

# “Cinema in the Hands of the People”: Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film\*

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*Approach the groups, listen. A whole population is discussing serious matters, and for the first time workers can be heard exchanging their views on problems which until now have been broached only by philosophers.*

—August Villiers de l’Isle-Adam,  
Paris, May 19, 1871<sup>1</sup>

*I have come to Besançon to speak about the necessity of reconstructing a common culture that permits all of us, anew, to speak to one another and to understand one another . . . that gives the strength to defeat one’s fear and to become an actor in one’s own life. . . . For me, culture is not solely reserved for the privileged few, it is not for a small elite. . . . I believe in the creative force of capitalism, but I am convinced that capitalism cannot survive without an ethics, without respect for a certain number of spiritual values, moral values, without humanism, without culture. We have to put culture back into capitalism. We have to balance capitalism with culture. We have to put capitalism back in the service of a certain ideal of man.*

—Nicolas Sarkozy, Besançon,  
March 13, 2007<sup>2</sup>

On May 3, 2007, near the end of his presidential campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy promised the French public that, if elected, he would “liquidate the her-

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1. August Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, “Tableau de Paris,” *Le Tribun du Peuple* (19 May 1871). Reproduced in *La Commune de Paris Aujourd’hui*, ed. Jacques Zwirn (Paris: Les Éditions de l’Atelier, 1999), p. 139. All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

2. Nicolas Sarkozy, “Discours à Besançon, 13 Mars, 2007,” n.p., [sites.univ-provence.fr/veronis/Discours2007transcript.php?n=Sarkozy&p=2007-03-13](http://sites.univ-provence.fr/veronis/Discours2007transcript.php?n=Sarkozy&p=2007-03-13) (accessed September 1, 2011).



*Georges Binetruy and the Medvedkin Group.* © ISKRA.

itage of May 1968.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the stakes of this now-infamous piece of political theater and the connotations of “May” within its rhetoric were most clearly established in another campaign speech delivered in Besançon on March 13, 2007, cited above. In Besançon, Sarkozy contended that to oppose the “heritage of May ’68” was to take a stand “against the refusal of all authority, against cultural and moral relativism, against lowering standards [*nivellement par le bas*] . . . against the lack of culture.”<sup>4</sup> Sarkozy’s decision to deliver his most scathing denunciation of the cultural and political legacy of the French 1960s in Besançon was itself a symbolic gesture of no small strategic significance. For Besançon emblemizes both the immediate prehistory of the upheavals of May ’68—in the strikes and factory occupations that began there in March 1967—and their most potent afterlife—in the experiments in *autogestion*, or workers’ self-management, that culminated in the cooperative established in the occupied LIP watch factory in 1973. In his association of the struggles for self-determination that took hold in Besançon during the late 1960s with the wholesale denigration of culture, and in his call for culture as a force of reconciliation in service of capital, Sarkozy reveals the contours of what might be called his politics of aesthetics.

It is in Besançon, therefore, that one might begin to establish a counterhistory of the moment that Sarkozy, in high Stalinist language, would “liquidate.” The Besançon *Groupe Medvedkine*, one of postwar Europe’s most significant experiments in cultural production “from below,” stands as an exemplary anamnestic to Sarkozy’s claim that a generalized opposition to culture is foremost among the inheritances of May. Between 1967 and 1971, a group of workers at the Rhodiaceta textile factory in Besançon, with no prior training or experience in cinema, produced a number of extraordinarily variegated films reflecting what Kristin Ross has called “the union of

3. Quoted in Louis-Jean Calvet and Jean Véronis, *Les Mots de Nicolas Sarkozy* (Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2008), p. 152.

4. Sarkozy, “Discours à Besançon, 13 Mars, 2007,” n.p.

intellectual contestation with workers’ struggles” that culminated in 1968.<sup>5</sup> The collective emerged from a sustained *rencontre* with the French filmmaker Chris Marker and the film-production cooperative SLON (*Service de lancement des œuvres nouvelles*), which dedicated itself during these years to fostering a *cinéma ouvrier*, adamantly refusing any leadership role and with it the model of individual authorship altogether.<sup>6</sup> As Marker put it in an interview from 2003, his project was “to give the power of speech to people who don’t have it, and, when it’s possible, to help them find their own means of expression.”<sup>7</sup>

