05 2003

Filmic Counter-Information

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Within the framework of this publication, I see my role as a film historian primarily in presenting some material: instructive examples of filmic counter-information from the 20s to the 90s. This can only be done within such a short period of time by using highlights and I will limit myself to the theme of the "portrayal of power". We will see that many of today's questions already arose in exactly the same way in earlier periods, and we will become acquainted with some film authors' solutions.

The "political film" was born in revolutionary Russia between 1919 and 1925, for instance films by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, etc. Yet the crucial impulse for revolutionizing the non-fiction film also came from Russia. In the course of the 1920s, the left-wing became increasingly fascinated by the notion of technical media being able to capture reality in a "documentary" way, i.e. that films and photos could assume the character of documents and thus serve as arguments in political struggles. The role played by the model of the so-called "Russian film" in the genesis of these notions was not insignificant. The emphasis on social responsibility and artistic experiment in Russian documentary film set new standards, which also justified a new terminology. Statements found in the German

press indicate that the term "documentary film" became part of the specialized vocabulary in the late 20s, inspired by innovative Soviet examples.[1] Soviet cinematography had broken with the old forms – e.g. the cultural film – to carry out the new social functions of film. Theoreticians such as Sergei Tretyakov spoke of an "operative" art that is useful to the social movement.

These kinds of documentary films first appeared as feature-length auteur films in the late twenties in capitalist countries, where they served as "counter-information". The first significant documentary film that came to Germany was Yakov Bliokh's *Shanhkajskij dokument* (The Shanghai Document, SU 1928). It can be regarded as a prototype of the operative film, a film of counter-information. It opens showing the Shanghai harbor and life in the Chinese and European quarters. The hard work of the overburdened coolies is contrasted with the indolence of the property-owning Europeans and the Chinese elite: an exhausted cooly peeks through a fence and catches a glimpse of the European bourgeoisie enjoying bathing and cocktails, the wheels of his cart fade into the turning records of the dancing hedonists, a giant treadmill powered by coolies is transformed into a carousel with laughing European children, followed by the hard work of Chinese children in the silk mills and phosphorous-poisoned match factories. There is a rumbling in the city, but the European military machinery suppresses the unrest. Then revolutionaries fill the streets and the Europeans hide in the enclaves behind sandbags, call for battleships and have regular troops and tanks land. In March 1927 the Southern Army of the Kuomintang under Chiang Kai-Shek takes over the city, but then there is a bloody break with the previously allied communists, bound prisoners are executed. In the end, Chiang Kai-Shek is branded as having betrayed the Chinese Revolution.

What is epoch-making about this film is the "discovery" of the politically framed parallel montage, the analytical view of the camera and the politically, journalistically unambiguous stance. The author insists – not least of all with the title – that this is a matter of "documents" of practices of oppression and exploitation. The break with the postcard idyll previously conventional in travelogues is sharp and final, which contemporaries also acknowledged in their reviews: "The cultural film must attain documentary value. However, this documentary will never be without a political flavor." (Film und Volk, No. 1, November 1928, p. 4) Bliokh's parallel montage conjoins images that have no spatial or temporal relation to one another per se, but instead these relations are first produced by the montage. Precisely because this is transparent for the audience, it is made explicit that this is an "interpretation" of the world as it appears, specifically from a socialist perspective: a "communist deciphering of the visible"[2]. The subtle difference between (justified) partisanship and propaganda is found where a person passing judgment is palpable behind the description. Through the revealing of the specific strategy of representation, the object loses authenticity, but the representation gains it. Authenticity is thus not an intentionless characteristic of images, no a priori given natural occurrence, but rather has to be understood as the form and result of media representation.

What is interesting in terms of the portrayal of power is that the author has obscured the delicate role of the Soviet Union with its financial and military support of Chiang Kai-Shek and turned his factual defeat into a moral victory for the communist workers by invoking his "betrayal". The core of the counter-information, specifically the practices of exploitation and the ruthless use of violence remain untouched by this and can thus be quite graphically disseminated. This is evident in the tremendous

resonance to the film, especially in Germany, England and America.

