaving the Factory*, including the all-important beginning and end. The structural significance of these images is not celebratory but on the contrary insistently critical. *Workers Leaving the Factory* makes these images visible not as the honourable origin of cinema but rather as the early, the earliest possible, visualisation of the thwarted relations between the cinema and the factory. Farocki's film, within the critical tradition of suspicion and scepticism, proceeds to demystify cinema's origin. The Lumière brothers'

³⁰⁸ Farocki, Harun quoted in Weinrichter, Antonio (ed.), *La Forma que Piensa. Tentativas en Torno al Cine-Ensayo*, Editorial Diputación Foral de Navarra, Pamplona, 2007, p.41. My translation ('buscar el significado submergido, limpiando el detritus de la imagen').

images do not symbolise cinema's engagement with reality or the coming together of mass medium and mass workplace. On the contrary, Farocki learns to see these images – a lesson imparted to the spectator in turn, in their repetitive use – as an inaugural error, as evidence of cinema's culpability in making invisible the place where all politics takes place, that is, the factory.³⁰⁹

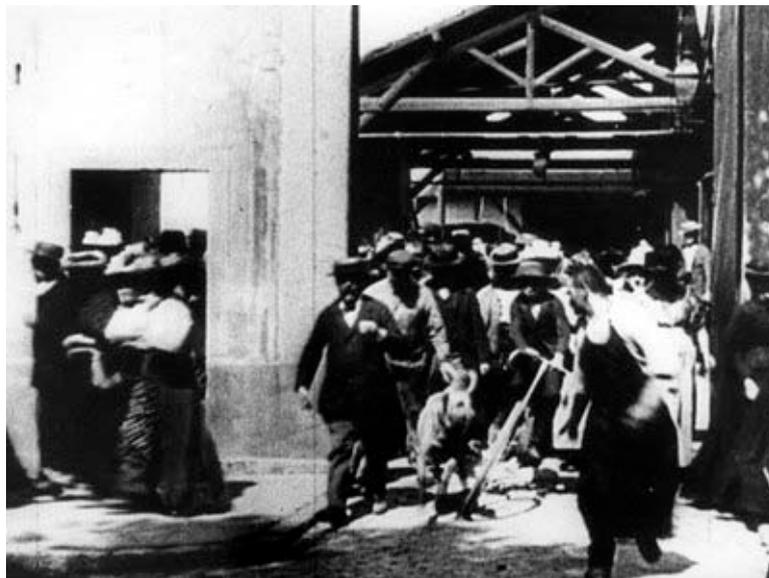


Figure 6. Still from *Workers Leaving the Factory* (Louis and Auguste Lumière, 1895)

In his essay 'Workers Leaving the Factory', Farocki exposes the non-relation between the cinema and the factory in the following terms:

The first camera in the history of cinema was pointed at a factory, but a century later it can be said that film is seldom drawn to the factory and is even repelled

³⁰⁹ Here I am rephrasing Alain Badiou's sentence: 'all contemporary politics has the factory as its place'. Quoted by Peter Hallward in *Badiou, A Subject to Truth*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2003, p.232.

by it. Films about work and workers have not emerged as one of the main film genres, and the space of the factory has remained on the sidelines. Most narrative films take place in that part of life where work has been left behind. (...) Over the last century virtually none of the communication that took place in factories, whether through words, glances or gestures was recorded on film.³¹⁰

Cinema has failed to engage itself with the primary space of modern politics. It has failed in its function of visualising the factory as a workers' site, and even the factory as an industrial space. 'Factory' is a name without a cinematic scene; neither a scene of 'real life' (documentary) nor a scene of fiction (narrative). This double failure entails that cinema has succeeded in making the factory invisible, in erasing its memory from the people-spectators. It is the separation from the conflictive space of the factory that has come to constitute the spectacular nature of cinema: cinema as escapism. The camera of the Lumière brothers remains outside the factory, founding the recurrent motif of 'workers leaving the factory' and cinema's lack of commitment with this space. It is a visual motif that manifests the apathetic and yet effective distance cinema has ignominiously maintained from the workers' site. For Farocki, cinema's repulsion for the factory demonstrates its connivance with both the capitalist and Soviet regimes for which the factory is a zone of complete non-representation. *Workers Leaving the Factory* interweaves indiscriminately a sequence from Fritz Lang's *Clash by Night* (1952) where Marilyn Monroe walks out of a fish cannery after a day's work, the silent images of strikers outside their workplace in Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Dezertir (The Deserter)*, 1933) or the sequence of an alienated Monica Vitti wandering around the murky industrial area of Ravenna in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Deserto Rosso (Red Dessert)*, 1964). Cinema's

³¹⁰ Farocki, Harun, 'Workers Leaving the Factory' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.238.

structural negation of the factory as re-presentable is in agreement with the Hollywood-Mosfilm-Cinecittà regime of the visible where 'the exploiter doesn't show the exploitation of the exploited'.³¹¹

In Farocki's film the disclosure of cinema's connivance with dominant regimentations of work and its non-re-presentation goes hand in hand with the re-vision of the Lumière brothers' images. Farocki situates their images in a series of conjunctions with various commentaries, songs, silences and other images that make palpable the tenacity with which cinema has kept its cameras outside the factory. These conjunctions reveal different layers of connivance bearing witness to cinema's repulsion for the factory. Farocki develops in the film a strategy of accumulation that piles up revelation after revelation, persuasively visualising cinema's ignominy. This accumulation of images leaves in its wake a pile of revelatory cinematic debris. Farocki is an allegorist who heaps emblematic images one on top of the other, annulling their different provenances, meanings and values otherwise ascribed to them within the history of cinema. Farocki plays the Lumière brothers' film without commentary at the beginning and at the end of his film. But between the two an instructive process will have taken place. The spectator cannot see the

³¹¹ Godard, Jean-Luc quoted by Hito Steyerl in 'Is a Museum a Factory?', *e-flux*, No. 7, June-August, 2009. Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/is-a-museum-a-factory/> (accessed: 15/03/2013). I have to specify that Antonioni's *Deserto Rosso* was not filmed in Cinecittà. Using the expression 'Hollywood-Mosfilm-Cinecittà' my intention is to expand Godard's critical formula 'Hollywood-Mosfilm' to include the subdominant European cinematographies, also at the heart of Farocki's critique. The French, German and Italian cinematographies are often forgotten in the critique of cinema industries and their organisations of the visible. Besides, it is worth quoting Antonioni's words explaining his aesthetic interest in the industrial landscape. Talking about *Deserto Rosso* he affirmed that 'it's too simplistic to say – as many people have done – that I am condemning the inhuman industrial world which oppresses the individuals and leads them to neurosis. My intention was to translate the poetry of the world, in which even factories can be beautiful. The line and curves of factories and their chimneys can be more beautiful than the outline of trees, which we are already too accustomed to seeing'. Quoted by Chatman, Seymour Benjamin and Paul Duncan in *Michelangelo Antonioni, Complete Films*, Taschen, Köln, 2004, p.91.

Lumière brothers' film with the same eyes after watching and listening to the evidence gathered against its inaugural infamy. The piling up of images, the mass of revelations function as an instructive apparition that the spectator can hardly ignore. *Workers Leaving the Factory* is not only the compilation of a visual motif, as it is most often described, but a catalogue of revelations.

Farocki first reveals that the Lumière brothers' decision to film the workers leaving their factory in the Monplaisir quarter of Lyon is not informed by any kind of socio-political preoccupation: this scene is chosen primarily to demonstrate the capacity of film to capture movement. Their interest in the workers' movement is purely a 'scientific curiosity'.³¹² The Lumière brothers do not conceive *Workers Leaving the Factory* as a symbolic representation of the political power of the workers' movement even if, as the narrator of the film explains, 'when this material was filmed the European governments feared a workers' uprising'. *Workers Leaving the Factory* in this sense offers up a very different picture from, for instance, the representation of a determined proletariat advancing towards the light and the spectator in *Il Quarto Stato* [*The Fourth State*] a painting Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo began in the same years that the Lumière brothers were filming *their* workers. In contrast to this emblematic image of an unstoppable proletariat, the Lumière brothers' images appear as the representation of a banal, everyday scene.

³¹² According to Kracauer 'Lumière told Méliès that he considered film nothing more than a scientific curiosity'. Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film, The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1997, p.32.

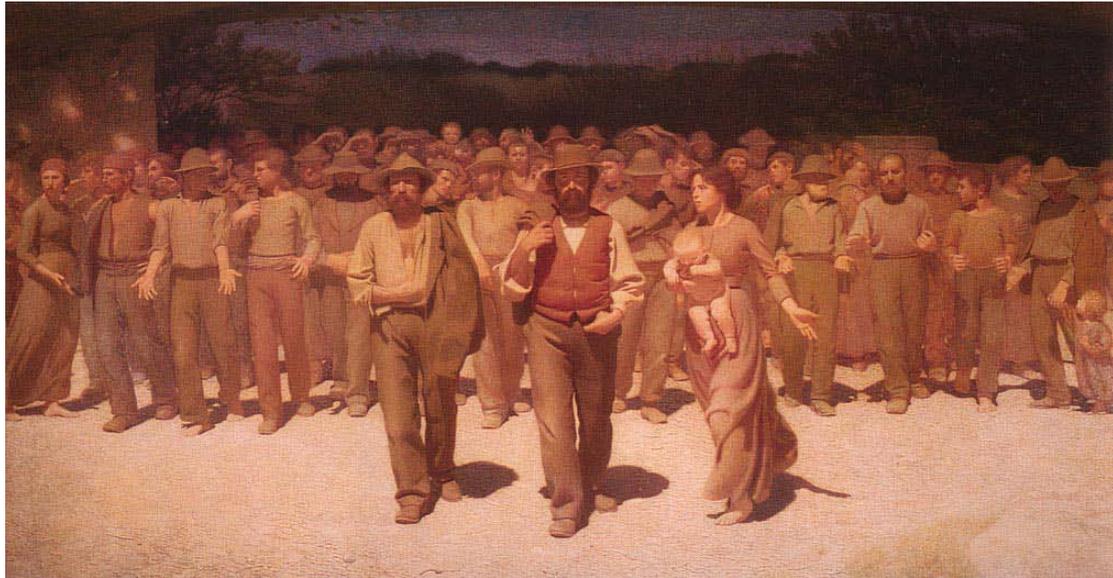


Figure 7. Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, *The Fourth State* (1901)

Through the commentary and a series of contrasting sequences Farocki exposes this distinction between the Lumière brothers' visualisation of the workers and other images that exalt their collective power. He reads the Lumière brothers' interest in capturing the physical movement of the workers as symptomatic of cinema's 'addiction to motion'.³¹³ For Farocki, this addiction to movement has most often blinded cinema to collective history. The Lumière brothers' images are celebrated as a new way of looking at the world, when in fact Farocki reveals them as a new way of being blind to it. It is at the editing table that Farocki makes visible and short-circuits the consensual definition of cinema as moving image. He freezes, repeats, rewinds but also describes, discusses, narrates images

³¹³ Farocki, Harun, 'Workers Leaving the Factory' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.238. Vertov's manifestos are amongst the most vigorous descriptions of cinema's obsession with movement: 'I [the camera-eye] free myself from today and forever from human immobility, I am in constant movement, I approach and draw away from objects, I crawl under them, I move alongside the mouth of a running horse, I cut into a crowd at full speed, I run in front of running soldiers, I turn on my back, I rise with an airplane, I fall and soar together with falling and rising bodies'. Vertov, Dziga, 'Resolution of the Council of the Three 10/IV – 1923', in Adams Stiney, P. (ed.), *The Avant-Garde Film, A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, Anthology Film Archives, New York NY, p.5.

from the cinema archive. This work-with-images that is a thinking-with-images brings forth a multiplicity of meanings, a multiplicity pitched against the impetus of the narrative flow and its one-directional progress. Farocki strives primarily, and this is a general characteristic of his cinema, 'to bring time to a standstill, for events have an advantage over our understanding', for 'things disappear from view before they are halfway understood'.³¹⁴ Farocki develops in his cinema an 'aesthetics of delay' so as to re-adjust the expeditious rhythms of the image and its form of life under capitalism.³¹⁵ His treatment of the image does not simply counter movement with immobility. It articulates rhythms giving rise to an experimental spectrum that encompasses both suspension and acceleration, in the form of discrete audiovisual modes that work to fundamentally recast the existing relation between images, as well as the one that binds them to a concrete socio-political state of affairs. It is an aesthetics that continuously visualises the capacity of working with images to rhythm again the presentation of the visible.

Furthermore, the conviction that the cine-camera is fundamentally a technology of control plays a primary role in Farocki's oeuvre; hence its appearance as a recurrent motif, also present in *Workers Leaving the Factory*. His cinema figures among the work of those historians and practitioners of the visual who, after Foucault, understand cinema not as the neutral result of technological improvement and progress but as part of the development of

³¹⁴ From Farocki's film *Zwischen Zwei Kriegen* (*Between Two Wars*, 1978).

³¹⁵ I borrow the expression 'aesthetics of delay' from Laura Mulvey. She uses it in her book *Death 24x a Second, Stillness and the Moving Image* in which she analyses how different films, from Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* to Abbas Kiarostami's trilogy of *Koter*, develop different aesthetics of delay. She understands these films are exemplary of how 'the cinema has always found ways to reflect on its central paradox: the co-presence of movement and stillness'. Mulvey, Laura, *Death 24x a Second, Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion, London, 2006, p.12.

a heterogeneous dispositif of control since the end of the nineteenth century.³¹⁶ The martial genealogy of cinema energises Farocki's non-redemptive self-critical impetus. Farocki has observed that there is a 'similarity between filmmaking and police work' and that 'it is a difficult and never an entirely appropriate job to document life, whether in a police station or on a film set'.³¹⁷ The connivance of the cine-image with dominant regimes of the visible is double: through its amnesia-producing speed and through its powers of surveillance. In *Workers Leaving the Factory* the banal images of the Lumière brothers' film appear as the first example of cinema's complicity with the society of control. Farocki reveals that these images are not an example of 'life caught unawares' but that they are staged. This revelation complicates the standard double helix structuring the history of cinema; the helix opposing the Lumière brothers (as the fathers of the transcription of real life to film) to Georges Méliès (as the father of cinematic artifice, illusion and fantasy). The Lumière brothers' film is not, as Siegfried Kracauer interpreted it, a picture of 'life at its least controllable'.³¹⁸ On the contrary, it is a cinematic example of space and time management; or rather it is a case, conventionally the inaugural case, on account of which the cinema itself is rendered a factory of space and time management. The Lumière brothers' camera does not simply record the regulated space, times and movements that congregate around the factory gates, it operates as part of the regulatory apparatus controlling the movement of the workers, its trajectory and tempo. The Lumière brothers produced at least three different versions of this scene. Farocki explains that each

³¹⁶ Paul Virilio (an author with whom Farocki has been often compared) or Friedrich Kittler have analysed the interdependence of the technologies of cinema and warfare. See Virilio, Paul, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Verso, London, 1989; Kittler, Friedrich, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999.

³¹⁷ Silverman, Kaja and Farocki, Harun, *Speaking about Godard*, New York University Press, New York NY, p.13.

³¹⁸ For Kracauer the Lumière brothers' films show 'life at its least controllable and most unconscious moments, a jumble of transient, forever dissolving patterns accessible only to the camera'. Kracauer, Siegfried, *Theory of Film, The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1997, p.31.

time the workers-actors were assembled behind the gate and started walking out on the camera operator's command.

Farocki makes visible the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Factory* as the foundation not of the dream factory but of a properly disciplinary factory. The audiovisual condemnation at work in his essay video allows us to conclude that the cinema has not represented the factory because it is itself a factory. Gilles Deleuze's description of the ideal factory, for instance, can be applied to define the scene Farocki scrutinises: 'to concentrate, to distribute in space, to order in time, to compose a productive force within the dimension of space-time whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component forces'.³¹⁹ Farocki asserts a parallel existence between the power over time and space by which the filmmaker coordinates the actor and the power over time and space by which industry regulates the life of the worker. This extends to the common structure of the factory gate and the projected image to frame and control the workers-actors. The gate and the image are two techniques of compression that regulate the flow of the workers-actors and make possible the appearance of a multitudinous workforce in action. The narrator of the film comments: 'the best moment to perceive the number of workers is when they are leaving the factory'. Farocki accumulates and compares a myriad of these moments that are the repeated evidence of a mass movement. But these moments do not simply visualise the collective force of the anonymous many. *Workers Leaving the Factory* leaves its spectator on the threshold of a paradox: if the image/gate is what lets us see the seemingly

³¹⁹ Deleuze, Gilles, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, No. 59, Winter 1992, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, p.3. The prison is for Foucault and Deleuze the model of these disciplinary institutions. Deleuze illustrates the expansion of the prison model with a filmic example. He recalls the scene from Roberto Rossellini's *Europa 51* where the heroine exclaims 'I thought I was seeing convicts' after encountering some workers. Farocki will use this line to title his film on a Californian prison: *Ich Glaubte Gefangene zu Sehen (I Thought I Was Seeing Convicts, 2000)*.

unstoppable rise of the workers' tide, it is at the same time the technique by which this tide is channelled, disciplined, controlled.

Workers Leaving the Factory mobilises the cinematic motif of 'leaving the factory' not as the *horror vacui* representation of the proletariat in its incalculable potency. Rather, this motif appears as the manifestation of the ephemeral visibility of the workers in the society of discipline and control, to continue to use Foucault's terminology. As Farocki puts it: 'Immediately after the workers hurry past the gate, they disperse to become individual people (...) With their departure from the factory, the workers do not remain behind as a body of united workers and thus their image as workers disintegrates'.³²⁰ He adds that most fiction films 'begin where the identity of the protagonist as worker ends'.³²¹ Cinema begins when the worker leaves the factory, when the worker leaves the name worker to enter the world of the family, to enter the kinship arrangements father/mother, wife/husband, daughter/son. The society of discipline and control, capitalist or other, offers at the factory gates a mere glimpse of a collective image, a collective anonymous name. The narrator exposes the visual ephemerality of the name 'worker' by repeating throughout the film the same descriptive line: 'the workers disperse, the life of the solitary being can begin', 'the workers disperse, the life of the solitary being can begin'. This repetition works as both a sceptical lament and an incantation to disturb this consensual

³²⁰ Farocki, Harun, 'Workers Leaving the Factory' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.239.

³²¹ Farocki, Harun and Ernst, Wolfgang, 'Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.277. I explore more thoroughly the representation of collectivities in the third part of this thesis as it is focused on the relation cinema-people.

narrative; it issues a call to slow down the march of the workers, to begin to revoke the invisibility of the political name, the visual dispersion caused by historical progress.

2- *Essayistic pedagogies with the image*

The cinema of Farocki is most often classified within the turbulent category of the 'essay film'.³²² Nora Alter has given an *activist* definition of this cinematic non-genre:

Whatever defining secondary features the essay may have *qua* genre, a basic one remains that it is precisely *not* a genre, since it strives to be beyond formal, conceptual, and social constraint. Like heresy in the Adornian literary essay, the essay film disrespects traditional boundaries, is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, is self-reflective and self-reflexive. It also questions the subject positions of the filmmaker and audience as well as the audiovisual medium itself -whether film, video, or digital-electronic (...). The essay film can be grasped as an audiovisual *performance* of theory and criticism executed within and by the filmic text, thus producing a productive and/or inhibiting resistance to scholarly discourse.³²³

Farocki is more cautious with the critical potential of this heretic non-genre. For him, the term 'essay film' is too vague and is all too easily appropriated to non-militant contexts.

³²² For a genealogy of the concept of 'film essay' see Weinrichter, Antonio (ed.), *La Forma que Piensa. Tentativas en Torno al Cine-Ensayo*, Editorial Diputación Foral de Navarra, Pamplona, 2007.

³²³ Alter, Nora M., 'The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film: Farocki's Images of the World and the Inscription of War', *New German Critique*, No. 68, Spring - Summer, 1996, pp.171-172.

He prefers to define his films as ‘a form of intelligence’.³²⁴ Nevertheless, the complexities and inconsistencies of the definition of the essay, both as a literary and cinematic form, configure a productive framework to re-think the complexities and inconsistencies of Farocki's audiovisual politics. My interest on the essay is not based on the belief that this non-genre is in itself *resistant*. Rather, I recognise different articulations of the essayistic, each with different implications and efficacies. In *Workers Leaving the Factory* a series of essayistic dissonances displace its politics of revelation from the hidden/unveiled binary to a configuration of knowledge relations that begin to erode the hierarchical relation between revelationist *auteur* and spectator.

The singularity of Farocki's essayism resides in its ambivalence: on the one hand it effectively develops a dramatics of revelation, on the other hand it de-legitimizes normative protocols of knowledge. As we have seen, *Workers Leaving the Factory* persuasively exposes cinema's participation in the Hollywood-Mosfilm-Cinecittà regime of the visible, the regime of the invisible factory. The essayistic quality of the film presents this connivance with the compelling force of a revealed truth that Power has otherwise kept veiled. At the same time, and here lies the paradoxical strength of his cinema, Farocki's essayism displaces images and words from their function of revelation. Another assemblage between image and function is at work in his films: the exposure of the ideological strata behind the image is re-distributed by another politics of knowledge. It is as if the cinema of Farocki was impelled not only by the conventional faith in

³²⁴ For Farocki the category of ‘essay film’ is ‘just as unsuitable as documentary film (...) When there is a lot of music on TV and you see landscapes – they've started calling that an essay film as well. A lot of stuff that is just relaxing and not unequivocally journalistic is already called essay’. See Hüser, Rembert, ‘Nine Minutes in the Yard: A Conversation with Harun Farocki’ in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.313.

exposure but by the dictum *to know something is to stop thinking about it*. The name ‘factory’ is not only revealed as a ghost in *Workers Leaving the Factory*: it haunts the cinema-factory relation, transforming it into a *force field* by which to re-visualise and re-sonorise the factory and the cinema.³²⁵ In this field it is possible to experiment with a cinema irreducible to a factory-of-knowledge. Farocki’s essayism continuously passes between a politics of revelation that reproduces normative structures of knowledge (and its attendant binaries: hidden/exposed, knowing/ignoring, visible/invisible) and a politics that oxidises these structures and reconfigures the pedagogical capacities of the image (a politics haunted by ‘factory’ as a political name).

Thinkers and practitioners of the essay film, such as Ursula Biemann or Antonio Weinrichter, often agree on a series of common characteristics to define the form of this cinematic non-genre: fragmentation of the narrative, use of non-referenced images and quotations, valorisation of the subjective and the digressive, juxtaposition of contradictory ideas and/or visualities, self-reflexivity leading to self-criticism, hybridity between fact and fiction.³²⁶ This is the catalogue of film forms privileged by ‘a post-structuralist cinematographic practice’ against what we could call *treatise films*.³²⁷ This catalogue supposedly prevents the formation of a position of authorial mastery in the process of knowledge production. Yet Farocki’s methods do not find themselves in simple

³²⁵ I borrow the expression ‘force field’ from T. W. Adorno who uses it to define the essay in his ‘The Essay as Form’. Adorno affirms that the essay ‘erects no scaffolding, no edifice (...). It is a force field, just as under the essay’s glance every intellectual artefact must transform itself into a force field’. Adorno, T. W., ‘The Essay as Form’, *New German Critique*, No. 32, Spring - Summer, 1984, p.161.

³²⁶ See Weinrichter, Antonio (ed.), *La Forma que Piensa. Tentativas en Torno al Cine-Ensayo*, Editorial Diputacion Foral de Navarra, Pamplona, 2007.

³²⁷ Biemann, Ursula, ‘The Video Essay in the Digital Age’ in Biemann, Ursula (ed.), *Stuff It, the Video Essay in the Digital Age*, Institute for Theory of Art and Design, Zürich, 2003, p.8.

accordance with these practical tenets. His cinema constructs a critical distance from the latter and their presumed efficacy as weapons waged against the affectations of intellectual mastery. Farocki does not so much apply a formula countering doctrinal protocols of knowledge in order to reveal hidden truths, as works to make consistent, in singular ways, the force of the treatise (the doctrinal, the objective, the exact) and the autonomy of the essayistic (the non-doctrinal, the subjective, the digressive). These articulations are particularly visible in Farocki's text (the commentary) and its relation with the visual track. I have identified three conjunctions that exemplify the strange consistencies between the essayistic and the treatise that emerge in the relation between images and words in the film, what I am calling a militant hyperbolism, a double austerity, and a very serious comedy of surveillance.

As we have seen, Farocki's film is focused on the forty-six seconds of the Lumière brothers' *Workers Leaving the Factory*, with an intensity such that the scene it rehearses comes to be treated as nothing less than the guiding leitmotif of the cinema itself, across its entire historical span: 'I found myself gaining the impression that over a century cinematography had been dealing with just one single theme'.³²⁸ Farocki plays in the film, both in the commentary and in the repeated use of the commemorated images, with this overestimation of the motif in question. In this sense, Farocki's essayism coincides with Adorno's characterisation of the essay as a form of overinterpretation: 'its interpretations are not sober, the essay *overinterprets*'.³²⁹ The hyperbolic text goes beyond the appropriate limits of what the visible shows. It functions as a critical device in Farocki's

³²⁸ Farocki, Harun, 'Workers Leaving the Factory' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.242.

³²⁹ Adorno, T. W., 'The Essay as Form', *New German Critique*, No. 32, Spring - Summer, 1984, p.152.

cinema, as he readily acknowledges: 'I always try to avoid interpretations where the film dissolves without leaving a residue. One of my strategies is to overinterpret or even misinterpret a film. My hope is that something is being saved in such exaggeration'.³³⁰ The hyperbolic, a strategy commonly used in the art of rhetoric, testifies to the fact that 'revealing the truth' involves a proper measure, a proper temperance. To exaggerate has a double-edged effect; it both empowers and de-legitimizes the speaker/author. It is a strange model of enunciation that does not consolidate what is the enunciated without undermining that very same thing.

This hyperbolic tendency has a double effect in *Workers Leaving the Factory*: it foregrounds the strength of Farocki's dramatics of revelation, underwriting its efficacy, and it displaces these dramatics from an oppositional organisation of knowledge between the true and the false. The hyperbolic allows him to make powerful revelatory statements: 'factories have not attracted film, rather they have repelled it', 'where the first camera once stood, there are now hundreds of thousands of surveillance cameras'. But these revelations are not simply sustained by a politics of accuracy and moderation (Farocki does not care about exceptions). Very differently, these circulate as the improper statements of a militant hyperbolism that breaks with the self-controlled, balanced, respectable equilibrium of legitimate argumentation; in this case the argument of the historical significance of the Lumière brothers' inaugural demonstration. The revelatory in the cinema of Farocki combines the abrupt unveiling of the ideological sub-strata buried within the image and the assemblage of a hyperbolic efficacy for the audiovisual. For Farocki the hyperbolic is a tool to critically and powerfully re-articulate the grounds upon

³³⁰ Hüser, Rembert, 'Nine Minutes in the Yard: A Conversation with Harun Farocki' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.313.

which the non-relation between the cinema and the factory is staged and to experiment with the efficacy of excessive sentences that improperly permeate the image. This is Farocki's singular version of the critical tradition of separating words and images in the cinema:

Often I make such a playful use of the commentary, I propose this meaning and then another meaning, and then exchange them, as one does when playing cards in a game. They are never the so-called representative illustrations for these ideas. There is always a reading of the images, sometimes a provocative reading, where the audience will wonder, 'surely, this can't be the right commentary to these images?' Between the images and the commentary there is a parallel, but it's a parallel that will meet in infinity.³³¹

It is not only a provocation but the construction of an improper force field through which the film's spectators listen to a commentary that leads to a hyperbolic encounter with the images held forth.

The text of *Workers Leaving the Factory* develops an austere economy with regard to the words it employs. The commentary is shorn of any verbosity. It is composed of concise observations that strike their target, the images, with unerring precision, instead of engulfing them in a flood of words. The text intertwines two logics of austerity: a laconic tone and the use of poetical ellipses. This economy presents the text as a succession of lapidary statements. The revelations Farocki makes about the cinema-factory relation have the sparse force of a military command. It is an economy that makes the revelation appear

³³¹ Elsaesser, Thomas, 'Making the World Superfluous: An Interview with Harun Farocki' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.187.

in all its objective strength. To reveal is to laconically stick to the point: 'the cinema is repelled by the factory'. Farocki does not need to explain or construct an argument; the revelatory impulse has no need of rhetorical ornaments. The power of the revelation resides in the fact that it presents itself in the temporality of an instant, without discussion. Farocki's text does not simply serve to illustrate what the re-organisation of the images allows him to see; rather, the text itself acquires a force whose instantaneous nature is analogous to that of the image. Farocki's sentences are snapshots. But Farocki's linguistic austerity also has a poetical dimension that calls for the participation of the spectators in the enunciation of revelations (an invitation I have accepted in this first part of this chapter). The succinct commentary operates with a series of ellipses that emphasise the revelation but without then verbalising its critical ramifications. Farocki does not elaborate upon his revelations; he does not draw all the possible consequences from his visual archaeology. Finally, the text often has an evocative quality: the workers walk 'as if impelled by an invisible force', they run 'as if they had already lost too much time', they leave the factory 'as if they knew somewhere better to be'.

There is in Farocki's text a strange consistency between a sparse laconism where the revelation appears as self-sufficient and a use of poetical ellipsis that calls for additional words. The intertwining of this duality is also at work in the qualities of the narrator's voice. Didi-Huberman has opposed Farocki's neutral voices in his films to the drama of Godard's voice in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*. The voice of the narrator in Farocki's cinema is 'precise and by no means affected by an apocalyptic pathos', whereas Godard speaks with 'an inspired voice, the voice of a prophet with a melancholic touch'.³³² In the English

³³² Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Remontages du Temps Subi*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2010, pp.176-177 ('une voix inspirée, une voix de prophète au grain mélancolique').

version of Farocki's films, the narrator is most often the actress Cynthia Beatt, in *Workers Leaving the Factory* it is the film scholar Kaja Silverman (Farocki himself in the German version). Their vocalisation has an objective, flat, monotone modulation. But this flatness does not simply imitate the trained ideological flatness of mass media journalism, and it is not simply neutral, as it has most often been heard. Rather, it is closer to the flatness of Robert Bresson's actors-models. The dull and the brilliant in the speakers' vocalisation produces a dry expressivity that can pass unnoticed.³³³ It is the imperceptible expressivity of a militant vocalisation making commensurable two voices most often thought of as incompatible. It is the militancy of a voice objectively distant, revealing the truth of what there is to see (the voice of God of expository documentary films) yet at the same time affected by the images that the speaker has, through revelation, learnt to see again (the voice of the essayist).³³⁴

Thomas Elsaesser has described Farocki as 'an archaeologist who executes his reconstructive work not in triumphalist gestures (...) but in the spirit of sorrowful contemplation and melancholy reflection'.³³⁵ However, the seriousness of his texts is not

³³³ Here I reformulate a sentence by Robert Bresson on the 'voix blanche': 'Expression that can pass unnoticed, obtained by almost imperceptible slowings and quickenings and by the dull and the brilliant in the voice'. Bresson, Robert, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, Quartet Books, London, 1986, p.54.

³³⁴ For a discussion of the voice-over in Farocki's cinema see Rascaroli, Laura, 'The Metacritical Voice(Over) of the Essay Film: Harun Farocki, Found Footage and the Essayist as Spectator', in *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Columbia University Press, New York NY, 2009, pp.44-63.

³³⁵ Elsaesser, Thomas, 'Harun Farocki: Filmmaker, Artist, Media Theorist' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.27. Olaf Möller describes Farocki as 'the saddest of the lot [the lot of the journal *Filmkritik*]. His texts, especially those concerning contemporary themes, resemble the most corrosive of acids. Underneath, despair certainly makes itself felt, but also astonishment at the fact that things are represented the way they are'. See Möller, Olaf, 'Passage Along the Shadow Line', in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.75.

simply melancholic, nor does it simply manifest a disciplined gravity. Rather Farocki assembles in his writings a mournful tonality borne of analytical exactitude, a combination that conveys an exceptionally precise and revolted despair. In *Workers Leaving the Factory* the revelatory text is punctuated by concise sentences such as: ‘working in the factory is hell’, ‘they [the workers] walk slowly as if following a coffin’. The gravity of the text is at the same time deeply affective yet economical. It is this particular articulation of the objective and the subjective that gives to his revelations their entirely specific intensity.

The often sombre and activist seriousness of Farocki's revelations is nevertheless not exempt of derision and even a certain comic touch. Film scholars interpreting Farocki's oeuvre often overlook Farocki's tough humour (perhaps because it can appear almost indiscernible on account of the avalanche of critical revelations). And yet, his is a ‘sarcastic archaeology’.³³⁶ In *Workers Leaving the Factory*, there are various unexpected examples of sporadic comic effects that, however minor, contribute to the oxidation of the protocols regulating Farocki's revelations. The parallelism between cinema and surveillance, as we have seen, is a constant and important issue in Farocki's cinema. The narrator of *Workers Leaving the Factory* reveals that the camera of the Lumière brothers is the ‘precursor of today's many surveillance cameras which automatically and blindly produce an infinite number of images in order to safeguard private property’.³³⁷ Farocki accompanies this revelation with different uses of pre-existent images; a series of

³³⁶ I borrow the expression ‘sarcastic archaeology’ from Kodwo Eshun who used it in a public discussion of *Workers Leaving the Factory* and Godard's *British Sounds* organised by myself on March 11th 2001 for InC Research Group, Goldsmiths, University of London.

