

A Note on The Regressive Side of Modernization in Relation to Two Films by Robert Altman

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My intention here is not so much to offer a reading of Robert Altman's science fiction film *Quintet*, but to begin to think, very tentatively, about the types of "utopian texts" we may hope to encounter in a world context of general crisis and cultural exhaustion. At the same time, I hope the type of reflection I am proposing here will help to explain my interest in Robert Altman's work.

Quintet is set in a medieval Ice Age in the distant future, near the "end of History", as one of the characters puts it (the film was made in 1979, a decade before Fukuyama's notorious pseudo-Hegelian decree). The Paul Newman character comes back to his native town in search of "work", only to find out that this old-fashioned practice has been widely replaced by a board game called "Quintet". The rules are incomprehensible, both to the audience and to many of the participants, and the only connection between the arbitrary decision-making process and the players is a "judge", whose task is to make sure the latter obey the rules of "ethics" (the choice of terms couldn't be more appropriate). "Quintet", we find out as the film moves towards the end, is actually a game which involves the lives of the participants and the punishment for losing is death. The film has been read by a number of critics as an allegory of the system of Hollywood film making¹ (a theme which, understandably, became an obsession with Altman), but it

can also, of course, be more widely seen as an allegory of the market and the contemporary regime of the global division of labor: in this dystopian world, the forces of production are frozen (literally, in this case), immobilized, driven by invisible and irrational forces which can, indeed, lead to the death of those involved.

I would like to contrast this film with another of Altman's box office disasters: *Kansas City* (1996). Here the ins-and-outs of American politics and business (as well as organized crime; in the film the two terms are synonymous) are commented on by a jam session at a jazz club. Jam sessions, which can last days with musicians replacing each other as weariness demands they take a break, are an incredibly democratic form of collective cultural production: musical themes, or "challenges", are picked up, commented upon, changed, exchanged and developed in endless, often unpredictable directions. Not even the rules and hierarchies of tonal music need to be obeyed. This combination of labor and *jouissance*, however, is very different from the "free-for-all" of liberal pluralism: the condition for participating is rigorous training in and mastery of one's instrument and the general rules of improvisation. I am inclined to think that the contrast between the two films, that is, between, on the one hand, an analysis of the waste of productive forces and, on the other, the full exploitation of a wide range of talent and expressive possibilities, offers a comment on the history of film which can be of interest for those concerned with thinking about the "utopian text".

The concept of the "waste of the productive forces" was explored by Marx in all the volumes of the *Capital*, but especially in the third, where he establishes a connection between rising levels of accumulation of capital and the fall of the tendential rate of profit, the latter being related to the exploitation of time spent on labor, greatly diminished in Marx's own time – and much more so in ours – by new waves of technological innovation. The creation of ever greater numbers of "superfluous" laborers, who cannot be incorporated by the economic system despite whatever social investment is made in them, leads to what Marx called the "waste of productive forces". The usefulness of the concept for the analysis of cultural production depends, of course, on the assumption that both intellectual and "common" laborers are equally subject to the constraints and rules of the division of labor. One of the most successful critical efforts to understand this connection and its consequences was made by Walter Benjamin, especially in the essays "The Author as Producer" (1934) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935-6).

The latter is maybe better known and its main propositions have been widely debated. Of the two propositions that interest me here, the first still

attracts some interest, whereas the second is usually treated with a certain feeling of nostalgia, as a treasure of happier former times, when the idea of change and, why not, revolution still seemed to be alive, something we can get rid of now that we “know best”. The first proposition has to do with the conditions of collective recognition and visibility of the inescapable relationship between art and politics. The final formulation of the text is well known and applies both to the '30s as well as to our own age: at a time in which fascism regards war as an aesthetic experience of the highest order, revolutionary demands must respond by politicizing art. Or as Raymond Williams once put it, the artist who shouts stridently for “freedom” (which usually means the freedom to compete in the cultural market) against “engagement”, has already aligned himself with the historical forces he pretends to ignore.² Thus the need, as Benjamin claims, to avoid bourgeois illusions about culture and insist on the social function of art, on its material bases, and on the collective nature of even the most “personal” expression. (Now, however, that very few artists (or critics) express any hesitation when the first chance to flirt with the market looms on the horizon, and that the materiality of culture is acknowledged without a blush, there has been renewed interest, at least in Marxist quarters, in the debate between Benjamin and Adorno, and the latter’s reflections on the dialectic between social determinations and art’s “semi-autonomy”).