This is also demonstrated by an important operative film of the German workers' movement, Phil Jutzi's *1. Mai – Weltfeiertag der Arbeiterklasse* (May 1st – International Holiday of the Working Class, D 1929), which also became known by the title *Blutmai 1929 (*Bloody May 1929*)*. The film centers around a brutal police action in Berlin to enforce the demonstration prohibition against May 1st that was decreed there. Motorized police units and police on horseback disperse demonstrators in front of the central office of the Communist Party of Germany in Bülow Square (today: Rosa Luxemburg Square). Close-ups show the use of rubber clubs and single demonstrators being chased. Again and again in the tumultuous scenes, we see demonstrators fleeing, then arrests and the barricades set up by the workers. The next part shows the situation on May 2nd: even the bourgeois press is outraged by the death of nineteen demonstrators, yet the death toll will still rise by a third. Press photos edited into the film show armored vehicles and uniformed police with rifles, the film camera pans across building facades with gun holes. Police are now on patrol everywhere in the barricade quarter controlling IDs. The reportage closes with the solemn funeral for the dead and a flaming speech by Thälmann. With the large-scale mourning rally, a dramaturgical model – particularly suitable for the medium of film – is presented, which turns the factual defeat into a political victory.

What is remarkable is that a whole crowd of communist cameramen were prepared for the tumults and filmed the events from numerous perspectives, especially from the rooftops. The film about the brutal police action on the part of the police force directed by the Social-Democrat Zörgiebel vividly illustrated for many people the willingness of the German Social-Democratic

Party to join alliances against the workers and widened the gulf between the workers' parties. The articles in print media and the vividness of the film led to the founding of a non-partisan investigation committee. *Blutmai 1929* must thus be regarded as one of the most successful examples for an operative employment of media. Interestingly, the film was also screened later in the course of a court trial, obviously as something with the character of a document: "Every picture is a harrowing reproach," wrote the paper Die Rote Fahne (November 25, 1931).

The spectacular shots were subsequently repeatedly quoted, for instance in a special edition of the Soviet news program *Sojuskinojournal* No. 33 entitled *Perwoje maja w Berline* (SU 1929), in Vladimir Yerofeyev's critical portrait of Germany *Kastschastliwoi gawani* (The Happy Harbor, SU 1930), and in Ivor Montagu's *Free Thaelmann* (UK 1935). Yet it also appears in National-Socialist films as a sign of the instability of the Weimar Republic, such as in Johannes Häußler's *Blutendes Deutschland* (Bleeding Germany, D 1933) and Hans Weidemann's *Jahre der Entscheidung* (Years of Decision, D 1937-39).

For the history of filmic counter-information, there are three moments that clearly come to the forefront here: first, being precisely prepared for the (predictable) actions of the police force and the principle of collectivity (in other words the multiplication of standpoints) while filming enables the subversion of existing power relations. Secondly, there is the problem that most pictures can also be reinterpreted by the political opponent at any time. How can one film in such a way that political opponents cannot turn the pictures the way agents are turned? Thirdly, in its whole arrangement the film conveys that the director and his cameramen are united with the communist movement and the party, that they do not depict it from the outside, but rather represent it directly.

The third example from the Weimar Republic is Werner Hochbaum's film *Zwei Welten* (Two Worlds, D 1930), made on the occasion of the Reichstag elections of September 14, 1930. It is undoubtedly one of the most interesting election films of the SPD (Socialist Party of Germany), which is based entirely – in the tradition of *The Shanghai Document* – on a sharply contrasting montage between rich pleasure-seekers and poor proletarians. Elegant tennis players from high society engage in small talk, while an army of unemployed people marches by in the streets. A golf player sporting a monocle toasts his fellow sportsmen, while people seeking work stand in line at the public employment office. The wealthy, golf-playing industrialist is driven home by his chauffeur, while one of the unemployed walks back to his desolate back-yard flat. Other tenements, back-yard alleys, narrow lanes, shacks and bedraggled half-timbered houses file past: the homes of the proletariat. Meanwhile, the industrialist changes into a Nazi uniform and visits his bored mistress in a salon. As is frequently the case with Hochbaum, detail shots, such as pulling on the armband with the swastika, contain the essential characterization. Rarely has a film so succinctly and sharply described the close relationship between industrialists and fascists.