³³⁷ Farocki, Harun, ‘Workers Leaving the Factory’ in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.238.

assemblages that expose a very serious comedy of surveillance. Farocki recycles images from promotional and research videos illustrating different experiments with new surveillance equipment made by unspecified corporations. These videos and their saturated colours, the bad acting and pretentious montage or music function as powerful but also comical scenographies that visualise the technologies available for the fortification of the factory. All these sequences assemble a strange repertoire of surveillance equipment used to isolate the factory from society, a repertoire that makes visible the techniques that maintain the factory at a distance from society, unaccounted for in its politics, invisible in its cinema. To emphasise the segregation of the factory, Farocki includes images from different sources where factory gates and fences evoke a prison environment (also Farocki compares the factory, more precisely, to internment camps). This analogy is treated without any trace of humour. Farocki reveals that the combination of factory and prison is far from being rare in the history of institutional formations.

Moreover, Farocki dramatises the capacity of the camera to capture every minute detail, to arrest every movement with its watchful eye. Thus he makes a pause to focus on one second from the Lumière brothers' film where we (hardly) see a worker tugging at the skirt of another worker, insignificantly disrupting the perfectly choreographed parade of the workers leaving their workplace. The humorous anecdote attracts the scrutiny of the filmmaker who isolates the different frames, freezes them and rewinds the sequence several times with analytical zeal. It is the stern and absurd imitation of a hyper-vigilant observer/filmmaker controlling the precision of a dance number s-he has choreographed. The triviality of the scene adds a comical layer to the analysis. At the same time, it delays the flow of the film in order to make visible the microscopic capacity of the camera to control not only the evident but infinitesimal details of everyday life.

The double-edged hyperbolism, the Spartan and evocative austerity of Farocki's text and the very serious comedy at work in *Workers Leaving the Factory* construct a strange force field with which to reveal the ghost name 'factory'. Cinema's repulsion for the factory is not so much argued but essayistically revealed. Farocki does not simply explain this repulsion, as Godard did in an interview, as a matter of censorship: 'cameras are forbidden in the factory, in the workplace, in the airports (...) I don't have the right to film in any of the places that represent 80% of productive activity in France'.³³⁸ In *Workers Leaving the Factory*, the revelations concerning cinema's ignominy do not come from an outside, but as if they were happening in front of us, so to speak. Farocki does not so much apply or confirm an exterior knowledge with which to see and read the motif of workers leaving the factory; rather, the different operations he develops with pre-existent images define what he is able to see, what he is able to declare about them and their relation to a collective history.

These operations constitute an instance of what he calls 'visual thinking'.³³⁹ Farocki does not so much convey what he knows to the audience but what he is able to poetise and state through the medium of image and word. The consistency between poetical evocation and objective analysis gives all its vigour and rigour to his cinema.³⁴⁰ It is the intertwinement

³³⁸ Godard, Jean-Luc quoted by Hito Steyerl in 'Is a Museum a Factory?', *e-flux*, No. 7, June-August 2009. Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/is-a-museum-a-factory/> (accessed: 15/03/2013).

³³⁹ Farocki, Harun and Ernst, Wolfgang, 'Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts' in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.265.

³⁴⁰ The articulation of these two registers brings Farocki closer to his 'mentors' Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. For the intertwinement of the discourse of reason and poetry in the cinema of Huillet-Straub see chapter two of this thesis.

of two registers that place Farocki's speaker outside conventional, parliamentary, reasonable protocols of truth. The voice of the narrator is displaced as a master's voice and yet the revelations resound with the potency of a truth. This is the singular force of the audiovisual field that Farocki constructs in *Workers Leaving the Factory*: the force of a speaker-essayist who does not seek legitimacy in normative protocols to speak and who essays different combinations between words and images. These dramatics of revelation produce powerful affirmations that are both concise verses and lyrical slogans.

Such affirmations are not, however, conclusions.³⁴¹ *Workers Leaving the Factory* develops an essayistic pedagogy that requires the participation of the spectators to make connections between images and words and to imagine the ramifications and consequences of what they are looking at and listening to. The significance of his politics of revelation does not rely 'on an infinite reservoir of naïveté in those who make up the audience for these unveilings', a naïveté the filmmaker-master would teach the spectator to leave behind.³⁴² *Workers Leaving the Factory* does not simply teach that cinema is a disciplinary factory of control and knowledge production, that the repression of the factory is a formative question for the audiovisual regime we live in. Primarily, it makes visible an anonymous capacity to intertwine different registers in order to re-organise images and words and make up conclusions. Farocki's essayism does not simply legitimise or delegitimise his deductions; rather it transforms the screen into an editing table. This mode of working with the screen erodes its vertical capacity to dominate and fixate meanings. Farocki's screen-table follows the avenue opened up by Warburg to work with images in

³⁴¹ Didi-Huberman speaks of a refusal to conclude at work in the cinema of Farocki. See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Remontages du Temps Subi*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2010, p.148.

³⁴² Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2003, p.141.

his atlas *Mnemosyne*.³⁴³ The modest *table* in the practice of Warburg works as a surface where different encounters can happen, a surface that receives without hierarchy images of disparate origins and status, a surface where endless combinations of images can happen. In the cinema of Farocki, the screen becomes a blackboard where the spectators, like the filmmaker, are able to compare, put together and separate images and words. To compare, to exaggerate, to re-group, to comment, to silence, to poeticise are all operations constructing a singular audiovisual conjunction, or table, to reveal the invisibility of the factory-of-the-workers; a conjunction visualising the anonymous possibilities of any intelligence to essay.

Jacques Rancière has introduced a basic distinction to think about the strange powers of the essayistic.³⁴⁴ For him, there are two antagonistic versions of this speaker without proper legitimacy, the essayist. A first reading understands the essay as the stylistic position of a heroic identity able to survey from above the specialised compartments of knowledge. The essayistic corresponds then to a subjective disposition, to a privileged freedom able to reveal the deceitful operations of the image. It is the signature of an intellectual personality, in Rancière's words of a 'clownish figure of the intellectual'.³⁴⁵ Indeed if essay filmmakers, names such as Chris Marker, Agnès Varda or Farocki, have been praised for doing away with the politics of genre, they are also often criticised for representing 'a new edition of the *auteur* politics'.³⁴⁶ However, Rancière describes a

³⁴³ See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Atlas, ¿Cómo llevar el Mundo a Cuestas?*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2010, pp.18-19.

³⁴⁴ See Rancière, Jacques, 'Politique de l'Écriture' in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, pp. 61-74.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. p.73.

³⁴⁶ Weinrichter, Antonio (ed.), *La Forma que Piensa. Tentativas en Torno al Cine-Ensayo*, Editorial Diputación Foral de Navarra, Pamplona, 2007, p.27 ('una nueva edición de la política de los autores').

second understanding of the essayistic that moves away from the fatigued problematic of the *auteur*. The essay form that Rancière defends is not a ‘personalised intervention in the state of the world’ but an ‘intellectual adventure across the borders of specialised knowledge that singularly verifies the presupposition of a common power to think’.³⁴⁷ In this second version of the essayistic, the proper name of the *auteur* is not the sign of a heroic individuality. The signature of a proper name indicates ‘the engagement of a subject to support as hers something on the common territory of language and thought’.³⁴⁸

Farocki supports his statements with an improper doctrinal force. His essayism develops impossible essay-treatise films. Farocki has an ostensible faith in the efficacy of exposition and exposure. In his words, his purpose is ‘to investigate pictures, take them apart to reveal their elements’.³⁴⁹ He affirms that ‘it is not a matter of what is in the picture, but rather, of what lies behind’.³⁵⁰ At the same time, Farocki makes visible in his film a dramatics of revelation, adding an extra dimension to his self-defined procedure of unveiling. Since the sixties, the political project of the essay film has repeatedly accompanied its politics of revelation with a self-revealing reflexivity. This cinema exposes what lies behind the image while exposing itself in different ways as a manufacturer of images. The logic of self-revelation operates, for a common-sense approach of means and ends, quite illogically since it reveals its own politics of revelation.

³⁴⁷ Rancière, Jacques, ‘Politique de l’Ecriture’ in *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.73. My translation (‘non une intervention personnalisée sur l’état du monde’, ‘une aventure intellectuelle qui traverse les frontières des spécialités dans la vérification singulière et hasardeuse de la supposition d’une puissance commune de la pensée’).

³⁴⁸ Ibid. My translation (‘la signature d’un nom propre marque ce qu’un sujet s’engage à supporter comme sien sur le territoire de la langue et de la pensée communes’).

³⁴⁹ Farocki, Harun and Ernst, Wolfgang, ‘Towards an Archive for Visual Concepts’ in Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, p.180.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p.12.

The power of revelation lies in its apparent spontaneity, in its lightning efficacy. One is struck, seized by revelation. To visualise the dramatics of revelation seems to undermine the intensity of its immediacy, of its instantaneous didacticism.

Following Rancière's distinction between these respective essay forms, there are two possible ways of reading the essayistic operation of self-revelation. One is to consider this reflexivity, as it has most often been understood, as a form of will to truth that propagates a self-conscious model of cinema-as-factory pitched against the duplicity of the Hollywood-Mosfilm-Cinecittà industry. What this reading does is to substitute one legitimating claim for another: the demystifying cinema is validated because self-demystifying, the proper name of the essay filmmaker is validated because self-exposed. And of course the essayist who proceeds in the name of truth is a familiar figure in the tradition of critique. But another interpretation is possible beyond the conventional appeal to transparency. Here self-revelation would not longer retain the alibi of a proper name but pursue the manifestation of a certain anonymity. Self-revelation need not necessarily have a heroic self as its primary coordinate: the juxtaposition of images and words appears as a capacity of anyone. *Farocki* then does not sound as the proper name of a Master revealing the true nature of cinema and revealing himself as a proponent of the factory of images. The cinema of Farocki is not engaged in this politics of redemption and confession. Rather, in the closing credits of his films, *Farocki* sounds as the signature that gives consistency to an audiovisual assemblage without a statically defined intellectual scaffolding: the film *Workers Leaving the Factory*.

In his essay dedicated to the visual memory of the disasters of the last century, Didi-Huberman has made a fertile comparison between Godard as a *sovereign auteur* and Farocki as a *modest auteur*.³⁵¹ Godard in *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* creates an epic history to illuminate the fate of cinema in the twentieth century where 'spectators are inevitably intimidated by so much knowledge of which they have no reference'.³⁵² Farocki in *Workers Leaving the Factory* works with one hundred years of images in order to re-appropriate them for a common intellect. As Laura Rascaroli has noticed, Farocki does not present himself in this video essay 'as a creator of images, but as a spectator of the images of the world; he places himself on the same plane as the audience, partly debasing himself, but truly raising the spectator to the level of creator of textual meanings'.³⁵³ The political resonance of *Workers Leaving the Factory* is not simply located in its condemnation of the absolute invisibility of the factory, but in its capacity to transform the revelationist act into a common spectatorial experience, open to anyone. 'Factory' appears as a name outside the stage of politics. But the film does not give a final determinacy to this ghost name, whether in the form of already known explanations, new images or a unique argument of the auteur. Very differently, the invisible factory becomes the occasion to construct a singular space where the doctrinal and the essayistic, the objective and the subjective, the poetic and the exact can co-habit on an improper screen-table for anyone to find a way to look at the relation between the factory and the cinema. *Workers Leaving the Factory* does not make us see and hear the factory simply as the hidden, silenced stage of dominant socio-political orders, but as an uncounted audiovisual motif enabling anyone to re-think the grounds upon which representation takes place. On this screen-table the name 'factory'

³⁵¹ Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Remontages du Temps Subi*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2010, pp.173-180.

³⁵² Ibid., p.177. My translation ('le spectateur se trouve forcément intimidé par tant de savoir dont il n'a pas les clés').

³⁵³ Rascaroli, Laura, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film*, Columbia University Press, New York NY, 2009, p.63.

has not ceased to haunt the experience of the filmmaker and the spectator. If the cinema is revealed as a factory, it also operates as a factory-of-the-workers, a cinema-of-the-spectators.

Chapter 4: Rust Factory (on Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks*)

Theorists, scholars and critics have unanimously celebrated Wang Bing's film *Tie Xi Qu* (*West of the Tracks*, 2003) as an exemplary film of the new millenium.³⁵⁴ According to the media scholar Lu XinYu, the film is 'without question the greatest work to have come out of the Chinese documentary movement, and must be ranked among the most extraordinary achievements of world cinema in the new century'.³⁵⁵ For her, the film is an exemplary representation of the recent socio-economic transformations in China; it is an exemplary case of what has been functionally called post-socialist cinema. The subject matter of the film, the decline of the industrial district of Tie Xi in the Manchurian city of Shenyang, illustrates the main preoccupation of this cinema: the destruction of the social fabric in the post-Tiananmen period, years known in China as 'the era of *zhuanxing*' ('transformation').³⁵⁶ The critical literature on the subject has pointed out that the common motif of post-socialist cinema is urban and industrial demolition. The main characters in both documentary and fiction films are 'the bulldozer, the building crane and the debris of

³⁵⁴ The most important points of critical reference are Lu Xin-Yu, 'Ruins of the Future, Class and History in Wang Bing's *Tiexi District*, trans. by J. X. Zhang, *New Left Review*, No.31, London, January and February 2005 and Sandhu, Sukhdev (ed.), *Leaving the Factory: Wang Bing's Tie Xi Qu*, Texte und Töne, New York NY, 2009.

³⁵⁵ Lu Xin-Yu, 'Ruins of the Future, Class and History in Wang Bing's *Tiexi District*, trans. by J. X. Zhang, *New Left Review*, N.31, London, January and February 2005, p.126.

³⁵⁶ See Zhang, Zhen, 'Bearing Witness, Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of Transformation' in Zhang, Zhen (ed.), *The Urban Generation, Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2007, pp.1-45.

urban ruins as carrying a poignant social indexicality'.³⁵⁷ The erasure of socialist or traditional modes of life in the context of the accelerated turn towards a market economy constitutes the common concern of post-socialist films: 'to intervene in a process that is rapidly erasing urban memory and producing collective amnesia'.³⁵⁸

West of the Tracks, together with films such as Lixin Fan's documentary *Last Train Home* (2009) or Jia Zhangke's docu-fiction *24 City* (2008), belong to a group of films intervening in this radical transformation: the precarisation of the workers' status in China. The Chinese authorities have particularly repressed the visibility of 'the labour question', as Maurice Meissner has pointed out:

In no area of basic human rights has the Chinese Communist state been more ferociously vigilant than in the suppression of labour activists who strive to organise free trade unions. Vital political and economic interests are involved in the special attention the secret police and state security organs have devoted to the labour question.³⁵⁹

The new independent Chinese cinema has developed an exceptional critical visualisation of labour struggles. Alain Badiou has pointed out that 'a great Chinese cinema is being formed around the question: what is happening to our factories and our workers?'.³⁶⁰ Post-socialist cinema makes visible the scale of this transformation: the precarisation of the

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p.3.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p.21.

³⁵⁹ Meissner, Maurice, *Mao's China and After, a History of the People's Republic*, Free Press, New York, 1999, p.543.

³⁶⁰ Badiou, Alain, 'Le Cinéma m'a Beaucoup Donné, Entretien avec Alain Badiou' in *Cinéma*, Nova Editions, Paris, 2010, p.23. My translation ('Un grand cinema chinois s'est constitue autour de cette question: que sont en train de devenir nos usines et nos ouvriers?').

world's largest industrial proletariat is producing 'the world's largest and most rapidly growing army of unemployed'.³⁶¹ 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', that is, the combination of State control and capitalist economic policies, has fundamentally guaranteed the supply to the industry of a vast number of unprotected, disciplined and low-paid workers. Slavoj Žižek can thus define contemporary China as 'the ideal capitalist state: freedom for the capital, with the state doing the dirty job of controlling the workers'.³⁶²

Similar to other heavy industry centres, from the rustbelt in the American Midwest to the Ruhr region in Germany, the workers and the factories of *West of the Tracks* are the victims of the capitalist regime of profitability. The literature on *West of the Tracks* understands that the film is exceptional in its ability to depict the size of the social catastrophe this worldwide regime proliferates. The still scarce critical texts on the film agree that the latter gives a familiar answer to the question 'what is happening to our factories?': the factory is in ruins. For Lu XinYu, the film depicts 'the ruin of industrial civilisation' and 'the dusk of an entire social world, together with all the hopes and ideals that created it'.³⁶³ For Chris Berry, it communicates 'the ruination of socialist modernity' and can therefore be considered 'an act of mourning'.³⁶⁴ For Andrew Ross, it records 'the death throes of a socialist mode of production where labour was coextensive with all other

³⁶¹ Meisner, Maurice, *Mao's China and After, a History of the People's Republic*, Free Press, New York NY, 1999, p.533.

³⁶² Žižek, Slavoj, 'Introduction' in Tse-Tung, Mao, *On Practice and Contradiction*, Verso, London, 2007, p.18. For Žižek the Chinese case reveals the mythical pairing of capitalism and democracy.

³⁶³ Lu Xin-Yu, 'Ruins of the Future, Class and History in Wang Bing's *Tiexi District*, trans. by J. X. Zhang, *New Left Review*, No. 31, London, January and February 2005, pp.125-136.

³⁶⁴ Berry, Chris, 'Leaving the Factory: Thoughts on *West of the Tracks*' in Sandhu, Sukhdev (ed.), *Leaving the Factory: Wang Bing's Tie Xi Qu*, Texte und Töne, New York NY, 2009, p.20.

aspects of human welfare’, ‘the extinction of a mass industrial personality for whom labour was a livelihood in the fullest sense of the term’.³⁶⁵ Dusk, death, extinction: the literature spares no earth-shattering epithet to interpret *West of the Tracks* as an exemplary representation of the end of the socialist factory. The grand scale of the factories committed to film by Wang Bing can only prove the reality of the catastrophe in all its magnitude. As though the dimensions of Tie Xi lent the appropriate operatic background, all the better to sing, once more, the funeral song confirming the end of socialism.

In this chapter, I move away from this obituary-like interpretation of *West of the Tracks*. It is an interpretation that is in accord with the dominant hermeneutics or symptomatology of the end of the industrial age and the end of socialism. In my view the insistence on a thematics of extinction leaves aside the complexities of the Chinese industrial history and also makes the singular representational politics of the film difficult to see and hear. The literature on *West of the Tracks* has been sensitive to the tragic dimension of the events Wang Bing records. However it has left untouched, by omission, the historical viewpoint that has accepted the inevitability of this tragic end. From this dominant viewpoint – what Jacques Derrida referred to as ‘the new Gospel’³⁶⁶ – a film like *West of the Tracks* has value only as a telling representation of the inevitable, the proof of a disappearance taken to be incontrovertible. But *West of the Tracks* is not exactly concerned with extinction; it is a film concerned with rust. It is not social ruins that play the leading role in *West of the Tracks*, but the pervasive phenomenon of oxidation. Wang Bing does not film a state of

³⁶⁵ Ross, Andrew, ‘The Filming of Desindustrialisation’. *Ibid.*, p.43.

³⁶⁶ Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx*, Routledge, New York NY, 1994, p.70. Derrida defines the dominant discourse as ‘the one that diagnoses, in all sorts of tones and with an unshakeable assurance, not only the end of societies constructed on the Marxist model but the end of the whole Marxist tradition, even of the reference to the works of Marx, not to say the end of history, period’ (p.69).

destruction in its final stage, a factory-ruin clearly separated from the non-ruined city of Shenyang. He does not simply contemplate the industrial debris of a golden age. What he lays bare is rust, that is to say, a permanent anticipation of the ruin. And this, above all, with a view to showing and understanding its fundamentally intrusive power: rust in the factory walls, in the machinery, in the train tracks, in the households, in the streets.

Moreover, I argue here that rust is not a simple motif but that it impregnates every take of the film. There is an audiovisual politics of rust at work in the film concerned with decay and how to document it, but also with the capacities of the moving image to oxidise itself in order to disclose a second life or possibility for the relation between the factory and the cinema. This audiovisual field of possibility calls into question the dominant equation between what we see (the degradation of Tie Xi) and what we are given to understand (the end of socialism). The oxidation of this pre-determined relation between the visible and the intelligible constitutes an opportunity to re-think the strange capacities of documentary cinema to work with the informational, the provision of evidence and with the artistic, the non-informational par excellence. The definition of documentary cinema as an 'art of actuality' has often been understood as a an intractable paradox. But a paradox is not a dilemma to be solved (in this case a dilemma confirming an irreconcilable separation between art and information in the order of things). Very differently, the paradoxical acts to re-formulate the regime of separation we are working in; it allows us to see and experiment with different equilibriums between representations and meanings. As Elizabeth Cowie has pointed out, 'the documentary is not opposed to art, but itself enables an art of *seeing anew*, as evidentiary of the contingent as well as the socially organised

worlds that juxtaposed bring about new connections'.³⁶⁷ The paradox of the documentary makes it able to question epistemic hierarchies, to hold together what has no reason to be together, to re-organise again the relation between information and art.

To understand *West of the Tracks* as a process of oxidation, the film itself as a site-in-change, gives rise to questions concerning the capacities of the documentary image, capacities that always cast the image within a political sphere: what in the film contravenes the prevailing consensus, the Gospel of socialist extinction? This question breaks with the commonsensical interpretation of *West of the Tracks* that sees the film as an exemplary representation, more or less poignant, of the collapse of the socialist world.³⁶⁸ This apparently irrefutable interpretation understands that the power of the image is to describe, recognise and order the turmoil of the visible. In the images of *West of the Tracks*, we simply recognise the end we have already been given to understand. The film demonstrates the almighty, devastating powers of 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics'. So how can the film be seen to introduce a note of ambiguity? How can it oxidise the consensual interpretation of the death of socialism? These are illogical questions, illogical because, against the Evidence, they potentially cause a disturbance of the very structure and premise of documentary art. The expression 'against the Evidence' is not intended to doubt the documentary's evidential power. It questions the identification of the visible evidence provided by the film with an ideological consensus that precludes the factory from being thought, seen and heard as a name-in-conflict.

³⁶⁷ Cowie, Elizabeth, 'Specters of the Real: Documentary Time and Art', *Difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2007, p.97.

³⁶⁸ Wang Bing himself explains the historical process of China in the following terms: 'We wanted to create a world, but in the end this world collapsed'. Quoted by Lu Xinyu in Berry, Chris and Xinyu Lu and Lisa Rofel (eds.), *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement*, Hong Kong Press University Press, Hong Kong, 2010, p.59.

In order to explore the intricacy of this ‘going against the evidence’, to begin with, I investigate, in a first section, the complex history of Tie Xi, focusing on the two major competing industrial models that shaped these factories (the Maoist and Soviet factory ideals). Then, in a second section, I critically discuss the conceptual and practical tensions at the core of the documentary mode of representation, the so-called observational style, employed by Wang Bing in *West of the Tracks*. I argue that the film develops a politics that oxidises certain conventions, allowing the possibility to interrogate the theoretical grounds from which the pedagogical and political capacities of the documentary image are ordinarily interpreted.

1- A Socialist Factory?

West of the Tracks opens with the following text:

Tie Xi District, located in the city of Shenyang, northeastern China, is the oldest and most extensive industrial manufacturing center in China. Built in 1934 to produce armaments for the Japanese Imperial Army, the factories were converted to civilian use soon after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. By the late 1950s, the factories were being refitted with equipment provided by the Soviet Union (much of it WWII era stock captured from the Germans at the end of the war). Most of the 157 Soviet-financed industrial projects in China during this period were located in Tie Xi District and the surrounding industrial belt. After the Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s, many of these factories were relocated to the interior of China, but over 100 factories remained in operation. In the early 1980s, factory employment in

the district was at an all time high. As workers who had been *sent-down* to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution began returning to the cities, the workforce in Tie Xi District swelled to over one million people. By the early 1990s, however, most of these state-owned factories had begun to falter and were operating at a loss. By late 1999, the factories began to shut down, one by one.

This tight summary of seventy years of local, national and international history provides all the extra-filmic information offered to the viewer of *West of the Tracks*.³⁶⁹ From the Japanese occupation to late capitalism, from Soviet influence to the Cultural Revolution, Tie Xi, the introductory text informs the viewer, has been shaped and re-shaped by discordant ideologies. The text situates the contemporary decline of these factories within a large context of political and industrial conflict. The dramatic history of Tie Xi exemplifies the turbulence of industrial history in the twentieth century. In this sense, the complex of Tie Xi does not simply symbolise the ruination of socialism but another episode (is it the final one?) within a short but intense history of industrial transformations. *West of the Tracks* does not simply make visible how these factories have become the ruins of an ideal, as the literature on the film incessantly repeats. It presents Tie Xi as a site of conflict, or rather, as a site-in-conflict.

According to Alain Badiou, the factory, the workers' site, is the testing ground of socialism. For him, Karl Marx 'was the first to perceive, at a time when factories were in fact seldom counted in the general historical presentation' that 'the factory is an event

³⁶⁹ Wang Bing also includes in the film the names of the factories he films (the Foundry, the Electric Cable Factory, the Steel Rolling Mill) and certain workers (while others remain anonymous).

site'.³⁷⁰ The factory is not simply at the origin of socialist politics, but socialism names the factory, disclosing it as a combative space. To think of the factory as a site-in-conflict is useful to understand that Tie Xi and its history do not simply represent a socialist ideal, moribund or other. Rather, the filmic presentation of Tie Xi and its history can reveal the theoretical and practical disagreements that permeate the testing grounds of the factory. Indeed competing socialist models of the factory, themselves multiple and contradictory, constantly confronted one another in Tie Xi.

The two main socialist industrial models, the Soviet and Maoist ideals, have two characteristics that set them apart from the capitalist Fordist factory (whilst no doubt sharing others with the latter). On the one hand, both attempt to dismantle the bourgeois class of technical specialists and impede its re-emergence. On the other hand, both address the issue of worker participation in management. In both socialist systems, workplace democratisation is, theoretically, an essential goal.³⁷¹ But, in both cases, as Alessandro Russo puts it, 'the relationship of worker-factory was at the junction of a deadly ambiguity'.³⁷² The promise of a full political recognition of the workers implicit in these theories, an essential promise for the existence of the socialist state, was most often 'reduced to forms of productive and social control, disguised with loyalty to a historical-political ideal'.³⁷³ There are also notable differences between a Soviet and a Maoist ideal

³⁷⁰ Badiou, Alain, 'The Factory as Event Site', *PRELOM, Journal for Images and Politics*, No. 8, Fall 2006, p.176.

³⁷¹ For an analysis of the different degrees of attention paid to the question of workers' participation in management in different socialist countries see Slider, Darrell, 'Worker Participation in Socialist Systems: The Soviet Case', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 4, July 1986, pp. 401-418.

³⁷² Russo, Alessandro, 'The Conclusive Scene: Mao and the Red Guards in July 1968', *positions: east asia cultures critique*, Duke University Press, Vol 13, No. 3, Winter 2005, p.564.

³⁷³ Ibid.

factory. I briefly analyse here the major characteristics of these two models to sketch their key conceptual tensions, the divergent claims and inconsistencies at the core of each of these organisational models. My intention is not to evaluate their historical achievements or failures, but to see how these conceptual tensions make of the factory a site-in-conflict, with a view to further understanding the historical complexities shaping Tie Xi.

The Soviet factory

Edinonachalie, translated as ‘single command’ or ‘one-man management’, was the key principle guiding the organisation of industrial enterprises throughout the Lenin and the Stalin eras.³⁷⁴ *Edinonachalie* gave the factory managers enormous powers in order to control labour indiscipline, develop managerial initiative and fulfil plan targets. In essence, Soviet factories were to operate as rational arrangements of individual workers commanded by a single managerial figure. Lenin insisted on one-man leadership and the leading role of the industry with the following words:

Large scale industry- which is the material source, the productive source, the foundation of socialism- unconditionally must have a rigorous unified will to direct the collective work of hundreds, thousands and even millions of men. But how can the rigorous unity of wills be assured? Only by the wills of the thousands and millions submitting to the will of a single individual.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ *Edinonachalie* was a guiding principle of administration throughout both the Lenin and the Stalin eras. See Kuromiya, Hiroaki, ‘*Edinonachalie* and the Soviet Industrial Manager, 1928-1937’, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April 1984, p.199.

³⁷⁵ Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, ‘The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government’, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965, p.269.

Soviet leaders accepted *edinonachalie* in the industry as the key to effective management and central control over the economy. *Edinonachalie* 'was indeed a microcosm of the way in which Soviet political leaders sought to administer society'.³⁷⁶

Western scholars have most often interpreted *edinonachalie* as a principle oriented towards 'centralisation and dictatorial rule' that transforms every factory director into a 'little Stalin'.³⁷⁷ Hiroaki Kuromiya has brought some much-needed nuance to this widely held interpretation. According to him, *edinonachalie* was never simply identified by the Party leaders with despotic powers; rather it meant 'institutionalised, accountable one-man management with workers' control incorporated'.³⁷⁸ Kuromiya has analysed how the campaigns to implement *edinonachalie* sought to enhance both managerial authority and accountability. In short, *edinonachalie* called for a twofold control to operate in the running of the factory: from above (from management to workers), and from below (from workers to management).³⁷⁹

On the one hand, *edinonachalie* sought to concentrate powers in the director's hands by circumscribing the powers of rival organisations (the party and trade unions) and the technical cadres (bourgeois experts). The director was to have a vast range of powers, extending from general administration to scientific protocol. The industrial manager, 'the indisputable master of the enterprise', was to be held responsible for virtually everything

³⁷⁶ Kuromiya, Hiroaki, 'Edinonachalie and the Soviet Industrial Manager, 1928-1937', *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April 1984, p.185.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ For an analysis of the system of factory control in the Soviet Union see Vucinich, Alexander, 'The Structure of Factory Control in the Soviet Union', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, April 1950, pp.179-186.

in the factory.³⁸⁰ The director sat at the top of an organisational pyramid that ranked employees at various levels, each above the other. The director would then delegate some power to the chiefs of shops who directly manage production within their department and who employ, dismiss and transfer workers as and when necessary. The foremen are the intermediaries between management and the workers. They can impose punitive measures upon the violators of labour discipline. But the director 'has the first and final word in all decisions'.³⁸¹ For its emphasis on single command, hierarchy, discipline and obedience *edinonachalie* has been most often interpreted as an instrument to suppress any attempts to institute any form of self-management on the part of the workers. Its critics understood that this model risked appearing indistinguishable from the capitalist factory and reinforced alienation by stifling the active participation of workers in the organisation of production.³⁸²

On the other hand, the party leaders also regarded *edinonachalie* in terms of managerial ability to incorporate workers' criticisms. An essential objective of the *edinonachalie* campaigns since the early thirties was to reinvigorate workers' control over management. The party leadership consistently clarified that managerial power was not free from workers' control, and emphasised that '*edinonachalie* meant not the decline of control but its increase'.³⁸³ *Edinonachalie* entailed a 'several-fold multiplied control from below to prevent the unlimited despotism of management'.³⁸⁴ Workers' control ('from below' or

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p.180.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² See Koenker, Diane, 'Labour Relations in Socialist Russia' in Siegelbaum, Lewis H.; Suny, Ronald Grigor (eds.), *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1994, pp.159-193.

³⁸³ Kuromiya, Hiroaki, 'Edinonachalie and the Soviet Industrial Manager, 1928-1937', *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April 1984, p.192.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

‘social control’) was an integral mechanism of Soviet management, an essential means to hold the managers accountable, by exposing mistakes, abuses and bureaucratism.³⁸⁵ The Party leadership encouraged various forms of ‘social control’: promotion of workers into administrative and technical positions, self-criticism, temporary worker control commissions, production meetings, ‘socialist competition’ and the ‘shock worker movement’ among them.³⁸⁶

According to Kuromiya, *edinonachalie* is to be understood as ‘the [Bolshevik] synthesis of dictatorship and its antithesis, democracy’.³⁸⁷ In practice, the integration of single command and workers' control most often produced in the factories an ‘intractable dilemma’.³⁸⁸ The practical application of *edinonachalie* was the source of constant disagreement between party leaders and workers accusing managers of inefficiency and despotism, and managers accusing party leaders and workers of interventionism. Kuromiya concludes that ‘in theory, dictatorship and democratic control were dialectically

³⁸⁵ A series of short films made by Alexander Medvedkine and his collaborators provide exceptional documents in this context: they offer a critical view of the situation of different workers' sites across the Soviet Union in the early thirties. See, for instance, *How Do You Live, Comrade Miner? (Iak jivech, tovarichou guirnik?)*, 1932) directed by Nikolai Karmazinsky or *The Conveyor (Konveyer)*, 1932) directed by Boris Kim. Hito Steyerl has commented that these films ‘show (...) much more than Medvedkin would perhaps have liked to have seen. They record the destitution, corruption, neglect, misery and apathy that has beset those parts of the Soviet economy. They also record the filmmakers' very earnest attempts to face the situation, as well as their endorsement of some of the incipient Stalinist policies of oppression’. See Steyerl, Hito, ‘Truth Unmade, Productivism and Factography’, *EIPCP*. Available: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/steyerl/en> (accessed: 15/03/2013).