The second proposition depends even more heavily on a dialectical turn for its comprehension and is far more debatable in our contemporary “post-History”, neo-liberal times. I refer here to the principle that bourgeois artistic production creates the conditions of its own demise, expressed in the essay by the apparent paradox that since film represents the climax of the process of destruction of the aura, its production based on the modern principles of the industrial division of labor, it is both the most developed extension of the rules of show business *and* the quintessential revolutionary art form. Not only because film production is based explicitly on various forms of collective practice, but also because film is a commodity and an industrial product, reducing (but dialectically elevating) intellectuals, artists and technicians to the level of labourers (“producers” is the term used in the 1934 essay) who can have few illusions about the social basis of their work. The central vision here is the end of ideology through the actualization of class struggle.

On a formal level, Benjamin reminds us of the epic vocation of (silent) film: because actors and objects are filmed “from the outside”, all acquiring a new “value” when they are photographed, they become accessories in formal compositions which break the hierarchy between man and his *material* surroundings. The vocation of film, therefore, is to challenge the tradi-

tion that characterized the dramatic practices of the 19th century, with their emphasis on the expression of well-defined individualities through dialogue, where every object must necessarily be part of the “background”, playing second fiddle to the presence of the protagonist.

For Benjamin film can, indeed, *must*, encompass all the advances of the other arts – painting, literature, theater, photography – and go beyond them. The principle which is a presupposition in other forms of cultural production – the drive towards totality, the possibility of telling many different stories, of establishing connections between different spaces, people, objects, of multiplying, shifting, comparing and contrasting different perspectives – everything that the novel and the theatre had been striving to achieve through the development of an astounding variety of very refined aesthetic devices (think of Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*) can be triumphantly and easily achieved in film. Eisenstein had made the same point when he demonstrated how Griffith had overcome the problems and realized with great technical skill the promises of the great tradition of the 19th century English novel (Dickens, in this case) and how Russian cinematography and his own montage theory had made advances in the field.³

This may be a good moment to remember what may be obvious: that Benjamin’s texts not only owe a great deal to Eisenstein’s montage theory and Brecht’s formulations about epic art, but are actually a response and a contribution to the debate triggered by Brecht’s experience with the German film industry on two key occasions.⁴

In 1930 Brecht and Weil sold the rights of their immensely successful musical play *The Threepenny Opera* to the German company Nero Films. The filming of classics of western literature and theatre had proved a lucrative business and for Brecht the reactionary nature of the operation was evident: to film the “classics” of the bourgeois drama of the 19th century, directors submitted the ample repertoire developed by the film pioneers to the conventions and demands of traditional drama. He therefore demanded that a clause be included in the contract stating that he would write the script, which he eventually did, writing a text the basis of which was the technical possibilities that he envisaged in the language of film. To his surprise, the company had started the film unbeknownst to him with the intention of producing a “faithful” rendering of the play as it had been seen on the stage. For Brecht the operation clearly represented a huge regression from the artistic angle and a clear experience of the “waste of productive forces”. He sued the company and lost. The experience demonstrated not only the advanced state of the process of commodification of intellectual values, but also one of the effects of the introduction of the “talkies”. This new technology enabled the intensification of the focus on the conventions

of traditional drama, with its concentration on the character's interior life, reversing the early experiments of silent film and at least in part resurrecting formal practices that had already been thrown in the trash can of history. The introduction of patents for the regulation of the use of sound equipment finalized the process that deprived the workers of the film industry of their means of production.⁵

When Brecht decided to film *Kuhle Wampe* in 1932 it was clear that this time the ownership of the means of production was a key condition. When the film was ready, problems with the censorship and the distribution companies hampered the hopes of a successful career for the film. The words of the censor are instructive and constitute a veritable literary theory lesson: the worker that commits suicide at the beginning of the film is a type, which indicates that his problem is not the problem of a single individual but of a whole society. The film, therefore, lacks "human understanding". The lesson now was complete: nothing but the *total* control of the means of production and a radical, revolutionary change in the relations of production are the pre-requisites for any ambitious, demanding artistic production.

