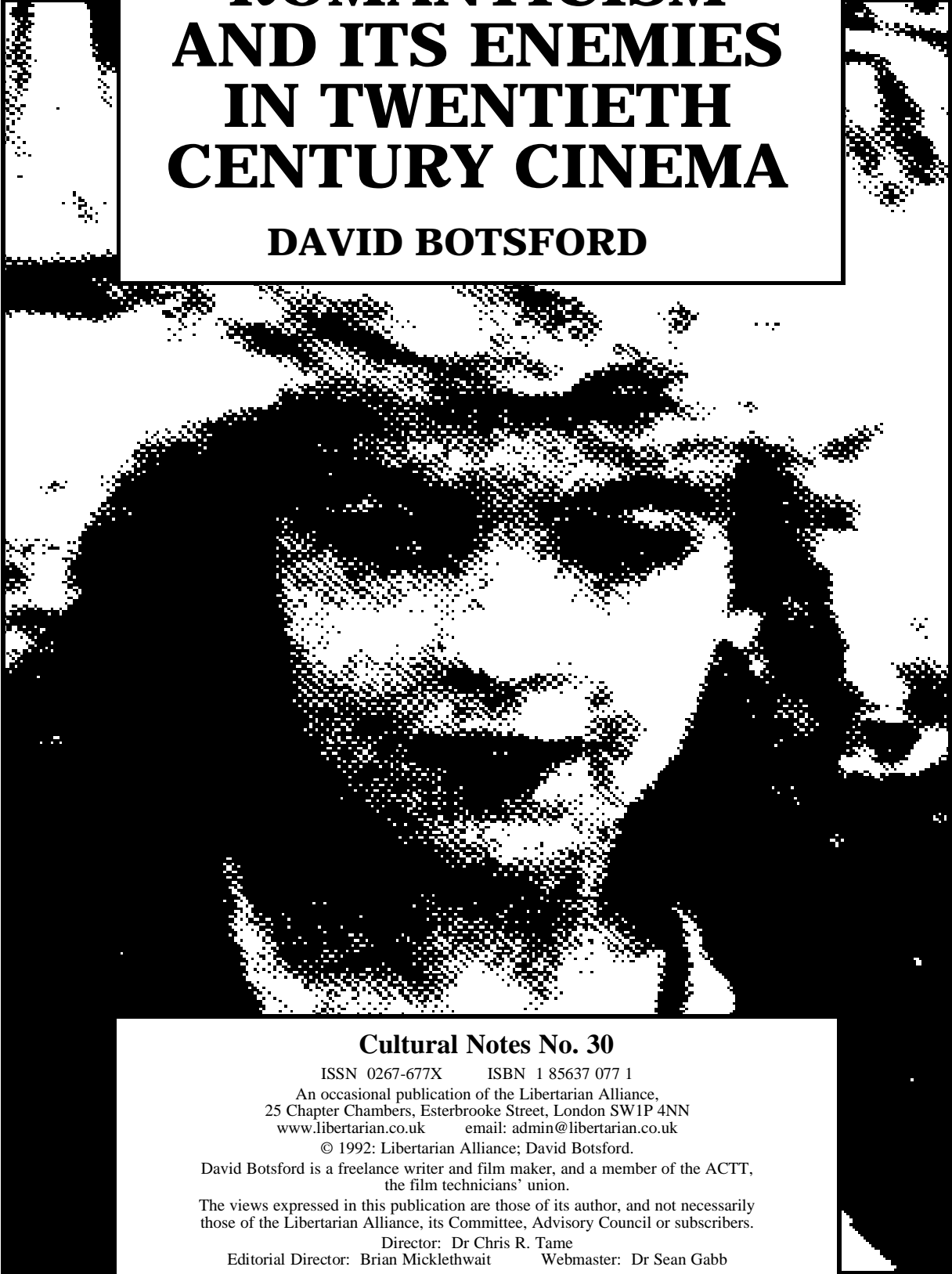




ROMANTICISM AND ITS ENEMIES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY CINEMA

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

ROMANTICISM AND ITS ENEMIES IN TWENTIETH CENTURY CINEMA

DAVID BOTSFORD

A controversy is currently going on in France about the country's most popular film of the year (1991 - ed.). In the first two months of its release, *Madame Bovary* (France, 1991), directed by Claude Chabrol, was seen by over two million people in France alone, and the film is proving equally popular abroad (it has not yet been distributed in Britain). Gustave Flaubert's novel, published in 1856, concerns a farmer's daughter who marries a humble doctor and whose desires for romance and social advancement lead her into adultery, bankruptcy and suicide. The novel was a key event in the mid-19th century reaction against Romanticism, which is defined by Ayn Rand as "a category of art based on the recognition of the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition".¹

Yet despite these origins, the new film is being condemned as actually encouraging Romanticism by concentrating too closely on the central character of Emma Bovary, played by Isabelle Huppert, and making her seem to dominate the society of which she is supposed to be a victim. An official at the Culture Ministry has complained that:

To allow the audience to identify so much with Emma Bovary is to encourage them to follow her dreams of bourgeois romance. I find it deplorable that a *cinéaste* like M. Chabrol should ignore the very clear socialist orientation of Flaubert's novel. It will result in a severe outbreak of *Bovarysme*.²

Bovarysme is a derogatory term for Emma's supposed "problem": the mistaking of dreams for reality; in other words, for the Romantic outlook. Doubtless this collectivist bureaucrat has been disturbed by the popularity of such broadly Romantic films as *Jean de Florette* (France, 1986) and *Manon des Sources* (France, 1987), both directed by Claude Berri, and *Cyrano de Bergerac* (France, 1990), directed by Jean-Paul Rappeneau, which was based on the novel by Edmund Rostand, one of the last of the great Romantic writers. Could the horror of a Romantic revival be beginning in the country that was the birthplace of the cinema?