³⁸⁶ ‘Socialist competition (or emulation)’ and ‘shock worker movement’ were propaganda campaigns *to inspire efficient labour* through voluntary competitions between state enterprises and individuals. See Siegelbaum, Lewis H. and Ronal Grigor Suny (eds.), *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1994.

³⁸⁷ Kuromiya, Hiroaki, ‘*Edinonachalie* and the Soviet Industrial Manager, 1928-1937’, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April 1984, p.194.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.193.

synthesised in *edinonachalie*' but 'dictatorship could, in practice, become independent of democratic control'.³⁸⁹

The Maoist factory

The Maoist ideal of factory organisation largely reacts against the authoritarianism at the core of the Soviet and capitalist models.³⁹⁰ It is a model that seeks to develop through various means an egalitarian organisation, going much further in terms of workers' participation than the Soviet 'twofold control'. In essence, the Maoist model sought to minimise the effects of the hierarchical division between management and workers.

The articulation of more or less egalitarian labour relations echoes the spirit of Mao's core political concept: the 'mass line'.³⁹¹ The 'mass line' is an ensemble of ideas and practices that seek to institute new kinds of relations in every aspect of social life between 'leaders and led'. It was developed by Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party during their years of struggle against the Kuomintang as a method to guarantee their victory, and later as a method to consolidate and permanently intensify the Revolution. In his text 'Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership', a sort of instruction manual for a good Maoist prince, Mao expressed the essence of the mass line in the following way:

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p.199.

³⁹⁰ For a comparison between the capitalist factory and the Maoist factory see King Whyte, Martin, 'Bureaucracy and Modernization in China: The Maoist Critique', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2, April 1973, pp.149-163.

³⁹¹ See Gray, Jack, *Mao Tse-tung*, Lutterworth Press, Guildford, 1973, pp.32-37.

In all practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily from the masses to the masses. This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study, turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action, then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are preserved in and carried away through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.³⁹²

The image of an endless spiral conveys well the spirit of the mass line: a perpetual mobilisation of leaders and led, learning from one another in turn. The mass line, according to Mao, is the practical development of the Marxist theory of knowledge: the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge considered as a continuous and dynamic process in which both leaders and masses are involved. The mass line is to maximise the involvement and commitment of the participants in any organisation; it is a practice of anti-stultification, borne 'through creative conflict'.³⁹³

The creative spiral in the factory, in the spirit of 'great exchanges of experience', led to the organisation of 'two participations'. On the one hand, management, the *cadres* in Maoist nomenclature, are required to spend regular periods of time outside their offices working with their hands next to their subordinates. On the other hand, the workers are systematically organised to participate in management. As Martin King Whyte insists: '[workers]' participation is not only solicited, but guaranteed [in the Maoist factory]; and to this end active efforts are made to formalise and mobilise the informal social groupings

³⁹² Mao, Zedong, 'Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership', *Marxists Internet Archive*. Available: http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_13.htm (accessed: 15/03/2013).

³⁹³ Gray, Jack, *Mao Tse-tung*, Lutterworth Press, Guildford, 1973, p.36.

of subordinates'.³⁹⁴ Workers are not simply to obey decisions that are issued by superiors. Every new policy (technical or political) is to be debated in regular discussion groups and study meetings, without a priori recourse to a higher order's authority. In an industrial context, one of the most common forms of participation between management and workers was the so-called 'triple combination' in which technical problems are dealt with by ad hoc groups composed of managers, technicians and ordinary workers.

To encourage workers' participation also aims to counter bureaucratisation. For the Maoists, the bureaucrats are educated individuals that set themselves apart from the rest of the population and advance themselves and their relatives at the expense of the people. Anti-bureaucracy is understood not simply as an administrative matter but as a key component against elitism and as a necessary means to promote the participation of all. Maoism equates bureaucracy with the incapacitation and stultification of the people. For this reason the Maoist model seeks to resist high degrees of specialisation and the consolidation of professionalism in the factories. Very different from the Soviet emphasis on productivity or hierarchical position, the Maoist system rewards 'political purity': social class origins, political enthusiasm, performance in past political campaigns. It favours 'the politically pure generalist more than the apolitical technical specialist'.³⁹⁵ Further policies downplayed the status distinction between management and workers: elimination of ranks, dress codes and other visible symbols, limitation of wages differences, similar housing for cadres and workers, and so on.

³⁹⁴ King Whyte, Martin, 'Bureaucracy and Modernization in China: The Maoist Critique', *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2, April 1973, p.153. The real efficacy of workers' participation in decision-making has in fact been questioned. King Whyte understands that the actual influence of workers over policy decisions was somewhat limited; nevertheless they were not left out of the process completely.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.151.

In the Maoist model, workers' participation is considered a key component both for political and economic purposes. However it is a participation that is compulsory and organised from above. To elicit enthusiasm, this model seeks to mobilise workers by convincing them 'that their most mundane daily activities have some ultimate impact on the future of socialism, and this realisation is supposed to promote high quality work and diligence in avoiding waste and inefficiency'.³⁹⁶ Mobilisation is to produce greater dedication and identification with the factory and its national goals. The factory is not simply a workplace; the common life of the community is centred upon it. Workers' residential, social, educational and recreational facilities and activities are very often located on factory property. One sees this in *North China Factory* (1980), a film by Tony Ianzelo and Boyce Richardson that documents the organisation and the everyday life of a Maoist-inspired textile factory and its attendant community of workers. The film shows both the egalitarianism and the totalising mobilisation of the workers' social life at the core of the Maoist model.

The history of the Tie Xi industrial complex exemplifies the disagreements between these different orientations of the Soviet and Maoist models. Tie Xi is situated in the region of Manchuria, which, after 1949 rapidly became 'China's major centre of heavy industry', a

³⁹⁶ Ibid., p.152. King Whyte insists that the workers' participation in the Maoist model goes beyond 'Western participative management' as a method to motivate workers and stimulate their productivity. According to him it is a matter of permanently mobilising and politicising the workers. We can nevertheless understand that the Maoist model is a particularly radical version of the participative management model in capitalist enterprises.

symbol of modernisation for the recently triumphant Maoist revolution.³⁹⁷ The effort to develop the heavy industry in Manchuria followed the Soviet model of economic expansion, which was an important reference point for the new regime in its early years. Together with machinery and expertise, the Chinese authorities imported the Soviet organisational credo, the *edinonachalie* system of one-man management. It was in Manchuria that this model was practically adapted and more thoroughly implemented within the Chinese industrial context. However, in the wake of its introduction, the Soviet system was heavily criticised, re-examined and transformed. Critics understood that ‘the system violated CCP traditions of Party control and collective decision making, that it was only centralism and no democracy’.³⁹⁸ Constant policy shifts ensued thereafter.

The conflict in Tie Xi is further complicated by the gradual introduction of further capitalist reforms in the Chinese economy. In fact, these factories were never purely socialist, but shared multiple characteristics with the capitalist Fordist factory. The workers of the Tie Xi factories were part of a system of lifetime job security with access to various social welfare services (housing, health insurance) – Lazarus has called this class *fonctionnariat ouvrier* [state workers].³⁹⁹ These conditions can be understood as a socialist version of Fordism. The *privileges* of these state workers have been gradually abolished since the late 1970s, a process known in China as ‘smashing the iron rice bowl’. In the 1990s, the Chinese government ultimately allowed unproductive, non-profitable state

³⁹⁷ Meissner, Maurice, *Mao's China and After, a History of the People's Republic*, Free Press, New York, 1999, p.121.

³⁹⁸ MacFarquhar, Roderick, *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng*, Cambridge University Press, New York NY, 1997, p.72.

³⁹⁹ Lazarus, Sylvain, *Anthropologie du Nom*, Seuil, Paris, 1998, p.181

factories to fail and close.⁴⁰⁰ *West of the Tracks* shows this erosion of workers' rights and the daily effects of this economical policy sanctioning failure following capitalist criteria.

The tensions between Soviet and Maoist models, as well as those inherent within these models, oscillating between centralised control (manager, Party) and workers' participation, between egalitarianism and hierarchy, make it extremely difficult to present a single socialist model of the factory (even more so in the context of Tie Xi). The Soviet and Maoist factories appear as the conflictive grounds upon which socialist ideals are put to the test, where workers' self-management was attempted, annulled and constrained in different ways. To learn about the intricate history of Tie Xi and the conflict between different socialist industrial models makes it difficult to give to this industrial complex the status of 'symbol of a bygone era'. More than representing an ideal of socialist industry (and the end of such ideal), the factories of Tie Xi appear in their dramatic history as a site in permanent conflict. If anything, Tie Xi represents the historical complexity of the factory as a site-in-dispute.

2- *Politics of Rust*

⁴⁰⁰ For an analysis of the category of the 'unproductive', the 'non-profitable' as an instrument of social disciplinisation see Revel, Judith, *Qui a Peur de la Banlieue?*, Bayard, Paris, 2008. Revel understands 'unproductiveness' as a novel instrument of social control (exclusion), a category that, beyond the walls of the factory, is today applied to manage the entire population.

Tie Xi, at the end of the millennium, constitutes the appropriate subject matter for a documentary film. Immense factories about to be closed down, heroic workers struggling to survive the dissolution of their world, the brutal erasing of socialist symbols and the emergence of new consumer habits, values and forms of socialisation satisfy the documentary's long-established addiction to transformation. Hito Steyerl has distinguished between two ways in which the documentary image engages with realities-in-change (with realities as always already in change). For her, documentary articulations oscillate between two poles: authority (documentary as an instrument of control) and potential (documentary as an agent of change). She argues that the documentary as a historical-juridical form 'is less interested in the transformation of things than in their permanence, less in their duration than in their eternity'.⁴⁰¹ The documentary form resolves its addiction to transformation by becoming a provider of stability.⁴⁰² In opposition to this authoritarianism shown by the documentary with respect to time, Steyerl speaks in the name of a 'documentary form as potential' that contributes to a non-predetermined visualisation of the transformation in question, 'to create a world after an image'.⁴⁰³ This is a useful distinction to begin to examine the intricacies of what *West of the Tracks* does with regard to its subject matter.

The China of the *zhuanxing* era, the era of transformation, has become a privileged scene for contemporary filmmakers to reiterate the standard sociological purpose of the

⁴⁰¹ Steyerl, Hito, 'The Languages of Documentary'. Available at: <http://www.no-w-here.org.uk/thelanguagesofdocumentary.pdf> (accessed: 15/03/2013).

⁴⁰² Paula Rabinowitz affirms for instance that 'documentary films provide a stability to an ever-changing reality, freezing the images within their frames for later instructional use'. Rabinowitz, Paula, *They Must Be Represented - The Politics of Documentary*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, p.17.

⁴⁰³ Steyerl, Hito, 'The Languages of Documentary'. Available at: <http://www.no-w-here.org.uk/thelanguagesofdocumentary.pdf> (accessed: 15/03/2013).

documentary, its function as a provider of stability. The social, political and economical transformation of China offers to documentary cinema the opportunity to rehearse, once again, functions such as to document what is about to disappear and to learn about what is about to emerge. The particularly vertiginous pace of the Chinese transformation appears to naturalise all the more these functions and the ends toward which they are driven: to confirm, always again, the end of socialism. Despite the pace of ruination in *Tie Xi*, we can understand that *West of the Tracks* does not simply confirm the logic of preservation and instruction that conventionally binds together documentary image and transformation. On the contrary, the film makes time (nine hours), it finds the time (nine hours) to oxidise a standard definition of the documentary image, thereby disclosing other capacities. This is the singular politics of rust at work in the film: a politics that makes the documentary not simply a site of change, an instrument for the documentation of change (more precisely of decline, extinction, dusk), but a site-in-change oxidising the solidity of 'the social ideal of good representation'.⁴⁰⁴

In order to understand *West of the Tracks* as a process of oxidation by which the coincidence of the image with the regime of the invisible factory is increasingly dissolved, it is necessary to analyse the singular way in which the film develops and radicalises its observational mode of representation. Observationalism is, using Bill Nichols words, one of the 'dominant organisational patterns' of documentary cinema, a pattern that is not immune to the tensions troubling the documentary with regard to realities-in-change.⁴⁰⁵

The observational has been at the centre of numerous polemics between its advocates and

⁴⁰⁴ Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 'Documentary Is/Not a Name', *October*, Vol. 52, Spring 1990, p.85.

⁴⁰⁵ Nichols, Bill, *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991, p.32.

those who consider it a naïve approach, if not an inadequate form for the methodological, epistemological and aesthetic ambitions of documentary cinema.⁴⁰⁶ The intensity of this debate is explained by the fact that the notion of observation agitates deep-rooted aspirations of the moving image. As Elizabeth Cowie puts it:

The idea of a truly observational filming has haunted cinema from its beginning, for the new visual apparatuses that emerged in the nineteenth century also gave rise to the idea of, and desire for, an unlimited access to reality in unmediated recordings of actuality, as if through the camera we could create a record of everything that an all-seeing God might have surveyed.⁴⁰⁷

The discussion of the observational often re-kindles the controversies associated to this modern dream of an all-visible world, a world transparent to itself, at the same time readable and visible, shorn of all shadow. To objectively record everything is indeed an ambitious imperative to adhere to. The weight of this promise has given way to doubts and repudiations regarding the observational capacities of film.

For Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, the discussion around the observational has both ‘conflated and reduced the meaning of observation to a narrow ocular strategy with a tall order of negative features: voyeurism, objectification, surveillance, assumed

⁴⁰⁶ For a discussion of these polemics see Grimshaw, Anna and Amanda Ravetz, ‘Rethinking Observational Cinema’ in *Observational Cinema, Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2009, pp.113-136.

⁴⁰⁷ Cowie, Elizabeth, ‘Specters of the Real: Documentary Time and Art’, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 18, No.1, 2007, p.90.

transparency, concealed ideology, lack of reflexivity, quasi-scientific objectivity'.⁴⁰⁸ Grimshaw and Ravetz defend an understanding of the observational not as a mode of vision predicated on distance and mastery but, in more humble terms, as a sensibility and a skilled practice allowing observers to encounter the world 'actively, passionately, concretely – while at the same time, relinquishing the desire to control, circumscribe or appropriate it'.⁴⁰⁹ This understanding is more generative to account for Wang Bing's sensibility with regard to the industrial complex of Tie Xi, a sensibility that has been aptly described as 'intensely observational'.⁴¹⁰ It is the intense modesty of this hyper-observationalism and its effects oxidising the conventional documentary functions that concern me here. I explore the oxidising powers of his observational practice first with regard to the position of the filmmaker within the filmed events, and secondly with regard to the pedagogical capacities of the image.

Observational Witness

Observational language, says Bill Nichols, cedes 'control over the events that occur in front of the camera more than any other mode [of documentary representation]'.⁴¹¹ This 'ceding control' entails that the observer avoids speaking for or on behalf of the observed

⁴⁰⁸ Grimshaw, Anna and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema, Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2009, p.115.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., p.5. In their argument, they insist that the term 'to observe' etymologically means 'to conform one's action', 'to comply with', 'to respect'.

⁴¹⁰ Berry, Chris, 'Leaving the Factory: Thoughts on *West of the Tracks*' in Sandhu, Sukhdev (ed.), *Leaving the Factory: Wang Bing's Tie Xi Qu*, Texte und Töne, New York, 2009, p.19.

⁴¹¹ Nichols, Bill, *Representing Reality, Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 1991, p.38.

(via voice-over commentary, via music external to the observed scene, via re-enactments, via interviews). The critics of the observational have often disdained this stance avoiding a directly interventionist approach as a false guarantee of impartiality or as the result of a naïve understanding that sees the world as a pure, real entity insofar as it is untouched by any external agency.⁴¹² Grimshaw and Ravetz have taken issue with this simplification and affirmed instead the observational as a field of negotiation between the observer and the observed. Observational filmmakers are to develop a skilled practice ‘to insert themselves into the world, relinquishing their privileged perspective in favour of an openness to being shaped by particular situations and relationships they encounter’.⁴¹³ In my own view, observational filmmakers are engaged in a practice of becoming witness: they are not simply actors in a situation, nor mere external observers. As witnesses, with all the ambiguity that this figure implies, they are to negotiate their position within the observed (via their silence, their bodily presence, the camera's presence). The articulation of separation and participation in observational documentaries, following different politics, troubles any simple equation of observation with detachment, neutrality, false modesty.

The observationalism of *West of the Tracks*, and other contemporary Chinese films, has not been exempt from interpretations understanding it as a transparent language that lets the reality of social change speak for itself. It has indeed been interpreted as a sort of non-

⁴¹² Jacques Derrida, in his critique of the ethics of living speech, has analysed the incapacitating powers of the logic equating interventionism with aggression and the observed with a pure innocence. See ‘The Violence of the Letter: de Lévi-Strauss à Rousseau’ in *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MA, 1976, pp.101-141.

⁴¹³ Grimshaw, Anna and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema, Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2009, p.X.

authoritative, free form in the context of China's particular audio-visual regime.⁴¹⁴ *West of the Tracks* is considered an exemplary case of the Chinese New Documentary Movement, an ensemble of post-1989 documentary practices sharing common characteristics: production independent from the State, focus on contemporary China instead of on historical events, local specificity, unscripted spontaneity, and use of lightweight technology. In China, the observational style of these documentaries has been called 'on-the-spot realism' (*jishi zhuyi*).⁴¹⁵ The unscripted quality of these documentaries, their use of a handheld camera, of natural light and their focus on social issues constitute a form of novelty in the context of Chinese audiovisual culture. These documentaries have broken with the form of illustrated lectures that has historically dominated Chinese documentary cinema and are defying the State-controlled documentary production wherein social themes are marginalised by official media. 'On-the-spot realism' is, according to its interpreters, a 'free-flowing style' working 'against the old, rigid aspects of Maoist utopianism and established political ideologies in China'.⁴¹⁶

But if the Chinese New Documentary Movement is interested in observational representation, it is not because these filmmakers have a naïve faith in an ideal of pure observation or in the liberation of documentary forms. It is because of the singular capacities of observational documentary forms to intervene in the social world. As the filmmaker Hartmut Bitomsky has pointed out, observational cinema does not simply respect the peaceful flow of reality, but resembles a military strategy engaged in the combat of truth. That is to say, the conventions of observational cinema 'stem directly

⁴¹⁴ See Berry, Chris and Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel (eds.), *The New Chinese Documentary*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2010.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.15.

from the logistics of the war documentary'.⁴¹⁷ Portable cameras, film sensitive to natural light and a minimal recording unit reduce the technical burden of the filming process and maximise its capacities to follow and record the always unpredictable course of action. The observational camera intervenes in a manner analogous to a military surveillance operation: it is mobile, more or less undetectable, and yet ever-present. Observational filmmakers are not disinterested observers; rather, they act like silent soldiers in the trenches: no questions asked, they anxiously wait for the spectacle to happen. These military qualities allow the observational camera to remain at a safe distance, but also guarantee the constant and penetrating presence of the filmmaker in the battlefield of reality. The observational form thereby lends to the filmmakers' practice both a silent non-interventionism and a relentless presence.

The observational language of *West of the Tracks* develops in a singular way this double capacity: for all its discreet non-interventionism, it nevertheless at no point seeks to disguise the signs of the filmmaker's bodily presence within the setting being filmed. Didi-Huberman has suggested Wang's filming approach gives voice to a 'humble' form of discourse.⁴¹⁸ Armed with a rented mini-DV camera that he holds against his chest, Wang is able to capture, exhaustively, every detail in these factories: the different shades of red in the rusting walls, the various densities of steam coming out of the machinery or of the workers' baths, the vast array of noises, movements and conversations resounding throughout the immense industrial complex. He films all of the workers' everyday life; we not only see them working, but eating, discussing, drinking, taking a shower, waiting. A

⁴¹⁷ Bitomsky, Hartmut, 'Cinéma, Vidéo et Histoire' in *Face à l'Histoire 1933-1996, L'artiste moderne devant l'événement historique*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1996, p.49.

⁴¹⁸ Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2012, p.252. My translation ('ce discours humble').

revealing example of Wang's humble *modus operandi*, a humbleness that does not seek to absolutely erase its presence, occurs in his film *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (2007). Wang records, in one take, a long monologue of the journalist He Fengming relating her experience of the Chinese Revolution and the Maoist regime. She unhurriedly tells her story whilst sitting in her living room. As the end of the day approaches, the room gradually becomes darker. Wang only interrupts the flow of her speech to timidly ask, when the darkness has rendered her almost invisible, to switch on the lights. The cinema of Wang Bing is peopled with these invisible, subtle interventions.

In a similar way, the images of *West of the Tracks* constantly make visible and audible a discreet but ever-present body, that of Wang himself. We occasionally see his shadow, hear his footsteps. More occasionally still, a worker talks to Wang who, from behind the camera, mumbles a minimal response. But, furthermore, Wang films with the mini-camera against his chest, recording with exactitude all of his bodily movements. His body operates as the support structure of the film; it is literally 'the ground of vision'.⁴¹⁹ The images become an index of his presence in the Tie Xi factories; they make visible his absence from the frame. In this way, this observational film is also a first person documentary.⁴²⁰ These *physical images* contradict the ideal of the camera as a transparent and incorporeal apparatus, a mechanical intermediary between observer and a pre-given world of objective truth. The images of *West of the Tracks* make clear that the problem

⁴¹⁹ Crary analyses how 'the corporeal subjectivity of the observer (...) becomes the site on which an observer is possible' in the nineteenth Century. See Crary, Jonathan, *Techniques of the Observer - On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1992, p.4.

⁴²⁰ See Lebow, Alisa (ed.), *The Cinema of Me, The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, Wallflower Press, London, 2012.

observational cinema inhabits is not so much the question of a pure observation before any intervention, but rather the question of *corporeal vision*.

Jonathan Crary, among others, has investigated how the understanding of vision as a bodily experience, what he calls *subjective vision*, has historically raised questions about the reliability of observation as a mode of knowing. He suggests that insofar as ‘the functioning of vision became dependent on the complex and contingent physiological makeup of the observer’, vision was rendered ‘faulty, unreliable, and, it was sometimes argued, arbitrary’.⁴²¹ Crary develops a Foucauldian argument in order to understand how ‘the relocation of perception in the thickness of the body’ became a precondition for the instrumentalisation and disciplinarisation of human vision.⁴²² But epistemological uncertainty also makes observation operational as a site of contestation. Observational cinema can be understood as a cinematic site where it is possible for a subject (the filmmaker, the spectator) to articulate other relations between vision and knowledge; a site where a politics of vision, dominant or emancipatory, is at stake.

There is a figure that acts the incarnation of this epistemological uncertainty across the history of Western culture: that of the witness. The witness does not simply remain exterior to the event but is ‘a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it’.⁴²³ The

⁴²¹ Crary, Jonathan, *Suspensions of Perception - Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p.12. For Crary, subjective vision is a defining characteristic of the modern rupture with the classical mode of visibility.

⁴²² Ibid. p.13.

⁴²³ Agamben, Giorgio, *Remnants of Auschwitz, The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York, 1999, p.17. Agamben etymologically distinguishes *testis*, which indicates the

implication of the witness within the event makes his or her word both credible and partial. The witness incarnates the problematic relation between the authority of the lived experience and the credibility of its expression. It is necessary to discuss this figure to fully appreciate observation as an active form of witnessing. The corporeal camera work in *West of the Tracks*, despite – and perhaps even because of – its humility, oxidises the safe patina of the filmmaker-as-observer and makes visible the filmmaker-as-witness. Between observer and witness, observational filmmakers oscillate between the inside and the outside of the event. Between participation and non-intervention they can claim to occupy an objective and subjective position simultaneously. This is the field of possibility wherein observational forms can operate. To think of observational cinema in relation to the act of witnessing is to think about documentary cinema at large as a site within which these relations do not have a definitive protocol, where they can be re-articulated and re-interpreted in different ways.

In *West of the Tracks*, Wang is not any witness; his position can be determined as at once ubiquitous and mute. The observational filmmaker, the filmmaker who refuses to speak in the name of the filmed event, wields the strange powers of the silent eyewitness, the one who stolidly *observes silence* in relation to a lived-and-filmed experience. But how are we to listen to the silence of the mute witness? The silent witness is a complex limit-figure that haunts the contemporary discussion of the testimonial. Different authors, from Giorgio Agamben to Jacques Rancière, have critically analysed the spectacular syntax of muteness associated with this figure. It is a syntax that cancels out the conflict at stake within the witnessing act between the irreducibility of lived experience and the reliability

position of a third party in a trial (supposedly neutral), from *superstes*, the person who has lived an experience (insufficiently neutral in the context of a trial).

of its transmission. It is a syntax that dreams of putting a stop to the unintelligible hemorrhage pouring out of any lived act of observation. The efficacy of observational documentaries, their testimonial credence, can be located in their varying ability to give audiovisual form to this imagined syntax.

Agamben and Rancière have identified two wrong ways of listening to the mute witness. In both cases, the singularity of the mute witness is effectively annulled by the listeners/interpreters: in the first case through the rendering absolute of silence, in the second case through a filling up of the witness' silence with a predetermined interpretation. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben analyses how different writings grant to the mute witness 'the prestige of the mystical'.⁴²⁴ The silence of the mute witness works in these texts as the voiceless evidence of the unsayability of the event (of God, in the religious context that Agamben discusses). In this interpretation, taken to its extreme, there is an absolutisation of the witness' silence that makes the lived event absolutely incomprehensible, unrepresentable, unspeakable. Agamben criticises this radical mystique when it negates what he identifies as the core of the witness act: 'the tie between an impossibility and a possibility of speaking'.⁴²⁵

In this context of the mute witness, Rancière has proffered a further determination of listening in which silence, far from making impossible any attempt at interpretation, is itself made to speak through the act of witnessing. It is useful to pay attention to this strange logic of a *speaking silence* in order to understand how the critical literature on

⁴²⁴ Agamben, Giorgio, *Remnants of Auschwitz, The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York NY, 1999, p.32.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.157.

West of the Tracks has tended to make Wang's silent presence speak, and disclose an alternative way of listening to and looking at the observational witness. In *The Names of History*, Rancière analyses the complex operations by which a series of historical discourses have come to give value to the mute witness.⁴²⁶ He understands that the figure of the mute witness works, in the texts that summon it, both as a body 'on which the truth has been directly imprinted upon' and as the bearer of 'a word that emanates from no mouth, of a speech that escapes the plasticity of spoken language and therefore cannot lie'.⁴²⁷ The mute witness is summoned as a contradictory figure that speaks truly only insofar as he or she is silent. In these historical discourses 'everything speaks', but 'the only one who speaks is the one who is silent'.⁴²⁸ The mute witness is beyond deceit and partiality, free of memory's frailties, and is therefore taken to have a privileged relation to truth, unique access to the irreducibility of the lived event. The mute witness does not have the capacity to singularise (analyse, think, nuance or simply describe) the lived event but is the carrier of the lived event's silent and visible truth. More than interpreting, more than giving sense to this silence, the task of the historian is to listen attentively, with an expert ear, to the witness' mute murmur and decipher or liberate its truth.

This interpretation of the mute witness operates implicitly in most of the literature dedicated to *West of the Tracks*. This literature praises Wang's silent, disciplined, intense immersion for its capacity to access the reality of the Tie Xi factories. For example, the

⁴²⁶ See Rancière, Jacques, 'The Founding Narrative' in *The Names of History, On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minneapolis, Minneapolis MN, 1994, pp.42-60.

⁴²⁷ Rancière, Jacques, *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.531. My translation ('la chose matérielle sur laquelle la vérité s'est directement imprimée', 'le porteur d'une parole qui n'émane d'aucune bouche et échappe à la plasticité du langage des mots, donc à toute possibilité de mensonge').

⁴²⁸ Rancière, Jacques, *The Names of History, On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minneapolis, Minneapolis MN, 1994, p.57.

camera of *West of the Tracks* registers the long duration of this immersion (Wang stayed intermittently two years in Tie Xi). Season after season, the images tell us that Wang is present and mute. The camera registers how Wang's body has endured, like the workers he films, the cold temperatures of the Manchurian winter, the long waiting hours with nothing to do, the desolate immensity of the industrial complex. He has endured and yet he, a discreet hero, does not accede to speech. But his difficult breathing, his different step rhythms, the hesitating camera movements *speak more truly than words* of a body that *suffers*. The Latin form of 'to suffer', *sufferire*, denotes not simply the experience of something unpleasant but more generally 'to support', 'to carry', 'to bear'. Wang is an eyewitness who does not simply observe but *suffers* the hardships of life in Tie Xi. His silence does not lie but carries the infinite non-verbal signs of a real *suffering*. The corporeal camera work of *West of the Tracks* is credible because it makes visible a silent body, Wang's, which 'has paid in its flesh for the right to be believed'.⁴²⁹ But what are we to believe? What sense is there in the silent in-visibility of Wang Bing's breathing presence?

Silence encourages belief in the observational as a representational mode that does not seek to deceive with words, that does not divert the spectator's attention from the *silent voice* of the visible. The logic of this silent voice is particularly powerful because it operates by deciphering (assigning) an immanent sense in the mute body of the witness. It is a sense the witness embodies more than argues, lives more than knows. To follow this logic is to understand that the observational mode creates a scene of visibility where the mute witness is the living proof that certifies in his or her flesh the obviousness of a

⁴²⁹ Rancière, Jacques, *Et Tant Pis Pour Les Gens Fatigués, Entretiens*, Editions Amsterdam, Paris, 2009, p.531. My translation ('il a payé dans sa chair le droit d'être cru').

unique sense. As Rancière has pointed out, to assign an immanent sense to the mute witness most often reproduces dominant interpretations of what there is to see in the observable world.⁴³⁰ For him, to make the mute witness speak, to make sense of their murmuring silence, can only follow and confirm a pre-determined interpretative schema. In the critical literature on *West of the Tracks*, the corporeal camera work and absence of commentary are transparent forms that reveal, ideally (without words), what we already know. *West of the Tracks* is an elegy to the working class, a film that verifies the ruinous state of the socialist factory. To represent this disappearance, Wang Bing appropriately remains mute and present. Wang is neither a distant observer, nor a manipulative interventionist. The critical literature can therefore claim for the film another efficacy: the audiovisual inscription of Wang's bodily endurance *suffers, bearing* the truth of the tragic end of socialism.

But the witnessing operation at work in *West of the Tracks* can be interpreted from very different grounds, from a very different understanding of the observational. Without glorifying muteness, without filling it up with a predetermined interpretation, the visualisation of the filmmaker's silent suffering does not simply confirm the agony of the socialist factory. Very differently, and perhaps more simply, the silent presence of the observational filmmaker makes visible and audible an endless operation of approximation to the site of the factory. Wang's muteness is not an absolute silence. Apart from the film itself, as we have seen, the images continuously murmur an interminable, hesitant, yet alert presence. These impurities (breathings, echoes, the sound of steps in the snow), this quasi-silence or rusted silence, speak of the infinity of the task Wang is engaged in – the

⁴³⁰ See Rancière, Jacques, *The Names of History, On the Poetics of Knowledge*, University of Minneapolis, Minneapolis MN, 1994, p.57.

filming of Tie Xi. The images of *West of the Tracks* vibrate with every movement and register every sound of the filmmaker's body, verifying the ghostly presence of a witness who precariously but determinedly meanders around Tie Xi. More than an act of revelation, the film is a *physical exercise* of approach, never complete, to the factory. The murmuring body of the mute witness, the observational filmmaker, shows us that 'to bear witness is to tell *in spite of all* that which it is *impossible* to tell entirely'.⁴³¹

The film is quite literally an exercise. Wang started to film Tie Xi because he wanted to practice with his rented camera. He filmed three hundred hours. This amount of footage indicates the ambiguity of the filming experience. On the one hand, it is an exhaustive effort to document every corner of this vast, rusting industrial complex before it disappears. *West of the Tracks* fulfils documentary cinema's function of recording an 'ephemeral event, a vanishing custom, a disappearing species, a transitory occurrence'.⁴³² On the other hand, the formidable duration of the filming, and of the film itself, the time it takes in each take, express exhaustion, or rather an oxidation. Wang films *everything* of Tie Xi but this *everything* (the factories) appears always too vast, too endless and too distant to be apprehended.

The long scenes in which he follows the workers around the industrial labyrinth best exemplify the ambiguity of this observational experience. Wang is repeatedly behind the workers, filming their backs, following them wherever they take him. He carries out the

⁴³¹ Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Images in Spite of All*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago IL, 2008, pp.104-105.