In the face of the call to “put culture back into capitalism” as the foundation of a new “common culture,” it becomes urgent to recover a conception of cultural democratization that entailed not universal access to art as a palliative, but confrontation with the political fault lines running through the field of representation. However, if today the Medvedkin Group is charged with the potential energy of anachronism, so too was it at the moment of its inception. The group’s collective moniker itself evinces Marker’s untimely resuscitation of the legacy of Soviet factography, as received through its least likely practitioner, the satirical filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin. Tracing the historical conjunctions and disjunctions that led to the genesis of the group, this essay will focus on the first two films produced through the common labor of those previously kept separate: *À bientôt j’espère* (1967–68), a documentary on the struggles at Rhodiaceta by Chris Marker, Mario Marret, and SLON; and *Classe de lutte* (1968), the Medvedkin Group’s first collective film. As a means of coming to terms with the specificity of the Medvedkin Group’s cinematic practice, this essay will end with a discussion of Jean-Luc Godard’s contemporaneous work in the Groupe Dziga Vertov, with its parallel but ultimately irreconcilable claims for self-reflexivity, collectivity, and class consciousness.

“*Les Révoltés de la Rhodia*”

On February 25, 1967, three thousand workers in Besançon occupied the Rhodiaceta textile factory owned by Rhône-Poulenc, then one of the largest French corporations, and declared a strike that lasted over a month.<sup>8</sup> This was the first factory occupation in France since 1936, a date that reverberated within the factory walls

5. Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 11.

6. Kristin Ross has argued that the model of the “*rencontre*,” to which I will return in closing, exemplifies the challenges to specialization that flourished in May 1968. See *ibid.*, p. 103. In 1974, SLON changed its name to ISKRA (*Image, Son, Kinescope et Réalisations Audiovisuelles*, referencing Lenin’s newspaper *Iskra* [“spark” in Russian]) and moved its base from Brussels to Paris. Still operative today, the group is dedicated to producing films “that question our world by giving speech to those who do not have it.” For more on SLON and ISKRA see the booklet published with the Medvedkin Group DVD collection, *Les Groupes Medvedkine: Le cinéma est une arme* (Paris: Éditions Montparnasse, 2006), pp. 6–9.

7. Chris Marker, “Marker Direct,” *Film Comment* 39, no. 3 (May–June 2003), p. 39.

8. Georges Maurivard, a worker at Rhodiaceta in the 1960s and a member of the Medvedkin Group, has recently offered an account of the strike in Georges Maurivard, “‘Classes de Lutte,’ luttes de classes,” *Critique Communiste* 186 (March 2008), pp. 92–100.

for the duration of the strike, lending the demonstrations an incipient sense of historicity as they quickly spread through the Rhône-Poulenc trust. The events at Rhodiaceta were initiated by those who worked the “4/8,” a debilitating seven-day schedule shared by four teams who worked staggered eight-hour morning, afternoon, and night shifts—two morning shifts followed by two afternoons, then three night shifts, and finally two days of rest before the cycle began again. The terms of the strike, however, were not restricted to grievances related to hours, pay, and working conditions. What was unique at Rhodiaceta was that one of the most prevalent demands of the striking workers was access to culture, not as a utopian slogan but as a pragmatic political claim—one to which, however, no factory directorate could adequately respond. In speeches, interviews, tracts, and posters, the workers in Besançon contended that culture was a mechanism for the maintenance of class hierarchies; and by extension, in recognizing themselves as the constitutive exclusion of the cultural sphere, the strikers called into question the conception of culture as a separate category within bourgeois society, supposedly divorced from the means-end rationality of productive existence.

The centrality of culture to the workers’ struggle in Besançon can primarily be credited to the local cultural center known as the CCPPO (*Centre culturel populaire de Palente-les-Orchamps*). From its foundation on September 9, 1959, the center’s first president, Pol Cèbe (a worker at the Rhodiaceta factory and resident of the working-class district of Palente-les-Orchamps), along with two Besançon teachers, René and Micheline Berchoud, established an ambitious cultural program for the local community, including performances of Brecht plays, lectures on Picasso, and an evening consecrated to Jacques Prévert and his work with the Groupe Octobre during the years of the Popular Front.<sup>9</sup> They also held regular projections of films such as René Vautier’s banned *Afrique 50*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, Godard’s *La Chinoise*, and works by Eisenstein and Joris Ivens. Concurrently, Cèbe took over the factory library at Rhodiaceta, which had fallen into disuse, and filled the shelves with classics of Marxist and Communist thought as well as with poetry and art monographs, transforming the small library into a space for workers to assemble, hold reading groups, debate, and organize. In their manifold activities, the CCPPO self-consciously adopted Brecht’s principle that

one need not be afraid to produce daring, unusual things for the proletariat so long as they deal with its real situation. There will always be people of culture, connoisseurs of art, who will interject: “Ordinary people do not understand that.” But the people will push these persons impatiently aside and come to a direct understanding with artists.<sup>10</sup>

