Displaying the Contemporary

The revolution cannot take its cinema from the past but only from the future.

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There is no shortage of identifiable moments, or movements, of radical, even revolutionary, cinematic practice. As examples *par excellence*, one could take the small but influential body of pioneering cinematic output produced by the surrealists in post-First World War Paris, or the experimental propagandist cinema of Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Esfer Shub and others in post-revolutionary Russia. Both bodies of work were designed to instigate and support revolutionary change, of the mind, and/or of the social order. In these films – for example *L'Age d'or/The Golden Age* (Buñuel, 1930) and *Oktyabr': Desyat' dney kotorye potryasli mir)/October: Ten Days That Shook the World* (Eisenstein, 1927) – revolutionary subject matter is welded to revolutionary cinematic qualities. Today, perhaps it is the latter which is most celebrated – Buñuel noted that surrealism succeeded in the realm which it deemed least important – the realm of art – but failed in the most important – the realm of revolutionary transformation. At the time, however, these films had an explosive impact, and that impact is best understood if we recognise the dialectical interaction between the films' content and form.

Other filmmakers with a politically radical agenda have adopted more pragmatic approaches when it comes to questions of form. The recent US-produced films *Trumbo* (Roach, 2015) and *Hail, Caesar!* (Coen Brothers, 2016) highlight that the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) intervened successfully in Hollywood, and not just as *Trumbo* highlights, in terms of uplifting Academy Awards. At the height of its influence, from the mid-1930s to the advent of the blacklist in the 1950s, the CPUSA smuggled radical political ideas into a wide range of Hollywood films in an attempt to engage a mass audience with communist ideology. In films such as *Blockade* (Dieterle, 1938), scripted by John Howard Lawson, the CPUSA Hollywood organiser who would subsequently become one of the Hollywood Ten, the CPUSA strove to inspire solidarity with the besieged Republican government during the Spanish civil war. *Blockade* exemplifies how attempts to reach a mass audience can result in the dilution of the political content and, in contrast to the dynamism of the work of Buñuel and Eisenstein, the results are bland, the politics muted, indeed, insipid.

At the time, the CPUSA was attempting to use mainstream cinematic forms to organise solidarity with Spanish anti-fascism; its cinematic approach was symptomatic of the CPUSA's Popular Front politics. Popular Frontism involved developing a minimal political programme in an attempt to build a wider, cross-class anti-fascist movement. Conversely, inside Spain at this time, the newly-collectivized film industry in Catalonia – part of the programme of collectivisation which swept Catalonia in the immediate aftermath of the fascist uprising in July 1936 – was symptomatic of a different anti-fascist strategy, one which trod an anarchist-inspired, revolutionary path. Yet, although the communists and anarchists adopted different political approaches to fighting fascism – depicted cinematically in *Tierra y Libertad/Land and Freedom* (Loach, 1995) – when it came to filmmaking there were similarities. Alongside the production of propagandist newsreels, the collectivised cinemas produced fictional features such as

Aurora de esperanza/Dawn of Hope (Sau, 1937), which fused propaganda and melodrama: boy gets job in factory; boy meets girl, boy joins anarchist trade union and becomes engaged in revolutionary struggle. These two examples, illustrate that across varying shades of leftist opinion, there have been repeated attempts to draw on popular cinematic forms to propagate radical politics.

Blockade is limp politically and limited practically; however, with other projects the CPUSA had significantly greater success. While the term *film noir* is well-established for its German Expressionist-inspired monochrome movies featuring fedora-clad private eyes and femme fatales cast in *chiaroscuro* lighting, lesser known is the term *film gris*. The latter referred to a small body of Hollywood films in which communist directors and writers infused *film noir* with an overt, class-based critique of capitalism. For instance, in three films authored or co-authored by Abraham Polonsky, *Body and Soul* (Rossen, 1947), *Force of Evil* (Polonsky, 1949) and *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* (Gordon, 1951), there is an exploration of corruption and gangsterism embedded within a more obviously politicised analysis than is evident in mainstream *noir*. The films, moreover, remain highly-engaging pieces of mass-produced cinematic entertainment.

For the proponents of Third Cinema, however, a revolutionary film movement which grew out of South America in the 1960s, there was an incontrovertible contradiction between the desire of radical filmmakers to make overtly political cinema, and the desire of the entertainment industry to make profitable products in the capitalist marketplace. In 'Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World', Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino highlight what they see as the limitations of pursuing this path. They cite Jean-Luc Godard's comment that filmmakers who work within the system inevitably become 'trapped inside the fortress.' For advocates of Third Cinema, it was necessary to turne one's back on the existing production houses and exhibition spaces to develop a new, truly independent and revolutionary, anti-colonialist cinema.

