05 2003

"... beyond the limitations of the rectangular frame"

Michaela Pöschl

Translated by Aileen Derieg

La Commune. Paris 1871 is described as an "UFO in the audiovisual landscape"[1], a film that "falls out of the frame". The subject matter: the workers' revolution of 1871 in Paris ending with a bloodbath – 30,000 Communards dead.[2] The title of my essay quotes the director Peter Watkins. He describes *La Commune* as a process moving outside the boundaries of the framework – in film language: the frame. How does *La Commune* show the actions of a crowd, how does the film give this crowd of workers a form, and how is taking action (reflection and action) possible beyond this representation? Watkins' question and mine as well is: Can the principles of collectivity and self-organization, but also the contradictoriness of the Commune be suitably represented? A film grew out of this question about suitable representation, which leaves behind the traditional framework of production and reception at three levels: at the level of form, at the level of the production process, and at the level of distribution and presentation.

I.

La Commune was supported by Arte and the Paris Musee d'Orsay. Although it was originally planned to produce a 35 mm version from the 16 mm negative for the cinema, there was not enough money to do so, because Arte did not uphold the agreement to release and distribute a video edition, and the film, being 345 minutes long, found neither producer nor distributor. The film was shot in an empty factory building in June 1999 over 13 days, following the chronological sequence of events. Neon lights were mounted on the ceiling of the building providing even lighting. This made lamps on the floor superfluous, camera and sound technicians could move freely through the crowd. The set, a series of interconnecting spaces, represents the 11th Arrondissement of Paris, a center of revolutionary activity during the Commune as a workers' district. On the one hand, it is very faithful to detail and "realistically" designed, but the boundaries of the illusion remain visible at the same time. Exterior spaces are declared interior spaces, the set switches constantly between "the illusion" of the film and "the reality" of the protagonists.[3]

Over 220 people from in and around Paris took part, 60% of them without acting experience, including unemployed people, Sans-Papiers from Algeria and Morocco, most of them from various leftist connection, but also people from the right-wing camp.[4] To begin with, the participants spent a year researching the history and their own roles – with support from the film's research team. [5] After this, there were further discussions in groups about the backgrounds and motives of the roles and about parallels between the political situation then and now. Debates were continued during the thirteen days of shooting: among the participants, with Watkins and the team, about what one would say, how one could feel, how to react to historical and current political events. The

results of these exchanges were finally improvised in front of the camera.

Universal Clock[6], a documentary about the making of *La Commune*, shows Watkins instructing the right-wing historian Foucart: "You don't have to search for a position, I want you to be yourself." But who is he "himself"? I wonder how differently Watkins assesses so-called "learning from history"[7] for left and right-wing participants[8] (was it the case that the former found and changed their positions in long discussions, while the latter were simply supposed to "be themselves"?), but I also wonder about what the exchange between left and right-wing groups was like during the production process. *Universal Clock* also shows Watkins giving a participant explicit instructions to look into the camera: "... it's not natural otherwise." The question arises again as to his – and also our – ideas of "authentic" behavior in front of a camera. Which form may improvisation by amateurs have? Which images do we regard as "natural" and "improvised"? Which images do we see in *La Commune*?

There is no "heroic figure". The heroine is a crowd of people with their strengths and contradictions. Long camera pans from group to group shot with a wide-angle lens, always with more than three people in the picture, fish out single discussions from the crowd and the constant noise level and tumult – latently and permanently representing the crowd. This form conveys a social dynamic, because contrary to close-ups representing the individuality of heroes and heroines, we see the hope of a crowd, their fears, anger, debates, differences, conflicts – and movements between all these states. *La Commune* shows less action than emotional states and reflection against the background of political struggles.

Watkins' anachronistic strategy of integrating two television teams in the plot that plays over fifty years before the invention of television raises the question of a changed, emancipatory role of media. There is the state, one-dimensional Versailles TV with interviews with experts and ideological commentaries, and there is the Commune TV, where mainly Communards speak, but also bourgeois and clergy. The two TV teams play a central role in structuring the film around its "collective protagonist" (the crowd), because it is the television reports that join the single scenes together, rather than a linear, ordered plot. Events are often interrupted by journalists conducting interviews with participants. In part, it is historical figures that have a chance to speak, but mostly it is the anonymous crowd of workers; the perspective is that of "history" from below.[9]

The film shows the crowd, often associated with "disorder" in the negative sense, as a desiring, diversely constituted power. A general in the government army says in *La Commune*: "This is total disorder. The Commune spreads disorder, it's that simple. We restore order. The French understand that. No people in the world wants to live in disorder. We guarantee order." The film thus represents an image of dis-order that eludes this order, a space of self-determined agency and negotiation.[10] "We disagree, that is bad. No, it's good, that is movement,"[11] is said in Bertolt Brecht's play *The Days of the Commune*. Watkins' film gives this movement a fitting form – an appropriate process of creation, which is in turn closely interwoven with issues of form.