For the principle of counter-information, the hybrid film form is interesting here, in other words the fact that documentary observations are permeated with staged scenes. In portraying persons of power, there are many situations that cannot easily be filmed as a documentary, since access to shoot the film is not permitted. In addition, power is portrayed here with irony, with subtly covert sarcasm, which makes the political opponent appear ridiculous while seeming to approve. The incidental change of clothing goes beyond this and advances to a politically intensified mental image. With the use of irony and mental image, a meta-

level arises: the pictures are no longer read only at the first level of meaning.

Chris Marker and François Reichenbach's *La sixième face du Pentagone* (The Sixth Side of the Pentagon, F 1968) documents the march on the Pentagon from October 21, 1967 in the course of a demonstration against the Vietnam war. In the crucial phase of the demonstration the chain of guards gives way and part of the crowd breaks through, running towards the entrance of the ministry of war. Now the police force demonstrates its full brutality: the students are greeted on the stairs of the building with clubs and driven back. The image of the police officers with clubs between the pillars of the entrance to the Pentagon is exactly the image that the demonstrators desired – as Hilmar Hoffmann analysed at the time: "It is not a matter of storming the Pentagon, but rather the symbol that it stands for. Through the principle of non-violence, with which the hundred-thousand demonstrators wanted to draw attention to their movement inspired by *élan revolutionnaire*, they wanted to discredit the legal power before the whole world. The representatives of this power were ultimately forced to acknowledge their own impotence in the face of the entirely peaceful plebiscite."[3]

What is interesting about this sequence is that Marker used it again several years later in his film *Le fond de l'air est rouge* (1977), investigating it in terms of its political function: "There are only a few policemen to be seen, and they are overrun by the crowd. The crowd is ecstatic that it has crossed a boundary that no one wanted to keep them from. And then order is restored again there on the steps following an attempt that must be called symbolic to penetrate the interior. The police were really afraid, they should not have been alarmed. I filmed these scenes at the time and then, to meet bluff with bluff, I presented them as a victory of the

movement. But when I look at these pictures today and compare them with the reports by police, who said that they set fire to commissioners' offices themselves in May 1968, then I wonder if some of our victories in the 60s were not at this same level."

This honest and self-critical analysis was probably only possible after a period of several years. The film author questions the images. The picture is no longer taken for granted as a document of a situation. There are contexts and truths, which – depending on the historical point in time – are faded in or faded out. The author has become a lone warrior. He no longer has to be considerate of the party rationale or the goals of the movement. He can even criticize it, when he compares the widely propagated "victories of the 60s" with the tall tales of the pseudo-radical policemen. It seems to be a matter of political counter-information, but it is really a matter of bluff and illusion, of feints, pretended attacks and deceit. Everything has become a little ambiguous, even the seemingly so unequivocal images – or should I say *especially* the seemingly so unequivocal images? Marker's lesson is: nothing is unambiguous. Nothing is simple.

Unlike the film from 1967/68, *Le fond de l'air est rouge* is an essay film, such as those made particularly in periods of political crisis, when people need to be set free from their old ties. "Perhaps one should say: 'in-between time', because optimism makes people so dumb and pessimism makes them so inflexible." [4]The separation between the political and the private, as it was still consistently maintained in the operative films of the German communist party of the 20s, is undermined in the essay film.

In 1977 Marker takes recourse, among other things, to pictures that he shot himself, adds new commentaries to them from across the span of time, thus creating distance with simple, artificial

coloration. In *Sans Soleil* in 1982, the time that has passed since the first shooting is made even more radically visible in the body of the images themselves: the demonstration pictures from the 60s from the airport project Narita are manipulated with an image synthesizer, flooded with changing color values so that the outlines of what is depicted dissolve, unravel, become deformed, keeping the image constantly and slightly in motion. Pictures of demonstrators raising their fists over and over have become a convention through the inflationary use of the counter-public sphere of the 70s, have seized up. Something similar applies to the frequently shown pictures of kamikaze pilots. Marker's procedure works especially well with these traumatic image motifs. In the commentary he calls these pictures "less dishonest", because they do not intend to be anything but "pictures" and not a past form of reality that has long since become unreachable.