Claude Chabrol, the director of *Madame Bovary*, is quick to deny such a trend, let alone his own film's contribution towards it:

It's nonsense to claim that there has been an increase in *Bovarysme*, and I certainly hope that there isn't going to be a revival of romanticism. That is exactly what the film and the book are

against. Flaubert was writing a sort of pamphlet to shake people out of the fantasies they observed from 19th-century novels - Chateaubriand or Walter Scott. He hated *Bovarysme* and, for myself, Emma is everything I detest: both a romantic and a fanatic ... If there is a tendency towards escapism nowadays, then it is all the more important to make a positive and combative film like *Madame Bovary*, to how dangerous that can be.³

Dangerous, one has to ask, for whom? For the millions who attend the cinema in the hope - conscious or unconscious - of entering a world in which an individual's values can be achieved by heroic action, and that might, perhaps, inspire the viewer to action to achieve his or her own dreams? Or for such as the socialist official quoted above, and those film-makers and other artists, such as Chabrol, whose endless representations of defeat and irrationality depend largely on the taxes extorted from these millions and dispensed by such bureaucrats?

D. W. GRIFFITH

Yet Romanticism was not always such a despised outlook within the cinema. The cinema began at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th as an unashamedly popular entertainment. At a time when Naturalism was consolidating its dominant position in the "serious" arts, the cinema's origins as a "low-brow" diversion promoted by showmen and fair-ground operators meant that its formative development occurred virtually immune from the dominant artistic and literary ideas of its day. Needless to say, this pandering to public taste greatly enhanced the artistic possibilities of the film medium. The Oxford poets of Shakespeare's day snobbishly deplored the Bard's use of crowd-pulling devices such as sword-fights, love interest and comic characters, and for his breaking the bonds of the three unities (time, place and action) which had been the convention of Western theatre since the time of the Greeks. Nobody today doubts who was the greater artist. Similarly, the cinematic form was created in response to consumer demand, and in very large measure through the vision of a Romantic artist of the first order: David Wark Griffith.

Following a career in the theatre as an actor, director and playwright, D. W. Griffith entered the infant American film industry as a script-writer and director,

producing no less than 488 short films from 1908 to 1914, in which he developed virtually all of the techniques we know today as the film grammar.

So universally is this grammar understood today - rather better, in fact, than that of the English language - that it comes as some surprise to learn that some of the earliest film-makers used a long pole placed between the camera and the actors to ensure that the latter did not come too close to the camera; that others added a section of black leader in between shots in order to avoid too sudden a jolt of the audience's point of view; and that audiences would loudly ask where characters' legs had gone when they first saw Griffith's pioneering use of the medium shot and the close-up.

The earliest films were simply photographic records of actual scenes or comic incidents; they were followed by filmed plays, in which the camera would record an entire scene from a fixed viewpoint in long-shot; and then the beginnings of editing, with the films of Edwin S. Porter. It was Griffith, however, who unleashed the full potential of the new art film, and developed editing to present a re-construction of reality - from many individual shots - characterised by causality, rationality and objectivity, a reality, indeed, in which individuals could achieve their goals through rational action. Griffith, in his construction and extension of the parameters of the film form, was carrying out the process described by Rand not simply in an individual work, but in a new art form:

By a selective re-creation, art isolates and integrates those aspects of reality which represent man's fundamental view of himself and of existence. Out of the countless number of concretes - of single, disorganized and (seemingly) contradictory attributes, actions and entities - an artist isolates the things which he regards as metaphysically essential and integrates them into a single new concrete that represents an embodied abstraction.⁴

It has been said - rightly or wrongly - that all subsequent philosophy is a footnote to Plato. It is no exaggeration to say that Griffith stands in the same relation to cinema.

The Birth of a Nation (US, 1915), Griffith's epic film of the American civil war and its aftermath, was both the longest film ever made to that date and in relative terms it was also the most profitable film ever made. But it was widely condemned for its sympathetic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan, and faced cuts or outright bans in many parts of the United States. This action made Griffith a vigorous opponent of film censorship, and he responded to his critics with a film that can be ranked among the finest achievements of Romantic art.

INTOLERANCE

Intolerance (US, 1916) is a condemnation of its subject throughout the ages. It consists of four epic stories in one film: the fall of ancient Babylon, the life of Jesus Christ, the massacre of the Huguenots in France in 1572, and a story about contemporary America. Its theme is that Intolerance (the film's inter-titles use a capital "I") has existed in all times and places, but that, whatever the odds, it can be combated and ultimately defeated by the actions of individuals.

The heroine of the Babylonian story is the Mountain Girl, a young woman who discovers a plot by the priests of the god Baal - the representatives of Intolerance - to open the gates of the city to the forces of Cyrus, king of Persia. The Babylonians succeed in defeating the first Persian attack; while they are celebrating their apparent victory with a vast banquet, the priests let in the Persians. The Mountain Girl arrives to give the warning too late, and is killed fighting the Persians. Through intertitles superbly integrated with the action, Griffith informs us of the achievements of Babylonian civilization, its rule of law, and its scholarship, and these are the values at stake in the Mountain Girl's struggle.

Christ is shown as the enemy of the Intolerance of the Pharisees, with their attempts at regulation of every detail of life. Many libertarians may dispute whether this is a realistic presentation of Christ's teaching, but strict historical realism, of course, is no necessary part of Romanticism. The two incidents from the Gospels which Griffith selects as the essence of Christ's mission are precisely the two which most closely accord with libertarianism: his turning of water into wine at the wedding at Canaan, and the prevention of the stoning of the adulteress. Finally the Pharisees, threatened by Christ's teaching and actions, succeed in having him crucified.