This political approach found an echo in the critical commentaries of sixties film critics, most notably in the highly-influential Paris-based journal *Cahiers Du Cinema*, and, closer to home, in the pages of the academic film journal, *Screen*. In the mid-1970s, *Screen* conducted an extensive debate on the politics of radical filmmaking ostensibly through a discussion on realism and the politics of form. The focus of the debate was an exploration of the formal qualities of *Days of Hope* (Loach, 1975), a four part BBC television series charting the history of the

British labour movement from the First World War to the 1926 General Strike. Scripted by the Marxist writer, Jim Allen, *Days of Hope* was deemed to possess an acceptable level of revolutionary content, but lacked the Brechtian or Godardian qualities which drew attention to its own constructedness, it was deemed not to be the revolutionary text, *Screen* critics demanded. Perhaps unaware of these debates, Margaret Thatcher attacked *Days of Hope* in her address to the 1976 Conservative Party conference, signifying, perhaps, that film critics might be well-advised to factor both film audiences and film's use-value into their analyses.

So, what does this cursory thumbnail sketch of only some of cinema's most well-established radical moments suggest? Well, numerous points could be made, but I'm going to pull out four. Firstly, it highlights the rich contribution made by politically-engaged filmmakers to the history of cinema. Secondly, it illustrates the diversity of the kinds of films that might fall under the term radical or revolutionary (and this list can be expanded extensively in a host of directions, not just politically and geographically). Thirdly, that exhibition is as integral to an alternative cinematic practice as production. Fourthly, it might help us to contextualise the practice of radical film culture in our own present.

This issue of *The Drouth* is published to coincide with Glasgow hosting the 2016 Radical Film Network Festival and Unconference. The Radical Film Network was founded in London in 2013 and brings together academics, activists, film-makers and other participants in radical film culture in order to discuss and promote alternative film cultures. At the first RFN national conference (Birmingham 2015) some of the activists and filmmakers in attendance expressed disquiet that, as the event was run along conventional academic lines, academic voices were prioritised. For the Glasgow event, then, the unconference attempts to create a more equal forum for discussion:

> an unconference is a participant-oriented meeting where the attendees decide on the agenda, discussion topics, workshops, and, often, even the time and venues. The informal and flexible program allows participants to suggest topics of their own interest and choose sessions accordingly. The format provides an excellent opportunity for researchers from diverse disciplines to work collaboratively on topics of common interest. The overarching goal for most unconferences is to prioritize conversation over presentation. In other words, the content for a session does not come from a select number of individuals at the front of the room, but is generated by all the attendees within the room, and, as such, every participant has an important role.[1]

We have also structured the unconference to take place alongside a film festival with the intention of further bringing academic and non-academic participants into dialogue.

Initially, we hoped to have ten or a dozen screenings and events in the festival; however, reflecting the vibrant state of alternative film culture in Glasgow, the number has grown to around forty. When organising the programme we interpreted 'radical' broadly. Indeed, we decided that there would be nothing more conservative than deciding that someone or something was not radical enough to be included. Therefore, there are events and screenings which might well stretch and challenge accepted definitions; for the organisers, this is a strength, not a weakness.

Perhaps it is in terms of exhibition that we might locate something of the radical. Of all the events that are taking place, only one is taking place in a conventional cinema, the rest take place in alternative spaces such as the headquarters of the Scottish Trades Union Congress, Glasgow Women's Library, galleries, and community and third sector venues across the city. Or might the radical be constituted in the juxtaposition of the diverse variety of individuals and organisations brought under one umbrella? What might it mean to place the work of two very different Glaswegian filmmakers, Basharat Khan and Chris Leslie side-by-side? The title of Khan's two feature-length documentaries, *Taxi through Pakistan* (2014) and *Etxea: The Basque Word For Home* (2015) indicate the geographical breadth of his work, and his latest in-progress project connects Glasgow with the Gaza Strip. Chris Leslie, on the other hand, specialises in documenting cinematically, the changing face of Glasgow's architectural landscape. And what might it mean to have Glasgow Women's Library screen *March*, a film documenting a large-scale public art event which took place locally on International Women's Day, 2015 and have that brought into conversation with the local trade union activists who made a series of short films on their work-related concerns, or with the organisers of a symposium on queer film exhibition in Scotland? Or to explore the films of the self-styled Mr Glasgow, taking place as part of Radical Home Cinemas, in his stall at The Barras, alongside discussion of the work of Lebanese filmmaker Akram Zaatari on views of the Middle East which take place in The Common Guild and are framed within a discussion on the work of Jean Genet and Jean-Luc – Godard. The festival is not the work of one individual creator, but represents the collective efforts of a host of individuals and organisations.

In the run-up to the event, many of the organisers have been discussing informally what might constitute a twenty-first century radical film practice. These discussions will continue at the 2016 RFN event and beyond as participants in radical film culture meet to discuss and develop their work. But in returning to the spirit of Paris or Russia almost a century ago, and to paraphrase Marx in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, 'The revolution cannot take its cinema from the past but only from the future.'

Endnotes

1 Budd A, Dinkel H, Corpas M, Fuller JC, Rubinat L, Devos DP, et al. (2015), 'Ten Simple Rules for Organizing an Unconference' *PLoS Comput Biol* 11(1): e1003905. http://journals.plos.org/ploscompbiol/article?id=10.1371/journal.pcbi.1003905
For a fuller outline of the RFN Unconference see rfnglasgow.info (last accessed 06 April 2016)