⁴³² Rabinowitz, Paula, *They Must Be Represented - The Politics of Documentary*, Verso, London, 1994, p.17.

shadowing of the workers with the patience of a hunter looking ‘for a precise moment’.⁴³³ But to tenaciously follow the workers does not guarantee an appropriate observing method for capturing the significant instant. To follow someone else's footsteps is also ‘a way of being absent’, ‘a way of distancing yourself from your own self’, an experience where ‘you exist only in the trace of the other’.⁴³⁴ The long tracking sequences of *West of the Tracks* oxidise the standard function of recording the ephemeral. They make visible the endless and obstinate approach to a site and its inhabitants of a witness who is never completely present nor absent, who refuses to anticipate but humbly immerses himself in the rhythms of the factory, in its invitations and interruptions.



Figure 8. Still from *West of the Tracks* (Wang Bing, 2003)

⁴³³ Wang Bing explains his interest in capturing ‘the moment’ as follows: ‘If we say there is a meaning in a documentary film, I think it is not through the story told by the documentary, but rather through a moment, a precise moment. This is what will transmit something new. For instance if we consider a place, a moment’s in someone’s life, even ten minutes, it does not matter, as soon as this moment exists’. See Alphant, Marianne; Rotmann, Roger, ‘Réel et Fiction, Entretien avec Wang Bing’, video-interview directed by Bernard Clerc-Renaud, Centre Pompidou, August 2008. Available at: <http://www.centrepompidou.fr> (accessed: 20/06/2013).

⁴³⁴ Baudrillard, Jean, ‘Please Follow Me’ in *Sophie Calle. Suite Vénitienne. Jean Baudrillard. Please Follow Me*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1988, p.76.



Figure 9. Still from *West of the Tracks* (Wang Bing, 2003)

West of the Tracks develops a hyper-observationalist form that continuously exceeds the parameters of a standard documentary function. There belongs to its images a disruptive duration of the shots that continuously oxidises a sociological purpose of observation. More generally, it oxidises the pre-determined relation between the visible and its interpretation (the intelligible). The more Wang follows the workers, the longer the takes last, and the more he endures, then the more the unfinished nature of his approach to the factory becomes apparent. This relentless oxidation does not necessarily mean that the representation of Tie Xi, the bearing witness to its decline, is impossible. Rather, it affirms a capacity of observational cinema irreducible to that of representation, a capacity to intervene in different ways in the visualisation and interpretation of the site in question in an entirely other form. *West of the Tracks* does not simply reveal the tragic and silent truth of the socialist factory. Through a hyper-observationalist oxidation it constructs the partial, strange, contested image of a rusting factory. The factory is not represented as an original site, a pure ruin that an observer must penetrate and decipher, but as an already

stratified, already complex configuration that a witness (the filmmaker, the spectator) can ceaselessly approach.

Observational Education

Documentary cinema has historically presented itself, first and foremost, as an educational medium. As a document, it makes different realities knowable, opening up a world of evidence to scientific and sociological scrutiny. But also, as an image, documentary cinema develops different pedagogies of seeing to consider these realities. Documentary modes of representation have articulated this duality between documentation (production of evidence) and image (organisation of the visible/audible) by developing different logics of educational efficacy. The educational efficacy of the observational language has been questioned with particular intensity. Bill Nichols, for instance, pointed out that observationalism is in accord with the protocols of the social sciences and their attempt to present a neutral documentation of reality.⁴³⁵ The disciplined absence/muteness of the filmmaker allows sociological representation to partake as a legitimate voice (because silent) in the powers of objectivity. Observationalism is then justified as the film method favoured and developed by the social sciences in their quest 'for a scientific use of film'.⁴³⁶ For Grimshaw and Ravetz this kind of argumentation greatly simplifies the pedagogical capacities of the observational. They understand that this kind of simplification is motivated by a refusal to acknowledge modes of relational knowing,

⁴³⁵ Nichols, Bill, *Representing Reality, Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis IN, 1991, p.41.

⁴³⁶ Trinh, Minh-Ha, 'Mechanical Eye, Electronic Ear, and the Lure of Authenticity' in *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, Routledge, New York NY, 1991, p.53.

modes where 'to know something' becomes displaced by a 'relating to something'.⁴³⁷ For them, far from being a validated language of neutrality, a normative language widely accepted, observational cinema challenges habitual modes of knowing. They use adjectives such as 'sensuous', 'affective', 'bodily' to describe the observational as a suggestive approach more than a declarative mode of inquiry.⁴³⁸ Here I take issue with the discussion on the educational efficacies of observational cinema: I analyse in some detail an essay by Elizabeth Cowie, an example of the literature critical with the observational logic, to then focus on what I argue are the generative politics developed by the pedagogical sensibility at play in *West of the Tracks*.

In her essay 'The Spectacle of Actuality', Elizabeth Cowie has critically examined the knowledge relations developed in documentary cinema in general and in its observational form in particular.⁴³⁹ Her analysis reveals the fundamental identificatory processes at the core of the educational efficacy of observational documentaries. Cowie emphasises the multi-layered complexity of these processes and their powerful effects in the reproduction of knowledge. She affirms that these processes effectively make the spectator occupy the position of a *subject of knowledge*. With this notion, she identifies the place of the spectator/observer as a position of mastery in relation to the filmed events. This authoritative position is pleasurable twice over for the spectator: as scopophilia (pleasure of looking) and as epistophilia (pleasure of knowing). Following Walter Benjamin, who argued that 'the audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the

⁴³⁷ Grimshaw, Anna and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema, Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2009, p.134.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.IX.

⁴³⁹ Cowie, Elizabeth, 'The Spectacle of Actuality' in Gaines, Jane M.; Renov, Michael (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1999, pp.19-43.

camera', Cowie affirms that these pleasures are the comforting result of an identification of the viewers with the camera's gaze.⁴⁴⁰ This process is not so much an identification with the social actors in the film or a simple identification with the filmmaker/scientist but rather – and this is the further source of pleasure here – an identification 'with the place of address as the site of a coming-to-know of knowledge' by which the viewer becomes affirmed as 'a member of the knowledgeable culture'.⁴⁴¹ With the notion of the *subject of knowledge* Cowie has also problematised the empathetic processes that are otherwise taken to be inherent to the viewing of documentary films. For her, empathy above all maintains a hierarchical distinction between viewers (as knowing subjects) and social actors (as affected subjects). Empathy fulfils 'a certain ego ideal demand that we are *nice*; that we can be touched by human suffering, by the causes and claims of others'.⁴⁴² It ultimately leaves social actors mute (even if they speak), unable to reflect on their situation 'or else they will rival the spectator as knowing subject'.⁴⁴³ The fundamental educational process at work in viewing documentary films, if we are to follow this logic, is the construction, the validation, the confirmation of the viewer as a knowing observer.

According to Cowie, observational documentaries yield a particular form of pleasure within the psychic apparatus of the viewer. In observational cinema, the absence of filmmaker intervention but also the roving handheld camera 'gives the viewer the feeling of being an observer, of *seeing for oneself*'.⁴⁴⁴ The viewers are led to *feel* 'that they are

⁴⁴⁰ Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York NY, 1969, p.228.

⁴⁴¹ Cowie, Elizabeth, 'The Spectacle of Actuality' in Gaines, Jane M. and Renov, Michael (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1999, p.29.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.32.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.29.

discovering the space and place of the documentary scene themselves'.⁴⁴⁵ The viewers of observational cinema can *feel*, through identification with the camera's gaze, that they are advancing in a sort of Adamic filmed world, as though it was being encountered for the very first time. It is this impression of discovery that makes observational cinema particularly convincing, particularly appropriate for socio-political indoctrination. Without a voice-of-God commentary, observational documentaries convince precisely inasmuch as they do not seek to convince: they do not seek to make a case concerning the visible world, constructing a well substantiated, well informed, clearly exposed argument. The observational imparts the intonations of life not so much by arguing about them with words, but making visible and audible its rich variations. Images function in this form as persuasive manifestations of the infinite shades and echoes, the luminous evidence, of a visible world that can thereby become for the spectator an object of knowledge. As Bill Nichols has observed:

Observational cinema affords the viewer an opportunity to look in and overhear something of the lived experience of others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life, to see the colours, shapes, and spatial relationships among people and their possessions, to hear the intonation, inflection, and accents that give a spoken language its grain and that distinguish one native speaker from another. If there is something to be gained from an affective form of learning, observational cinema provides a vital forum for such experience.⁴⁴⁶

Observational forms allow the viewers, more than other documentary modes, to experience the filmed world not through a direct transmission of textual information, but

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., p.30.

⁴⁴⁶ Nichols, Bill, *Representing Reality – Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991, p.42. Unfortunately, Nichols does not explain what he understands by 'affective learning experience'.

rather through identification within an immersive exercise of observation. *West of the Tracks* offers, apart from the short introduction, no *external* information about what we see. The viewers of *West of the Tracks* learn how the factories sound and appear, in all their sensual splendour, *before* knowing the purpose of different machines, the names or occupation of its inhabitants or the reasons informing the workers' actions.

In her analysis, Cowie reveals how the affective learning experience at work in observational cinema operates, essentially, as a stultifying, indoctrinatory technique. For her, identification and empathy processes are effective mechanisms for knowledge reproduction, not least because they are pleasurable. The interrelations between filmmakers, spectators and filmed events have no generative or transformative capacity; they function to reproduce dominant knowledge conditions and hierarchical roles between observers and observed. The *affective labour* of the viewer is determined by and complicit with dominant codes of reality.⁴⁴⁷ Cowie's verdict on the transformative incapacity of the documentary is *almost* categorical: 'the documentary film (...) presents the knowable world not only or necessarily in order to enable us to know the world as the new, but also- and perhaps more often- to know the world as familiar, to find again our known objects'.⁴⁴⁸ The observational operates by making the viewers *feel* that they are discovering a world of their own accord and through their own agency. *In reality*, the

⁴⁴⁷ I borrow the expression 'affective labour' from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri who define it as 'the labour that produces and manipulates affects such as feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion'. Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio, *Multitude, War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2004, p.108.

⁴⁴⁸ Cowie, Elizabeth, 'The Spectacle of Actuality' in Gaines, Jane M. and Renov, Michael (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1999, p.30.

documentary's world 'has already been organised as knowledge' by an invisible hand.⁴⁴⁹ The affective experience of the observational documentary is therefore a mirage of participatory intensity. In this interpretation, the agency of the observational filmmaker in the educational relation is also questioned. The filmmaker's role is simply to guarantee the pleasure of identification. For this purpose, the representation of the observed world has to submit to verisimilitude, to conventional codes of recognition: 'the poor, for example, must appear properly poor in whatever way an audience may currently recognise poverty'.⁴⁵⁰ Conversely, to represent unknown worlds, the filmmaker simply has to exoticise them. Insofar as it is filmed, the world has to 'appear recognisable, familiar, and thus – in some sense – as the same as what we already know'.⁴⁵¹ Ultimately, filmmakers have no *take* in the representation; they can only do versions of reality conventions.

This interpretation of the relations between filmmaker, spectators and filmed world explains well the affective powers of observational documentaries when placed in the service of social indoctrination. It explains well the conformism of the existing literature on *West of the Tracks*. This is a literature that has valued the observational form of *West of the Tracks* as the appropriate means to represent the tragedy of Tie Xi as a drama we already know. It is a drama with the same pitiable actors, the same ruined stage, the same bleak denouement that *every* film representation of industrial transformation shares. It explains how this literature has confirmed and conformed to the *only possible* interpretation of this drama, the consensual narrative that has built up around the post-industrial age. This literature has repeatedly defined the film as a poignant learning experience imparting a well-rehearsed lesson.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., p.29.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., p.30.

However, Cowie's interpretation is not without its problems: it blocks any attempt to see beyond or rather besides its critique, to see the capacity of documentary films to re-figure the relation between filmmakers, spectators and filmed world. In one word, it is an interpretation that ultimately denies any political capacity to documentary cinema by reducing its role to social reproduction. Her critique is predicated upon a triple condemnation: the spectators are condemned to deceptively experience pre-modulated affects; the filmmakers are condemned to reproduce the conditions that constitute these affects as such; finally, the filmed world is condemned to its conventional form. In this instructional exercise, you (the spectator and the filmmaker) are condemned 'to learn only versions of what you already know or find only what you have already learned to look for'.⁴⁵² In the end, Cowie's interpretation operates from the grounds of the Western critical tradition that has systematised in order to reveal, insistently and successfully, the evils of interpretation, representation, mediation as means of social reproduction.⁴⁵³ This continuing tradition invariably assumes, under different guises, that the spectators are ignorant, passive and alienated, that the authors-filmmakers are deluded despots, and finally that there are authentic affects supposedly untouched by the manipulative powers of representation.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵² Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2003, p.166.

⁴⁵³ According to Kosofsky Sedgwick these grounds are 'theoretically and strategically familiar across the disciplines of Western scholarship'. Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ For a critique of this critical tradition see Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London, 2009. For a critique of 'authentic affect' see Ben Anderson, 'Modulating the Exces of Affect' in Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregoty J. (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2010, pp.269-285.

This critical tradition makes it difficult to see the singularity of the politics of rust at work in *West of the Tracks*.⁴⁵⁵ The film articulates a singular distance with its standard functions that requires thinking the relations and affective transactions between filmmaker, spectators and filmed world from more affirmative grounds. The political capacity of *West of the Tracks* does not simply lie in the representation of the workers left behind by the transformations of the Chinese socio-economic landscape, but rather in the oxidation (which is something other than a simple break) of this social function and its associated epistemic positions, as they pertain to the filmmaker, the spectator and the social actors. Wang Bing understands his role in standard sociological terms; he does not shy away from the roles of recorder and voice-giver.⁴⁵⁶ He affirms that his initial intention in *West of the Tracks* was to film ‘the typical Chinese of the low social level’ in order to show how ‘they carry themselves with dignity in whatever situation’.⁴⁵⁷ The film makes visible, in the social tradition of documentary cinema, *how the other half lives*. At the same time, *West of the Tracks* is a film that makes visible the strange ambiguities of sociological observation. Wang Bing affirms that when he started to film he did not have any rational filmmaking strategy. More or less unintentionally, there is in the film a representational process that constantly corrodes the perimeters of sociological purpose, leaving the observational form porous to a non-sociological interpretation of its capacities. At stake here is a documentary cinema that broaches its particular context of social transformation by dismantling the

⁴⁵⁵ Cowie seems to make an exception in her argument via a brief discussion of Freud's uncanny. She speaks of the possibility of another kind of affective relation with the filmed world, one in which the spectator experiences ‘the impossibility of mastery, of knowledge and sense making’. Unfortunately she does not develop this exception and reduces it to a footnote. This exception is thus reduced to being the other side of her portrayal of the spectator as an egotistic subject of knowledge. Cowie, Elizabeth, ‘The Spectacle of Actuality’ in Gaines, Jane M. and Renov, Michael (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1999, p.43.

⁴⁵⁶ Minh-Ha, Trinh, ‘Documentary Is/Not a Name’, *October*, Vol. 52, The MIT Press, Spring 1990, p.85.

⁴⁵⁷ Wang Bing quoted by Lie, Ji in ‘Wang Bing’s *West of the Tracks*, Salvaging the Rubble of Utopia’, *Jump Cut - A Review of Contemporary Media*, No. 50, Spring 2008.

very protocols by which such a context would ordinarily be addressed. It is in this sense that its process is one of oxidation.

The rust at work in *West of the Tracks* challenges the characterisation of the observational form, the documentary mode as that which facilitates, with no trouble, the identification of the spectators with the social actors and/or the camera's gaze. The formal features of the observational documentary operate in the film not so much as smooth strategies for empathy but as rusty means diverting and distracting identification. This is the case with the long take, the filming technique privileged by observational documentaries and Wang. The long take is most often considered the appropriate means to represent lived reality, by minimising intervention (montage). Following this understanding of the long take as a guarantee of temporal verisimilitude filmmakers such as Harun Farocki have rejected it. But can the latter be otherwise? Pier Paolo Pasolini, among others, has radicalised the interpretation of the long take as a truthful means of representation. Pasolini bluntly equates the long take with the essence of cinema and, furthermore, with life itself:

The substance of cinema is therefore an endless long take, as is reality to our senses for as long as we are able to see and feel (a long take that ends with the end of our lives); and this long take is nothing but the reproduction of the language of reality. In other words it is the reproduction of the present. But as soon as montage intervenes, when we pass from cinema to film (...), the present becomes past: a past that, for cinematographic and not aesthetic reasons, is always in the present mode (that is, it is a historic present).⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁸ Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 'Observations on the Long Take', *October*, Vol. 13, The MIT Press, Summer 1980, p.5.

For Pasolini, montage is death, the long take is life (a duality that cinema is necessarily encompassed by). With this poetics, Pasolini emphasises that the long take does not make the representation of life more clear, credible, recognisable for the spectators but, on the contrary, ‘infinite, unstable, uncertain, indescribable’.⁴⁵⁹ The long take enables ‘a certain kind of intelligibility that is different from an answer’; it resists ‘constructing a singular [individual] meaning to what is before the camera; instead the long take is expansive’.⁴⁶⁰ The long take transfers to the screen *the continuum of reality* in all its discontinuous ambiguity.⁴⁶¹

The long takes of *West of the Tracks* are *long long* takes. They are complex entities that, through their length, expose the spectators to the factories-in-conflict of Tie Xi, to their darker variant of red, to ‘the exuberance of rust’.⁴⁶² In them, repeated interruptions, abrupt changes and competing centres of attention make it difficult to stabilise and isolate the sense of the filming and filmed actions. The rust of the camera's gaze makes it difficult for the spectators to focus on and simply identify with the place of address or with the social actors. The workers appear in these *long long* takes not so much as social actors but as nameless ghosts wandering around the space in question. The workers are ghostly figures who nevertheless speak and periodically argue their case; we hear and overhear discourses

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Kissel, Laura, ‘The Terrain of the Long Take’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2008, p.351.

⁴⁶¹ Here I am rephrasing André Bazin's formula ‘to do away with montage and transfer to the screen the continuum of reality’. Bazin, André, *What is Cinema? Volume 1*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1967, p.37. Grimshaw and Ravetz recognise Bazin and his notion of a ‘cinema of duration’ as key to their understanding of observational cinema. See Grimshaw, Anna and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema, Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington IN, 2009, pp.11-23.

⁴⁶² ‘In my view nothing is more precious than the exuberance of rust’. Bataille, Georges, ‘Dianus’ in *The Impossible*, City Light Books San Francisco 1991, p.115.

and sentences such as: ‘next thing you know, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) will be renaming itself the Republican Party’; ‘what kind of society is this anyway?’; ‘survival of the fittest’ and so on. And yet, save for the episode focused on the life of Old Du, a man who lives at the margins of the industrial complex, Wang avoids any individualised intimate portrait of the workers. As Wang has declared in an interview: ‘My film is not about off-post workers at all, and if somebody thinks it is about off-post workers I’d say he [*sic*] probably did not get to understand my film’.⁴⁶³ Instead, he admits: ‘The factory is my protagonist’.⁴⁶⁴ *West of the Tracks* organises a politics of rust that is not merely directed towards a sociological recognition and empathetic denunciation of the workers’ situation in contemporary China. The film is rather engaged in a representation that continually oxidises any simple understanding of temporal realism and makes the factory-of-the-workers visible and audible for the spectators as a site-in-conflict. The stretching of time in the film is the result of an exhaustive observation that does not make the industrial space and its inhabitants more and more knowable, but more and more suspenseful. Duration continuously oxidises in this film sociological intentions, it continuously delays the expected representation of the factory. The oxidation at work in this observational approach makes the combination and variability of different processes of identification and disidentification possible.

The representational rust of *West of the Tracks* emphasises the strangeness of the Tie Xi factories and the unstable position of the filmmaker in his endless documentation of this

⁴⁶³ Wang Bing quoted by Lu Xinyu, ‘*West of the Tracks* and the New Documentary Movement in Contemporary China’, in Sandhu, Sukhev (ed.), *Leaving the Factory: Wang Bing’s Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, 2009, p.3.

⁴⁶⁴ Wang Bing quoted by Lu Xinyu, ‘*West of the Tracks: History and Class-Consciousness*’ in Berry, Chris and Lu Xinyu and Lisa Rofel (eds.), *The New Chinese Documentary*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2010, p.60.

site. The rust of the camera's gaze makes it difficult to determine a pleasurable position of mastery for the spectator to settle into, for a proper reproduction of knowledge to happen. And yet, whilst this is the case, the camera's advance does not simply condemn the spectator to 'a repeated encounter with the impossibility of mastery, of knowledge and sense making'.⁴⁶⁵ The oxidation at work across the film calls for an interpretation of the affective learning transactions between filmmaker, spectator and factory irreducible to either the *pleasurable* affect of mastery or the *resigned* affect of fatalism in the face of an apparent impossibility (the impossibility of looking at the factory). *West of the Tracks* relentlessly maps an industrial site that becomes increasingly unfamiliar. It is the paradox that lends the film all its force as an affective learning experience.

The determined camera work, the *suffering* of the filmmaker, the *long long* takes speak of an endless approach to the factory. The film is a resolute exercise of approach, not a revelation or a demonstration of the factory's unrepresentable opacity. Its observational sensibility radicalises the film into oxidising the factory and the workers as objects of knowledge, and the filmmaker and spectators as subjects of knowledge. The known factory (the one that has disappeared with the end of socialism) appears under a different light in these long nine hours of cinema. There is neither a confirmation nor a simple break with the pre-determined industrial narrative already familiar to the spectator. More than conquering or mourning a (fake) position of mastery, the politics of rust at work in the film allow the spectators to weave into the fabric of what they know endless images and incomplete sounds. These images and sounds disclose the factory as a workers' site with which to oxidise the production of thinkable objects (the factory, the workers), with

⁴⁶⁵ Cowie, Elizabeth, 'The Spectacle of Actuality' in Gaines, Jane M. and Renov, Michael (eds.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 1999, p.43.

which to oxidise the practice of thinking as a mode of production. These images and sounds demonstrate the capacity of cinema to generate a site from where it is possible to de-industrialise how we look at the factory and the workers.

Part Three

People Fever,

The Popular Passions of the Militant Image

Introduction

To write a history of the relation between the moving image and the name 'people' would be a laborious, labyrinthine, perhaps infinite, task but also an entirely necessary one to understand the field of possibilities that cinema has created for itself, as well as to imagine new ones. As an 'art of the masses', the cinema has repeatedly staged, with widely divergent socio-political intentions, a series of encounters with the people. To study *with passion* this series in all its variety, it is necessary to reconsider the name 'people' itself, by recognising 'the ambiguity inherent in the nature and function of the concept of people', an ambiguity between 'people' as 'the constitutive political subject' and 'people' as the name of those 'excluded from politics'.⁴⁶⁶ The ambiguity of this name will therefore lead us to make a distinction between two cinemas: a cinema for which 'people' is an already constituted entity and a cinema for which 'people' is the name of a multiplicity at odds with the political order. The problem tied to the name 'people' also reveals the impossibility of developing a cinematic formula that would resolve this ambiguity and film people ('the constitutive political subject') without forfeiting people (those 'excluded from politics'), thereby finally filming the people once and for all. Yet this impossibility, far from condemning the moving image to sterility or failure, gives rise to a generative cinema that, in one way or another, encompasses a field of popular experimentation.

⁴⁶⁶ Agamben, Giorgio, 'What is a People?', *Means Without Ends: Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2000, p.28.

In his recent book *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Didi-Huberman has begun to analyse the representation of the people in the visual arts, including the cinema.⁴⁶⁷ He argues that for early and modern cinema the figure of the people was a crucial representational issue. The invention of cinema multiplied the possibilities of making visible an otherwise anonymous people; a potential the work of filmmakers such as the Lumière Brothers explored by filming *anyone* (children playing, peasants working, athletes, religious processions, workers leaving a factory, etc). Modern filmmakers, from D. W. Griffith to Fritz Lang, from King Vidor to Leni Riefenstahl, brought forth the people through different aesthetico-political combinations. For Didi-Huberman the lesson to extract from modern cinema is not that the cinema makes the people visible, but that what matters is the sense(s) of this visibility. For him, each specific case stands in need of analysis in order to see whether the form of the representation traced out contains or frees the people.⁴⁶⁸ The sense of this freeing is by no means simple. Didi-Huberman, engaging with the ambiguity of the concept and referent in question, makes a distinction between two people: the unified people of revolution (or counter-revolution) and what he calls the ‘people-fragment’, the ‘people-fracture’, the ‘people-residue’.⁴⁶⁹ According to Didi-Huberman, the visualisation of the people as a unified social body is a self-evident operation (people as military parade), whereas the representation of the ‘people-fragment’ is the site of ‘a non-appeaseable conflict’.⁴⁷⁰

In what follows I will begin to explore the relation between ‘people’ and cinema not so much in terms of figuration, people as an audiovisual figure, but rather in terms of

⁴⁶⁷ Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2012, pp.141-257.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.144.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.107. My translation (‘people-bris, les fragments, les débris’).

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.108. My translation (‘un conflit inapaisable’).

participation. Didi-Huberman focusing on the representation of the people does not take into account militant audiovisual initiatives where the people are not only figures, whether democratically or antagonistically represented, but also participants in the very making of the representation. He does not take into account cinema experiences that seek to break with the customary role of the people in cinema as *figurant* (as figures, as extras in the background of the action, and that remain so even when they are brought to the fore). And yet, the popular passions of the militant image are crucial when re-staging the relation people-cinema, both with and besides the question of representation.⁴⁷¹ It would be easy to understand the popular passion of the militant image as a mere chimera or as a process simply objectifying the content of the name 'people'. In contrast, my argument holds that the collective passion attached to the militant image is best understood as a struggle caught up in the ambiguity of the name 'people'. To make militant images involves a passion, I insist here, in the sense Foucault gives to this notion. It involves a movement towards the people and with the people generating moments of 'intense communication' that seek to reconfigure the audiovisual division of labour between filmmaker, people and image.⁴⁷²

From early anarchist cinema to activist digital video, from the cinema of the various Popular Fronts and the film-tracts of May 68 to the militant adventures of third cinema,

⁴⁷¹ Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray have defined the militant image as 'any form of image and sound – from essay film to fiction feature, from observational documentary to found-footage ciné-pamphlet, from newsreel to agitational reworkings of colonial production – produced in and through film-making practices dedicated to the liberation struggles and revolutions of the late twentieth century'. See Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.1. I use the term 'militant image' in a larger sense to include any image involved in a liberation struggle of any type.

⁴⁷² For Foucault passion is a state 'that allows intense communication'. Foucault, Michel, 'Passion According to Werner Schroeter', *Foucault Live, Collected Interviews 1961-1984*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1996, p.314.

the practice of counter-cinema has been unremittingly affected by a *people fever*. The history of militant audiovisual practices demonstrates that every militant image is an image deeply agitated by this passion. To make images for the people and images with the people implies an encounter that opens the militant image to doubt, change and invention. For the militant image, the mobilisation of the name 'people' goes hand in hand with a radical questioning, a *mise-en-critique*, of the name 'cinema'. The powers of the image, particularly the moving image, have aroused, as we have seen with the case of Farocki, endless suspicions of connivance with dominant economico-political regimes (whether in the form of commodification and alienation, discipline and control). The name 'people' is at the heart of this hermeneutics of suspicion, to (ab)use Paul Ricoeur's felicitous expression.⁴⁷³ In this visual hermeneutics, 'people' alternately refers to a mass victim of manipulation or a virtually revolutionary force. This strong interpretation of the extraordinary politicising/de-politicising powers associated with the (moving) image has stimulated the development of militant cine-cultural practices, committing it to questions such as: how can the most alienating and dangerous art galvanise the mass of spectators into a people? With what forms and modes of organisation can the militant image develop a cinematic alternative to the alienating image? The practice of the militant image is suspicious of its own power, its capacity to reduce the spectator to passive victimhood, whilst at the same time being convinced of its ability to contribute to the activation and emancipation of a people. In this fever, the powers of the moving image appear at once both extraordinary and unreliable, a circumstance that ensures they are subject to continuous interrogation and experimentation.

⁴⁷³ See Ricoeur, Paul, *Le Conflit des Interprétations. Essais d'Herméneutique I*, Seuil, Paris, 1969.

The participation of the people in the moving image is at the core of this experimentation. Throughout the twentieth century participation has been a key field of experimentation for any critical art form. Walter Benjamin argued early on, with explicit reference to the Soviet context, that the apparatus by which the spectators of an artwork are given access to, even active involvement in, the process of production is ‘better, the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, the more readers or spectators into collaborators’.⁴⁷⁴ The cinema has developed two main participatory experiments that can be loosely identified with the investigations of second and third cinema: a *cinema of auteurs* and a *guerrilla filmmaking practice*.⁴⁷⁵ Both cinemas erode the predominant mode of participation reserved for the spectator in industrial cinema: identification with the hero through narrative continuity and associated mechanisms.

The auteur approach breaks this identification with interruptions and disruptions, with a view to activating discussion and analysis on the side of the spectators, while exhibiting the creativity of the artist. Critical filmmakers inspired by Brecht have explored how cinema can leave room for imagination, reflection and critical distance on the part of the audience. I have analysed to some extent the significance of this tendency in the first part of this thesis with the work of Straub and Huillet. Guerrilla filmmaking aims to encourage communal creativity and anti-imperialist unity in every aspect of the image production. Apart from stimulating discussion, it is a cinema that seeks to open up the making and the distribution of images to forms of non-hierarchical participation. Numerous adventures of

⁴⁷⁴ Benjamin, Walter, ‘The Author as Producer’, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 2, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2003, p.777. For a history of participation in the arts see Bishop, Claire (ed.), *Participation*, Whitechapel, London, 2006.

⁴⁷⁵ See Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Getino, ‘Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of Cinema of Liberation in the Third World’, in Stam, Robert; Miller, Toby (eds.), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Malden MA, 2000, pp.265-286.

the militant image have oscillated between these two poles, combining strategies and aspirations. In this part of the thesis, Peter Watkins' *La Commune (Paris 1871)* – a film that oscillates throughout between auteurism and collectivist filmmaking – will act as my principal point of reference, in order to look at and listen to the popular passions of the militant image. *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is a film particularly abundant in popular anxieties and engagements. With the questions it poses, the tensions it exposes and the precarious solutions it composes, the film constitutes a significant case through which to experience the people fever of militant cinema and its history.

But if we now turn to *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, it is also on account of its subject. The events of 1871 and the formation of the Paris Commune have inspired a century of revolutionary thought. From Marx to Luxemburg, from Kropotkin, Lenin and Mao, to contemporary philosophers such as Badiou, every theorist/practitioner of Revolution has analysed these events and, even if drawing different conclusions, they are all united in understanding 1871 as one of the key historical references in the project of proletarian emancipation.⁴⁷⁶ These different readings have offered contrasting interpretations of the uprising of *le peuple de Paris*, the popular administration this established and the ferocious repression it was met with by the *Versillais*. Bakunin, for instance, understood the Commune as a ‘rebellion against the State’.⁴⁷⁷ For Trotsky, the failure of the Commune teaches revolutionaries ‘one single lesson: a strong Party leadership is

⁴⁷⁶ See for instance Lenin, V. I., ‘The Experience of the Paris Commune of 1871’ in *The State and Revolution*, Penguin Books, London, 1992, pp.33-51; Marx, Karl, ‘The Civil War in France’ in Carver, Terrell (ed.), Marx, *Later Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, pp.163-207.

⁴⁷⁷ Bakunin, Mikhail, ‘The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State’ (1871). Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1871/paris-commune.htm> (accessed: 29/09/2012).

needed'.⁴⁷⁸ The Situationists read the Commune as 'the biggest party of the nineteenth century', a party that revolutionised everyday life.⁴⁷⁹ Across these interpretations of the Paris Commune, different voices within the turbulent history of socialism have demonstrated different understandings of the name 'people'. Reading this literature and the conflict it stages between non-Party, Party and popular party interpretations, the Commune appears not so much as the inaugural episode of proletarian power, 'the first worker power in history', a beginning that all would want to commemorate, but rather as traumatic historical material, torn between contending interests.⁴⁸⁰

Cinema has been largely absent from the barricades of the *communards*. The Commune has only very rarely made an appearance there, proving to be a particularly complex and colossal subject, associated with various failed projects throughout the twentieth century (Jean Grémillon's, most notably).⁴⁸¹ Cinema has repeatedly refused to address this event for financial and ideological reasons. For Western production companies, the subject matter is too embedded within a complex political context for it to appeal to the general public. For 'actually existing socialism' and its representatives in the West, as a glorious yet ultimately inadequate episode, it proved unsuitable for educating the masses in the

⁴⁷⁸ Trotsky, Leon, 'Lessons on the Commune' (1921). Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1921/02/commune.htm> (accessed: 29/09/2012).

⁴⁷⁹ Debord, Guy and Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem, 'Sur la Commune', *Revue Internationale Situationniste*, No. 12, Paris, September 1969, p.110 ('la plus grande fête du XIX^{ème} siècle').

⁴⁸⁰ Badiou, Alain, 'The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics', *Polemics*, Verso, London, 2006, p.279. It is important to emphasise here that the way Badiou uses 'worker' in an explicitly expanded sense, designating all those struggling against their exclusion from politics (see the introduction of this thesis).