In the French story, a Catholic nobleman becomes romantically involved with a Huguenot girl in the Paris of 1572. Catherine de Medici and other wicked advisers - again, the incarnations of Intolerance - persuade the weak king, Charles IX, of the existence of a Huguenot plot against him, and prevail upon him to sign an order for their extermination. In the course of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre which follows, the nobleman tries to save the girl and her family, but ends up being butchered alongside them.

The American story concerns the disastrous results of a "reforming" campaign to "improve public morals" by a group of frustrated middle-aged women. With superbly filmic economy - and a remarkable gift of prophecy, given what happened under Prohibition - Griffith demonstrates the reality of such campaigning activity: a shot of the women gloating over the banning of the sale of alcohol is followed by another showing policemen demanding and being handed free

bottles of liquor as a price for tolerating illegal sales; a shot of the closure of a brothel and the arrest of its inmates is followed one showing prostitutes awaiting customers in an alleyway under the eye of aggressive-looking pimps.

These events lead indirectly to a violent factory strike which leaves the hero unemployed and the heroine as an impoverished orphan, as her father has been killed in the strike. The hero starts working for a gangster, and tries to force the heroine into prostitution. But he falls in love with her; this "love of a good woman" induces him to leave the gangster, and they get married. But the gangster is murdered by his mistress; all the evidence points to the hero being the killer, and he is sentenced to death. A friendly policeman, however, doubts the verdict and helps the heroine to discover the truth. Hours before the hero is to be hanged, the mistress admits the deed, and the policeman and the heroine engage in a desperate chase to reach the state governor, obtain a pardon and bring it to the prison before the execution is carried out. They reach the scaffold just as the noose is being tightened, and the hero and heroine, having triumphed over the forces of Intolerance, live happily ever after.

The plots, acting, sets, lighting, and above all the editing combine to give *Intolerance*, in my view, the best claim of any motion picture to the title of the "greatest film of all time". The cinema has been going downhill ever since. By the use of dynamic montage, Griffith cuts across time and space to link themes and multiply the emotional impact in a manner unequalled in any film before or since. Thus he cuts from the massed armies of Cyrus of Persia advancing on the unsuspecting city of Babylon, to the armed troops moving towards the homes of the sleeping Huguenots, to the frantic chase of the heroine in a racing car to catch up with the train in which the governor is travelling. Griffith said that:

... the stories will begin like four currents looked at from a hilltop. At first the four currents will flow apart, slowly and quietly. But as they flow, they grow nearer and nearer together, and faster and faster, until in the end, in the last act, they mingle in one mighty river of expressed emotion.⁵

And the Romanticism is undisguised: the theme of the film is that whatever victories Intolerance may have won in the past, it is within the power of ordinary human beings in the present day to overcome the forces of Intolerance and to achieve their values on this earth.

It was *Intolerance*, prints of which were imported through the Allied blockade of Soviet Russia in 1919, that was the single most significant film in the development of the Soviet cinema. On seeing the film, Vsevolod Pudovkin gave up his career in chemistry to

become one of the Soviet Union's leading film directors and theorists.

EISENSTEIN'S CRITICISM OF GRIFFITH

We have already seen, through a survey of the career of Sergei Eisenstein,⁸ how the Soviet cinema at the same time adapted Griffith's methods of editing and defined itself in opposition to the aesthetic manifested in his films. Griffith's film construction, his use of parallel montage and the close-up represented a conception of an objective reality, distinct from the subjective perception of the observer, and composed of discrete and separate elements - in large part, in fact, the very epistemology expounded by Ayn Rand. As Eisenstein correctly pointed out:

[M]ontage thinking is inseparable from the general content of thinking as a whole. The structure that is reflected in the concept of Griffith montage is the structure of bourgeois society.⁷

Eisenstein argued that it was in its capacity for generalisation and abstraction, the perception and reconstruction of "unity in diversity", which was achieved through its Marxist philosophical premises, that the Soviet cinema surpassed that of Griffith:

The school of Griffith before all else is a school of *tempo*. However, he did not have the strength to compete with the young Soviet school of montage in the field of expression and of relentlessly affective *rhythm* ... But true rhythm presupposes above all organic *unity* ... [O]ur concept of montage had to be born from an entirely different 'image' of an understanding of phenomena, which was opened to us by a world-view both monistic and dialectic.

For us the microcosm of montage had to be understood as a unity, which in the inner stress of contradictions is halved, in order to be re-assembled in a new unity on a new plane, qualitatively higher, its imagery newly perceived.⁸

A manifestation of the distinction between these two outlooks was the difference between the American "close-up" and the Soviet "large-scale":

Among Americans the term is attached to *view-point*.

Among us - to *the value of what is seen* ...

In this comparison immediately the first thing to appear clearly relating to the principal function of the close-up in our cinema is - not only and not so much to *show* or to *present*, as to *signify*, to *give meaning*, to *designate* ...

Griffith's ... close-ups create atmosphere, outline traits of the characters, alternate in dialogues of the leading characters, and close-ups of the chaser and chased speed up the tempo of the chase. But

Griffith at all times remains on the level of *representation and objectivity* and nowhere does he try through the *juxtaposition* of shots to shape *import and image*.⁹

Eisenstein argued that the principle of Soviet montage, by contrast, was “the substance of *an exact copy of the language of excited emotional speech*”, and corresponded to the development of spoken language, in which the “primitive metaphor” predated the emergence of complex languages:

To the parallelism and alternating close-ups of America we offer the contrast of uniting these in fusion; the MONTAGE TROPE.