The only thing that Marker considers truthful is the perspective of the moment, which is identified as such. However, the image reservoir that is stored in photo and film does not keep up with this rewriting of the past, because it remains bound to the appearance of the moment through the exactness of reproduction. In the manipulated images Marker shows the inevitable distance to the unmediated event, which our memory has long since taken as an unconscious non-operation: the drift of the images. Marker's depiction of the power or impotence of today's demonstrators in light of the airport that has been built is also marked by the eminence of an independent spirit, for which the result of the conflict is not the only criterion: "In fact, the fight was lost. At the same time, though, everything that they won in terms of insight into world events and self-recognition could not have been attained except through fighting."

In Germany, the events of autumn 1977 rocked the optimistic scenario of the "counter-public sphere", as it had been represented by the movement of 1968 and according to which a filmmaker works for a concrete audience, as a medium in service to a cause. It is not a coincidence that the essayist collective film *Deutschland im Herbst* (Germany in Autumn, D 1978) marks a heightened sensitivity for the staging of reality, in between Schleyer's funeral and the terrorists' funeral. It is not a coincidence that the distrust of what the official dictum calls "reality" began in the "German Autumn". It is not a coincidence that since this time the author has become more important in film, as has the subjective film form all the way to the essay film. The retreat into an "inner public sphere", as it has been described as the reaction to the news of the Stammheim deaths, took place under the conditions of a news blackout and sudden flood of information. The widespread helplessness and uncertainty about official and unofficial representations led to people finding security, calmness, and the "rhythm of a self-determined search for truth" only within themselves.

It is only against this background that, for example, Alexander Kluge's sharp criticism of the emblematicness of pictures as conveyed by television can be understood: parades, politicians' rituals, staged public sphere. In the collective film *Krieg und Frieden* (War and Peace, D 1982/83) made by Kluge, Böll, Aust and Schlöndorff, they develop counter-strategies, for example by shooting these kinds of events "from the periphery". The news shots that have melted into conventions of an arriving politician getting out of an airplane and crossing a red carpet are shown here from the periphery of the event, from the perspective of the personnel: helicopters with top European and American politicians land in rapid succession. By concentrating on the helpers who roll

out the carpet again each time, suffering – like the journalists present – under the wind from the helicopter blades, the film clearly reveals the staging of the ritual and simultaneously turns it over to derision.

A procedure working "from the periphery" thus allows the camera to look at incidental scenes, virtually turns them around, for example by looking at the press taking photos. At the moment when the official cameras of state television are turned on, these cameras of counter-information are turned off. The classical center, the "main event" is not filmed. The commentary provides additionally researched information, for instance that the landing of the helicopters is arranged according to the order of the gross national product of the states. Today preparation (e.g. accreditation as journalists) and post-production (subsequent research for information) have become indispensable for successful counter-information. The days of a simple accompaniment in solidarity with social movements are over once and for all.

Incidentally, the authors also apply the same procedures to conventionalized pictures of demonstrations. The major demonstration of the peace movement with 300,000 participants in Bonn is described from the perspective of the "toilet men". In an adjacent noble hotel, the hotel employees ponderously regulate the demonstrators' access to the toilets. The lines in front of the door say as much about the success of the demonstration in terms of numbers as the shots of crowds or announcements about numbers of participants.