9. For an account of the CCPPO, see ISKRA, pp. 2–5, and Cèbe’s brief recollections in Maurivard, p. 100. Bruno Muel offers a remarkable testimony of Cèbe’s role in the CCPPO and the Medvedkin Groups in Bruno Muel, “Les riches heures du groupe Medvedkine (Besançon-Sochaux, 1967–1974),” *Images Documentaires* 37/38 (2000), pp. 15–35.

10. Bertolt Brecht, “Popularity and Realism,” in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso Press, 2007), p. 84.

It was into this well-formed atmosphere of cultural contestation that Chris Marker entered on March 8, 1967, when he received a letter from Besançon. Written by René Berchoud, the letter informed Marker of the recent events at Rhodiaceta and asked if he would be willing to send any films for projection in the occupied factory—and why not come down and see what was going on himself? To Marker, who had spent the better part of his career since the 1950s making film-essays in locales such as China, Cuba, Israel, and Siberia, Berchoud made a plea for local matters: “If you aren’t in China or elsewhere, come to Rhodia—important things are happening.”<sup>11</sup>

This letter, in fact, was the culmination of a prolonged correspondence between Marker and the Berchouds that was predicated on their parallel experiences in French post-Liberation popular-culture movements. In the 1940s, Marker worked for the sister organizations *Peuple et Culture* and *Travail et Culture*, which sought to “bring culture to the people and the people to culture” as a means of fostering radically democratic forms of popular expression.<sup>12</sup> Initially a member of the theater workshop, Marker soon worked alongside André Bazin in the film section of *Travail et Culture*, organized *Peuple et Culture*’s educational dossier, *DOC*, and edited, with Benigno Cacérès, a volume of documents on the history of French working-class movements since the nineteenth century entitled *Regards sur le Mouvement ouvrier*.<sup>13</sup> Marker opened this latter text with Brecht’s poem “Questions from a Worker Who Reads,” thus evincing the commitments he shared with the activists at the CCPPO.<sup>14</sup> It was, in fact, the *Peuple et Culture* movement that provided the impetus for the foundation of the CCPPO and for its dedication to a Brechtian paradigm of the popular.<sup>15</sup> However, this historical conjunction linking the filmmaker to the center, and thus providing the conditions of possibility for the Medvedkin Group’s eventual formation, remained latent until Berchoud sent his invitation during the strikes of March 1967.

Marker recalls that when he received the message from Besançon he was in the process of editing the first SLON project, *Loin du Vietnam* (1967), a collective cinematic protest against the Vietnam War with contributions from Godard, Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda.<sup>16</sup> Abandoning his editing table, Marker drove 400 km from Paris to Besançon with his soundman Antoine Bonfanti, his cameraman Pierre Lhomme, and photographer Michèle Boudier, and met Cèbe, the Berchouds, and a number of striking workers. Soon

11. Berchoud, quoted in ISKRA, p. 5. Until his involvement at Rhodiaceta, Marker’s only major films shot in France were *Le Joli Mai* (1963) and *La Jetée* (1962). The former will be discussed briefly below.

12. For a brief but insightful account of Marker’s involvement with these organizations, see Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 23–27.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Bénigno Cacérès and Christian Marker, *Regards sur le Mouvement Ouvrier* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1951), p. 7.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

16. ISKRA, p. 14.

after, Marker published a report on the strike complete with photographs and interviews in the March 22 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*. “The question for these men,” Marker writes, “is not to negotiate—in the American style—their integration into a ‘society of well-being,’ but to contest this society itself and the value of the ‘compensations’ it offers.”<sup>17</sup> Marker situates Rhodiaceta at the disavowed center of postwar French prosperity, giving the lie to the propagandistic media tropes of the “end of the class struggle.” One worker interviewed by Marker argues, “This movement calls into question the entire society in which we live.” Another states, “They want us to always be proles [*prolos*], uncultivated men who are there for work and that’s it. How do you think a guy who has just worked eight hours at Rhodia can look to develop himself intellectually? It’s almost impossible.” He continues, “We can’t fight exclusively on the union level or the political level, if we don’t fight at the same time on the cultural level, on the level of the development of one’s personality, of one’s intelligence, etc.”<sup>18</sup> At Rhodiaceta, culture signified the capability to express oneself and not be reduced to silence. Not restricted to seeking specific remunerations, the strike contested the very foundation of a political order based upon the division of manual and intellectual labor.