In the theory of literature a *trope* is defined thus: “a figure of speech which consists in the use of a word or phrase in a sense other than that which is proper to it,” for example, a *sharp wit* (normally, a sharp sword).¹⁰

Examples of the montage “trope” in Eisenstein’s films include: the footage of workers being gunned down by tsarist troops edited with the killing of cattle in a slaughter-house in *Strike* (USSR, 1924); the three shots of statues of lions cut together to become one lion standing and roaring in *The Battleship Potemkin* (USSR, 1925); and, in *October* (USSR, 1928), the cutting of shots of harps and balalaikas with shots of Menshevik speakers criticising the storming of the Winter Palace at the Second Congress of Soviets:

[T]hese harps were shown not as harps, but as an imagist symbol of the mellifluous speech of Menshevik opportunism at the Congress. The balalaikas were not shown as balalaikas, but as an image of the tiresome strumming of these empty speeches in the face of the gathering storm of historical events. And by placing side by side the Menshevik and the harp, the Menshevik and the balalaika, we were *extending the frame of parallel montage into a new quality, into a new realm: from the sphere of action into the sphere of significance*.¹¹

Eisenstein argued that *Intolerance* demonstrated the limitations of Griffith’s philosophy, and the superiority of Soviet methods. The four stories of *Intolerance* are linked by a “refrain shot” of Lillian Gish rocking a cradle, which seeks to show the recurrence of the same theme throughout all four stories. According to Eisenstein:

Griffith had been inspired to translate these lines of Walt Whitman,

“... endlessly rocks the cradle, Uniter of Here and Hereafter.”

not in the structure, nor in the *harmonic recurrence of montage expressiveness*, but in an *isolated picture*, with the result that the cradle could

not possibly be *abstracted into an image of eternally reborn epochs* and remained inevitably simply a *life-like cradle*, calling forth derision, surprise or vexation in the spectator.¹²

Intolerance also, in Eisenstein’s view, failed to unify its four stories, and it remained “a drama of comparison, rather than a *unified, powerful, generalized image*”, because of “an inability to abstract a phenomenon, without which it cannot expand beyond the *narrowly representational*.”¹³ Griffith’s lamentable ignorance of Marxist history and philosophy was his central problem:

The *formal failure* of their mingling in a *single image* of *Intolerance* is only a *reflection of a thematic and ideological error*.

Is it possible that a tiny general feature - a general and superficially metaphysical and vague viewpoint towards *Intolerance* (with a capital *I!*) - can really unite in the spectator’s consciousness such obviously historically uncollated phenomena as the religious fanaticism of St. Bartholomew’s Eve with labor’s struggle in a highly developed capitalist state! And the bloody pages of the struggle for hegemony over Asia with the complicated process of conflict between the colonial Hebrew people and enslaving Mother Rome? ...

In history and economics it was necessary for the gigantic work of Marx and the continuers of his teaching to aid us in understanding *the laws of the process* that stand behind miscellaneous *separate data*. Then science could succeed in abstracting *a generalization from the chaos of separate traits* characteristic for the phenomena ...

The question of montage imagery is based on a definite structure and system of thinking; it derives and has been derived only through collective consciousness, appearing as a reflection of a new (socialist) stage of human society and as a thinking result of ideal and philosophic education, inseparably connected with the social structure of that society.¹⁴

Posterity has, I submit, proved which of the two cinematic masters - for both Griffith and Eisenstein, despite everything, deserve that title - has proved to be the greater. When I saw *Intolerance* earlier this year, the packed audience was cheering and laughing - in the appropriate places! - in a way I have never seen at any other silent film. By contrast, two scenes in *October* (USSR, 1928) had the audience laughing out loud last time I saw it. The first is the crowd at the Finland Station anxiously awaiting the arrival of Lenin, which is prefaced by an inter-title of the word “HIM!” so large it fills the screen from top to bottom. The second is the scene at the Second Congress of Soviets mentioned above, where the Menshevik

speakers are being shouted down by earnest-looking Bolsheviks. The inter-titles read, "Down! Down!" and "Down with the lackeys of the bourgeoisie!" One wonders at the extent to which the recent defeat of the heirs of these Bolsheviks has punctured the entire artistic and psychological edifice so self-confidently erected by Eisenstein and other Soviet artists. Certainly I submit that if the two films were to be shown in Russia today, the reactions to them might be even more pronounced than they were in London.

Nonetheless, Eisenstein's creation of the "mass-hero", which was the purest embodiment of the Marxist method of montage, and which we have examined elsewhere,¹⁵ had a tremendous impact on Western film-makers in the 1920s, and fitted in well with the anti-Romantic tendencies which then (as now) dominated Western culture and cinema. The High Romanticism which characterised the cinema of Griffith was replaced by what Rand describes as:

the equivalent of the slick-magazine Romanticism, with a still less discriminating level of taste and imagination, and an incommunicable vulgarity of spirit.

Partly in reaction against this debasement of values, but mainly in consequence of the general philosophical-cultural disintegration of our time (with its anti-value trend), Romanticism vanished from the movies and never reached television.¹⁶

LANG

The Romantic tradition was kept alive in the work of Fritz Lang, who was identified by Rand as one of the great Romantic film-makers. The science-fiction film *Metropolis* (Germany, 1927), directed by Lang, is set in a vast city of the future. The workers toil in bad conditions in giant underground factories, while the rich enjoy decadent pleasures above ground; growing unrest results. The hero, the son of an industrialist, falls in love with a working-class girl who favours compromise between the capitalists and the workers, arguing that the workers cannot live without the products of the mind, represented by the capitalists, any more than the latter can survive without the hands of the workers.

Seeking to provoke the workers into actions which will justify the use of violence against them, the industrialist arranges for an evil scientist to kidnap the girl and replace her with a robot in her image which will incite them to revolt. When this occurs, the mob destroys a power-plant, which floods the workers' city, and comes close to drowning the children there. But the heroine escapes, saves the children, appeases the mob, and the hero arranges an understanding between his father and the workers, arguing in the final title that relations between the brain and the hand must be mediated by the heart.

The film, which foreshadows in many respects the theme of *Atlas Shrugged*, was praised by the Spanish socialist-anarchist film-maker Luis Bunuel for its visual power, but also criticised in the following terms:

Its actual story is trite, turgid, pedantic, and stalely Romantic ...