The project was, as everyone knows, defeated with the rise of Hitler and the "legal" transformation of the process of film production into a monopoly of American and German companies, which shared the world market at a meeting in Paris in 1930.⁶ The American chapter of this story is of great interest, not least because of the climate of political agitation that characterized the first two decades of the 20th century in the United States. But after the 1929 crash and Roosevelt's election every advance took place within the limits imposed by the rise of the New Deal and its complex relationship with the cultural industry: even Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1940), the most accomplished attempt to amplify a range of expressive possibilities most American film directors and producers did not even know about, is already a planned regression in relation not only to Welles's own work in the theater, but also in relation to the rich tradition of political theater in the first two decades of the century, which may be only comparable to the German experience. What remained after this "age of revolutions" was the uncomfortable fact – which cultural criticism is yet to deal with adequately – that for many important artists and critics on the left the plenitudes and splendors of aesthetic intensities and the development of a refined aesthetic and cognitive apparatus to be used to map reality in astonishingly revealing ways depended on political defeat and on those artist and critics turning their backs on the world of class struggle and revolutionary political organization (not, of course, always a question of individual choice).

However, the constant attempt by a number (albeit limited) of contemporary artists and critics to produce a utopian vision of a cultural practice in film production that keeps alive the early promise described by Benjamin may be seen as a sign of hope. If anything, Altman's attempt to re-function the post-modern pastiche (which, indeed, fulfilled with a revenge the demand of a wider range of available expressive forms) and its generic transformations to remind us of those early possibilities is an example of that operation. An analysis of his work must, therefore, deal with not only the filmic "texts" and their incredibly rich realization of the "epic vocation" of film, but also with his experiments with alternative methods of production (which cover a wide range of topics, from the collaborative writing of the script to his approach to directing actors).⁷ Distribution, of course, remains a crucial unresolved problem, which has made of Altman something of a cherished eccentricity in Hollywood and has prevented his experiments from acquiring greater visibility.

If, as Fredric Jameson argues in *Archaeologies of the Future*, the utopian text is an apparatus which scans the horizon of social life both for utopian enclaves, that is, for areas of social life that have not yet been completely colonized by the reifying forces of capital, as well as for a diversity of available expressive forms that can say the "new contents", then the end of the waste of productive forces is the inescapable horizon of any utopian vision in cultural production and criticism. To go beyond the "desire to desire" that constitutes the utopian drive in commercial film, as Jameson demonstrates in his analysis of *Dog Day Afternoon*,⁸ where the political content is not so much in the obvious progressive content, but in the desire, however faintly detectable, to see the wheels of History begin to turn again (in the form of class struggle in the case of this film), it is crucial to understand that the production of a really democratic, critical and, why not, subversive culture depends not only on renewing old hopes, which we thought had been forgotten, but, ultimately, on the change of relations of production which will give power to the true producers: artists and technicians. Or, to say the same in other words, the utopian text depends on the conditions which would eventually spell out its uselessness.

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NOTES

- ¹ See, for example, Norman Kagan, *American Skeptic: Robert Altman's Genre-Commentary Films* (Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1982).
- ² Raymond Williams, "The Writer: Commitment and Alignment" in *Resources of Hope* (London & New York, Verso, 1989).
- ³ Sergei Eisenstein, "Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today" in *Film Form – Essays in Film Theory* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977).
- ⁴ The experience is analysed by Brecht himself in two essays, "The Threepenny Material" and "The Kuhle Wampe Film" in Marc Silberman, ed. and trans., *Bertold Brecht on Film and Radio* (London, Methuen, 2000). For an analysis of the experience I am drawing upon, see Iná Camargo Costa's excellent unpublished essay "Brecht no cativoiro das forças produtivas".
- ⁵ Eisenstein, among other directors, insisted that film-makers think about more creative uses of sound.
- ⁶ See David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York & London: Norton & Co., 1990).
- ⁷ In this regard, see the immensely interesting account of the production of *Nashville* in Jan Stuart, *The Nashville Chronicles* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
- ⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film" in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992).