⁴⁸¹ For an analysis of Grémillon's failed projects see Weber, Alain, 'Grémillon et les Malédicteurs', in Sellier, Geneviève (ed.), 1895, *Revue d'Histoire du Cinéma, Hors Série*, FCAFF, October 1997, pp.67-81. See also Grémillon, Jean, *Le Cinéma? Plus Qu'un Art... Ecrits et Propos 1925-1959*, Broché, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2010.

virtues of Party organisation. Redoubling this twofold negation, the media apparatus has largely ignored, if not censored, the few films devoted to the histories of the Commune. And yet, exceptional films on the subject such as *La Commune* (Armand Guerra, 1914), *Novvy Babylon* (Leonid Trauberg and Grigori Kozintsev, 1929) or *1871* (Ken McMullen, 1990) have developed differing audiovisual experiments with which to broach the subject and its political lessons, experiments that make it difficult to reduce their signifying constellations to a single discursive intention.

From alternative modes of production to genre combinations, from inventive audiovisual techniques to exaggerated theatricality, the handful of films (literally a handful) dedicated to the Commune have made images and sounds that trouble the transmission of one reading of this popular revolution. Taken together, these exceptions to the dominant invisibility of the Paris Commune offer something like a condensed catalogue of the different modes that, across its history, cinema has tended to work with in relation to the name 'people'. These films intertwine in a variety of ways a treatment of the people as a datum of the social structure with a cinematic disidentification by which the *communards* are summoned to appear, making an anonymous past people present. From indoctrination to participation, from the ignition of critical consciousness to popular entertainment, these films on the Commune often combine in complex ways differing methods and effects that seek to teach and/or represent and/or activate and/or amuse and/or sermonise and/or empower, the people.

This part briefly re-visits salient cases within the history of the militant image and some of the other films dedicated to the Paris Commune, to better discern the singularity of the

popular passion at work in *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*. In the making of the latter, the name 'people' is mobilised in different conjunctions, provoking different challenges and stimuli for the participants, from the actors to the spectators, not to mention the filmmaker. I explore three of these conjunctions that render the film a process of intense communication: the film as an instance of popular television, the film as an instance of popular historical re-enactment, and finally, the film as a popular media struggle for collective enunciation. These three dimensions will allow us to take the measure of the contagious people fever that agitates this film process.

Chapter 5: Dirty Television

The production of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* makes visible the constraint, if not the outright impossibility of developing alternative modes of image-making within mainstream television. Since the 1960s, Watkins has often worked for television corporations making films against the authoritarian conventions that rule the contract between filmmaking and film viewing, exploring other modes of audiovisual production. The singularity of his cinema resides in carrying out its media analysis and critique within the mainstream communication system, confronting it and being confronted by it. Whereas other filmmakers have struggled to open up spaces in which to work at the margins of the industry or beyond it altogether, Watkins' work is best understood as a guerrilla operation, an antagonism at the heart of the system.⁴⁸² Watkins positions his work in the middle of the television industry with the following words:

I am worried about the whole role of the media; I cannot lift myself out as some kind of elitist who has somehow found the eternal secret of being the perfect researcher and the perfect complex filmmaker, who is removed from this. I'm not. I'm right in the middle of it.⁴⁸³

⁴⁸² See Shamberg, Michael, *Guerrilla Television*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1971. For a history of the alternative television movement in the seventies in North America see Boyle, Deirdre, *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*, Oxford University Press, New York NY, 1997.

⁴⁸³ MacDonald, Scott, *A Critical Cinema 2, Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1992, p.415.

In my view the evocation of this 'being in the middle' is not simply the appropriate answer of a self-conscious auteur but as a declaration of intentions, or even a declaration of war. Watkins is not interested in occupying the late night hours of television, the minority slots; he struggles for his films to be shown in prime time.⁴⁸⁴ Furthermore, Watkins struggles to make films that are not simply his films, elitist films resulting from a more or less sheltered, more or less personal, practice. He seeks to open up the film process, and in this his work coalesces with the intentions of guerrilla television, addressed to a populist outside beyond the mafia of medium professionals.⁴⁸⁵

His practice defies the marketisation of television, the popular medium par excellence, by working to inflect this 'popular' with a participatory accent. Through this combative gesture, 'popular' starts to sound differently than in the customary understanding of popular forms: an understanding that proceeds 'as if they [popular forms] contained within themselves, from their moment of origin, some fixed and unchanging meaning or value'.⁴⁸⁶ *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is a popular television film in that it does not formalise protocols of popular participation but rather makes visible the popular form as something open to (any) contestation, the popular as a form of contestation. The film occupies public television with a collective process, traversed by various problems and contradictions, without ever coagulating its own popular impetus. This process exposes

⁴⁸⁴ Kobena Mercer has problematised the multicultural televisual policy advocating the creation of 'minority slots' (focusing on the case of Channel Four). See Mercer, Kobena, 'Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation', *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1994.

⁴⁸⁵ I borrow the equation of television and the mafia from Serge Daney who argues that 'its strength [commercial television's] resides in the fact that those who make it have impunity and can tolerate some impoverished critic's protests. They have the impunity of the mafia, to such an extent that you decide that it is impossible to win this war'. Daney, Serge, *Postcards from the Cinema*, Berg Publishers, London, 2007, p.125.

⁴⁸⁶ Hall, Stuart, 'Notes on Deconstructing Popular' in Storey, John (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, University of Georgia Press, Athens GA, 2006, p.451.

the absolute commodification of the popular in mainstream media and the role of the latter in the production and reproduction of dominant social relations. In order to look at the singularity of this experiment of *people TV*, I will distinguish Watkins' work from the popular as it is mobilised by commercial and public televisions. Secondly, I will explore the case of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* as an experience of counter-television, or to use a term coined by Michael Chanan, an experiment of third television, where a popular process is in continuous tension with its media framework.⁴⁸⁷

1. People TV

One of the most virulent attacks on capitalist practices of the moving image is the one developed by T. W. Adorno. In 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', Adorno and Horkheimer understand cinema as the most violent *art*, the most powerful cultural agent of mass de-politicisation.⁴⁸⁸ They affirm that 'the sound film, far surpassing the theatre of illusion, leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience'.⁴⁸⁹ This denunciation of cinema as capitalist spectacle operates by exacerbating the arguments at the base of the critique of another art, or pseudo-art, bourgeois theatre. The illusionism, the identification mechanisms and the cheap thrills of bourgeois theatre are intensified in the art of the screen. No exception is to be made here; the innovations of

⁴⁸⁷ In his essay 'The Changing Geography of Third Cinema' Chanan analyses processes at the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties in the United States and Great Britain, the heartlands of 'first television', which permitted the development, not without limitations, of a 'third television'. See Chanan, Michael, 'The Changing Geography of Third Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 38 No. 4, Winter 1997, pp.383-385.

⁴⁸⁸ Adorno, T. W.; Horkheimer, Max, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1997, pp.120-167.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.126.

Orson Welles or the anti-heroes of Charlie Chaplin are ‘calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system’.⁴⁹⁰ In essays such as ‘How to Look at Television’, Adorno applies the logic of this all-encompassing denunciation to his analysis of the effect upon the spectator of televisual socio-psychological stimuli.⁴⁹¹ Although Adorno sees television as ‘a medium of far-reaching potentialities’, virtual capacities he did not grant cinema, he does not explain what this potentiality consists of.⁴⁹² His main concern, *en bon maître*, is to sensitise his readers against the perverse effects of television on the minds of the people. His purpose is to open the eyes of the spectators to the hypocrisy of most television shows whose primary aim is to reproduce ‘the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that seem to fit with totalitarian creeds even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be anti-totalitarian’.⁴⁹³ He reads this televisual hypocrisy as a form of capitalist sadism.⁴⁹⁴

Adorno's arguments have been intensely criticised in the last decades for denying any agency to the spectators, for its paranoid undertones and its binary oppositions, but his work offers a ferociously eloquent characterisation of what ‘people’ names in the mass

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., p.129.

⁴⁹¹ Adorno, T.W., ‘How to Look at Television’, *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 1954, pp.213-235.

⁴⁹² Ibid., p.213.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., p.222. It is worth noting the difference of this instructional purpose with the argument developed in ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’. Adorno concludes this chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* arguing that the power of the culture industry goes beyond awareness of its ideological manipulation. The helplessness of people is compounded by the fact that they are compelled to buy and use the products of the culture industry ‘even if they see through them’. Adorno, T. W.; Horkheimer, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1997, p.167.

⁴⁹⁴ Adorno writes: ‘The less the message is really believed and the less it is in harmony with the actual existence of the spectators, the more categorically it is maintained in modern popular culture. One may speculate whether its inevitable hypocrisy is concomitant with punitiveness and sadistic sternness’. Adorno, T.W., ‘How to Look at Television’, *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 1954, p.221.

media system.⁴⁹⁵ In essence, cinema and television partake in an iron system of cultural impoverishment, homogenisation and populist indoctrination. The capitalist practice of the moving image deceives the people with a ‘pleasure immediately contained in order to ensure a docile return to the factory’.⁴⁹⁶ Cinema inculcates ‘obedience to the social hierarchy’.⁴⁹⁷ In television ‘the message is invariably one of identification with the status quo’.⁴⁹⁸ The mass art forms regulated by Western film studios and television corporations anaesthetises the people into a programmed, manageable mass of consumers. The people are isolated and detached from their critical/political capacities by the totalitarian effects of the audiovisual industries. People are thereby transformed into a quantifiable aggregate, the audience. The culture industry reduces spectators to ‘statistics on research organization charts’, ‘divided by income groups into red, green and blue areas’.⁴⁹⁹ Television manages the people through a process of ‘head counting with some demographic sophistication so that heads of a particular socioeconomic class, age, group, gender or other classification can be collected, counted and then sold to an advertiser’.⁵⁰⁰ For the audiovisual industries ‘people’ names a commodity sold to advertisers and sponsors. In the culture industry system, television and cinema are popular media because masses of people watch them.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁵ See for instance Fiske, John, *Television Culture*, Routledge, London, 1989 or Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London, 2011. It is worth mentioning that the critique of Adorno's arguments in these books happens without mentioning his name, helping to make his arguments sound abstract and banal.

⁴⁹⁶ Girard, Mathilde, ‘Kracauer, Adorno, Benjamin: Le Cinéma, Ecueil ou Etincelle Révolutionnaire de la Masse’, *Lignes*, 11, Lignes/Editions Leo Schérer, Paris, May 2003, p.210 (‘plaisir effleuré, tout de suite contenu, afin d’assurer le retour docile aux postes de l’usine’).

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Adorno, T.W., ‘How to Look at Television’, *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 1954, p.220.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Fiske, John, *Television Culture*, Routledge, London, 1989, p.310.

⁵⁰¹ As Stuart Hall has argued, the market defines the popular in quantitative terms: ‘things are said to be popular because masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them and seem to enjoy them to the full’. ‘Notes on Deconstructing Popular’ in

This quantitative definition of people, as Stuart Hall has remarked, is ‘the one which brings out socialists in spots’.⁵⁰²

The counter-practice of Peter Watkins is not only concerned with the popular ratings, the popular as rating, of commercial television. His struggle is primarily focused on the television's claim to be a public service and its prescriptive definition of the popular. His television films are operations within the public communication system testing the commitment to social values of audiovisual media such as the British Broadcasting Corporation or ARTE.⁵⁰³ His filmography, testimony to a career during which Watkins soon developed a reputation for being ‘paranoid’ and ‘difficult to work with’, is a militant cartography mapping the transformation of the public media system.⁵⁰⁴ In his book *Media Crisis*, where he reflects upon this long and troublesome career with Adornian ardour, Watkins argues that the organisation of mass communications has become increasingly repressive, with public television succumbing to the rationale of its commercial equivalent.⁵⁰⁵ The erosion of the distinction between public and private has made alternative practices of televisual production within the mass media not only difficult but increasingly impossible. Watkins' analyses are never nostalgic for a bygone age. For him, the distinction between commercial and public television is an appeasing myth being

Storey, John (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, University of Georgia Press, Athens GA, 2006, p.444.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ For a historical analysis of the notion of television as a public utility see Scannell, Paddy, ‘Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept’ in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham (eds.), *Media Studies, A Reader*, New York University Press, New York, 2000, pp.120-134.

⁵⁰⁴ As Scott McDonald puts it, Watkins ‘has often been characterized as paranoid and difficult to work with, even by those who might be expected to admire and support his work’. MacDonald, Scott, ‘The Filmmaker as Global Circumnavigator’, in Grant, Barry and Jeannette Sloniowski (eds.), *Documenting the Documentary, Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit MI, 1998, p.360.

⁵⁰⁵ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007.

exposed today by what he perceives as the contemporary form of the media crisis. It is since the beginning of his career that his work has faced various forms of institutional violence such as censorship and ostracism. Watkins has denounced how public and commercial television have been structurally organised since their inception to prevent any real participation of the public in the media. In his writings and in his practice, Watkins explores the possibility of another public TV or rather another people TV founded upon collective modes of production.

According to Watkins, public television has since its inception neglected an active concept of the people, developing instead an anti-democratic model focused on information transfer, aesthetic satisfaction and cultural edification. His condemnation of public service broadcasting echoes the main arguments elaborated by radical left critics of the public property model and its failures as an answer to the historical conflict between work and capital.⁵⁰⁶ The central role of the state in the public property regime has ensured the bureaucratisation of production and the formation of a caste of social experts that acts in *the best interests of the people*, interests it has itself prescribed.⁵⁰⁷ In his analyses, Watkins emphasises how the anti-democratic practices of state television are sustained by a pseudo-democratic discourse of expertise that speaks in the name of popular culture:

⁵⁰⁶ According to Ugo Mattei, among others, the expansion of public property in the twentieth century was the result of a compromise to alleviate the intensity of the conflict between workers and capitalists. See Mattei, Ugo, 'The State, the Market, and some Preliminary Question about the Commons (French and English Version)', 2011. Available at: http://works.bepress.com/ugo_mattei/40 (accessed 12/05/2013).

⁵⁰⁷ For a general critique of the 'public property model' see the text by the activist collective Observatorio Metropolitano 'La Reinención de los Comunes' in *La Carta de los Comunes*, Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2011, pp.47-57.

the thesis defended by many popular culture specialists maintains that television is a constructive and democratic tool of communication due not only to *the shared language and experience* that *ordinary* people can enjoy through widely viewed, popular programmes such as soap-operas, game shows, police series, but also because it makes possible identification with its characters and themes. But the premise that popular culture is a truly *democratic* force in society is very suspect, even if only because its processes and forms are in themselves the complete antithesis of a real democratic experience.⁵⁰⁸

The 'shared language and experience' of public television is defined and limited by the constant exhortation to render itself accessible, to provide a readily available mass of information and stimuli. It is an access culture that seeks to avoid complexity at all costs in the best interest of a well-informed public who are not to intervene in the mysteries of media production. Public service television has limited its social role to be an efficient entry point for everyone. It has limited its democratic mandate to providing 'equal access for all to a wide and varied range of common informational, entertainment, and cultural programmes'.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁸ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.175. My translation ('la thèse soutenue par un grand nombre de spécialistes de la culture populaire prétend que la télévision constitue un outil de communication constructif et démocratique, non seulement par la simplicité de son langage et l'expérience commune dont les gens *ordinaires* peuvent bénéficier au travers d'émissions *populaires* largement diffusées, feuilletons et séries policières, jeux télévisés, mais aussi par l'identification qu'elle permet avec les personnages et les thèmes évoqués. Or ce présupposé d'une culture populaire moteur d'une dynamique sociale authentiquement démocratique est plus que suspect, ne serait-ce qu'en raison d'un processus et d'une forme qui constituent en eux-mêmes l'antithèse absolue d'une véritable expérience démocratique').

⁵⁰⁹ Scannell, Paddy, 'Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept' in Marris, Paul; Thornham, Sue (eds.), *Media Studies, A Reader*, New York University Press, New York, 2000, p.133. For a critical analysis of the notion of access in culture see Rogoff, Irit, 'Academy as Potentiality' in Nollert, Angelika et al. (eds.), *A.C.A.D.E.M.Y.*, Revolver, Frankfurt, 2006, p.18.

Everyone is the all-embracing people of this public rationale. As the name of all, the perimeter of this total people can be delineated, calculated upon, normalised. It is possible, on its basis, to draw up a representational average. The people of this public television is never to be considered above or under, but always equivalent to this average. The average popular meaning or value is, essentially, simplicity. To communicate with the people in the requisite simple form sustains the dream of immediate, transparent communication. It is in this 'people' as the embodiment of an average, normative simplicity that the public media system can hallucinate itself as part of a 'perfect, successful, optimum communication', a communicative relation that 'no longer includes any mediation'.⁵¹⁰ It is through this conjuration of a simple people that the public media can imagine itself as a vehicle of democratic communication.

This democratic hallucination is a mechanism of cultural levelling that, according to Pier Paolo Pasolini, ultimately leads to the genocide of popular cultures.⁵¹¹ In his analyses of the Italian mediascape of his time, not far from Adorno's in its general thesis, Pasolini speaks of a second fascism that has managed to produce with the help of national television a unified, uniform, average culture that the first fascism attempted but failed to impose.⁵¹² It is against this cultural levelling and simplification that the politics of the audiovisual practices I am concerned with in in this thesis is best understood. The powerful montages of Farocki with banal images of work, the method of Straub and Huillet with actors and complex texts, the inexhaustible industrial landscapes of Wang

⁵¹⁰ Serres, Michel, *The Parasite*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2007, p.79.

⁵¹¹ Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 'Il Genocidio', *Scritti Corsari*, Garzanti Libri, Milan, 2000, pp.226-231.

⁵¹² See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Peuples exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2012, p.212.

Bing and the contestation of standardised media by Peter Watkins all make visible and audible, with different languages, a multiple, heterogeneous, complex people.

The *everyone* of public television is a people without people, as is the audience of commercial television. Watkins envisages another people TV, one struggling against the regressive peoples of commercial and public television. For Watkins, a people TV implies the creation of an audiovisual public space wherein history and representation can be considered through the process of filming itself. If I maintain the term ‘public’ to define this televisual space, it is because Watkins repeatedly uses it in his writings. He understands his work as a means ‘to offer the public the opportunity to participate’, ‘to find ways to help the public to free itself from this repressive [media] system’.⁵¹³ For Watkins, such participation in the means of media production should be ‘a constitutional right for every man, woman and child’.⁵¹⁴ This participatory tendency makes Watkins’ people TV resonant with the concept of the commons. The contemporary discussion around this concept comes as an answer both to ‘the demise of the statist model of revolution’ and ‘the neoliberal attempt to subordinate every form of life and knowledge to the logic of the market’.⁵¹⁵ Its purpose is to consider different modes of property and access, but also collective action, by making a distinction between commons and the notions of private *and* public property. Against the game of reciprocal reference between public and private, *commoning* refers to self-managed and self-regulated modes of

⁵¹³ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.13, 15. My translation (‘trouver des formes susceptibles d’aider le public a se liberer de ce systeme repressif’, ‘offrir au public l’opportunitè de participer’).

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., p.131. My translation (‘un droit constitutionnel de tout homme, femme et enfant’).

⁵¹⁵ Federici, Silvia, ‘Feminism and the Politics of the Commons’, *The Commoner*. Available at: <http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/federici-feminism-and-the-politics-of-commons.pdf> (accessed: 04/10/2012).

inhabitation, based upon non-commodified cooperative ways of producing. Beyond a question of 'access', processes of commoning are aim to open up to the people a means of direct action. Watkins' conceptualisation and practice of a people TV could be viewed as struggling for the commoning of the public media. His work re-traverses the media division of labour and the distancing of production and consumption with a view to re-thinking the conditions under which spectators, himself included, consume television. As we will see when analysing the specific media space developed by *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, fundamental ambiguities between private, public and common persists at the heart of this experience, making audible the disparate noises of this battle.⁵¹⁶

Watkins' conception of television as public space resonates with the guerrilla television movement of the seventies, developed by radical descendants of Marshall McLuhan, and with the contemporary emergence of alternative and autonomous digital media spaces seeking to decentralise and democratise audiovisual production.⁵¹⁷ But, as we have seen, the singularity of his work is conferred by the decision to operate (mostly) from within the dominant public media. In this sense, his combat is not dissimilar in its general impulse to the work of other filmmakers-infiltrators such as Jean-Luc Godard who, in the seventies, believed that 'television had to be taken as our collective destiny or as the only public space that remains, even if it is trashed, and all we have to do is begin to work with that

⁵¹⁶ This ambiguity is no exception in processes of communing. As Silvia Federici has emphasised, the public/private alliance has defined conditions under which collective management can be made to converge with its interests. *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁷ For an analysis of the relation between the counter-television movement of the seventies and contemporary digital counter-information practices see Tripp, Stephanie, 'From TVTV to YouTube: A Genealogy of Participatory Practices in Video', *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 64, No. 1-2, Summer 2012, pp.5-16 or Merrin, William, 'Still Fighting the Beast: Guerrilla Television and the Limits of YouTube', *Cultural Politics*, Duke University Press, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 2012, pp.97-119.

public space'.⁵¹⁸ In productions for French public television such as *Six fois deux/Sur et sous la communication* (1976) and *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1977-1978), Godard, teamed with Anne-Marie Miéville, developed a form of anti-television that identified and appropriated for experimentation the formal and contextual conventions of the medium. These works are auteurist infiltrations whose chief purpose is 'to radicalise popular attitudes towards TV by pushing to the limits the elements and capabilities they [Godard and Miéville] find most potentially valuable within [the medium]'.⁵¹⁹ Watkins too seeks a popular radicalisation in these terms but with the addition of the public's participation (as actors, scriptwriters, technicians). For Godard and Miéville, the potential of television resides in its intimacy with the viewer, the extensive time frame of TV series and the ability of video technology to easily manipulate images and sounds. *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* portrays the daily life of two children whose ordinary events are cast in an entirely compelling light through the diverse mediums of interview, analysis by experts and audiovisual experimentation. Yet whereas Godard and Miéville people the TV screen with episodes taken from ordinary life, the films of Watkins are collective explorations of the televisual medium through extraordinary historical episodes. A further difference still between these two public televisions resides in the way they conceive of the role of the filmmaker. In *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* there is an ironical hypertrophy of authorship. Each episode of the series contains all the usual ingredients of television: presenters, talking heads, reverse angles, game shows, serials, news bulletins, interviews, and so on. Miéville and Godard present 'the whole of

⁵¹⁸ Godard quoted by Serge Daney, *Postcards from the Cinema*, Berg Publishers, London, 2007, p.126.

⁵¹⁹ Sterritt, David, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard, Seeing the Invisible*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.251.

television simultaneously in each individual programme'.⁵²⁰ Godard describes himself 'as a network programmer' organising a whole 24 hour programme grid in each of the thirty minutes-long episodes.⁵²¹ Watkins, on the contrary, replaces this exuberant show of auteurism with an act of self-effacement, giving himself over to the collective processes of counter-television. As I will endeavour to show, this self-effacing gesture on the part of the auteur is a significant source of tension in the process of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, replete as it is with a series of ambiguities.

Watkins' *TV people* are fundamentally a people of participation. His films call for 'new publics composed of people who are not satisfied sitting quietly but who on the contrary want to get involved and participate'.⁵²² With this emphasis on spectators who stand up and speak up, Watkins distinguishes his practice not only from auteur-focused practices, but from that school of interpretation which celebrates TV spectators 'not as simple consumers but as producers of meanings and pleasure'.⁵²³ John Fiske argues in *Television Culture* that audiences have a 'semiotic power' that resists the attempts of television producers to possess and control the determination and circulation of meaning.⁵²⁴ Inspired by Barthes' birth of the reader and Foucault's power/resistance symbiotic coupling, Fiske celebrates the multiplicity of readings and pleasures that a TV series like *Dallas* has aroused worldwide: 'a Dutch Marxist' understands its narrative excess as anti-capitalist

⁵²⁰ Witt, Michael, 'Altered Motion and Corporal Resistance in *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants*', Temple, Michael and James Williams and Michael Witt (eds.), *For Ever Godard*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2007, p.203.

⁵²¹ Sterritt, David, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard, Seeing the Invisible*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.255.

⁵²² Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.180. My translation ('nouveaux publics constitués d'individus qui ne sauraient se satisfaire de rester sagement assis, mais veulent au contraire s'impliquer et participer').

⁵²³ Fiske, John, *Television Culture*, Routledge, London, 1999, p.312.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.316.

critique, a 'feminist' reads its plot as a parody of sexism, a 'group of Arabs' re-write the storyline to enjoy *Dallas*.⁵²⁵ For Fiske, these multiple responses prove that the ideological interests of television producers 'cannot comprise all of the textual fabric'.⁵²⁶ Against Adorno's indoctrinatory interpretation of the culture industry and its deceitful pleasures, Fiske downplays the propensity for ideological manipulation within the televisual transmission and naively concludes that the latter, 'far from being the agent of the dominant classes [...] is the prime site where the dominant have to recognise the insecurity of their power'.⁵²⁷ He applauds the semiotic multiplicity of responses to *Dallas* as they correspond to a 'popular cultural capital' that allows 'the subordinate to express and promote their interests'.⁵²⁸ The resistance of the subordinate audience to the privileged meanings of television allows them to 'strengthen their identity'.⁵²⁹ This argument, habitual in well-intended and yet paternalistic valorisations of the popular, circumscribes the discrete identities of which an aggregate audience is comprised within their already constituted form. However convincing these may be, however joyfully they are undertaken and however resistant they appear to be, in their respective readings, the feminist, the Marxist and the group of Arabs are merely sent back to themselves as what they always already were. Very differently, the work conducted by Watkins under the rubric of a *people TV* seeks to create a platform from which spectators, and indeed the filmmaker himself, can re-shape their relation to the media field and its customary distribution of active and passive roles. Where Fiske emphasises re-appropriation as a mode of self-affirmation, the process of a film such as *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* will have constructed situations whereby participants (including spectators) can reformulate

⁵²⁵ Ibid., p.312, 315.

⁵²⁶ Ibid., p.321.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., p.326.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., p.325.

individual and collective questions (including the very meaning of this individual and collective) in direct confrontation with the media structure they otherwise inhabit.

2 - *Commune TV*

For the people TV of Peter Watkins the Paris Commune is not simply an appropriate subject matter; it is also an organisational model to aspire to when constructing this, or any, film. The Paris Commune, a 'working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time', stands within the history of socialism as an attempt to establish a truly participatory democracy.⁵³⁰ The communards eradicated the political function as a specialised occupation through establishing a form of distributional authority. The equality between representatives and represented was sustained by permanently subjecting every representative to the principles of revocability and responsibility. Political power was thus practiced as an empty place whose occupiers were subject to immediate recall, as well as being interchangeable. The political questions the Commune was able to discern in terms of popular participation resonate with Watkins' struggle to treat filmmaking as a democratic process, a situation on account of which a collective's creative power can unfold in non-hierarchical ways. As Emmanuel Barot has put it:

⁵³⁰ Marx, Karl, 'The Civil War in France', in Pierson, Christopher (ed.), *The Marx Reader*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1997, p.252.

Cinema as democracy and for democracy, this is the struggle of Watkins: not in the sense that cinema would simply be a political tool among others, but in the sense that the film itself, in its content, its modes of construction and mode of production, has to incarnate its own purpose – emancipation.⁵³¹

To explore the possibilities and effects of a democratic film practice within public television, a process communing public TV, is the ultimate purpose of Watkins' work. According to Michael Wayne, this commitment to practice filmmaking as a democratic adventure through popular participation makes of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* 'a rare example of Third Cinema in Europe'.⁵³² For Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, Third Cinema was not exclusive to the Third World, but rather a cinema that 'recognises in the anti-imperialist struggles of the people of the Third World and its equivalents in the heart of the metropolis, the most gigantic cultural, scientific and artistic manifestation of our time'.⁵³³ Without denying this general identification, I argue here that a comparison between the cinema imagined and practiced by Solanas and Getino against 'the lords of the world film market' and Watkins' seditious media combat is a useful exercise to grasp the singular form of popularity at stake with *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*.⁵³⁴ Against a restrictive definition of third cinema, a merely identificatory and/or celebratory one, my argument insists on the need to explore discrete versions of the militant image in order to

⁵³¹ Barot, Emmanuel, *Camera Politica, Dialectique du Réalisme dans le Cinéma Politique et Militant*, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, Paris, 2009, p.89. My translation ('Le cinéma comme démocratie et pour la démocratie, voilà la lutte de Watkins: non pas au sens où le cinéma serait simplement un instrument du politique parmi d'autres, mais au sens où par lui-même, par ses contenus, par ses modes de construction, et par son mode de production, il doit incarner sa propre finalité').

⁵³² Wayne, Michael, 'The Tragedy of History: Peter Watkins' *La Commune*', *Third Text*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2002, p.65.

⁵³³ See Getino, Octavio 'Militant Cinema, An Internal Category of Third Cinema', in Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography*, *Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 2011, p.52.

⁵³⁴ See Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Getino, 'Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of Cinema of Liberation in the Third World', in Stam, Robert and Toby Miller (eds.), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Malden MA, 2000, p.265.

discern both common and different problems. I will focus the comparison on three key aspects of the film process: the financial production, the film language and, finally, the dissemination of the film.

Cinema, as an industrial art, has raised suspicion first and foremost because of its fundamental need of monetary capital, that ‘universal agent of separation’.⁵³⁵ Cinema is thus different from most arts on account of its historically high production costs. It did not take long, then, for cinema to become an industrial art developed by private companies with various relations to the financial markets and other industries. A key impetus driving Adorno's condemnation of capitalist cinema is its ‘dependence (...) on the banks’.⁵³⁶ More recently, Badiou has defined cinema as an ‘absolutely impure art’ because ‘its conditions of possibility are part of an impure material system’.⁵³⁷ For Badiou, who is oblivious to alternative practices of the image in his most recent writings, these conditions are irrevocably impure: a collective, technical and financial confusion and excess. For him, the open-ended work of the cinema is to isolate fragments of purity within this original material chaos. In a somewhat papal gesture, Badiou insists on this impurity to all the better declare that the cinema is ‘essentially innocent’.⁵³⁸ Thus neither Adorno nor Badiou distinguish between the cinema of private corporations and the cinema supported by public/national funding, a mode of production that has made cinema adventures vulnerable to state interference. The financial dependency of cinema on the private/public complex (the latter inevitably supporting the dominant representation of the world) has

⁵³⁵ Marx, Karl, ‘The Power of Money’, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p.130.

⁵³⁶ Adorno, T. W.; Horkheimer, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Verso, London, 1997, p.123.

⁵³⁷ Badiou, Alain, *Cinéma*, Nova Editions, Paris, 2010, p.154, p.362. My translation (‘art absolument impur’, ‘le système de ses conditions de possibilité est un système matériel impur’).

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.218. My translation (‘il est pour l'essentiel innocent’).

seen accusation after accusation levelled at the cinematic form in critical accounts of culture.

Counter-practices of the moving image have therefore often looked for alternative modes of production in order to gain autonomy and spare cinema this particular indignity. For Solanas and Getino, independence from the private/public complex is paramount for any form of militant image since, as they put it in their collaborative text 'Towards a Third Cinema', 'the mass communications [of this complex] are more effective for neo-colonialism than napalm'.⁵³⁹ For them to avoid the media napalm means that 'at least at the earliest stages, the revolutionary filmmaker and the work groups will be the sole producers of their films'.⁵⁴⁰ They propose financial alternatives to the private/public complex in the form of international cooperation, ticket sales, fundraising through the then active 16mm circuit and the garnering of support from revolutionary organisations. Their ideal would be to produce films that leave the expropriator expropriated, using funds obtained from 'the expropriation of the bourgeoisie – that is, the bourgeoisie would be financing guerrilla cinema with a bit of the surplus value it gets from the people'.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁹ Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Getino, 'Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of Cinema of Liberation in the Third World', in Stam, Robert and Toby Miller (eds.), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Malden MA, 2000, p.269. Ros Gray and Kodwo Eshun have emphasised that 'Towards a Third Cinema' was not, as it has been most often assumed, a manifesto but rather a collaborative essay, itself part of an on-going process of practice and theorisation, 'one of a series of texts that attempted to theorise a practice that was inherently speculative'. Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), 'Editors' Introduction', *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.3.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., p.280.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p.281.

La Commune (Paris, 1871) is less revolutionary in its financing. Watkins has experimented with alternative modes of production in projects such as *The Journey* (1987) for which he organised ‘a grassroots, voluntary, international system committed to the production of an openly political film’ but most of his work has been done within the more conventional framework of television co-production.⁵⁴² The public TV channel ARTE and the private company 13 Productions co-funded *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* in the context of a series of cultural events in France centred on the Paris Commune. ARTE is a Franco-German cultural channel that understands its mission is to produce television programmes ‘to promote mutual understanding and unity among the peoples of Europe’.⁵⁴³ It presents itself as an exception within the mainstream media landscape promoting alternative and creative productions. 13 Productions is a private company owned in the main by the Lagardère Group, a French multinational conglomerate involved in the media business but also in aeronautical research and weapons technology. It is only four years after the filming of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* that the film crew learnt by chance that a ‘cannons merchant’ owns 13 Productions.⁵⁴⁴ For Watkins, this means that the descendants of the *Versaillais*, they who massacred the *communards*, have financed *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*. This compromised co-production confirms for him, then, the symbiotic relation of interests between private and public corporations, what he sees as an ‘unhealthy and hidden relation’ that ‘corrupts the cultural field’.⁵⁴⁵ For these corporations, to finance a film with militant aspirations like *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is to invest in a token product, an exception, to validate their cultural pedigree or, in the case of ARTE, to

⁵⁴² MacDonald, Scott, ‘The Filmmaker as Global Circumnavigator, Peter Watkins’ *The Journey and Media Critique* in Grant, Barry and Jeannette Sloniowski (eds.), *Documenting the Documentary*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, MI, p.363.