*Be Seeing You*

Inspired by this experience, over the course of the year, Marker and his crew frequently shuttled between Paris and Besançon, establishing ties with the CCPPO, secretly shooting footage in the factory, interviewing workers, and attempting to involve them directly in the production of a film about the factory occupation and its consequences. The initial result of these trips to Besançon is *À bientôt j’espère*, filmed by Marker between March 1967 and January 1968 with the Communist filmmaker Mario Marret and the SLON team.<sup>19</sup> The film opens on Christmas Eve, 1967, months after the end of the strike, with a shot of workers exiting the Rhodiaceta factory—thereby echoing the image of labor (or, more precisely, its cessation) that inaugurates the cinema itself in *La Sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon* (1895) by those fellow natives of Besançon the Lumière brothers.<sup>20</sup> As the workers exit the factory, Georges (Yoyo) Maurivard, a young militant, attempts to gather together a group to demonstrate in support of recently laid-off comrades from a Rhône-Poulenc factory in Lyon. Marker’s film follows Maurivard from his initial *prise de parole* in March to his increasing involvement as a delegate of the French Democratic Confederation of Labor (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*, CFTD) and, by the end of 1967, of the

17. Marker, “Les Révoltés de la Rhodia,” *Le Nouvel Observateur* 123 (March 22–29, 1967), p. 26.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

19. The role played by Marret in the film’s production is ambiguous. Marker later writes, “It was to him that we owe, throughout *À bientôt j’espère*, this ambiance of perfect equality between filmmakers and filmed that I surely could not have accomplished alone.” Marker, “Pour Mario,” in ISKRA, pp. 11–19.

20. Making this connection explicit, Marker wrote a script in the early 1970s for an unrealized film entitled *La Sortie des usines Peugeot* that he proposed to Bruno Muel. Muel, “Les riches heures du groupe Medvedkine,” pp. 31–32.

General Confederation of Labor (*Confédération générale du travail*, CGT), France’s largest trade union, officially affiliated in the 1960s with the French Communist Party (PCF).<sup>21</sup> Interviewed by the filmmakers in December with a group of fellow Rhodiaceta workers, Maurivard describes his faltering and fearful first attempt to stand on an overturned barrel and address his comrades to urge the continuation of the strike. The interview flashes back to a shot of Maurivard in March, reading a tract into a microphone before three thousand striking workers and a mass of supporters. Over a montage pairing footage shot amid and above the crowd with still photographs of workers and graffiti on the factory walls, Marker argues in a voice-over that the originality of the strike could be found in “the idea, continually reprised, that inequality on the level of working conditions translated to inequality in all levels of life, that no salary hikes would suffice to compensate.”<sup>22</sup> He continues, “The tangible result of the strike is not the percentage of pay augmentation achieved but the education of a generation of young workers who have discovered in the identity of their conditions, the identity of their struggle.” Corroborating Marker’s claims, Maurivard states that during the strike, the workers “lived for the first time an experience of collectivity” and that, in the occupied factory, they “mutually discovered one another.” As attested by the men



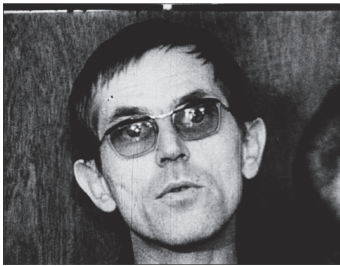
21. George Ross provides a historical context for a shift in allegiance such as Maurivard’s, explaining, “The Rhodiaceta strike was interesting because of conflicts between the CFDT and the CGT regarding its conduct. The CFDT in Besançon originally sparked the strike over working conditions (having to do with the work schedules of swing shift workers). When the strike spread through the Rhône-Poulenc complex the CGT took over its guidance, leading to a wages/hours national settlement, according to its own tactical goals. The Besançon/Rhodiaceta CFDT was unhappy at this settlement and continued to agitate around the issues of working conditions, an agitation which bore fruit in May 1968.” George Ross, *Workers and Communists in France: From Popular Front to Eurocommunism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 162.