In my opinion, the film's chief fault lies in its creator's failure to follow an idea offered by Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*; in his omitting one actor (though one full of barely explored potential): the masses. This is where the theme of *Metropolis* ought to be located. What we are required to accept instead is a series of individuals full of arbitrary, crude emotions, and invested with a symbolism to which they did not respond - far from it. This is not to say that the masses *aren't there* in *Metropolis*: they are, but throughout they seem to fulfil a purely decorative function: the function of a gigantic "ballet"; they seek rather to delight us by their wonderful and balanced evolutions than to help us understand their soul, their exact submission to more human and objective motives.¹⁷

Lang replied that in all his films he showed "the desire to keep an individual as an individual".¹⁸ It is significant that when Lang fled to the United States in 1933 on the National Socialist assumption of power, the films he directed there were almost exclusively thrillers and detective stories, the genre described by Rand as "bootleg Romanticism".

Buñuel displayed considerable gall in condemning Lang for turgidity. Those of his own cinematic festivals of irrationality which I can recall are characterised principally by this quality. His surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (France, 1926) is a meaningless juxtaposition of images ranging from a car accident to an eye being slit open with a knife; mercifully, the film is only about ten minutes long. In *The Exterminating Angel* (Mexico, 1962), a group of rich people assemble in a house for dinner, and some mysterious force prevents them from leaving. Over a tediously long time, their behaviour becomes increasingly depraved, thus presumably demonstrating the essentially savage nature of the bourgeoisie. It is significant that when Buñuel wanted to score a direct ideological hit, however, he resorted to Romanticism. In 1960 the Franco government, hoping to raise its international cultural status, invited him back from exile to make a film. The result was *Viridiana* (Spain, 1961), about a young nun's disillusion was the Catholic Church and eventual rejection of its values in favour of materialism, a film free of irrationality and with a strong element of the Romantic in that it concerns a clash of values between Catholicism and materialism, and individual characters acting according to those values.

In the same way, following the failure of the "mass-film" of Eisenstein to electrify the Soviet masses in a

communist direction (or even get them into the cinema), the Stalinist regime imposed the essentially Romantic form of socialist realism as the only acceptable school in all the arts. In 1934 Eisenstein, knowing what was expected of him, rationalised the change by writing:

[O]ur enthusiasm produced a one-sided representation of the masses and the collective; one-sided because collectivism means the maximum development of the individual within the collective, a conception irreconcilably opposed to bourgeois individualism. Our first mass films missed this deeper meaning ...

In 1924 I wrote, with intense zeal: "Down with the story and the plot!" Today, the story, which then seemed to be almost "an attack of individualism" upon our revolutionary cinema, returns in a fresh form, to its proper place.¹⁹

An interesting "hybrid form" between the mass-film and socialist realism was *Earth* (USSR, 1930), directed by Alexander Dovzhenko. In a Ukrainian village, a young Stalinist hero champions the cause of collectivisation and mechanisation among the peasants, against the scheming of a group of kulaks. He brings a tractor into the village, and uses it to knock down the fences that separate the plots of earth, ploughing the land as one vast collective. He is then murdered by a mad young kulak, and his death unleashes the forces of collective anger among the villagers, who unite at his funeral in the determination that the hero shall not have died in vain. The first half of the film emphasises the individual action of the hero. The montage construction of the latter half establishes a conflict between - on the one hand - the massed ranks of singing villagers walking behind the coffin, their faces filling every inch of the screen and burning with growing anger and determination, and - on the other - long-shots of the insane kulak, burying his head in the soil, and isolated at the bottom of the frame, most of which is filled with the sky, while inter-titles show the kulak ranting that he is determined to keep his property.

(The print of this film which I saw suffered at the hands of both Soviet and British censors. Originally, when the hero brings the tractor into the village it breaks down, and the peasants urinate into the radiator in order to restart it. The Stalinist regime considered this an undignified representation of the New Soviet Man, and cut the sequence, so the tractor breaks down and inexplicably starts moving again. Intercut with the funeral sequence was a montage image of a naked woman dancing, supposedly representing the unleashing of the forces of new life; this was unacceptable to the British censors, who excised it from the film.)

Soviet cinema screens of the 1930s and early 40s were filled with communist heroes acting according to Marxist-Leninist values, historical figures building

Russian greatness, and even such phenomena as socialist realist musical comedies. The directors of these films were generally less gifted than Eisenstein and his colleagues, and the technical quality of Soviet films fell markedly after the Soviet Union began manufacturing its own film equipment and stocks during the Second Five-Year Plan, rather than importing them from the West. But the regime understood what motivated people, and Eisenstein's talents were themselves marshalled to these broadly Romantic ends, particularly in *Alexander Nevsky* (USSR, 1938). Thus, while the "montage trope" and other cinematic concepts developed in the radical 1920s did not entirely disappear from the Soviet cinema, it was ironically Griffith's rather than Eisenstein's aesthetic that became dominant within it.

THE NAZIS

Dr Josef Goebbels, too, understood the essential function of the cinema, and arranged that most German feature films under National Socialism would be straightforward entertainment, with only a minority being made primarily for propaganda purposes. He believed that an excess of film propaganda would be self-defeating, and Dr Ian Kershaw, in his study of the effects of the National Socialist regime's propaganda on the German public, bears him out:

The effectiveness of propaganda ... was heavily dependent upon its ability to build on an existing consensus, to confirm existing values, to bolster existing prejudices. Its success was guaranteed wherever it could identify Nazi aims with values which were unquestioned.²⁰

Among the minority of propagandist films, it was those which drew on Romanticism, and conformed to the Griffith method of montage, that proved most effective. The impact of two of the regime's most notorious films demonstrate this clearly.