II.

In Brecht's epic theater, alienation effects produce "suspensions" intended to provide space for reflection for the audience *and* the performers. And the reflection is expressed (in the best case), according to Brecht, as "debates", "responsible decisions", "attempts at well-founded positions"[12]. *La Commune* represents the search for an opinion and the search for a suitable language for it. It does so not at the level of form[13], but rather at the level of the activities of the protagonists. Three mutually overlapping phases can be distinguished in the entire production process: before the filming, during it and afterward. The most important aspect of the before phase was asking the protagonists to take part in researching a key event from their own history. In other words, it is a matter of writing history, of language, and of the ability to take action. The protagonists largely developed their "parole"[14] themselves. The entire film revolves around a collective search for a language that is able to convey their own wishes and demands. Clothed in historical garb, the protagonists speak about their own situation and develop common strategies for action.[15] The film offers them a platform for developing new feelings and attitudes, thinking new thoughts, and trying out language/thinking and taking action as *one* action. Towards the end of the film, a protagonist formulates what distinguishes participation in *La Commune* from participation in a conventional film in her view: "In the film you are on .... the barricades and you are mixed up in a battle, in a ... physical battle. As soon as the camera comes and you have to speak, it is difficult, because thinking has to correspond to doing. There is a possibility for change in this kind of work. (...) The transformation depends mostly on whether we succeed in harmonizing our thinking and actions and fighting for our ideals. And that does not necessarily have to be with physical violence." Patrick Murphy, Watkins' biographer, stated rather emotionally:

"Watkins' cast do not *act* in the normal sense of the word – they become."[16]

Towards the end of the film, the actions of the protagonists become increasingly free, not only in the interviews with journalists, but also in long discussions among themselves. They discuss social and economic inequalities today and the question of help. Is it not better to investigate the structures of violence and change them, than to think about help *for* "others"? "I have used my own work," writes Watkins, "to demonstrate the possibilities for working with the public to develop alternative media processes, in order to change the existing system."[17] In the film, a protagonist says, "She remains a bourgeoise, who wants to help the poor. That is no way to make a revolution." The point is obviously the need for changing social structures, not a need for help. On this, Brecht wrote: "If violence no longer dominates, there is no more need for help. Therefore, you should not demand help, but get rid of violence. Help and violence form a whole. And the whole must be changed."[18]

"Unfortunately, even within the ranks of those leading protest against globalization," says Watkins, criticizing the positions of video activists that are often uncritical of media in his opinion, "many people apparently cannot identify the media as being a crucial part of the problem! More precisely, they appear reluctant to debate media form and process, or interactive communication with the public; they continue, instead, to produce monoform videos and films *about* their protest work, and the problems of globalization."[19] For him, the key is found in activating the crowd in the context of image production as well: "Individuals and community groups can and should play a direct role in deciding and creating what they see via the audiovisual media."[20]

The almost six-hour action of the film repeatedly involves creating a space of one's own, a voice of one's own, images of one's own: a space for the "Union des Femmes" in the city hall, a separate newspaper for women, the Communards' own television. "We will no longer be silent," it is said. "We want to be able to criticize." The Commune television broadcast is accordingly entitled: "Commune Television. Everyone is talking about the Commune". With the rise of representative politics within the Commune, however, the familiar problems of filmic representation also occur. For instance, journalists in the film have to discuss whether they should mention the Commune's idea of setting up a welfare committee in their broadcast (and thus shifting the Commune into a negative light) or not.