⁵⁴³ ‘The ARTE Group’. Available at: www.arte.tv (accessed: 03/10/2012).

⁵⁴⁴ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.210. My translation (‘marchand de canons’).

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.* My translation (‘pervertisse le champ culturel’).

confirm an alleged commitment to democratic media. In order to denounce this perversion, a neo-colonialist re-appropriation of the militant image as Solanas and Getino would put it, Watkins has proposed to add a new sequence introducing the film for future screenings. This introduction would consist of an interview with the filmmaker containing a denouncement of the hidden relation between the public institution and the private company that have financed what the spectator is about to see.

With regard to the film language, Watkins finds no significant difference in the audiovisual forms developed by public and commercial television. For him, both partake in the same culture of accessibility secured by the use of the same language, which he calls the *monoform*. The monoform is the only language used to edit and structure audiovisual productions within the mass media. Films, TV news, soap operas, reality TV shows, documentaries, all use the same form to inform and/or entertain the audience. If the monoform has varied over time; Watkins describes the contemporary grammar of this language as follows:

It is the densely packed and rapidly edited barrage of images and sounds, the 'seamless' yet fragmented modular structure that we all know so well. (...) Nowadays it also includes dense layers of music, voice and sound effects, abrupt cutting for shock effect, emotion-arousing music saturating every scene, rhythmic dialogue patterns, and endlessly moving camera.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., pp.36-37. My translation ('C'est le mitraillage dense et rapide de sons et d'images, la structure, apparemment fluide mais structurellement fragmentée, qui nous est devenue familière. (...) De nos jours, la Monoforme se caractérise également par d'intenses plages de musique, de voix et d'effets sonores, des coupes brusques destinées à créer un effet choc, une mélodie mélodramatique saturant les scènes, des dialogues rythmés, et une caméra en mouvement perpétuel').

The origin of this audiovisual vocabulary is to be found in the work of early Hollywood cinema.⁵⁴⁷ According to Watkins, D.W. Griffith's innovations in filmic discourse provide the inaugural model.⁵⁴⁸ The vocabulary of TV productions is limited further by the standardised time slots created to satisfy the needs of advertisement. Hence, the majority of TV productions have to invariably last 47 to 52 minutes for long programs and 26 minutes for short ones. Public television has also adapted its production to these uniform temporal blocks. Watkins calls this dominant segmentation of time the *universal clock*.⁵⁴⁹ He understands that these formal and durational restrictions have impoverished televisual production on a planetary scale. The monoform generates anti-democratic impulses that explain in part 'the marked lack of will for collective commitment in Western societies'.⁵⁵⁰ He identifies the monoform and the universal clock as major blockages preventing any form of participation on the part of the spectator in audiovisual media production. The discussion of the monoform and of alternative languages is therefore mandatory for Watkins when embarking upon a militant film process.

Against the standardisation of televisual time, Watkins privileges filming modes that make improvisation possible. In the case of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, Watkins sought to counter the staccato rhythms of the contemporary monoform through the use of long, highly mobile, uninterrupted takes. He imposed at the beginning of the shooting a handheld camera that navigates the set, and never ceases to be on the move; this he calls

⁵⁴⁷ Watkins does not systematically unfold in his texts the historical genealogy of this vocabulary. Overall, his ideas resonate with the sophisticated analysis of the Institutional Mode of Representation developed by Burch. See Burch, Noël, *Life to Those Shadows*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1990.

⁵⁴⁸ For a reconsideration of this habitual critique of Griffith's cinema see Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space – Frame – Narrative*, BFI Publishing, London, 1990.

⁵⁴⁹ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.42.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.40-41.

the 'you-are-there style'.⁵⁵¹ Such mobility allows the actors 'to improvise, change their mind, react on the spot during the filmed discussions' and forces them 'to abandon poses and artifices to confront in real time their own questions about contemporary society'.⁵⁵² In her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane takes issue with this opposition between industrial time and improvisational time. Doane understands that this opposition has traversed cinema since its inception. The cinema emerged as an unprecedented technology seemingly able to record 'life itself, in all its contingency, movements, actuality'.⁵⁵³ At the turn of the nineteenth century, in a context of ferocious industrialisation, the emergence of cinematic form appeared to momentarily give rise to a series of promises: among them 'the promise of rematerialisation of time', and 'the free and undetermined moment' cinema captures, which 'holds out the promise of newness itself'.⁵⁵⁴ This newly found faith in the contingent and the ephemeral in the form of the moving image soon faded once cinema became a factory of dreams. But Doane argues that these promises were always already internal to capitalist temporality. She convincingly demonstrates that the privileging of the contingent does not resist industrial time; it is its very result. The fascination in Western visual cultures for the contingent and the ephemeral since the development of capitalism is interdependent with the standardisation of time, not opposed to it. For her, cinema participated in the re-structuring of time and

⁵⁵¹ Starr, Peter, 'The Filmic Commune', *Commemorating Trauma, The Paris Commune and its Cultural Aftermath*, Fordham University Press, New York NY, 2006, p.180.

⁵⁵² Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.193. My translation ('improviser, changer d'avis, réagir sur le vif aux discussions filmées', 'abandonner poses et artifices pour affronter en temps réel leur propres interrogations sur la société contemporaine').

⁵⁵³ Doane, Mary Ann, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p.22.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.208, p.10.

contingency in capitalist modernity: the apparent freedom of play in the contingent simply serves to make capitalist time more tolerable.⁵⁵⁵

And yet, Watkins' insistence on capturing fleeting moments of improvisation at odds with the industrial *monoform* and its characteristic temporality does not simply operate as a naïve strategy, one in line with the self-defeating logic of cinema as pure, unmediated inscription. What matters to him *avant tout*, beyond or in place of the opposition spontaneity/artifice, is to create a film situation open to collective participation, for actors and crew alike. The shooting of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* became a stage of permanent discussion where, as I will analyse further in the last section, the improvisational logic of the filming mode chosen by the artist was in fact challenged. For Watkins, to make a collective film with the public is 'to open to their participation the decisions affecting the main orientations of the film and the methods used to make it'.⁵⁵⁶ The collaborative research and discussion undertaken before, during and after the shooting process is a principal determinant of the form of film language employed. This form is not the preserve of the filmmaker alone. The formal structure and staging of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* developed out of this discussion process, re-casting the original vision of the film as a result.

This open-shooting mode coincides with Jorge Sanjinés' characterisation of guerrilla filmmaking as 'a process where the immutable script is disappearing or where the

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., p.107.

⁵⁵⁶ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.126. My translation ('partager les prises de décision sur les orientations principales du film et les méthodes employées pour le réaliser').

dialogue, during the act of filming, spontaneously issues from the people themselves and from their prodigious capacity'.⁵⁵⁷ The revolutionary filmmaker has to remain open to engaging with multiple forms of expression: 'pamphlet films, didactic films, report films, essay films, witness-bearing films'.⁵⁵⁸ For Solanas and Getino, this openness must encompass the technical side of the film production, so as to call into question 'the myth of irreplaceable technicians'.⁵⁵⁹ In fact in the case of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, participatory decision-making concerning the film's form was limited. Watkins did not agree to the request by the project's participants to extend the collaborative process so as to encompass the shooting and editing of the film. For Watkins, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is an attempt to marry two types of creativity: 'the solitary, egotistical version on the one hand and the open, pluralistic model on the other'.⁵⁶⁰ This auteur/collective dichotomy is by no means unusual to the notion of Third Cinema, since the latter has in actuality come to encompass practices 'far closer to an auteurist model of filmmaking than to the militant collectives such as Newsreel that Solanas and Getino had cited [in 'Towards a Third Cinema]'.⁵⁶¹ *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* makes visible in its form the tension between the collective and the artist that traverses the history of Third Cinema.

⁵⁵⁷ Sanjinés, Jorge, 'Problems of Form and Content in Revolutionary Cinema', in Martin, Michael (ed.), *New Latin America Cinema*, Wayne University Press, Detroit MI, 1997, p.63.

⁵⁵⁸ Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Getino, 'Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of Cinema of Liberation in the Third World', in Stam, Robert and Tody Miller (eds.), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Malden MA, 2000, p.276.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.279. The reorganisation of film work proposed by this militant literature, with its emphasis against specialisation, among other elements, resonates with the way Maoism attempted to reorganise work in the factories against bureaucratisation and to encourage worker participation (see chapter four of this thesis).

⁵⁶⁰ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.194. My translation ('la version solitaire et égoïste d'un côté et le modèle ouvert et pluraliste de l'autre').

⁵⁶¹ Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), 'Editors' Introduction', *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.4.

Finally, the other aspect of the film process I will analyse here is its dissemination. In their various texts, Solanas and Getino understand that the organisation of ‘political circuits of distribution’ is a priority for militant cinema.⁵⁶² They also emphasise that militant films are not simply to be distributed but ‘instrumentalised’.⁵⁶³ Every film is to be primarily ‘the detonator’ of a political event.⁵⁶⁴ Solanas understands their film *La Hora de los Hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) as ‘an anti-show because it denies itself a film and opens itself up to the public for debate, discussion and further developments’.⁵⁶⁵ For the militant version of Third Cinema that Solanas and Getino advocate, the participatory experience of people as actors in film is to be doubled and intensified by the participatory experience of the spectators as actors in life. The collective process opened up by the film production is to continue in its instrumentalised dissemination. Film screenings are artistic-political events understood as anti-spectacle mobilisations not simply because specific messages are conveyed, specific situations denounced. The screening is also an opportunity for militant filmmakers to re-think their practice in terms of spectatorship, a further ground upon which the question of the people comes forth. In every film event, Getino emphasises, ‘the militant group corrects, negates or confirms specific aspects of the policy that each film synthesises in its encounter with the people’; it also ‘enriches new projects’ and ‘clarifies the steps on the way to new film-making’.⁵⁶⁶

⁵⁶² Getino, Octavio, ‘The Cinema as Political Fact’, in Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.50.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁵⁶⁴ Godard, Jean-Luc and Fernando Solanas, ‘Godard on Solanas, Solanas on Godard’, Fusco, Coco (ed.), *Reviewing Histories: Selections from New Latin American Cinema*, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo NY, 1987, p.83.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁶ Getino, Octavio, ‘The Cinema as Political Fact’, in Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.48.

To energise this encounter with the people, this situation of intense communication, militant cine-culture experiments with various modes of projection that contradict the individualistic conventions of bourgeois screening and encourage a collectively active spectatorship. Films are paused to discuss specific aspects. Live music, poetry readings, political speeches and art exhibitions accompany the film. The screenings happen outside the cinema theatre, in factories or local cultural centres. The purpose of these action-packed, nomadic screenings is to disinhibit the spectators and transform them into protagonists of the film-event. Each event is to become ‘a place of liberation, an act in which man takes cognisance of his [*sic*] situation and of the need for a deeper praxis to change the situation’.⁵⁶⁷ The ‘man’ in question here refers both to the spectator and the filmmaker. These film-events organise ‘free spaces’ on account of which the life of the participants can be considered and reconfigured. In an avant-garde spirit, this cinema is animated by a passionate commitment to art as a means of revolutionising life. Its ultimate goal is ‘to pass from the screen to the theatre, that is, to life, to the present’.⁵⁶⁸

The creation of an association by those who participated in *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, called *Rebond pour La Commune*, is an instance of this sought after convergence of film practice and life. For Watkins, this association is ‘the most important outcome of any of the shooting processes I have been involved in’.⁵⁶⁹ *Rebond pour La Commune* has taken charge of the afterlife of the film, organising screenings and events related to the history

⁵⁶⁷ Godard, Jean-Luc and Fernando Solanas, ‘Godard on Solanas, Solanas on Godard’, Fusco, Coco (ed.), *Reviewing Histories: Selections from New Latin American Cinema*, Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, Buffalo NY, 1987, p.83.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid. Here I have limited myself to the screenings as conceived by Solanas and Getino, there are of course many other examples and experiments in the history of cinema, a history of alternative screenings still to be written. See Gray, Rosalind, *Ambitions of Cinema: Revolution, Event, Screen*, Ph.D. Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2008.

⁵⁶⁹ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.198.

of the Paris Commune and to the actors' experiences during the film's making. The main purpose of the association is not only to rescue the history of the Commune by ensuring the distribution of the film, but 'to spread the collective process it has set off'.⁵⁷⁰ It is an organisation seeking to 'continue in time the process of resistance and participation beyond the film'.⁵⁷¹ This exuberant second life achieved by the film stands in stark contrast with what must be considered something like an institutional death. The channel ARTE was dissatisfied with the film, apparently for aesthetic reasons, and gave it minimal promotion. They declared the film 'an artistic failure'.⁵⁷² On one occasion ARTE broadcast the piece at such a late hour that the various questions formulated in the second half of the film devoted to the political present – from the critique of the media to questions concerning immigration laws – would only have been seen, as Watkins says, by sleepwalkers. ARTE also refused to produce a video version and a booklet about the film process as had previously been agreed. And yet this institutional response did not have the final word: the association of participants circulated the film through alternative networks (squats, festivals, social movements, independent theatres), thereby giving it another life. Thus the short televisual life and the long associative life of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* make visible an opposition between two cinematic temporalities: the film as an end product of the television industry and the film as an open-ended process of militant dissemination and contestation.

My intention with this brief comparison is not to quantify to what extent *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is a more or less pure Third Cinema film, but rather to grasp the

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid. . My translation ('diffuser le collective processus qu'il a déclenché').

⁵⁷¹ Ibid. My translation ('prolonger le processus de résistance et de participation au-delà du film et dans la durée').

⁵⁷² Ibid., p.204. My translation ('un échec sur le plan artistique').

plurality of processes of which popular participation is comprised. The insistence of Solanas and Getino on a practice untouched by external industrial conditions, by any form of neo-colonialism in its production and distribution, contrasts with Watkins' tarnished television practice. The work of revolutionary cinema as explained by Solanas and Getino is to construct a cine-culture outside of and against neo-colonialism, where the camera becomes 'the inexhaustible expropriator of image-weapons' and the projector 'a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second'.⁵⁷³ Very differently, the film practice developed by Watkins navigates within the stormy waters of mainstream media, exposing its anti-democratic structure, identifying potential breaches within its system, and treating the moving image as an art of the people. More than a pure or impure example of Third Cinema, such production, its combination of collective and individualistic styles pitched against the monoform and an associative afterlife pitched against institutional death, makes visible a tension in the process of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* between popular aspirations and medium conditions. Beyond the dichotomy between a wholly authentic popular cinema and a wholly corrupted public-commercial one, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* finds itself in continuous tension with not only the public/private media complex that sustains it, but its own collective organisation. In this precarious process, one that renders obsolete the very notion of a happy ending, it is the passion, ferocity and dirt of a popular media struggle within the industry that gives the film its affective power.

The Third Cinema imagined and practiced by Solanas and Getino and the Third Television imagined and practiced by Watkins, although developing different strategies, are both

⁵⁷³ Solanas, Fernando and Octavio Getino, 'Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of Cinema of Liberation in the Third World', in Stam, Robert and Toby Miller (eds.), *Film Theory: An Anthology*, Blackwell, Malden MA, 2000, p.279.

combative acts seeking to resist the commercial and public appropriations of the name 'people'. In the texts and images of these practitioners, 'people' or 'public' are not idealised names with which to purify or redeem the tarnished arts of cinema and television. In these practices, and it is in this sense that they can be characterised as militant practices, the mobilisation of a participatory people implies the transformation of the factory of moving images into a constitutively open construction site. 'People' here does not refer to an identifiable body that the filmic process would visually document, but an inexhaustible name through which what the cinema is and could be is endlessly reinvented. The practices of Solanas, Getino and Watkins are in this way engaged with the multiplicative power of the name 'people'. For Watkins, a process such as the one developed in *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is not a model to follow but an experiment. To make a collective film does not purify the cinema but rather makes clear that the cinema is literally 'a manipulative experience, which you must continually re-evaluate'.⁵⁷⁴ A similar popular understanding traverses the texts of Solanas and Getino. As Ros Gray and Kodwo Eshun have noticed, their texts constantly make clear 'the tentative nature' of their cinema project.⁵⁷⁵ I understand this tentativeness as the particular form that their popular passion takes: to encounter the people requires a re-thinking of revolutionary cinema as an uninterrupted succession of attempts, hypotheses, experiments. As Getino puts it in his formidable text 'The Cinema as Political Fact', revolutionary cinema is an 'inconclusive cinema'.⁵⁷⁶ It is worth quoting his illuminating words:

⁵⁷⁴ McDonald, Scott, *A Critical Cinema 2, Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1992, p.412.

⁵⁷⁵ Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.5.

⁵⁷⁶ Getino, Octavio, 'The Cinema as Political Fact', in Eshun, Kodwo and Ros Gray (eds.), *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.47.

What is important is the consciousness of inconclusion and of an ongoing project in each one of our works, because they will be plunged into the liberation process that, far from being complete, is being constructed day by day: it is the action and search examined, interrogated, questioned, problematised by a people moving towards the construction of its revolutionary project. To propagandise or raise consciousness is not only to transmit facts and ideas, but also for these to be used by the masses in the construction and practice of what still has not been complete. For this, we require more than a cinema that leaves its target audience with ideas already understood, theses already resolved and elaborations already complete.⁵⁷⁷

Getino's words elucidate how the name 'people' works in the practices of Third Cinema and Third Television. 'People' is not a fixed referent, the welcome counterpoint of the perverse moving image, but the name with which cinema discovers again and again its capacities and fragilities.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 6: Re-Enacting People

Watkins' work provides a fertile terrain upon which to imagine what a *popular period film* can be and what questions such a genre is capable of stimulating when considering the capacities of cinema in general. His cinema makes it possible to imagine a historical film wherein a people would be neither the mere extra of the event in question, nor a community with a pre-determined destiny, but the name of a collective, to misquote Marx, forging its own story under the complex circumstances of cinema production and historical re-enactment.⁵⁷⁸ Watkins understands his work in opposition to 'the effects of soap historical dramas', and thus an attempt to 'share with the public another way of exploring and presenting history'.⁵⁷⁹ His films have explored alternative ways for the moving image to represent historical episodes combining in different ways elements habitually restricted to either fictional or documentary modes. The play of fiction against documentary, and vice versa, sees his filmic work begin to question the truth apparatuses

⁵⁷⁸ I am referring to Marx's renowned line: 'men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past'. Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, New York International Publishers, New York, 1963 [1852], p.15.

⁵⁷⁹ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.13. My translation ('les effets des reconstitutions historiques feuilletonesques', 'partager avec le public une autre manière d'explorer et de présenter l'histoire').

of documentary cinema, with a view to undoing the great hero narrative of historical dramas by filming 'history from below'.⁵⁸⁰

Watkins' history films have tended to focus on those grand episodes that the work of history usually privileges: battles. *Forgotten Faces* (1960), Watkins' first amateur film, reconstructed the Hungarian revolt of 1956 in the outskirts of Canterbury. His first professional film for the BBC, *Culloden* (1964), reconstructed the homonymous battle of 1746 between the Jacobites and the troops of the British government. But it is the social history of these events that interests Watkins, the stories of the anonymous participants, of common soldiers and rebels. In his films, battles are not shown from the perspective of the victor's glory; rather, they are occasions to consider, as E.P. Thompson would put it, 'the blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves'.⁵⁸¹ With the Paris Commune, Watkins takes his commitment to social history further, whereby the production process itself transforms the film crew into a re-enactment society. And as with any re-enactment society, the film's cast and crew re-stage the events of the Paris of 1871 'in replica costume and using replica weapons'.⁵⁸² Very different from the hierarchically organised re-enactment involved in most period films, *La Commune (Paris 1871)* opens up, as we have started to see, a process of popular re-enactment in order to make the past something once more present.

⁵⁸⁰ Thompson, E. P., 'History from Below', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, pp.279-280.

⁵⁸¹ Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin Books, London, 1991, p.12.

⁵⁸² Definition of reenactment society quoted by Rebecca Schneider in *Performing Remains, Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment*, Routledge, New York NY, 2011, p.29.

Collective re-enactment is a practice haunted by different ‘people’. The recent literature on collective re-enactment has emphasised its development throughout the twentieth century, the diversity of its forms (‘living history’, battle re-enactment, history pageants, and so on) and the complexity of its significations. This recent academic and artistic interest in collective re-enactment has rehearsed various versions of the name ‘people’, often in contrasting directions. In his brief genealogy of collective re-enactment, a survey that extends from Renaissance parades to contemporary art performances, Sven Lütticken locates the seed of contemporary forms of re-enactment in the governing ideology of nineteenth century historicism, for which:

each historical period and its culture was conceived as having its own unique organic essence, which was the character of a particular stage in the development of Spirit, Humanity or of a *Volk*. By integrating the unique essence that is a historical period and the march of progress or ethnic-spiritual continuity of a race, the past could gain relevance for the present.⁵⁸³

According to Lütticken this reactionary agenda is the background against which to understand the growth of re-enactment practices. Historicist re-enactment uses past styles to consolidate the status quo by ‘clothing the ceaseless advance of modernisation in forms that suggest continuity and a logical evolution’.⁵⁸⁴ Collective re-enactments are rituals that help to ensure the continuation of the same. He underlines that when ‘progressive educators’ have appropriated collective forms of re-enactment to make participants experience art and history; they have primarily acted as specialists dictating the rules of

⁵⁸³ Lütticken, Sven, ‘An Arena in Which to Reenact’ in *Life, Once More – Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2005, p.29.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid. p.43.

this participation. Thus Lütticken's popular re-enactment is conceived on the basis of an understanding of the popular as a field in which the ruling class objectifies the people and social educators indoctrinate them into a form of pre-fabricated, pseudo-democratic participation.⁵⁸⁵

In her book *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider offers a very different take on popular re-enactment. She understands collective re-enactment as 'the popular and practice-based wing of what has been called the twentieth century academic *memory industry*'.⁵⁸⁶ Her analysis proceeds on the basis of a critical valorisation of popular re-enactment, rejecting its characterisation as a mere pastime or heritage activity. She experiences American Civil War re-enactments as nether-spaces and nether-times, 'between theatre, history museum, religious ritual, sport, hobby, craft fair, archaeological dig, educational field trip, anthropological fieldwork, religion and yes... art installation'.⁵⁸⁷ In this multidimensional temporal complex, encompassing real salt pork, fake amputations and nostalgic masculinity, one feels queasy, Schneider tells her reader. She interprets this queasiness as an affect worth investigating Civil War re-enactments are popular activities through which a performance scholar can encounter certain questions concerning her field of expertise (the 'live', the 'faux', the document,

⁵⁸⁵ It is worth noting that Lütticken also mentions 'proposals for re-enactments that react against conservative and reactionary tendencies in re-enactment'. He lists a series of cases as examples of 'alternative re-enactment', from the *Pageant of the Paterson Strike* (1913) organised in what he terms as the heyday of trade unionism by the Industrial Workers of the World to Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) that re-played the 1984 confrontation in the fields and streets of Orgreave between the striking Yorkshire miners and the police. Lütticken however does not explain in what way these events are anti-conformist, as if their themes (riots, strikes, revolutions) were enough to make them immune to the reactionary characteristics he finds at the root of re-enactment.

⁵⁸⁶ Schneider, Rebecca, *Performing Remains, Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment*, Routledge, New York NY, 2011, pp.25, 8.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

participation). Schneider is less interested in matters of organisation or making a distinction between different forms of popular politics in the process of re-enactment than she is in exploring her position as a witness of these wars played out once more. Schneider's *popular* re-enactment corresponds to an understanding of the popular as a field of inspiration from where one can endlessly re-draw the line between the high and the low, between elitist and popular art, so as to challenge the order of the known.

The practice of collective re-enactment at work in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* is an opportunity to consider the nature of the popular tensions at work in such a practice in general, tensions that Lütticken's and Schneider's analyses resolve too easily or bypass altogether. The film's re-staging of the past is not a process of identification with the victims of a history otherwise written from above; nor does it simply travel back through time with a view to experiencing the complexities of time, ignoring the chronological distinction between then and now. In order to explore these tensions and better discern the cinematic chronopolitics of *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, I will briefly explore the temporal significance of the Paris Commune within socialist history. I will then consider in detail how the film endeavours to initiate a process of collective identification with a past revolutionary people, not in the mode of popular indoctrination or stultification, but so as to lay the ground for what could be called a *film people*.

1. Chronopolitics

Speaking of American War re-enactments, Sven Lütticken concludes that these events turn '[the American] revolution into a stabilising factor for the present'.⁵⁸⁸ Very differently, Rebecca Schneider, in her visits to battle re-enactments in Virginia, discovers another inhabitation of time and space irreducible to the basic tenets of performance theory. For Schneider, these re-enactors stage the Civil War not simply as past but as 'past and on the move, co-present, not left behind'.⁵⁸⁹ She admires them for feeling they 'can trip the transitivity of time'.⁵⁹⁰ She interprets the queer time of battle re-enactment as a break with what she considers to be the prevalent modes of capitalist temporality: presentism, immediacy and linear time.⁵⁹¹ Re-enactment is not a matter of re-living the past to confirm the present but on the contrary, according to Schneider, implies 'that the bygone is not entirely gone by and the dead not completely disappeared nor lost, but also, and perhaps more complexly, the living are not entirely (or not only) live'.⁵⁹² Lütticken's popular victims, condemned to repetition, and Schneider's popular zombies sketch two general and divergent chronopolitics with which to interpret what historical re-enactment does with time in time: the past is either stabilised as something past so as to confirm the sense of the present or the past is taken to be unfinished thereby making the present into which it encroaches less fully present. I argue here that in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* there is a singular chronopolitics at work, an uneasy combination of audiovisual forms that

⁵⁸⁸ Lütticken, Sven, 'An Arena in Which to Reenact' in *Life, Once More – Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2005, p.47.

⁵⁸⁹ Schneider, Rebecca, *Performing Remains, Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment*, Routledge, New York NY, 2011, p.15.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid, p.10 and Lütticken, Sven, 'An Arena in Which to Reenact' in *Life, Once More – Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2005, p.47.

⁵⁹¹ This identification of capitalist time with progressive linearity has been complicated by various authors, particularly those interested in post-Fordism. See for instance Berardi, Franco, *Precarious Rhapsody*, Minor Compositions, London, 2009.

⁵⁹² Schneider, Rebecca, *Performing Remains, Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p.106.

implicitly contest the dominant configurations of the present in order to affirm the presence, now *and* then, now *through* then, of a collective struggle.

The Paris Commune and its afterlife have deeply affected the history of socialism and moreover its conceptualisations of revolutionary time. As Kristin Ross has put it, ‘when Marx takes the Commune seriously he must confront the multiplicity of roads replacing the unique Highway of History’.⁵⁹³ Subsequent socialist interpretations of the Paris Commune have also oscillated between two temporalities: these revolutionary events are past times (*pastimes*) in need of commemoration, or breaks in chronological time that disrupt the order of the present. The distinction between a Soviet and a post-Soviet interpretation expresses this temporal schism. The post-Soviet interpretation of the Paris Commune started well before 1989. It was the Situationists who in the 1960s re-opened the question of the Paris Commune for study and debate, re-enacting it against the conventions of the doctrinal Left and its scientific theories about the right time for the right revolution.⁵⁹⁴ For scientific socialism, the Commune was an ‘unplanned, unguided, formless revolution’ that could only be explained as ‘an evolutionary accident’.⁵⁹⁵ The Commune was an immature event, an immaturity that explains its rapid failure. The communards were out of joint, ‘moving at once too fast in their unplanned seizure of power and too slowly’.⁵⁹⁶ The revolutionary government of Paris lasted only from March the 18th until May the 27th. It ended with the massacre and deportation of thousands of communards. To go back to the 1871 events means to return to a communist defeat before

⁵⁹³ Ross, Kristin, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Verso, London, 2008, p.25.

⁵⁹⁴ See Ross, Kristin and Henri Lefebvre, ‘Guy Debord and the Internationale Situationniste’, *October*, Vol. 79, Winter 1997, pp. 69-83.

⁵⁹⁵ Ross, Kristin, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Verso, London, 2008, p.25.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

‘the Marxism of the epoch of victorious revolutions’.⁵⁹⁷ This *before*, as Daniel Bensaïd has explained, meant for the Situationists that the present must be questioned by operating ‘a radical critique of Stalinism and, more generally, of the bureaucratic phenomenon’.⁵⁹⁸ Since the *14 Thèses Situationnistes sur la Commune*, a myriad of thinkers and activists have repeatedly recuperated the Paris Commune from the diminutive position accorded it by the Soviet model of successful revolution, in order to articulate a politics of emancipation markedly different from Left party traditions.⁵⁹⁹ Since May 68, and again since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Paris Commune has emerged as a key historical event for analyses and practices seeking to re-define, re-activate, re-invent the sense(s) of the political at a re-newed distance from the triumphant-march-of-progress models through which it was previously understood.

Alain Badiou's essay ‘The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics’ represents one of these post-situationist recuperations, one that illustrates the temporal disagreements at stake in the socialist memory of the Commune.⁶⁰⁰ It is in addition a text that makes its own contribution to what we will continue to call the chronopolitics of re-enactment.

⁵⁹⁷ This is the definition Stalin gave of Leninism, quoted by Alain Badiou in ‘The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics’, in *Polemics*, Verso, London, 2006, p.265

⁵⁹⁸ Bensaïd, Daniel, ‘Politiques de Marx’, in Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels, *Inventer l’Inconnu, Textes et Correspondance Autour de la Commune*, La Fabrique Editions, Paris, 2008, p.83. My translation (‘contribuer à une critique radicale du stalinisme et, plus largement, du phénomène bureaucratique’).

⁵⁹⁹ Gerald Raunig has recently recuperated the Paris Commune and develops, with and against the work of Antonio Negri, one of the ‘typical’ post-68 modes of interpretation of the Paris Commune in his book *Art and Revolution*. About the Russian model, Raunig writes: ‘The course of the Russian Revolution and its later interpretations have marked the ideas of successful revolution more than all the other rebellions, uprisings and revolts and more than the conventional theories of revolution as well, yet they have also paralysed these ideas at the same time’. Raunig, Gerald, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, Semiotext(e), New York NY, 2007, p.27.

⁶⁰⁰ See Badiou, Alain, ‘The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics’, in *Polemics*, Verso, London, 2006.

Badiou's essay analyses the ways in which the Left, defined as 'the set of parliamentary political personnel that proclaim that they are the only ones equipped to bear the general consequences of a singular political movement', has kept alive the memory of the Commune.⁶⁰¹ He equates this memorialisation with a political death. For Badiou this memory has never been anything other than betrayed, with Karl Marx's proclamation about the Paris Commune at the end of *The Civil War in France* acting as an early problematic cenotaph:

Working men's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them.⁶⁰²

These few lines inaugurate the trouble at the heart of Badiou's critique of the Left and its memorialisation of the Commune. Marx recognises the Commune as the 'harbinger of a new society' and he calls for the 'pious conservation' of these events. The Left, Badiou argues, will have neglected the former at the expense of the latter. As Marx preached or instructed, the Left has sacramentally celebrated the Commune throughout the twentieth century, although Badiou notices that 'the Left, whose baseness is constitutive, has now fallen so low that it no longer even makes the pretence of remembering the Commune'.⁶⁰³ Whether farcical commemoration or outright erasure, the result thus amounts to the same:

⁶⁰¹ Ibid. p.272.

⁶⁰² Marx, Karl, 'The Civil War in France', *Later Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p.207.

⁶⁰³ Badiou, Alain, 'The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics', in *Polemics*, Verso, London, 2006, p.273.

Leftist celebrations have merely maintained a ‘formal fidelity to the Paris Commune’.⁶⁰⁴ These commemorations have only served to empty the Commune of any political relevance for the present. Against this memorial *pastime*, Badiou calls for the re-activation of the Paris Commune as a political event. Commemoration and re-activation therefore appear in his essay as two opposing practices concerning *today* in its relation to the past.

For Badiou, to re-activate the Paris Commune means to live in its *truth*. Of what does this truth consist? Of nothing more than a refutation of the following premise: that ‘the unique place of politics is the party’.⁶⁰⁵ This truth of the Commune determines the sense that Badiou gives to both the farcical commemoration and the political reactivation of the event in question. The classical interpretations of 1871 have tended to identify the Commune with a failure of state power. Badiou reads the subsequent development of both workers' parties and the state-party form as institutionalised attempts ‘to resolve problems the Commune left unresolved’.⁶⁰⁶ These political parties present themselves as mature and scientific solutions to the Commune's *unplanned, unguided, formless revolution*. In these cases to commemorate the defeated Commune serves as a justification of the parliamentary game of the workers' party (social-democracy) or as a consolidation of the power of the state-party apparatus (Stalinism). The commemoration of the Commune undertaken by Left parties, whereby the former is treated as ‘a heroic but defective exercise of power’, effectively renders it ‘politically obsolete’, thus ‘proscrib[ing] its re-activation’.⁶⁰⁷

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., p.257.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., p.265.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., p.264.