Jud Süß (Germany, 1940), directed by Veit Harlan, was a distortion of historical events in the Duchy of Württemberg in the 18th century. In the film, Joseph Süß-Oppenhaimer, a Jew, arrives in Württemberg, and the decadent duke makes him his finance minister in return for promises of wealth. Süß imposes punitive taxation on the people, gains increasing privileges for himself, persuades the duke to allow in thousands of Jews and finally rapes a German girl, who kills herself. This leads to a general revolt, led by the girl's fiance, who is the hero of the film. The duke dies of a heart attack, and Süß is arrested, condemned and executed, while the other Jews are expelled from the city.

The film was a box-office success, and it is worth noting that the supposed villainy of Süß lies chiefly in his violation of individual and property rights, hardly values which were the essence of National Socialism. Goebbels's agents reported that:

The total effect of the film can be gauged from such spontaneous expressions of opinion as "One feels like washing one's hands afterwards" ... Among the scenes especially singled out by the public - apart from the rape scene - is the entry of Jews and all their belongings into Stuttgart. In fact this scene has repeatedly prompted *demonstrations against Jews*. In Berlin, for example, there were shouts of "Drive the Jews from the Kurfurstendamm!" and "Throw the last of the Jews out of Germany!"²¹

It is significant that this film, dubbed in Arabic, was re-distributed in the Arab states in 1955 by Sovexport-film, the Soviet film agency.²²

The propaganda documentary *Der Ewige Jude* (Germany, 1940), directed by Dr Fritz Hippler, sought to show the supposedly malevolent nature of Jewry by a remarkable array of cinematic devices, including specially-shot footage of Jewish ghettos and their inhabitants, and what purported to be the kosher slaughter of cattle; extracts from feature films; newsreel and documentary footage from around the world; and a "montage trope" which cut together shots of Jews with others of large numbers of scurrying rats, and maps seeking to compare the migration of Jews across the world with the movement of plague-carrying rats.

This film was a box-office failure, and Goebbels was informed as to the reactions to it as follows:

Reports ... all agree that it is often only the politically active sections of the population who have seen the film while the typical film audience has largely avoided it ... The film was repeatedly described as being an exceptional "strain on the nerves".²³

COMMUNISTS IN HOLLYWOOD

It is well known that communists and their fellow-travellers achieved a powerful influence on the American film industry in the 1930s and 40s, and placed obstacles to the employment of outspoken critics of communism, such as Rand, who worked as a Hollywood script-writer in this period. Nonetheless the Griffith film aesthetic remained intact, and the communists understood that their propaganda would be more effective if it was indirect. As Rand explained in 1946:

The purpose of the Communists in Hollywood is *not* the production of political movies openly advocating Communism. Their purpose is *to corrupt our moral premises by corrupting non-political movies* - by introducing small, casual bits of propaganda into innocent stories - thus making people absorb the basic principles of Collectivism *by indirection and implication*.²⁴

Only a few films degenerated into crude Stalinist propaganda. *Mission to Moscow* (US, 1943), directed by

Michael Curtiz, was based on the memoirs of Joseph Davies, US ambassador to the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The film glorified Stalin's tyranny, the GPU, the Moscow show trials and the invasions of Poland, Finland and the Baltic states in a manner which the Soviet cinema of this period eschewed, preferring to praise Stalinism by historical analogy, most memorably in *Ivan the Terrible* (USSR, 1944), directed by Eisenstein. (Only later, in the period 1946-52, at the height of the "cult of personality", were Soviet film-makers ordered - in *all* films - to show the Communist Party as the guiding force in all activities, and Stalin as personally involved in all decisions of any consequence. Partly as a result of this, and also because of the repression of film-makers, annual film production in the Soviet Union fell from twenty in 1946 to five in 1952).

Thus did the Griffith film aesthetic, an aesthetic in accord with the Aristotelean laws of logic, remain the dominant framework of film-making. The Romantic impulse which was most appropriate to it, however, was largely eclipsed, except in the the cinema of totalitarian regimes and in the "bootleg Romanticism" of thrillers and adventure films.

GODARD

The next major challenge to this aesthetic came with the *nouvelle vague*, a broad term for the films which emerged among a group of French film-makers and critics associated with the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the late 1950s. By this time, technical developments such as light-weight cameras and high-speed film-stocks allowed more flexibility in film-making, and lower costs. These film-makers, who included Claude Chabrol, advocated a *cinéma d'auteur*, a cinema which would represent the personal vision of the writer-director, freed from the control of outside pressures. Of course, from the Romantic point of view, this is in principle entirely admirable; the last major American film which had been such a personal vision had been *Intolerance*, in which Griffith had been the sole investor and producer as well as writer, director and editor. Nonetheless the films which resulted from the *nouvelle vague* showed a vision which in many cases could not be further from that of Romanticism, or indeed rationality of any kind.

Because the *nouvelle vague* films were each the product of one individual's view of the world, it would be impossible to do justice to them without analysing the work of each director separately. Let us therefore examine - as briefly as possible - the work of the man whose name is most closely associated with the *nouvelle vague*: Jean-Luc Godard.

A Bout de Souffle (Breathless) (France, 1959), Godard's first film, was made in the form of a thriller, but edited with jump-cuts and other discontinuities, and unexplained actions which tended to break down

both the rationality of the Griffith film grammar and the Romantic premises of the thriller genre. The story concerns a criminal on the run in Paris who becomes involved with an American girl and ends up killing a policeman before being gunned down himself. *A Bout de Souffle* was praised for its “fresh approach” by many critics who evidently failed to perceive Godard’s essential parasitism in using the thriller format to maintain the viewer’s interest, while using technique to project a anti-rational and anti-causative view of the world, a view which constitutes no less than an attack on the human mind itself.