Johan van der Keuken also shoots "from the periphery" in at least several passages. In *De platte Jungle* (The Flat Jungle, NL 1978), we see and hear a conversation between the author of the film behind the camera with a union representative seeking to justify the

health-hazardous expansion of industry along the coast. For the principle of counter-information, it is initially striking that van der Keuken does not simply let the union representative talk, but argues with him instead, virtually besieging him with hard questions ("Where is socialism left then, if one runs after the entrepreneurs like that?"). For an argumentative discussion conducted with such presence of mind, though, the filmmaker must be well prepared and in a position to oppose his counterpart. Marcel Ophüls, for instance, mastered this perfectly; a certain independence, a theatrical and possibly even physical presence are part of this, too, however. [5]

In van der Keuken's case it is the union representative that is the "poor sod" who is obviously squirming under the pressure of the questions, yet who is simultaneously a power figure as the responsible union representative speaking for an important institution (to the tradition and responsibility of which van der Keuken refers with an insert and a pan to a union poster "90 Years of Struggle"). After the union representative has been outed as a lackey of the entrepreneurs in a conversation lasting perhaps five minutes, van der Keuken does something unexpected: he adds another minute, in which the union representative is not seen in his professional function, but rather as a private person, singing out loud as he drives, the son visiting his old parents in the country once a week and feeding the chickens with them. This is also part of a procedure that works "from the periphery": the depicted center – the profession and the function and the power as union representative – is extended (at least for a moment) by the other side of the personality. Although Keuken does not weaken his argument at all in this way, he is protective of the human being.

Theatrical presence, humor and quick-wittedness also distinguish Michael Moore in *Roger and Me* (1989); he has even been called a

"political stand-up comedian". In his film, Moore attempts to confront Roger Smith, then head of General Motors, who had cut 30,000 jobs in Moore's home town of Flint. In this unequal duel between David and Goliath, Moore is naturally always turned away. In the finale, however, there is an encounter – created with montage – between the head of the corporation and the victims of his decision: a self-righteous, sanctimonious Christmas speech before shareholders is edited together with a forced eviction in Flint taking place at the same time. The family with several children is unable to pay debts amounting to $ 150 and clears out their meager belongings, carrying them piece by piece to a car. Although the method of political parallel montage originated at the beginning of the century (such as in *The Shanghai Document*), it is still far from being exhausted. Today's films of counter-information are distinguished by an extensive arsenal of stylistic devices: self-criticism, bluff, irony, wit, the view of events from the periphery, the letter form, dialogical film forms.

Films discussed:

Schanchaiskį dokument (The Shanghai Document, SU 1928, 60') Yakov Bliokh

Blutmai (Bloody May, D 1929, 12') - Phil Jutzi

Zwei Welten (Two Worlds, D 1930, 15') - Werner Hochbaum

Le fond de l'air est rouge (The Base of the Air is Red, F 1977, 179') - Chris Marker

Sans Soleil (Sunless, F 1982, 100') - Chris Marker

Krieg und Frieden (War and Peace, D 1982/83, 107') - Kluge, Böll, Aust, Schlöndorff

De platte Jungle (The Flat Jungle, NL 1978, 90') - Johan van der Keuken

Roger and me (USA 1989, 90') - Michael Moore

Der Renegat Nr. 2 (D 1995, 97') - Abbildungszentrum

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[1] Cf. (forthcoming): Thomas Tode, "Sowjetische Dokumentarfilme in der Weimarer Republik – oder die Erfindung des modernen Dokumentarfilms in Geiste der Russen", in *West-östliche Spiegelungen*, Neue Folge, Band 2, Lotman Institut der Un iversität Bochum 2004 (printing in progress).

[2] Dziga Vertov, Schriften zum Film, Munich 1973, p. 112.

[3] Hilmar Hoffmann, "La sixième face du Pentagon", in: *XIV. Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage 1968*, Oberhausen 1969, p. 69 ff. Also in: Westdeutsche Kurzfilm-Tage Oberhausen (Ed.), Edited by: Wolfgang Ruf, *Möglichkeiten des Dokumentarfilms*, Oberhausen 1979, p. 134.

[4] Mathias Greffrath, *Montaigne heute. Leben in Zwischenzeiten*, Zurich: Diogenes 1998, p. 23.

[5] On a side note, this was perhaps the greatest problem with the Bonengel film *Beruf Neonazi* (Neo-Nazi by Profession) and the Robby Müller film about *Leni Riefenstahl*: neither of the film authors was prepared to counter the media sophistication of their counterparts.