⁶⁰⁷ Badiou, Alain, ‘The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics’, in *Polemics*, Verso, London, 2006, p.265.

Against this proscription amounting to something like a death, Badiou suggests that the Commune has the potential to enact an alternative to party politics, one that discloses the unique sphere of the political itself. He insistently reiterates the uniqueness of the Commune: '*the Commune is what, for the first and to this day only time, broke with the parliamentary destiny of popular and workers' political movements*'.⁶⁰⁸ For Badiou, the Paris Commune would be the only event in the history of the workers' movement worth re-activating because it is the only event that has ever broken with the orthodoxy of the Left.⁶⁰⁹ According to this analysis, to commemorate is an act that consigns an event to obsolescence by submitting it to the power-oriented logic of party politics. To re-activate, on the contrary, is a process that unfolds in contravention of this logic, a process affirming that the 'dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be a simple statist formula, and that pursuing the march toward communism necessitates recourse to a revolutionary mobilisation of the masses'.⁶¹⁰ To re-activate this unique time is paradoxically to re-affirm the absence of precedent it created, the present it opened. For Badiou, the Commune is not simply a spectre that haunts each successive present, but an event that would mark the irruption of a new living time, a time through which a militant people untouched by party politics would finally live.

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid, p.272.

⁶⁰⁹ May 68 and the Shanghai Commune of 1967 are, for Badiou, only quasi-events, episodes he reads as partial re-activations of the Commune. See Badiou, Alain, 'The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?', *Positions: Asia Critique*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, Winter 2005, pp. 481-514.

⁶¹⁰ Badiou, Alain, 'The Paris Commune: A Political Declaration on Politics', in *Polemics*, Verso, London, 2006, p.269.

The re-enactment at work in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* could also be said to intersect with the ground opened up by the Situationists, a ground upon which 1871 is considered as a means to question the form(s) of the present. *La Commune (Paris 1871)* offers another critical version of such re-activation, by means that are theatrical and cinematic in turn. But what if the temporality of this re-activation did not simply work to defamiliarise the present, or usher in the pure new dawn of a post-party politics as described by Badiou? What if, on the contrary, it developed a tarnished amalgamation of various temporal structures, consolidating the relation between the communards' struggle and the media struggle of the re-enactors? To re-enact here is not simply to make the past co-present with the present, it is to mobilise the past with a view to activating a collective struggle. To activate the Commune is not to invoke a unique temporality that lies waiting to be inhabited, but, as the film process shows, it is to undertake a collective enterprise against the order of the absolute present. The singular temporality of this cinematic re-enactment resides in the fact that the present the film (re)presents is, at least, double: *La Commune (Paris 1871)* is at the same time a Brechtian re-enactment of the past and an observational documentary about its own collective undertaking in the present.

The Brechtian inspiration is legible in the film's juxtaposition of patently anachronistic components with a meticulous recreation of period detail. The set simultaneously presents a realistic *and* theatrical staging of the 11th district of Paris, 'with careful and loving detail applied for example to the texture of the walls, but with the edges of the set always visible, and with the exteriors (...) clearly seen for what they are, artificial elements within an interior space'.⁶¹¹ The actors wear period dresses, use period weapons yet speak the

⁶¹¹ Watkins, Peter, 'La Commune (Paris, 1871)', *Peter Watkins, Filmmaker, Media Critic*. Available: <http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm> (accessed: 20/06/2013).

language of today, watch television or speak to a microphone. The film follows chronologically the main events of the Commune, but it is interrupted by the introduction of texts pertaining to contemporary socio-political issues (for instance, the circumstances of the *sans-papiers*).⁶¹² Against the charges of period exactitude and stultifying realism, this practice of conscientious anachronism seeks to place the Commune in relation to the present by making yesterday and today comparable, so that it becomes possible for the film's spectators to identify the coincidences and differences between these respective historical situations. Against the charges of representational deception, the film persistently brings attention to the re-enactment's status *as* a re-enactment. At the same time, long sequences observe the real-time discussions between actors concerning the collective process of making the film. These sequences affirm the presence of a popular discussion, intertwining the Commune past and the present actuality in the singular now of the cinema. The affirmation of this collective presence through an observational mode makes the film something more than an exercise of simple comparison between the two times in question. Its images manifest an equivalence of past and present in view of a common struggle; a struggle revealing a continuum of resistance that undoes the partition past/present, dead/alive.

The two presents manifested here delineate two forms of relation between cinema and time. There is a self-reflexive mode that withdraws from both past and present their respective determinations. This mode corresponds to a cinema that is conscious of itself as

⁶¹² 'Sans papiers', literally 'without papers', designates immigrants working in France without rights. 'Sans papiers' is a name countering the dominant designation of these workers as 'illegal immigrants'. Badiou has been involved through the group *Organisation Politique* in activism with the sans papiers, under the banner 'everyone who is here is from here'. See Hallward, Peter, 'Badiou's Politics: Equality and Justice', *Culture Machine*, Vol. 4, 2002.

a representational medium, one that cannot help but bring forth the illusion of a presence otherwise foregone, a cinema that thinks of itself as an art of ghosts. But *La Commune (Paris 1871)* also presents itself as a record of present time, a documentary form that captures whatever is happening there and then in front of the camera. This observational technique makes the extended discussions committed to film an ‘experience of presence’ for the spectators.⁶¹³ And yet the paradox of this experience is that the presence it registers is comprised of heterogeneous orders of time: therein the past and the present do not cease to appear in an interwoven form; the observational technique in play here does not pertain to the present alone, as is customarily the case for this art of real time. The unique chronopolitics of the film therefore consists in juxtaposing these two distinct temporalities in a single moment, so that neither one appears without the other as a supplement, whilst at no point diluting their antagonism. Only as such do the yesterday and today with which the film is concerned form a constellation, and only as such is the present suddenly transformed into a *political* question: ‘what is the present here?’ ‘what is our present?’, and so on.

The tendencies characterising the form and process of *La Commune (Paris 1871)* – observation on the one hand, illusion on the other – have a ghostly antecedent in the first cinematic re-enactment of the 1871 events, the film *La Commune* (1914). This film was made by the collective *Le Cinéma du Peuple*, which developed ‘the very first militant use of the new-born medium of film’.⁶¹⁴ *Le Cinéma du Peuple* was created in 1913 by a group of French communists and anarchists after overcoming their doubts towards a medium

⁶¹³ Doane, Mary Ann, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p.23.

⁶¹⁴ Jarry, Eric, ‘The Cinéma du Peuple Cooperative Venture’, in Porton, Richard (ed.), *Arena: On Anarchist Film and Video*, ChristieBooks, Hastings, 2009, p.3.

that had been used by the police to identify rioters during recent strikes. *Le Cinéma du Peuple* made films to counter ‘the poison cleverly distilled in the minds of the People’, ‘the propaganda that stultifies the worker and peasant class’.⁶¹⁵ The key antidote they developed was to present the people with stories of the people; their films drew upon ‘the life of the workers, from the sometimes tragic days of strike’, in order to ‘make *relive* a number of scenes of the [Paris] Commune’.⁶¹⁶ According to their manifesto, the films were to be made ‘by ourselves and for ourselves’, through a ‘cooperative organisation, that is, impersonal (...) to defend our ideas of social justice through the image’.⁶¹⁷ In *La Commune*, the actors, members of the collective, re-enact with a pre-Brechtian ethos the opening episodes of the Paris Commune. The tone of the film is both celebratory and critical of the communards.

An extraordinary last scene troubles further the temporality of re-enacting such recent event whilst some of its participants are still alive. After re-enactors with visibly fake beards proclaim the birth of the Commune in a set representing the Parisian Hotel de Ville, the film all of a sudden switches to a documentary mode, recording a group portrait of communards who have gathered to pose in front of the camera. We see them speak, smile to each other, wave a *Vive La Commune* flag. They directly meet the camera's gaze. It is the first and almost the only existing moving image of communards. To my

⁶¹⁵ Marinone, Isabelle, ‘Educational Cinema’, in Porton, Richard (ed.), *Arena: On Anarchist Film and Video*, ChristieBooks, Hastings, 2009, p.24.

⁶¹⁶ *Le Cinéma du Peuple* produced, apart from *La Commune*, six films between 1913 and 1914. *Les Misères de l’Aiguille* and *Victime des Exploiteurs* are tragic dramas denouncing the exploitation of women workers and emphasising workers' solidarity and the efficacy of workers' political organisation. *Le Vieux Docker* is another poignant drama re-enacting the life of Jules Durand, an anarchist who was the victim of a ‘legal mistake’. *Une Visite a l’Orphelinat National des Chemins de Fer à Avesnes* and *L’Hiver, Plaisir des Riches, Souffrances des Pauvres* were visual pamphlets about the hard living conditions of the proletariat. Ibid., pp.23-26.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., p.24.

knowledge the only other surviving moving image of the latter is to be found in the film *Le Mur des Fédérés* (*The Communards' Wall*, 1935). This film, made by the cinematographic department of the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO), documents a demonstration commemorating the Paris Commune in 1935. After a summary explanation of the events of the Commune, illustrated by photographs and drawings, the film focuses on the 1935 procession as it heads towards the Père Lachaise cemetery, where surviving communards, visible through various medium shots, are honoured. The demonstration appears as the workers' response to the defeat of the Commune. The film above all emphasises the size of the crowds on parade, a mass of hundreds of thousands of people. The voice-over proclaims: 'Workers of France. Look and awaken to your magnificent and invincible force, which is like a river current flowing to the sea'.⁶¹⁸



Figure 10. Still from *La Commune* (Armand Guerra, 1914)

⁶¹⁸ Buchsbaum, Jonathan, *Cinema Engagé, Film in the Popular Front*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana IL, 1988, pp.56-59.

The images of the mass procession in *Le Mur des Fédérés* are offered as proof to the workers of their numerical power.⁶¹⁹ The commemoration of the Commune is an occasion to verify the mass power of the Popular Front, to contrast a past and honourable defeat with the certainty of coming victory. The sequence of the communards in the 1914 film by *Le Cinéma du Peuple* has effects somewhat different from those aimed at by this commemorative propaganda. It is a sequence that breaks with the fictional re-enactment of the real event to affirm the continued presence, in the strange and powerful present of documentary cinema, of the vanquished communards. The irruption in the film narrative of this cinematic portrait manifests a formidable phantasmagorical presence, a presence with extraordinary powers of persistence, a 'prophylactic against death'.⁶²⁰ This moving portrait is a militant prophylactic against the invisibility of the first workers' power. It demonstrates cinema's capacity to disturb the today of the spectator through the manifestation of a troubling presence, a phantasmagorical and disruptive 'to be continued'. Armand Guerra, the director of *La Commune*, evokes these powers in his description of the first screening of *La Commune* in March the 18th 1914. The presence of communards in the premiere did not simply confirm the reality of this now past episode, or its sentimental or propagandistic recuperation. It filled the cinema theatre with an air of struggle:

The spacious room was full. More than two thousand people came to the party (...). Among the spectators, there was a group of old Commune fighters who are and will continue to be, despite their old age, tenacious revolutionaries until they die, because they keep in themselves the imperishable breath of the barricade combats. How moving are these old communards sitting on the first rows, closely together, with their white heads and the hardened features of old

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., p.58.

⁶²⁰ Doane, Mary Ann, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2002, p.22.

age visible on their faces. Their names circulate from mouth to mouth among the multi-coloured crowd of spectators. When the first wave of applause resonates in the room, these revolutionary heroes express their gratitude with eyes filled with tears; these are tears of consolation when they see that today the Parisian people still remembers those who fought for freedom, those who have seen countless brothers of struggle fall next to them, killed by the soldiers' lead... Will this very people that admires them be able to imitate them?⁶²¹

2. *Energy!*

Watkins' *Culloden*, filmed in the same year that the United States openly entered the Vietnam War, re-enacts the homonymous battle of 1746 as an inglorious and miserable military operation where class divisions between common soldiers, officers and privileged aristocrats prevail. The voice-over in the film emphasises the hierarchy that persists even in these exceptional circumstances with comments such as 'it would take an enlisted man many years to earn the price of the wig worn by the captain'. *Culloden* challenges the written and romanticised history of 'the last battle fought on British soil': it demolishes without ceremony the reputation of its protagonists (that of Charles Stuart, for instance,

⁶²¹ Quoted by Jarry, Eric, 'L'Aventure de la Coopérative du Cinéma du Peuple', *Le Monde Libertaire*, No. 1251, September/October 2001. My translation ('La spacieuse salle était comble. Plus de 2000 personnes assistèrent à la fête [...] Parmi l'assistance, il y avait une véritable légion de vieux combattants de la Commune qui sont et continueront à être des révolutionnaires tenaces jusqu'à la mort, malgré leur grand âge, car ils gardent en eux l'impérissable souffle des combats des barricades. Comme ils sont émouvants les vieux communards qui occupent les sièges des premiers rangs de la salle, tous groupés, avec leurs têtes blanches, les traits durcis par les implacables rides de la vieillesse. Leurs noms circulent de bouche en bouche parmi la foule bigarrée de spectateurs et quand la première salve d'applaudissements résonne dans la salle, ces héros de la révolution nous expriment leur reconnaissance les yeux remplis de larmes, larmes de consolation en voyant qu'aujourd'hui encore, le peuple parisien se rappelle ceux qui ont combattu pour la liberté et ont vu tomber à leurs côtés d'innombrables frères de lutte, fauchés par le plomb de la soldatesque... Ce même peuple qui les admire serait-il capable de les imiter?').

Bonnie Prince Charlie) and seeks to reveal the limitations of conventional historical presentation (what Watkins would refer to as the ‘BBC documentary style’). It is a cinema of historical demystification, a ‘New History film’ seeking ‘to contest history, to interrogate either the metanarratives that structure historical knowledge, or smaller historical truths, received notions and conventional images’.⁶²²

Four decades later, with *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, the main reasons to re-enact a past event have ostensibly changed in Watkins' cinema. If *Culloden* portrays the people as victims of the Great History of Kings and Battles, in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* Watkins seeks to identify with the communards as those who are committed to taking their history into their own hands (and the definition of this *their* is going to trouble the identification). If in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* there is an exploration, questioning and interpellation of the past, these are not acts of historical demystification, but identification with a collective struggle. As Watkins puts it, his main objective with *La Commune (Paris 1871)* was not a social and critical reading of historical fact but above all a *show of collective commitment*:

What happened in Paris in the spring of 1871 represented (and still represents) the idea of commitment to a struggle for a better world, and of the need for *some form of collective social Utopia* – which WE need as desperately as dying people need plasma. The notion of a film showing this commitment was thus born.⁶²³

This emphasis on the collective, on *we*, associates Watkins' Commune with the eruption of

⁶²² Robert A. Rosenstone quoted by James Chapman in *Past and Present, National Identity and the British Historical Film*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2005, p.223.

⁶²³ Watkins, Peter, ‘La Commune (Paris, 1871)’. Available at: <http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm> (accessed: 27/09/2012).

the participatory in the post-1989 cultural landscape.⁶²⁴ Different from the standard discourse that accompanied art projects seeking to create moments of togetherness around the turn of the millennium, and which included a significant revival in the event of re-enactment, Watkins' tone is eminently confrontational.⁶²⁵

Watkins presents *La Commune (Paris 1871)* as a militant initiative against the dominant forms of representation consolidated after the fall of the Berlin wall. The triumphant march of capitalism, the consolidation of corporate power and the liquidation of popular movements, explains the urgency behind Watkins' words, their apocalyptic tone describing our situation as a matter of life or death. His words intimate the necessity of the shift in his cinema from demystification to identification with specific historical actors. For a filmmaker trained in the sixties in a strictly Brechtian inspired method against identification, this change in procedure and intention is of significance. But such a re-orientation of premises and effects in his film practice is not a conscientious violation of Brechtian modes of critical representation, as in the late films of Huillet and Straub, for example. Rather than abandoning a Brechtian method of demystification, a Brechtianism in any case very different from Huillet and Straub's in its mass media focus, it is re-articulated by Watkins so as to transform the film process into a microcosm within which militant identification and collective formation can be subject to experiment. *La Commune (Paris 1871)* develops a critical approach to the past not only to expose how history has been written from above, how official histories have ridiculed, de-politicised or simply

⁶²⁴ Claire Bishop explains the explosion of participatory arts in the nineties as an artistic response to the fall of the communist block post 1989. See Bishop, Claire (ed.), *Participation*, Whitechapel and The MIT Press, London, 2006, p.12.

⁶²⁵ For an overview of re-enactment as artistic practice see Pil and Galia Kollektive, 'Retro/Necro: From Beyond the Grave of the Politics of Re-enactment', in Farr, Ian (ed.), *Memory*, Whitechapel and The MIT Press, London, 2012, pp.55-63.

forgotten the Commune. Its challenge is to make possible a militant identification with the people of Paris 1871, through an experimental re-writing of history via collective participation.

This *people of Paris 1871* is not a simple historical referent with which to identify. As various post-Situationist historians have pointed out, to ascertain the identity of the communards is no simple task. The events of the Commune troubled conventional protocols of identification; its participants, the communards, have remained irreducible to the customary determination of historical agency, to what constitutes a revolutionary people in Marxist theory. The Commune is the name of an event in relation to which the habitual markers of peoplehood – nationality, social class, beliefs – cloud over. As Kristin Ross has remarked, the communards were far from being the industrialised proletariat depicted by Marx as the heroic avant-garde of revolution.⁶²⁶ In Ross' argument, to a large extent inspired by Rancière, the Commune appears to put into practice 'people' as the name of a dis-identification, the name of a certain *whoever*. 'Communards' designates an anonymous agency struggling to be other than what it is supposed to be. It is not the proper name of a given group being consigned to a given destiny, but, as Rancière would put it, a fundamentally anonymous name.

Following on from this perspective, to identify with the communards is not to put in place a mechanism of continuity by which a present people claims to be the heir of a people past, the offspring of a revolutionary race. It is a process of identification with a people

⁶²⁶ Ross, Kristin, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Verso, London, 2008, p.22.

‘whose time/space is rigidly defined and allotted by a dominant class’ and ‘who have become aware of their position in a structure of oppression’.⁶²⁷ In this structure of militant identification, the more or less anonymous communards do not figure as the bearers of a unique essence (the essence of their time), a people defining a particular stage in the development of a scientifically quantifiable, revolutionary *Volk*. To identify with the communards is to identify with a people engaged in a process of dis-identification from dominant structures of identification. As Ross puts it, it is ‘an identification with a group-subject whose joint activity is (...) combat’.⁶²⁸ This consideration of the Communards at work in post-Situationist readings of the Commune challenges the identitarian protocols with which a present people identifies with a past people, troubling the opposition between past and present and breaking with the notion of ‘people’ as a constituted social entity remaining stable over time. This dis-identifying identification consistently agitates the re-enactment process of *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, making it an exercise in counter re-enactment. The collective involved in the making of the film puts into practice a *cinema of the people*, for which identification becomes a militant process that does not confirm a lineage but confronts and affiliates a past and present that would otherwise remain determined by the governing media framework.⁶²⁹

Collective re-enactment has most often been mobilised as a theatrical art of identification. It has been conventionally understood as such because it offers forms of immersion making personal and collective experiences of otherwise abstract history possible. In re-enactment the participants or witnesses stand to re-work their existing knowledge of the

⁶²⁷ Ibid., p.59.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ With ‘cinema of the people’, I am here echoing the notion of ‘theatre of the people’. See Rancière, Jacques, ‘Le Théâtre du Peuple: une Histoire Interminable’ in Rancière, Jacques, *Les Scènes du Peuple*, Horlieu Editions, Lyon, 2003, pp.167-201.

past with direct involvement of history, up to and including something of a physical experience of the latter. This all-immersive quality of re-enactment has often been defined and defended through negative reference to the cinematic form. As Sven Lütticken has remarked, collective re-enactment was essentially developed against the cinema.⁶³⁰ According to him, a proliferation of re-enactment societies at the beginning of the twentieth century was a response to the proliferation of film screens and their supposedly negative effects on spectatorship. The dark, immersive, supposedly passive experience offered up by the cinema was understood as an artifice against which re-enactment levelled a living, in-person, all-participatory performance. Against the flatness of the screen, the constitutive separation between image and spectator, collective re-enactment transforms representation into a process of direct involvement, rendering passive observers into active witnesses, participants in a real three-dimensional experience. Once treated as cinema's other, collective re-enactment can forget its own specific representational circumstances, how it too is subject to illusion and simulation, and begin to understand itself as a form of what Rancière has described as 'a mediation striving for its own abolition'.⁶³¹ It is a form of participatory theatre that can always present itself as first and foremost a living practice by which a people is made present to itself, the past brought forth into presence in the very body of the actors, here and now. It is in accordance with this opposition between immersion and distance, between the 'live' and the representational (the latter thus finding itself associated with death) that the name 'people' has most often been treated in the theory and practice of re-enactment.

⁶³⁰ Lütticken, Sven, 'An Arena in Which to Reenact' in *Life, Once More – Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2005, p.33.

⁶³¹ Rancière, Jacques, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London, 2009, p.8.

According to this logic, Watkins' cinematic interest in the immersive potential of re-enactment could be interpreted as a form of atonement for cinema's representational sins, for the manipulative power of the cinematic form. *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* would thus be a tortuous exercise in expiation, explaining in turn the critical rejection of the film by the purists of cinema and theatre. The apparently anti-cinematic tone of many of Watkins' comments about his work could easily support this interpretation. Yet in lieu of all this, my argument holds that the passions, difficulties and imprecisions of this film/theatrical process can be looked at from an entirely different ground. *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is an experiment wherein the different logics of theatrical immersion and the mediating distance of the moving image confront one another but also supplement one another. Its singularity rests with its intensification of the opposition between theatrical re-enactment and mechanical reproduction, the 'live' of theatre and the 'death' of cinema (television), developing a counter-practice of re-enactment and re-drawing the lines between identification and mediation involved in the re-structuring of memory. For this militant practice of re-enactment, identification with a past revolutionary people is a matter of popular energy.⁶³² It is a practice seeking to mobilise the energy of the participants. And it is this re-vitalisation of the participants' bodies and minds that acts to counter the accusations levelled against this form: of promoting assent, of inducing docile and dull

⁶³² Militant re-enactment can address past events, as in *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, or recent events with the real actors re-enacting their own actions. This is the case with *The Battle of Orgreave* (an event conceived by Jeremy Deller and filmed by Mike Figgis) about the struggle between English miners and the police in the early 80s. It is also the case of *El Coraje del Pueblo [The Courage of the People, 1971]*, a film directed by Jorge Sanjines, which re-enacted the brutal suppression of a 1967 strike of miners in Bolivia. The film was scripted in collaboration with the miners, and 'actual survivors were called upon to re-enact, to re-stage, their survival'. See Mowitt, John, 'Jorge Sanjinés' *El Coraje del Pueblo*' in *Re-takes, Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2005, pp.133-174.

identification, and so on.⁶³³ The process of *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* develops a singular mobilisation of energies exacerbated by the cinematic framework in which the re-enactment takes place.

The mobilisation of popular energy has often acted to substantiate the revolutionary use of such a suspect form as the theatrical. The 1920 re-enactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace in Petrograd, which is a significant precedent for *La Commune (Paris 1871)* both because of its similitudes and differences, is a spectacular, or rather counter-spectacular, re-enactment organised to promote collective identification with the revolutionary enthusiasm of 1917. The re-enactment of this key event within the October Revolution, only three years after the fact, took place in a context of a life and death struggle for the Bolshevik-led movement: the counter-revolutionary White army was besieging Petrograd, and the population was suffering severe food shortages.⁶³⁴ Slavoj Žižek reports the testimony of a contemporary of the re-storming of the Winter Palace: ‘The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting’.⁶³⁵ This characterisation of the participants in the re-enactment as ‘all of Russia’ is hardly an exaggeration: the eight thousand people who took part as actors (including soldiers and sailors who participated in the 1917 event) and the one hundred thousand people who, more than spectators, acted as witnesses representing the revolutionary masses, made the re-storming the ‘biggest mass spectacle of all time’.

⁶³³ As Samuel Weber puts it ‘this is also a trait of the Platonic critique of theatricality: theater is dangerous because it induces assent’. Weber, Samuel, *Theatricality as Medium*, Fordham University Press, New York NY, 2004, p.11.

⁶³⁴ Recall that Watkins, too, will situate the events recounted in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* within a context of emergency.

⁶³⁵ Quoted by Slavoj Žižek, ‘A Plea for Leninist Intolerance’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, Issue 2, Winter 2002, p.560.



Figure 11. Anonymous photograph of the *Re-enactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace* (1920)

For the revolutionary Anatoly Lunacharsky, to organise a re-enactment in the extreme circumstances of the Civil War was justified because ‘to acquire a sense of self the masses must outwardly manifest themselves, and this is possible only when, in Robespierre’s words, they become a spectacle unto themselves’.⁶³⁶ The organisers of the re-storming thus understood that re-enactment would provide an opportunity to fuse the masses together in the form of a common aesthetic experience. Performing and witnessing the event once over was a way of provoking the participants into identification with the spirit of Revolution, a spirit increasingly under threat. And without activating the people’s vital energy, the audience would remain standing before a mere spectacle of mass consumption. Against the mass entertainment of capitalism, these theatrico-politics work with ‘people’ as the name of an inexhaustible depository of energy, one with which the participants are to re-connect through this collective identification. In both the re-storming and *La Commune (Paris 1871)* the theatrical process is based on an understanding of theatre as

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

action, the engendering and propagation of a shared enthusiasm that cuts across the classical division between performer and spectator. However, the mobilisation of this popular energy in each case proceeds on the basis of a very different logic: one of integration for the re-storming, and one of conflict for *La Commune (Paris 1871)*.

For an exuberant Žižek the blockbuster Soviet event stands in testimony to the emancipatory capacities of the arts during the early days of the revolution:

such performances, particularly in comparison with Stalin's celebratory Mayday parades, are evidence that the October Revolution was not a simple coup d'état carried out by a *small* group of Bolsheviks, but an event that unleashed a tremendous emancipatory potential.⁶³⁷

Žižek does not clarify what the difference between the Stalinist parade and the re-storming consists in precisely, although a numerical argument is implicit in his argument (the *many* of the performance, the *small* number of Bolsheviks). An explanation would have been of interest, particularly inasmuch as the re-storming, like the Stalinist parades, was hierarchically organised, with the dramatist Nicolay Yevreinov acting as a director and various army officers, as well as avant-garde artists, from Malevich to Meyerhold, as coordinators. Yevreinov conceived the re-enactment as a 'theatricalisation of life', a giving over of life to ritualism and play, as a means of mobilising and then channelling popular energies.⁶³⁸ This mass re-enactment was to inspire a further re-enactment still of

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ See Kleberg, Lars, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics*, MacMillan, London, 1993, p.55.

the same events, a cinematic version this time, in Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928).⁶³⁹ Eisenstein's team drew together eleven thousand people to stage and film the taking of the Palace, again including participants in the real event as well as its first re-enactment, distributing real guns and using large amounts of Petrograd's electrical power.⁶⁴⁰ After the stampede of workers in *Strike* (1925) and the collective pathos of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the sequence of the storming of the palace in *October* shows a victorious swarm of people. In each of these films, Eisenstein makes a people present by focusing on specific faces, gestures, postures, as well as firming the collective anonymous power of the many. Between portraits of 'types' and panoramic views of multitudes, Eisenstein's cinema makes the people perceptible as an energy with which to identify.⁶⁴¹

In these re-stormings, popular energies erupt from the fusion of participants, spectators and revolutionary ideas, whereas in *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, the mobilisation of energy happens through a different treatment of the collective. Collective energy is generated through a constant friction between the participants and the filming process. The numbers present in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* are of course more modest than those drawn upon in the Soviet mass spectacles, although the casting seems to follow a representational logic exercised with a view to including all: over two hundred people participated in the film, amongst which were unemployed people, sans-papiers from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, French nationals from different regions. Most of them were contacted through various leftist associations and during screenings of Watkins' films. Watkins also placed

⁶³⁹ Taylor, Richard, *October*, BFI Publishing, London, 2002, pp.9-10.

⁶⁴⁰ See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2012, p.153.

⁶⁴¹ A study of the relation between multitudes and cinema would have to include, in addition to the swarming people of Eisenstein, the people-vortex of Artavadz Peleshian (*Menk*, 1969), the people-procession of Jean-Luc Godard (*On s'Est Tous Défilés*, 1988) and the people-demonstration of activist documentaries (*Le Mur des Fédérés*, 1935).

an advertisement in the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* inviting people to participate in the film; participants with anti-socialist ideologies joined the crew in this way. The performing process was very different from the one at work in the re-storming. The immersion of the participants in their characters was unscripted. The re-enactment process was not intended to bring together the diversity of the cast and their stories into a united social body, one people with one ideology, but rather to intensify collective energies through discussion and antagonism. For Watkins, the re-enactment is an opportunity to gather together in disagreement energies that have been scattered since the triumph of neo-liberalism. The re-enactment process aims not to establish the representation of a cohesive, idealised people but to form a collective animated and indeed intensified by its internal antagonisms, its state of being-in-conflict.

The re-enactment undertaken by *La Commune (Paris 1871)* opens up an immersive field of play wherein different identifications, approximations and distances between actor and character, past and present, the living and the dead become possible. The acting process involves individual and collective identifications and distances. Altogether different from the method developed by Huillet and Straub analysed in the first chapter, the acting process in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* is focused on historical research and media critique. In addition to this the actors developed their characters by drawing upon their own experience and motivations, and what they say in the course of the action is largely based on their personal beliefs and feelings. A fundamental aspect of this immersive research was its collective dimension. Groups of actors and historians were organised to discuss the backgrounds of the historical or fictional characters they were tasked with portraying. Groups such as the ‘Union des Femmes’, the ‘Soldiers of the National Guard’, the ‘Anti-Commune Bourgeois’ were formed. In these groups, the actors discussed the relation

between the events of the Commune and society today, so that research into the past was then placed in the service of a critique of the present. The acting process therefore fomented identification through creative involvement whilst at the same time emphasising the investigative dimension of this approach to the historical past. In *La Commune (Paris 1871)* the combination of identification and research never appears in a straightforward manner. The re-enactment process is held in a state of permanent disequilibrium on account of the differing theatrical modes of activation and performance drawn upon.

Besides the theatrical performances, and different from the case of the re-storming, there is in *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* a ‘permanent involvement of the actors’ in each consecutive stage of the film: the pre-production, the filming itself and, as we have seen, its distribution.⁶⁴² Opening up the film process to democratic participation generated a collective energy beyond the direction of the artist (Watkins). The dialogue developed by the actors during their research continued throughout the thirteen days of shooting. The participants questioned the decisions taken by Watkins when filming the re-enactment, its procedures and effects. In fact this collective critical energy that continued to grow beyond the immediate context of the performance was something of a source of anxiety for Watkins:

the more conscious *I* was of the liberating forces *I* was unleashing, the more conscious *I* was of the hierarchical practices – and personal control – *I* was maintaining. (...) *I* also deliberately wanted to retain certain hierarchical practices (including being a director with over-all control) in order to see whether a mix of these, and more liberating processes could result in something

⁶⁴² Watkins, Peter, ‘La Commune, Problèmes et Satisfactions’, *Media Crisis, Homnisphères*, Paris, 2007, p.191. My translation (‘implication permanente des acteurs’).

satisfying both forms of creativity – a lone and ego-bound form, and an open and pluralistic form.⁶⁴³

In these lines Watkins voices the angst of the militant auteur enmeshed in a collective process. As Didi-Huberman has noticed writing about the desires and dangers of Pasolini's popular passion, to expose the people necessarily means to expose oneself *to* the people.⁶⁴⁴ Otherwise, instead of an encounter, one risks a fascistic objectification of the political subject in question. A collective process such as the one upon which *La Commune (Paris 1871)* is grounded necessarily implies the displacement of the auteur. Watkins has to engage with the collective's development of its own autonomy; he has to position himself in relation to the various ways in which the collective makes itself known, in cinema as in life. Between the *I* of the militant artist and the *we* he is part of, between the collective performance and its filming, *La Commune (Paris 1871)* appears as a formidably tense re-enactment process. The participants, including the filmmaker, form a *film people*, together and in confrontation at one and the same time, a people whose struggle to identify with the communards is energised and troubled by a militant research and a critical inhabitation of the same film space. In this common, disputed space, the identification process with a past people appears as a theatrical and cinematic practice in which the very conditions of calling upon the name 'people' are put to the test.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., p.194. My underlining. My translation ('plus je prenais conscience de la dynamique libératrice que je provoquais, plus je me rendais compte des pratiques hiérarchiques et de l'autorité personnelle que je contribuais à renforcer. (...) J'avais décidé de préserver certaines hiérarchiques (y compris le fait d'être un réalisateur qui contrôlait l'ensemble) pour vérifier leur éventuelle capacité à se mélanger à un processus plus libérateur et marier de ce fait deux types de créativité: la version solitaire et égoïste d'un côté et le modèle ouvert et pluraliste de l'autre').