This suspicion grows when one sees Godard’s subsequent prolific output of films. In the films he made in the early 1960s, vague themes are at least still discernable among the irrationality, meaninglessness and, above all, tedium. *Les Carabiniers* (France, 1961) seems to be an anti-war film; *Vivre Sa Vie* (France, 1961) purports to be about a girl who becomes a prostitute; *Le Mépris* (France/Italy, 1963) concerns - it appears - the frustrations of a film-maker; *Alphaville* (France, 1964) is a science fiction film in which the one identifiable element is a detective in conflict with an insane computer; and *Une Femme Mariée* (France, 1964) seems to deal with a woman’s unhappiness in marriage. And since the 1960s, even these traces of rationality have disappeared from Godard’s films; I am quite certain that the only reason anybody goes to see his more recent output is because many of his meaningless and unconnected images happen to be of rather attractive naked young actresses.

I hope that here the reader will excuse me the ordeal of examining these works in detail (sitting through them has been more than enough, thank you), and allow me to quote at some length from Reisz’s and Millar’s standard manual of film editing on Godard’s montage technique, and the philosophical premises which underlie them:

He uses frequent jump-cuts, that is to say, cutting together two discontinuous parts of a continuous action without changing the set-up. He cuts abruptly from one scene to another with little warning and no attempt at smoothness. His ruthlessness with parts of the action in which he is not interested is more thoroughgoing than ever before in the cinema. He makes no concessions to the spectator who would be glad of a dissolve to help him across the hours or the miles. He will have no truck with inherited rules about general-shots, medium-shots and close-shots. At first sight he appears never to have heard of the dangers of boring or offending the audience. He has the effrontery to present his audience with highly literate films built on the framework of an American B-feature thriller. (*Breathless* is dedicated to Monogram Pictures.) But he is as wayward about moods as they are predictable. He veers from tragedy to farce with indifference. He

tricks us by concerning us with an absurd plot in *Breathless*. In *Pierrot le Fou* even the tenses are mixed. Its curious chronology shows us scenes from present and future in continuous shots and in a continuous geographical location; not, in other words, as the obvious projections of one character’s mind. Above all, there is no comfortable morality propounded by the editing style.

The angles, the lengths of shot, the rhythm, fail to tell us who to love, who to disapprove of.²⁵

If one accepts this analysis, and also Rand’s assertion that “*Art is the indispensable medium for the communication of a moral ideal*”,²⁶ then Godard’s films do not deserve to be dignified by the title of “art film” which they are commonly given: they are not art at all. Reisz and Millar conclude their survey of Godard’s outlook (the word “philosophy” would be inappropriate) as follows:

Making pictures of a world which is in continuous flux, indefinable and unassessable, is a comforting way of attempting some understanding of it. But making pictures itself is a self-defeating process, for the pictures we make don’t have the effect of reintegrating the world for us. On the contrary, unlike painting, they substitute a lesser reality and a very convincing one, fragmenting the world even further, till all we have left is a continuous stream of visual memories standing in for first-hand experiences ...

As in dreams this world will be described by the “juxtaposition of things that don’t necessarily go together.” Its characters, who have no firm identity except the one they invent for themselves moment by moment, obey a logic we can’t always understand. The accounts for the constant changes in pace and mood, and for the bewildering *actes gratuits* of which the action consists. On the other hand, sometimes the best chance we have of coming to grips with this world is to let its confused medley of events unroll before us as uninterruptedly as we can. So the camera stands back in long shot, the take runs on, minute after minute, having nothing to add by cutting ...

Then we can see this language as an expression of anguish that the desire for integrating our vision of the world has broken down. It has broken down before that battery of fragments which life today has become. Our response to the increasing flood of information and sense impressions is panic: our minds reflect not a new synthesis but a meaningless kaleidoscope.²⁷

Now Godard is a Marxist, as was Eisenstein before him. Eisenstein sought to integrate the diverse sense-impressions (shots and sounds) into a perception of reality (montage, in the context of the cinema) formed

by Marxist understanding. Godard, by contrast, deliberately breaks down the integrating process, leaving the viewer with a mass of incomprehensible impressions, without causality or coherence.

There was, of course, nothing *nouvelle* about this sort of trash in any of the arts in the 20th century, although most such efforts - if they deserve that title - sunk into deserved oblivion after a brief interval. Eisenstein was scathing about such un-Marxian meaninglessness. He described a "theatre-composition" called *The Yellow Sound*, created by Vasili Kandinsky as early as 1912, which included unconnected coloured lights and backgrounds on the stage, sudden music, weird noises and the movements of an actor apparently pretending to be a plant. Kandinsky claimed that this approach allowed "freedom of feeling", and Eisenstein replied:

Such a view of "freedom" only frees us from reason. This is truly a rare, unique freedom, the only one *absolutely* attainable among our fascist neighbours.²⁸

Every sequence of Eisenstein's films had in the director's mind a clear and specific meaning and function, even - indeed, particularly - where they violate the conventions of the Griffith montage.

In one scene in *Potemkin*, for instance, a food shortage on board the ship has led to discontent, and a sailor is washing the officers' dishes. He reads the inscription on a plate, "Give us this day our daily bread", and in anger smashes the plate on a table. Eisenstein conveys the anger and significance of this action in nine very brief shots of the action from different angles over four seconds, in the course of which the plate is smashed twice, once over the sailor's left shoulder, the other time over his right. Whether or not the viewer considers this montage to be effective, it fits in precisely with Eisenstein's subjective re-construction of images. Godard's films consciously eschew re-construction of any kind.

Those of us who, for our sins, endeavour to produce works in the field of film and video have many lessons to learn not only from Eisenstein's films, and an understanding of how they are constructed, but also from his film theory and his studies of the cinema's relationship to the other arts. The same is true of other early Soviet film-makers, despite the regime and the ideology they set out to advance. With Godard, however, it is different. Personally, I feel polluted by studying his works, and that my own cinematic and televisual efforts will suffer by investigating them any more than I already have. It was Nietzsche who said, effectively, that you cannot stare too long into the abyss without the abyss staring back into you.