In 1871 the Commune successively excluded single positions and established hierarchies: first it was decided to hold meetings behind closed doors, then in the course of impending defeat, there was spying on "suspicious" persons, finally newspapers critical of the Commune were forbidden, and newspapers sympathizing with the Commune spread false information. "We want no authority that has all the power," says a woman in the film to the two reporters from Commune TV. "You are the only medium that reaches illiterate people, you are indispensable, people believe everything you say. We don't want that any longer! This permanent opposition must stop: Hierarchy is assailed with power and vice versa; and the fighting will go on and on until one is at the very top to set up the next dictatorship. Everything remains as it was." For several years now, hundreds of people are regularly seen at anti-globalization demos with video cameras, documenting the events, filming police assaults and uploading the images to the Internet, where they are accessible to everyone. At one level, a democratization of the medium is taking place here. At the level of

the definition of images, though, everything still remains the same: the fight for images that are supposed to tell "the truth", "the story".[21] *La Commune* repeatedly raises the question of the extent to which filming can be a revolutionary action. How important is the representation of the revolution? Can "watching" be more than voyeurism? "I'm sick of you standing around here and filming all the time and you don't even give a damn! Whether it's film or reality, you just stare! I want to fight against that!" screams a woman on the barricades. The resistance ultimately turns against Watkins himself. The whole film is shot with a single camera, which – unlike the interviewing journalists – never comes into the picture. The camera/the director is the blind spot of the film: There is much to debate[22], but what was not debated was the hierarchy between director and protagonists. They objected to, among other things, Watkins' method of sequence shots: the camera moves for ten minutes from one group to another, and as soon as the camera is there, it needs articulation at all costs. Some found themselves frustrated by the practice of having a microphone held in front of their mouths and taken away again faster than they wanted. In this context, the "Union des Femmes" demanded a half-hour discussion for themselves without cuts and with all the protagonists in the picture, and Watkins agreed to this: the form of the film developed from its production process, which enabled the protagonists to formulate their situation and tackle self-determined changes. This also affected the length of the film (six hours instead of two). However, Watkins did not agree to the more expansive request of some of the protagonists of merging their ideas of "direct public involvement" into a collective film process and finishing shooting the film together. "I remain anchored in traditionally hierarchical practices. (...) I believe," said Watkins about the problematic issue of hierarchy, "that *La Commune* gives examples of both, egocentric and open, pluralistic

forms. It is the role of *La Commune* to pose these issues for open discussion on a community, workplace, classroom level."[23]

III.

Aside from form and production process, it is primarily the alternative idea of distribution and presentation that goes well beyond the "rectangular frame".

"... the street belongs to us. This street belongs to us," screams a protagonist in *La Commune*. The communication of the participants among themselves led to the association *Le Rebond pour la Commune*. As *Le Rebond* defines its objectives on the website: "Seeing the difficulties which a film of such scope encounters, the insidious censoring by Arte on TV and their refusal to distribute the film on video, the refusal of French film distributors to release the film asks questions of our capacity to prolong and develop the process of resistance and participation. This is why our association sets itself the objective to initiate collective projects and debates around the questions which *La Commune* raises for us: To create free speech, with or without the institutions."[24] The protagonists still remained in contact after the shooting was finished; through their website they distribute videos and DVDs, press material, books, texts on the film, a teaching guide in English and French for possible screenings at schools, and an exhibition on the film with ten panels. In conjunction with extensive presentation tours all the way to Africa and South America, but also throughout Europe, Le Rebond organizes discussions and workshops (with historians from the research team, participants, production assistants, and others). The focus of the group's activities is thus not only on the distribution

of the film: it is most of all a matter of publicizing and expanding the process beyond the product.

Form, production and distribution process generate for both participants and recipients spaces of reflection, language and action, which reflect on and potentially change the traditional hierarchical structures of filmic production and political organization. As Watkins says on his website: "Le Rebond is undoubtedly the most important ongoing development in the process of any film I have made – and shows that it is entirely possible to create processes within the audiovisual media which can move beyond the limitations of the rectangular frame."[25]

---

[1] Cf.: http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Part III ("La Commune de Paris") / Response in France / Les Inrockuptibles.

[2] On the history and significance of the Commune, see: Karl Marx, Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich, in: Iring Fetscher (Ed.), Karl Marx, Friedrich Engles, Studienausgabe in 4 Bänden, Band IV, Frankfurt 1990; Guy Debord, Attila Kotanyi, Raoul Vaneigem, Theses on the Paris Commune, March 1962, in: http://members.opusnet.com.au/~rkeehan/si/commune.html; Hannah Arendt, Über die Revolution, Munich 1965, p.336f; Die Pariser Kommune 1871, anarchistische texte 16, Berlin, March 1979; Antje Schrupp, Frauen in der Pariser Kommune 1871, in: http://www.anarchismus.at/txt2/kommune.htm.