⁶⁴⁴ See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Peuples Exposés, Peuples Figurants*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2012, p.198.

Coda: the voice *off* the people

La Commune (Paris 1871) is a project that makes visible the passions, pure and impure, which animate its struggle for a popular re-enactment and for a popular television. And attached to this struggle is a singular field of sonority, one across which murmurs and screams, speeches and noises continue to ring out. The film process experiments with popular modes of speaking and listening within the televisual codes of (re)presentation and historical re-enactment. At stake in this battle is, for Watkins, the possibility of making audible ‘a collective voice’.⁶⁴⁵ The participatory process seeks to make the participants speak out and speak out together. In this following final section, in order to listen to this tumultuous process and move away from a reductive understanding of the collective utterance as simply the sum of opinions voiced, I use as an auditory aid the work of Félix Guattari and his notion of ‘collective assemblage of enunciation’. For Guattari, this notion is ‘not simply an alternate designation for a *people*, but for the linguistic, practical, and institutional formations that agitate them’.⁶⁴⁶ My argument will suggest that what constitutes the singularity of *La Commune (Paris 1871)* here concerns the way in which it makes ‘the voice of the people’ audible not as an indifferent vehicle

⁶⁴⁵ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.196. My translation (‘présenter une voix collective’). No doubt this is an aspiration found throughout counter-cinema: see Eshun, Kodwo; Gray, Ros (eds.), ‘Editor's Introduction’, *The Militant Image, A Ciné-Geography, Third Text*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, 20011, p.4.

⁶⁴⁶ Mowitt, John, *Re-takes, Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2005, p.32. Félix Guattari elaborates the notion of collective assemblage of enunciation in texts such as ‘Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist’ or ‘Desire is Power, Power is Desire’ both in Lotringer, Sylvère (ed.), *Chaosophy, Texts and Interviews 1972-1977*, Semiotext(e), New York NY, 2009.

for the transmission of predetermined meaning, nor as the sign of democratic validation, but rather as an instrument of struggle. Suspending the common registers in which the voice of the people is most often heard, from a register of sheer cooptation and privatisation to a register of sentimental philanthropy where condescension rhymes with good intentions, the voice sounds out here as the name of a collective struggle inventing for itself a new situation for communication.

The militant image's passion for, its desire to speak with the voice of the people corresponds to an intervention directed at the foundation of the political. With the militant image, cinema affirms itself as a field of experimentation making perceptible, and therefore re-organisable, the audiovisual dimension of this foundation. With the militant image, cinema operates as a heterogeneous platform upon which to fabricate and rehearse other vocal and visual arrangements. As various thinkers have recently argued, the inaugural moment of the political, constantly re-activated, occurs in the form of the division between voice and speech. Agamben and Rancière, among others, understand Aristotle's distinction between 'mere voice' (*phone*) and 'the power of speech' (*logos*) as instituting *the problem of the political*.⁶⁴⁷ The militant image can be understood as a process that calls upon the name 'people' as a vocal subjectivation with which to address the 'immemorial and perennial wrong through which the social order is symbolised by dooming the majority of the speaking beings to the night of silence or to the animal noise of voices expressing pleasure or pain'.⁶⁴⁸ 'People' in the militant image names those excluded from and who are mobilised or mobilise themselves to struggle against the

⁶⁴⁷ See Dolar, Mladen, *A Voice and Nothing More*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2006, pp.105-107.

⁶⁴⁸ Rancière, Jacques, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis MN, 1999, p.22.

established medium of political deliberation and action. Following Agamben, one must understand this exclusion not as a pure externality, but rather as an ‘inclusive exclusion’.⁶⁴⁹ The voices of the excluded both sustain and haunt the social order and its audiovisual determinations. Animalisation, infantilisation and pathologisation are some of the modes through which the social order maintains these troubling voices outside the frame of identifiable action.⁶⁵⁰ The militant image works with the voice of the people to amplify the resonance of its haunting powers; not simply to make voices speak, but to re-organise or re-inhabit the audiovisual field.



Figure 12. Still from *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (Peter Watkins, 2000)

The process of *La Commune (Paris 1871)* reveals, so as to struggle against, the inclusive exclusions and exclusive inclusions of the voice of the people in the television industry.

From the opening scene, the film appears as an operation staging media (re)presentations

⁶⁴⁹ Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999, p.7.

⁶⁵⁰ For an analysis of the uncanny dimension of the ‘voice off’ in cinema see Doane, Mary Ann, ‘The Voice in the Cinema: the Articulation of Body and Space’ in Weis, Elisabeth; Belton, John (eds.), *Film Sound*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, pp.162-176.

of the voice of the people. Two actors in period dress look at the camera, introduce themselves and announce for the viewer the roles they are going to play: two reporters from the Commune media broadcasting system. Gérard Watkins, who plays the reporter Gérard Boulet, states that what we are going to watch is 'both a film on the Paris Commune and a film on the role of the mass media in society, both yesterday's and today's'. The actress Aurélia Petit speaks of her character, reporter Blanche Capellier, as embracing her profession to the point of failing to criticise 'the power of the media (...) which she represents completely'. The film form and content is therefore structured by the opposition of two stations reporting on the events in question, the *Télévision Nationale* [National Television] of the government from Versailles and the *Télévision Communale* [Commune Television] of the communards. The opposition between the two televisions makes visible two modes of excluding/including the voice of the people. This opposition is not absolute but visible in the form of a Janus-face. The film makes these two modes concomitant in their anti-popular-voice violence. Both televisual modes exclude the voice of the people in different ways.

The National TV works as an apparatus of repression, expunging altogether the voices of the communards from the media space. This television reports on the events from a distance, from a studio set, calling upon the opinion of experts to ridicule, demonise and condemn the actions of the Commune and of a people transformed into a violent populace. The National TV works as an anachronistic vehicle with which to present the reactionary media responses to the events of 1871 that brutally silenced (through death and exile) the voices of the communards. The Commune appears in these news reports as an animalistic

orgy, as a criminal enterprise, as a form of social epilepsy.⁶⁵¹ The communard is a drunk, pervert, degenerate worker; the communaire ‘an obscene, sadistic, hysterical and cruel hydra’.⁶⁵² Within the film, the TV setting through which this discourse of total exclusion, or rather annihilation is meted out, does not appear anachronistically strange, but sounds all too familiar. The authoritative framework of the National TV combines pompous nineteenth century discourse, dress and manners with contemporary televisual forms. Although there is a touch of caricature, this combination is revealingly effective, both media times are easily confused. The introductory theme tune, the set design, the news format find seamless agreement with the Victorian-style conversational codes of the presenters. This agreement makes explicit how mainstream newscasts work as apparatuses against the popular voice, opting ‘to present us with life in its Sunday best, official, ritualised, men of state shaking hands’.⁶⁵³

In opposition to all this, the reporters from the Commune are, literally, with the people, located in the set that replicates the streets of Paris. The Television of the Commune presents the re-enactment of events in the *vox populi* reporting style. This reportage technique has appropriated precepts from *cinéma vérité* and guerrilla TV so as to validate itself through popular participation. Jean Rouch understood the filmmaker as a ‘diver who plunges into real-life situations’.⁶⁵⁴ Against the authoritative objectivity at work in mainstream newscasts, the guerrilla TV of the seventies practiced a form of reportage

⁶⁵¹ For an excellent analysis of the brutal media reaction against the Commune see Lidsky, Paul, *Les Ecrivains Contre la Commune*, Editions La Decouverte, Paris, 2010

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 112 (‘une véritable hydre obscène, sadique, hystérique et cruelle’).

⁶⁵³ Morin, Edgar, ‘Chronicle of a Film’ in Feld, Steven (ed.), *Ciné-Ethnography, Jean Rouch*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2003, p.229.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.230. It is worth mentioning that to engage with the people in their film *Chronicle of a Summer*, Rouch and Morin developed a ‘strategy of commensality’ consisting of dinner-discussions. The inhibitions of the speakers to be filmed were to be resolved with ‘excellent meals washed down with good wines’.

‘from within the crowd, subjective and involved’.⁶⁵⁵ Yet the *vox pop* approach has normalised these attempts at decentralisation with a highly codified style, rendering it a recurrent mode of reporting in contemporary broadcasting. The *vox pop* consists of ad hoc interviews involving members of the general public, *the man on the street*, generally in public spaces. Those interviewed appear to give spontaneous responses themselves elicited by a chance encounter with the camera. The aim of this reporting style is to integrate the audience into the narrative construction of the news, as if, by garnering a variety of opinions on the given subject, the public voice had been taken into account. The use of a variety of interviewees aims to ensure a representative plurality: a variety of ages, sexes, classes and communities tending to be preferred. The spontaneity and diversity of the speakers is what validates this mode of reporting, giving it a more democratic appearance than those modes reliant on the authority of experts. Television employs this medium style whenever the voice of the people matters, whenever the fetish at the heart of the modern concept of democracy – *vox populi, vox dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of god) – must be obeyed.⁶⁵⁶

Watkins uses the *vox pop* style as the main mode of representation in *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, developing his own version of listening in on the crowd in the midst of re-enactment. The camera moves around the crowd with a wide-angle lens, in each sequence framing a minimum of three re-enactors. To listen to a collective voice here means, first of all, to make visible the collective body from which this voice emanates, by ensuring the frame is never given over to an individual speaker alone. As Rancière has noticed, the

⁶⁵⁵ Boyle, Deirdre, ‘Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited’, *Art Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Fall 1985, p.228.

⁶⁵⁶ Boas, George, *Vox Populi, Essays on the History of an Idea*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 1969.

image most often signifies 'people' through 'a frame that encloses a lot of people'.⁶⁵⁷ The framing of many is employed to convey qualities often attributed to this name: togetherness, solidarity, anonymity. The Commune reporters move restlessly from one group of re-enactors to another, fishing out opinions from the tumultuous ocean of noise, the voices of bourgeois, soldiers, workers. This approach seeks to convey a social dynamic, because contrary to close-ups representing the individuality of heroic speakers, we see and listen to a variety of emotions and ideas. Individual speeches are constantly disturbed by other voices, other noises, in and out of frame. For Watkins, this is the form most appropriate to present an active people, audible in its multiplicity and traversed by strengths, conflicts and contradictions.

However, the anachronistic use of televisual modes through which to frame the events of the Commune at the same time brings the frame itself into view, thereby allowing these modes to be interrogated. Watkins' idiomatic use of the vox pop style in *La Commune (Paris 1871)* works to reveal its customary ideological application, on the basis of which popular participation is usually confined within a reductive frame of pseudo-democratic representation based around pre-determined identities. If Watkins uses the vox pop style violently (repetitively, droningly, exhaustively), this is to make tangible the representational violence implicit in the mode itself. The tireless approach of the reporters when it comes to making sense of the event in question, the restless movement through the filmic space, gathering more and more voices, appears anxious, alienating, and ultimately ineffective. The constant demand placed upon the participants to express themselves, to give voice to their problems, to clarify their position in relation to what is happening,

⁶⁵⁷ Rancière, Jacques, *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2003 [1990], p.113.

becomes more and more constraining. A microphone is held before the participants who are thus compelled to articulate their thoughts in a brief amount of time before the camera moves away in search of another point of view. To watch the film is to witness again and again a form of forceful participation where the rapidity with which the re-enactors have to articulate their thoughts under the threat of the microphone's withdrawal, makes it extremely difficult for them to communicate something other than despair, banalities or slogans without conviction (the voice of the people as mere voice). For all its plurality, diversity and its willingness to speak, the voice of this people speaks monotonously.

La Commune (Paris 1871) exposes the violence of these media conditions as reproducing the hierarchical separation at work in the television of experts between the event as it is analysed and the event as it is undergone, lived, suffered. The division of labour between the specialists of saying on the one hand and the specialists of doing on the other, in fact continues in the television of the Commune. The vox pop style appears as a pseudo-democratic patina, ultimately incapable of deconstructing the hegemonic voices of the television newsreel. If the voice of the expert remains ostensibly silent in the vox pop style this does not diminish its authority, it even consolidates it. For Reece Auguiste, member of the Black Audio Film Collective, these silent voices implicitly say to those they invite to speak: 'you may now speak but don't forget our narrator holds in his left hand a sword and in the right hand the winning card (...) we shall articulate your emotions, we shall define your sense of belonging or displacement'.⁶⁵⁸ If the National TV is an apparatus deaf to the living voice altogether, the Commune TV is an apparatus where the living voice is merely that, alive and nothing more. The vox pop approach appears in the film, in all its brutality,

⁶⁵⁸ Auguiste, Reece, 'Handsworth Songs: Some Background Notes' in Eshun, Kodwo; Sagar, Anjalika (eds.), *The Ghosts of Songs the Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collective*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, p.156.

as a device for converting a disparate complex of people into a homogenous sound object, to be listened to by a voyeuristic ear that is only accustomed to the well-known melodies of lived experience.

In their film *Tout Va Bien* (1972), Godard and Gorin take issue with the voyeuristic ear lent by the empathetic reporter, in search of the always elusive voice of the people. In a significant scene, a reporter played by Jane Fonda interviews a worker during the occupation of the sausage factory in which the film is predominately set. Yet instead of hearing the interview, we pass inside the inner monologue of another worker who is standing and listening to the dialogue being conducted between the worker and the journalist. This third, unidentified voice considers the content of the interview, its focus on the working conditions and family relations of a woman worker. The acousmatic voice-over begins to criticise the speech of her comrade: 'she should not have explained it in that way'; 'she spoke with a soft tone'; 'all those miseries, it was not her'; 'I was sick of it so I decided to sing'; 'it's like on TV, the journalist asking stupid questions and no one daring to interrupt'; 'so boring'; 'it is too soft, it does not stir the will to fight'. Having replaced the interview's content with an ad hoc critique of its protocols, the scene emphasises how letting people speak for themselves in predetermined media conditions does not necessarily guarantee that their voice will be heard. Gayatri Spivak has shown that, however well intentioned, in the face of the verdict 'the subaltern cannot speak', to respond by fighting for the inclusion of the voiceless in public discourse often amounts to a 'quick-fix frenzy of doing good with an implicit assumption of cultural supremacy

which is legitimised by unexamined romanticisation'.⁶⁵⁹ The aforementioned scene from *Tout Va Bien* calls into question the benevolence informing the reporter's actions and her romanticisation of the woman worker. No doubt the voice of a worker has been heard here, but, it is not the one the reporter has listened to; as Hito Steyerl points out, the testifying voice remains in this scene consigned to the realm of mute thought.⁶⁶⁰

In *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, the aggressive use of the *vox populi* mode that characterises much of the filming process at a certain point gives way to another mode of presenting the voice of the participants. During the filming, the re-enactors criticised Watkins' employment of this reporting style, the mobility of the camera and the insistence on capturing improvisational moments. Furthermore the trace of this conflict is visible in the film: we see re-enactors speaking to the camera about the media conditions in which they are made to speak or asking the Commune reporters to drop the microphone and participate with them in the battle (one of the reporters does indeed abandon her journalistic role). To counter the constrictions of the vox pop style that immediately forces the speaker into a reactive position before the camera and the reporter's questions, the participants convinced Watkins to commit to film a series of altogether more patient, probing sequences, and through further negotiation secured their inclusion in the final edit of the film. The voice is subsequently allowed to develop across other audiovisual conditions. The inclusion of unbroken observational sequences in the final cut lengthened the film's duration from the intended two hours to six hours, transforming it into a *film-*

⁶⁵⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'Subaltern Talk, an Interview with the Editors', in Landry, Donna; MacLean, Gerald (eds.), *The Spivak Reader*, Routledge, New York NY, 1996, p.293.

⁶⁶⁰ Steyerl, Hito, 'Can Witnesses Speak? On the Philosophy of the Interview', *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, May 2008. Available at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0408/steyerl/en> (accessed: 15/03/2013).

fleuve.⁶⁶¹ Through this juxtaposition of a vox pop style with an observational mode, *La Commune (Paris 1871)* becomes a film that is cast across two entirely distinct formal languages, the one initially imposed by the director and the one then negotiated for by the participants. The film is, as John Mowitt would have it, bilingual.⁶⁶² And this bilingualism is an experience of confrontation, not the pacific co-existence between two languages. The film stream becomes for the collective a turbulent operational field across which the very conditions of the voice with which they speak are disputed and defended.

Considered in the light of Watkins' original plans, this repudiation of the vox pop language appears to have been unintentional. However, a critical and collective analysis of the protocols informing media representation was a key part of the research process in which all the participants were involved before filming. Bearing this in mind, as well as Watkins' interest in exposing the filming process to the vicissitudes of collaboration and confrontation, it is not unlikely that the aggressive employment of the vox pop style was intended to provoke further discussion devoted to film syntaxes and their impact on the modes of seeing, speaking and listening. As we have seen, in these long observational sequences the re-enactors appear gathered together, discussing at length a variety of issues relating to both the events of the Commune and those of the present. In these sequences, the voices of the participants are rendered audible and visible in the form of a popular assembly. The observational language contrasts radically with the vox populi style: the camera does nothing to provoke the situation, it has not forced the one speaking into speech, it does not elect a spokesperson, there is no direct intervention of a reporter, a

⁶⁶¹ 'Film-fleuve' is a French expression literally meaning 'film-river' used to describe extraordinarily long films.

⁶⁶² Mowitt, John, *Re-takes, Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2005, pp.139-174.

figure speaking on the camera's behalf. The camera withdraws from the heart of the scene to record at a distance the proceedings of the informal assembly. The re-enactors unfold their dialogue in various directions without disruption, sharing experiences, agreeing or disagreeing in turn. But the observational method employed here does not simply recapitulate a tried and tested filmic language; rather, on account of the film's overarching bilingualism, it appears as yet a further means through which to examine the framework by which a voice can both speak and be heard.

Without a clear beginning or end, without a single direction, without an explanation of who is speaking – character or actor? – the observational discussions confounded the expectations of the television producers, who declared the film an artistic failure in need of ‘a more compact structure’.⁶⁶³ These voices betray the impatient ear of the television industry. For the television producers, Watkins has failed as an auteur by allowing the film to become a noisy stream of indeterminate chatter. The observational discussions with neither head nor tail are a manifestation of ‘the shame of language’.⁶⁶⁴ The bad (*kakos*) voice (*phone*) of this people amounts to a form of speech that does not speak, ‘a speech that destroys the silence while preventing speaking’.⁶⁶⁵ It is then the filmmaker's task to shape and punctuate this chatter with a cinematic grammar, under the pretext of benevolence, conferring upon these words the sense they are in themselves lacking. As Maurice Blanchot has pointed out, to accuse speakers of *bavarder* (talking too much, for too long) effectively annuls those speakers as speakers, whilst at the same time disclosing the authoritarian ground of the one who accuses. This auditory/authority structure defines

⁶⁶³ Watkins, Peter, *Media Crisis*, Homnisphères, Paris, 2007, p.204. My translation (‘nécessitant une structure plus compacte’).

⁶⁶⁴ Blanchot, Maurice, ‘La Parole Vaine’, *L'Amitié*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, p.145. My translation (‘la honte du langage’).

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.* My translation (‘la parlerie détruit le silence tout en empêchant la parole’).

the protocols by which the voice of the people is either negated (as mere noise) or exalted (as silenced voice) in the system of media communication. For this system, Watkins has failed to perform the most basic function of the author-auditor, to discern amongst the noise of the world the voices worth listening to. By refusing to employ a single, standard film language, he has failed to make these noises audible as the identifiable language of the people. Under-editing the participants' extensive discussions, Watkins relinquishes his positional power to decide which voice should count, and which should remain merely a murmur, without symbolic inscription. What the resultant cacophony above all represents, in this account, is a *missed chance* on the part of the artist, the chance to present, in a pre-determined language and easily recognisable form, the voice of the people.

For the communication industry, Guattari would say for capitalism in general, there are a determinate number of appropriate audiovisual languages through which the voice of the people may be heard.⁶⁶⁶ To assign a proper language to the voice of the people is to effectively disarm it. It is to avoid confronting 'the irreducible multiplicity of the people's speech', 'the plurality of tongues that constitute the language of the people'.⁶⁶⁷ The communication industry always has at the ready a mechanism with which to invalidate any attempt to stage an encounter with this popular irreducibility: it is the accusation of populism. In his critical analyses concerning anti-populism, Ernesto Laclau undoes the hierarchical opposition between proper speech and the boundlessness of popular discourse

⁶⁶⁶ For Guattari capitalism neglects to take into account any semiotic flow that does not conform to its two rules: that 'people [have] to express themselves in a way that confirms the division of labour' and that 'desire [can] only [be] expressed in a way that the system can recoup, or only if its linearised, quantified in systems of production'. Guattari, Félix, *Chaosophy*, 'Desire is Power, Power is Desire', Semiotext(e), Los Angeles CA, 2009, p.284.

⁶⁶⁷ Mowitt, John, *Re-takes, Postcoloniality and Foreign Film Languages*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN, 2005, p.149-150.

that decides which speakers count in the sphere of politics. A populist language is vague, simple, imprecise, in sum, mere *bavardage* that need not be taken into account, *legitimately so*. Laclau proposes that these attributes be understood less as a series of negative qualities than as a response to political conditions:

instead of counterposing ‘vagueness’ to a mature political logic governed by a high degree of precise institutional determination, we should start asking ourselves a different and more basic set of questions: is not the vagueness of populist discourses the consequence of social reality itself being, in some situations, vague and undetermined? And in that case, would not populism be, rather than a clumsy political and ideological operation, a performative act endowed with a rationality of its own – that is to say, in some situations, vagueness is a precondition to constructing relevant political meanings?⁶⁶⁸

Laclau will answer in the affirmative to these questions, making the cacophony of populism not a symptom of immaturity or primitiveness, a failure to speak properly, but something ‘inscribed in the very nature of the political’.⁶⁶⁹ The voice of the people is not a shapeless mass that needs an outside force to bring it into coherency, but the name of a collective complex engaged in a struggle concerning the very protocols by which a voice comes to be heard and counted. The voice of the people names the sound of a process that contests the idea that mature voices speak and immature voices babble.

In the case of *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, this struggle involves questioning and confronting the televisual codes that integrate the voice of the people into the mature/immature auditory structure of the communication system. The long observational

⁶⁶⁸ Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2007, pp.17-18.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.99.

sequences of *La Commune (Paris 1871)* are not a definitive solution by which the voice of the participants is set free from the merciless hands of the televisual clock. Observation does not secure a proper, natural immediate language that would finally grant the spectator access to the people as such. On the contrary, it is treated as one function among others – hence its appearance alongside a vox populi style in all its aggressive dynamism, in all its representational violence – and what this does is to render the framework of engagement visible itself. At stake here is a process of dis-identification with a mode of speaking and listening that makes speakers appear as identical to themselves and nothing more. The bilingualism of the film creates opportunities for the participants to experiment with the heterogeneous components of the moving image, allowing speakers and auditors to conduct their practice from unexpected places. That the collective voice can appear off balance, off course, off topic in the film is not the symptom of a pre-political stage but the sound of a process of experimentation.

Between the predetermined schema of the vox pop style, the identification between participants and their roles in the re-enacting process, and the speeches without a signature of the assembly sequences, the film constructs a sound chamber that, more than laying claim to a proper televisual form for the voice of the people, ultimately makes these voices sound out as the voices of anyone. With the voice made to pass through this enigmatic form, *La Commune (Paris 1871)* makes audible a collective struggle against the televisual management of the voice of the people. Guattari has described the capitalist management of voice as an ‘individuation of enunciation’, where the positions of speakers and auditors are prescriptively assigned and the only thing that matters is ‘the transmission of

information quantified in bits'.⁶⁷⁰ The vocal struggle of *La Commune (Paris 1871)* reveals the individuation at the core of the vox pop style that makes the one speaking a prisoner of dominant meanings, a prisoner of their own statements, a prisoner of information transmitted concerning themselves. The voice of the people does not sound out here as a polyglot sum of opinions, as the multilingual diversity of a pseudo-democratic survey or as the harmonious polyphony of a community chorus. The hoarse sounds of this collective struggle manifest the disaggregation of an identifiable popular voice as a first step in the collective assemblage of a popular struggle.

⁶⁷⁰ Guattari, Félix, *Chaosophy*, 'Desire is Power, Power is Desire', Semiotext(e), Los Angeles CA, 2009, p.281.

Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, the name operates as a generative concept with which to consider how different practices of the moving image participate in the audiovisual organisation of the world. The name is a generic mode of representation and symbolisation. In other words, as this thesis argues, the name works as a linguistic image whose relation to its referent is not given once and for all, but open to reconfiguration. As a generic image, the name is an open-ended concept on account of which it is possible to group together very different audiovisual operations. With the name, this thesis has been able to examine side by side very different practices of the image – an idiomatic literary adaptation, a collective television film, an endless documentary and a pedagogic essay video – establishing a field of investigation that is sensitive to how these practices have been treated by academic knowledge, but that is not determined by it. The development of such a field of research, a process marked by chance encounters and very concrete obstinacies, is a necessary step on the way towards experimentation with the political capacities of the image. It is a necessary step beyond the customary frameworks within which the political image corresponds to a stable genre with confirmed modes and effects, tracing out a trajectory with its periods of splendour and decadence in an always irregular history.

In this thesis, the moving image does not simply represent a set of pre-determined political subjectivities, but itself intervenes in the symbolic power of these names. If cinema

intervenes in the symbolisation of what is common, it is not as the mere record of a turbulent reality. It is because it is an art that has the capacity to write with images and sounds the names of what comes to be counted as belonging to this common. If this thesis verifies the symbolic capacities of the moving image, it is also attentive to how the name of political subjectivities affects different audiovisual practices. The analysis of these practices substantiates the idea, the original hypothesis informing this thesis, that a cinema engaged in the world and its symbolic organisation is compelled in one way or another to respond to the question of the political name, its images bearing these names as names-in-dispute. The practices analysed in the thesis test with the names such as ‘worker’ or ‘people’ their own capacities, not without anxieties, to imagine another audiovisuality of the world. They show that it is possible to inhabit the distance between a name and what it names so as to construct worlds whose audiovisuality is not determined by the violence of industrial, profitable, illiterate images.

To engage with these names as processes open to reconfiguration implies in each case to trouble the order of cinema, its subdivisions, its modes of production and circulation, its modes of counting in the world. It implies to develop pedagogies that affirm capacities while adopting an experimental inconclusiveness, inviting the spectator to participate in the audiovisuality of these names. The first part of this thesis understands that the cinema of Huillet and Straub does not simply strive to achieve an adequate representation of the worker but that their entire practice is concerned with staging a political understanding of this name. In their films, actors, professional or not, do not operate as mere bodies for the factory of cinema and its pre-determined hierarchies, but as active workers engaged in the reading of a complex text. A film like *Workers, Peasants* is at once a literary adaptation and a documentary recording the capacity of anyone to develop the discipline required to

generate a singular reading of a text. In the second part of the thesis, different from the affirmative communism of Straub and Huillet, films by Harun Farocki and Wang Bing show that the encounter between the camera and the industrial space is a singular historic problem. These films expose in different ways cinema's trouble with the factory, in both cases opting for a critical method other than that of mere denunciation. Wang Bing records his overwhelming encounter with an extensive industrial space elongating the takes beyond standard documentary purposes. His practice does not confirm the standard functions of the documentary image, but rather the capacities of the documentary to oxidise such functions, to inhabit a time and a space without a pre-determined narrative, to experience the endlessness of an encounter. Farocki, angry at the successive historical failures for which the cinema is responsible that have consigned the factory to invisibility, organises an audiovisual hyperbole for the spectator in which different images and sounds become comparable and in which conclusions become debatable. Cinema works in this case not as an instructional instrument, but as a site in which spectators can practice how they relate images, sounds and ideas. In the third part, the cinema of Peter Watkins makes visible how the militant image is agitated and stimulated by a people fever. It is this people fever that sends Watkins in pursuit of non-industrial modes of television making. *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* experiments with democratic modes of image production and distribution. The experimentation led to the bifurcation of the film language into a bilingual form: the documentation of the re-enactment and the documentation of the popular assemblies organised by the actors. This bilingualism has not ceased to outrage the defenders of a personal style, an aestheticism that excludes any attempt to practice cinema as a collective process.

‘Worker’, ‘factory’ and ‘people’ are names spoken at a critical juncture in the post-socialist age of globalisation, names at the core of contemporary discussions about emancipation. This thesis seeks to read in the work of Peter Watkins, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Wang Bing and Harun Farocki a series of discrete modes of resistance, each of which contests in its own way the erasure of these names from the public domain of audiovisuality. The significance of this resistance does not simply reside in continuing to use names that in the past decades have been left unpronounceable by the triumph of neoliberalism. The cinematic practices brought together here do not simply treat these names as an endangered species to be protected. More resolutely, such names become provocative once more in these practices, dangerous for a normative cinema and a motionless political debate. These names provoke not when they are treated as relics of the past without effect in the present, but when they become operators with which to agitate the present itself. In this sense, the thesis seeks to understand and learn from the affective relations with which each practice activates these untimely names: rage (Farocki), stubbornness (Huillet and Straub), humbleness (Wang), passion (Watkins). With this affective relation to the name, the different cases analysed here disorient the present as something transparent to itself, a present that is but the successor of the past and the seed of the future, a simple link in an unbroken chain.

This thesis is thus also a study in *anachronisation*, it weaves together different experiments in anachronic temporalities.⁶⁷¹ These practices of the moving image construct anachronic times, opening up, audiovisually, discrepancies on account of which the self-certainty of the present falters. The argument defends anachronism as a key power of the

⁶⁷¹ I borrow the term ‘anachronisation’ from Didi-Huberman who uses it in his study of Aby Warburg. See Didi-Huberman, Georges, *L'Image Survivante: Histoire de l'Art et Temps des Fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2002.

moving image to struggle against ideologies that establish the present as a normative order. 'Worker', 'factory', 'people' are not visible in these images according to the rhythms of succession, but according to audiovisual constructions where the past relentlessly haunts and the present stratifies itself in various directions. Straub and Huillet practice a cinema where workers are not the members of an identifiable class but inhabitants of an immemorial forest. Their resistance communicates not with social modes of being and doing but with the wind in the trees, the buzzing of insects, the moving rays of light filtered through foliage. The works of Wang and Watkins are time-consuming experiments, opportunities to experience the limits of appropriate duration. In the case of Watkins, the length of the film makes evident the need to reject the industrial temporality of television to start to listen with a democratic ear. In the case of Wang, the long shots reveal the factory as a labyrinthine space not regimented by industrial temporalities. Very different, in *Workers Leaving the Factory*, Farocki has no time for nuance. This thirty-six minute long video advances with an accelerated rhythm, one in which there seems to be no time to express all the injustices of the world, one with which to make contagious the rage of the artist directed at the state of affairs as they stand.

This thesis engages the moving image within a narrative that understands that the audiovisual experiments of the sixties and seventies detonated any definitive formula for making images with the ambition of intervening in the audiovisual presentation of the world. The work of Farocki, Watkins and Straub and Huillet exemplifies the obstinate and inventive reverberations of this audiovisual event. For these practices, the lessons of Bertolt Brecht were deeply significant in different ways, and they continue to be so today in the complex constellations within which they develop. Watkins practiced in the sixties a Brechtian form of denunciation, joining it today with the critical ideas of Third Cinema.

Straub and Huillet have not renounced the Brechtian method of estrangement, even if going on to engage with other poetics in order to develop a practice affirming the presence of a communist people. This does not mean that these different cases form a more or less eclectic post-Brechtian trend, one that would provide the key concerning how to do political images correctly in a new millennium. More simply, but also more ambitiously, the thesis verifies two basic principles for a politics of the audiovisual that follow in the wake of the detonations and obstinacies these adventures have given rise to. The moving image has the capacity to refuse to submit to a normative present, for instance, to the audiovisuality of capital-parliamentarism today. And, secondly, no definitive equation between means and effects, Brechtian or other, has a monopoly on the political image. These principles define the expanded field of intervention developed by grouping together the very different practices of Straub and Huillet, Watkins, Wang and Farocki, as well as understanding each one of these practices as a very concrete singularity.

The concept of the name operates in this thesis as a useful tool to materialise both the openness and concreteness defining the audiovisual practices in question. As specific interventions against normative symbolisations and as sources of turbulent disputes, the names of political subjectivities are a generative raw material with which to agitate and specify the powers of the image and its participation in the world. It is therefore possible and necessary to continue the analysis begun in this thesis and investigate other practices organising other articulations and visualising other discrepancies for the names discussed here or for other names in turn. A list of further practices to look at would no doubt include the work of Peter Nestler, and Lizzie Borden, Jean-Claude Rousseau and Souleyman Cissé, Johan van der Keuken and the collective Chto Delat?, Pedro Costa and Jean Rouch, Alain Giraudie and the Yugantar Film Collective, Jean Grémillon and

Patricio Guzmán, Artavadz Peleshian, Joris Ivens and Luc Moullet. This personal list, made from films that have affected me during the years I have been writing this thesis, is not an inventory of proper names but of practices with which to continue to trouble expectations.

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