09 2007

What Does It Mean to Make Films Politically Today?

Once Godard made the claim that it is no longer enough to make political films: one must make films politically.

Dmitry Vilensky

01. Old Questions

All those who understand that aesthetics, politics, and economics form a vital nexus believe that art can reveal with particular force the most acute problems of social development. History is a clash between different groups who defend not only their right to speak out, but also their vision of the future. If we wish to continue the political project today we must first pose the old question: Who is the subject of historical development and knowledge? And we must actualize the simplicity of the old answer: the struggling, oppressed class itself (Benjamin).

Contemporary political art strives to be consonant with the search for this subject, not with the mythic subject of previous social revolutions. As in the mid-19th century, we are once again hard pressed to say what this subject will be like. Nowadays we should, rather, speak of a fidelity to the old answer. This doesn't mean that filmmakers, intellectuals, and artists should personally keep faith with the current anti-capitalist movement. They should remain faithful, rather, to the space of subjectivity that gave rise to the movement.

It is this space where one affirms that making films politically means striving towards a historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. The artist/filmmaker should discover himself in the process of becoming-"proletarian." He should use his work to further the becoming-artist of the "proletariat," via the participation of the masses in different forms of creativity. The question remains the same, then. It is a question of the artist's political position: Whose side are you on?

02. The Position of the Speaking Subject

The main difference between the art of cinema/video and social journalism is that the artist cannot naively affirm that he is giving someone else a voice. It is always the filmmaker who speaks. Thus, alienating reality through a constant interrogation of the process of film production itself and the power institutions underlying production/distribution isn't something external to the film's formal organization, but an integral part of its structure, a method for making it. The truly political film (the thoroughly politicized film) isn't a film about politics. It is a film that problematizes the privilege of the speaking subject by revealing his social and class ties.

03. The Collective Nature of Filmmaking

Filmmaking is always a collective endeavor. This might be eclipsed by the personality of the director, who fashions his auteur's message by appropriating the creative resources of professionals and amateurs.

The making of a film, however, can be a model for the fullest unfolding of the entire collective's creative powers, with each participant acting as an equal co-creator. The process of "making film politically" should engender its own artistic soviet or council—a collective decision-making body that lends legitimacy to the

aesthetic utterance. Its task is comparable to those faced by structures for political self-government—soviets—which are supposed to make concrete decisions by combining representation (during the making of a film, a particular task would be delegated to the directing group or the camera group) with participatory democracy. Delegation arises from extensive collective discussion, from the articulation of a common position.

04. Realism

Cinema and video are manifestations of the realist current in art history. The new technological and media forms of documentalism are the latest avatars of this line. They are heirs to the realistic tradition in art and cannot be understood without analyzing it.

From its emergence, realism set itself the task of uncovering the meaning of reality in its development. This task, however, is also a political task.

Documentalism helps us rethink the problem of mimesis that has plagued traditional art forms like theater and painting (this rethinking began with the Brecht-Lukács debate) and tackle the problem of authenticity at another level.

As Brecht proved so precisely then, authenticity has nothing to do with the "simple photographic reflection of reality." Authenticity is based on the work's construction, for even in the most "faithful" documentary film "there is no material that is free of organization." Authenticity, the principal quality of a realistic work, is always a formal construction. It enables us to "extract" reality from the authoritative subjective interpretations proffered by false consciousness.

05. In Search of the Typical

Realism becomes such when it depicts not the concrete and particular (which is the case in mainstream contemporary art, where identity politics is hegemonic in representation), but the typical. As Engels famously put it, realism's principal task is "the truthful reproduction of typical characters in typical circumstances." The typicalist approach allows us to think and embody the problematics of contemporary society as an integral system rife with contradiction and in need of transformation. This take on reality is essentially cartographic. It rejects the bourgeois fetishism of difference, choosing instead to reflect the similarity in situations of oppression, exclusion, and resistance.

06. The Problem of Form

Traditional realism is characterized by its content. Today, the formal problem is solved not by coming up with new, eye-popping stunts (we'll leave that to Hollywood), but by constructing the film in a principally different way.

This construction can be based on a careful investigation of a situation that, for all its historical uniqueness, can lay claim to typicality or universality.

Nowadays, it is difficult to list the formal aspects of the truly politicized film. We can, rather, define these qualities by negating the dominant language of commercial art and film. This language is based on the aesthetics of sensation, seduction, and intoxication. It is the language of fragmentation and clever montage, and bombards the viewer with sound effects. We are well aware of the populist appeal of these devices and

strive (not always successfully) to resist it.

These type of films are minimalist not because of its low budget, but because it consciously embraces a reduction: it rejects the culinary approach. The language of the contemporary politicized film is the language of a consciously adopted visual asceticism. We once again remember Godard's famous preference for a ten-dollar budget.

This doesn't mean, however, that these films reject involving the viewer aesthetically and emotionally. This rejection is sometimes a serious deficiency in many contemporary works. The tradition of political cinema has evolved a whole set of means for exerting ideo-aesthetic pressure; it suffices to mention the alienation effect. The process of "making film politically" leads to construction of a multilayered composition that combines emotional effects and total intellectual analysis. Paradoxically, we must learn to touch the viewer's heart without entertaining him.

07. Teaching/Learning

It is a common opinion that contemporary political film is a film that teaches. Is it true? Whom does it teach? It is easy to say that it is open to everyone. I do not think that it works today.

"Make film politically" means to address to those who already have the experience of political development and are looking for ways to grow further. The task of truly political films is not just documentation and agitation: this task we can leave to social journalism. If there is as yet no place for such films in the media, we can clear a path for them into culture. But let's not confuse social journalism with art. I think that there is another role of understanding political process. It, rather, is to show the complexity of political subjectivization. "Cultivating the political instinct" means revealing all the difficulties and pitfalls of the becoming-political. It doesn't mean pretending that everything is simple and you have an answer to every question: we'll leave this stance to the parties and trade unions. Brecht's method of "learning plays" is once again important. This method calls on us to refuse the media's hierarchical and manipulative strategies. Instead, each time we strive to include collective, participatory practices in the film's making and thus seek new ways to exit the dead ends of political life.

"Make film politically" does not mean to make simply teaching films. It means to show us the learning process itself.