[3] On the preparation and production of *La Commune* see: http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Part III ("La Commune de Paris") / Production background.

[4] Watkins also placed an ad inviting participation in the film in the conservative daily paper Le Figaro. This led to contact with the right-wing historian Francois Foucart, among others, who plays in the film himself. Mentioned in: Peter Lennon, Hate and War, Interview with Peter Watkins, The Guardian, 25 February 2000.

[5] On the work of the research team and the names of the historians involved, see: http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Part III ("La Commune de Paris") / Filming "La Commune" – before, during, and after.

[6] Geoff Bowie, The Universal Clock, 35mm, 76 Min., Canada 2001. For more information on the film and Geoff Bowie's filmography, see: http://www.nfb.ca/universal_clock/bowie.html.

[7] What is to be "learned" is that "history ... is the object of a construction, the place of which is not homogeneous and empty time, but instead forms that which is filled with the now", wrote Walter Benjamin in 1939 (Walter Benjamin, Über den Begriff der Geschichte, in: Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, Band I.2, Frankfurt 1991, p.701).

[8] Watkins speaks vaguely about the role of those who play the Versailles army and the bourgeoisie in the film in the program booklet on the film: My Purpose in making La Commune, in: La Commune, un film de Peter Watkins, available for purchase from: http://www.lerebond.org/.

[9] Cf. Mike Wayne, The Tragedy of History: Peter Watkins's *La Commune*, in: Third Text, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 2002, p.65f.

[10] Primarily through Peter Watkins' formal decision to always show at least three people in discussion in the picture, but also through his decision in favor of a production staged as a process of

discussion and reflection. At the same time, however, the director also produces "order" by guiding 220 protagonists over a period of a year, staging the six-hour film within thirteen days, editing the material and – in any case – making his selection. (I am grateful to Angela Melitopoulos for pointing this out.)

[11] Bertolt Brecht, Die Tage der Commune, in: Bertolt Brecht, Gesammelte Werke 5, Stücke 5, Frankfurt 1967, p. 2135.

[12] Walter Benjamin, Was ist das epische Theater ? (1), in: Walter Benjamin, Gesammelte Schriften, Band II.2, Frankfurt 1991, p.527f.

[13] “La Commune has the loose discursive constitution of epic theatre, which Brecht described as developing in ‘curves’ and ‘jumps’, with ‘each scene for itself’”, as Mike Wayne describes the form of the film (The Tragedy of History: Peter Watkins’ *La Commune*, in: Third Text, Vol. 16, Issue 1, 2002, p.67.)

[14] See: Peter Watkins, My Purpose in making La Commune, in: La Commune, un film de Peter Watkins, (program booklet).“Parole” means “word”, “language” or “verbal exchange”.

[15] "I believe that ... our asking the cast to combine ...[their] research with ... [their] own ideas and perspectives (= ... [their] own parole) ... is of crucial importance," as Watkins outlines this process. “What is especially significant ... is the constant linking between the personal and the historical perspectives in our film, creating a form of living history ...” (Peter Watkins, My Purpose in making La Commune, in: La Commune, un film de Peter Watkins, program booklet.)

[16] Quoted from: Peter Lennon, Hate and War, Interview with Peter Watkins, The Guardian, 25 February 2000

[17] http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Summary of the Web-Site / The personal level, and Le Rebond.

[18] Quoted from: Gerald Raunig, *Spacing the Lines*. Konflikt statt Harmonie. Differenz statt Identität. Struktur statt Hilfe, in: Stella Rollig, Eva Sturm (Ed.), Dürfen die das? Vienna 2002, p.118.

[19] http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Summary of the Website / The global crisis, the MAVN, and media education.

[20] http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Summary of the Website / The community level.

[21] Cf. Hito Steyerl, Die Artikulation des Protestes, in: Gerald Raunig (Ed.), Transversal. Kunst und Globalisierungskritik, Vienna 2003, p.19-28.

[22] Watkins speaks of a "democratic interchange ... It means direct public involvement, at the local community level, in devising editorial content, film form, themes, and alternative processes" (http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Summary of the Website / What are the alternatives?).

[23] http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Part III ("La Commune de Paris") / Centralizing? Collective? Or both?

[24] http://www.lerebond.org/.

[25] http://www.peterwatkins.lt/ / Part III ("La Commune de Paris") / Filming "La Commune" – before, during, and after.