Some part of the explanation for this difference in attitude between Eisenstein and Godard comes, I submit, in a speech from one of the latter's films. *Le*

Petit Soldat (France, 1960), which is supposed to be an attack on the French role in Algeria, concerns the mysterious movements of a young Frenchman in Geneva who appears to be some kind of secret agent. In one scene he is tortured by men who appear to be wicked *pieds noirs* (one is never sure of anything in Godard's films except boredom). The protagonist complains that his generation has no cause to fight for, no war in which they can believe in, and expresses envy for the inter-war generation of socialists, who had such certainty and vision, and a war - the Spanish civil war - to believe in and put their hearts into.

One cannot resist speculation here. When Godard began his film-making career, the Marxist millennium had conspicuously failed to materialise in the West, and capitalism, even subject to massive state control and intervention, was providing ever greater material benefits for the "working class" who were supposed to be its victims, and who showed few signs of wanting to be told what to do by Marxists. Perhaps these facts resulted in a subconscious refusal to mentally integrate this reality on Godard's part. If so, if Godard's films are no more than the product of a mind which refuses to operate, then the plaudits heaped upon them by the "cultural establishment" in the West reveal rather more about that establishment and its "values" than they do about Godard.

"A GREAT VISION"

Libertarians have rightly drawn attention to the "bootleg Romanticism" of such films as *Dirty Harry* (US, 1971), directed by Don Siegel, and *Rocky* (US, 1976), directed by John G. Avildsen, as the continuers of the Romantic tradition in the cinema. The key to the success of these heirs to Griffith's conception is a strong plot - the manifestation of volition and causality - and a profound moral sense. Thrillers fail when either the plot is muddy and unconvincing, as in the recent film version of *Batman* (US, 1989), directed by Tim Burton, or where the supposed hero seems as nasty - if not more so - than the purported villain, as in *Robocop* (US, 1989), directed by Paul Verhoeven. By contrast, the plots of *Dirty Harry* and *Rocky* are clear and convincing, and in such films the use of force on the part of the hero is entirely justified on the part of the audience by the values he is seeking to keep or achieve. When, for example, Clint Eastwood tortures the villain in *Dirty Harry* to discover where the kidnapped girl, who is dying of suffocation, is being held, this action is justified in that the girl's life is of greater value than the abstract "civil liberties" of a multiple murderer.

We have already seen how the Romanticism of the films of Andrej Wajda subtly undermined communism in Poland and arguably helped to change the course of world history.²⁹ Let us also draw attention to the German film-maker Werner Herzog, director of

such films as *Aguirre, Wrath of God* (West Germany, 1974), about a Spanish *conquistador* searching for El Dorado in South America, and *Fitzcarraldo* (West Germany, 1982), about one man's struggle to build an opera house in the Peruvian mountains. Herzog, whose films are commonly dismissed as "idiosyncratic" and "eccentric", as they are indeed, given the predominant values of most of today's "serious" cinema, is one of the few Western film-makers with a commitment to High Romanticism, a commitment reaffirmed in a recent interview:

All my films have to do with a great vision, a great task and almost insurmountable odds. All my films give people courage for their own dreams.³⁰

While Herzog and Wajda - and Eastwood and Stallone at their best - continue to make films which embody such values, we can hope that the moment aspired to by Ayn Rand is not too far off, the moment when in the cinema, as in literature and all the arts,

armed with a code of rational values, aware of its own nature, confident of the supreme importance of its mission, Romanticism will have come of age.³¹

And that will really give the bureaucrats at the French Culture Ministry something to complain about.

NOTES

1. Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, New American Library, New York, 1971 (1975 edition), p. 99.
2. Quoted in *Daily Telegraph* magazine section, 7 September 1991, p. 21.
3. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 21.
4. Rand, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.
5. Quoted in Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form*, translated and edited by Jay Leyda, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1949, p. 243.
6. In David Botsford, *Collectivism Versus Romanticism in the Early Cinema: Sergei Eisenstein and the "Mass-Hero"*, Cultural Notes No. 25, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1991.
7. Eisenstein, *op. cit.*
8. *Ibid*, p. 234.
9. *Ibid*, pp. 235-236.
10. *Ibid*, p. 238.
11. *Ibid*, p. 240.
12. *Ibid*, p. 245.
13. *Ibid*, p. 241.
14. *Ibid*, p. 243.
15. *Ibid*, p. 243, 244, 245.
16. Botsford, *op. cit.*
17. Rand, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
18. Quoted in National Film Archive, programme notes to showing of *Metropolis*, London, 1989, p. 2.
19. Quoted in *ibid*, p. 2.
20. Eisenstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.
21. Ian Kershaw, "How Effective Was Nazi Propaganda?", in David Welch (ed.), *Nazi Propaganda*, Croom Helm, Beckenham, Kent, 1983, p. 200.
22. Quoted in David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, p. 291.
23. Patrick Robertson, *The Guinness Book of Movie Facts and Feats*, Guinness Publishing, Enfield, Middlesex, 1988 (3rd edition), p. 49.
24. Quoted in Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933-1945*, *op. cit.*, p. 301.
25. Quoted in Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, W. H. Allen, London, 1987, p. 199.
26. Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, *The Technique of Film Editing*, Focal Press, London, 1953 (1987 edition), pp. 345-346.
27. Rand, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
28. Reisz and Millar, *op. cit.*, pp. 357-358.
29. Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, translated and edited by Jay Leyda, Faber and Faber, London, 1943 (1986 edition), p. 93.
30. Botsford, *op. cit.*
31. Quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, 11 September 1991, p. 14.
32. Rand, *op. cit.*, p. 122.