22. All translations of French dialogue from the films are my own.

Chris Marker and  
Mario Marret.  
À bientôt j’espère.  
1967–68. © ISKRA.

interviewed in the film, what was most shocking was the experience of entering the factory and feeling *calm*, of setting up a cinema in the factory, of dancing, of appropriating the space of dehumanization as a space for community.

Opposed to a model where “socialism means working hard,” the community formed in March did not elevate work into a shared essence.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the testimonials recorded in *À bientôt j’espère* emphasize the liberating experience of laying claim to sectors of life inaccessible to the worker-as-such: to creativity, to culture, to communication. In one sequence, Marker shoots a poster made during the occupations that reads, “The CCPPO demands BREAD for all, but also: peace,



*Marker and Marret.*  
*À bientôt j’espère.*  
1967–68. © ISKRA.

laughter, theater, life.” Facing the camera in close-up, Cèbe emphasizes these concerns: “For us culture is a struggle, a claim. Just as with the right to have bread and lodgings, we claim the right to culture—it’s the same fight for culture as for the union or in the political field.” By refusing the stultifying identity of the worker denied all opportunity for “self-cultivation” and by establishing lines of communication between striking workers, artists, and militant student “*comités de soutien*,” a community emerged that destabilized monolithic and integral categories of identity, and thereby exceeded the bounds of traditional union or party representation (a conflict that only intensified, as we shall see). In

this way, the communitarian experiment of March approached the condition of an “unworked” or inoperative community (*communauté désœuvrée*) in Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense, one profoundly inimical to the discourse of community *as a work* (i.e., a unified “project of fusion”) or as being constituted *through work* (as in the ideal Platonic Republic where each person is defined by his or her role within the division of labor).<sup>24</sup> Marker later claimed, “You don’t need a degree in sociology to find in this state of things, one year in advance, the essential themes of May ’68.”<sup>25</sup>

*À bientôt j’espère* contrasts the efflorescence of protest and communication in March with its suppression in the following months. In a typically dialectical juxtaposition of voiceover and image, Marker pairs a montage of machinery producing syn-

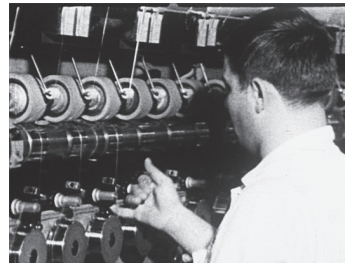
23. Guy Debord quotes this statement by German Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert and notes that it is “a fine herald of that *image of socialism* which was soon to emerge as the mortal enemy of the proletariat.” Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 67.

24. Community, for Nancy, is not produced as an *oeuvre*, which would “presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects).” Rather, community takes place in the interruption or fragmentation of forms of integral and closed being-without-relation. Community, therefore, “is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. and trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 15, 31.

25. ISKRA, p. 15.



thetic fibers shot secretly in Rhodiaceta by Bruno Muel<sup>26</sup> with the testimony of a worker who describes the way in which the mechanical time of the factory has completely quantified even the most personal, internal, physiological aspects of his life: “To eat, in principle, one must be hungry. However, when we eat, it’s not because we’re hungry, it’s because the electronic brain thought that we should eat because of a gap in production.” Another worker describes the reified and exchangeable time of the factory as an inescapable repetition, a perpetual return of the same: “It’s like always seeing the same film, always listening to the same record.” In their emphasis on the petrification of variable human time into static mechanical time, these sequences reflect Georg Lukács’ description of the fragmentation of experience under industrial conditions of labor, which “reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space.”<sup>27</sup> In order to express this degradation cinematically, Marker interviews a worker who performs the same gesture at a machine two hundred and forty-four times throughout the course of an eight-hour day, the temporal flux of his lived duration measured precisely by the number of times he carries out a predetermined set of motions. He sits in his kitchen and re-performs the rationalized movements of his daily labor for the camera, his bandaged hands moving as determined by the absent machine, in one of the many close-ups of hands in Marker’s films. Between these hands and those of Maurivard, pointing and gesturing while speaking to a crowd, the filmmakers trace the transformations and disappointments of the March movement. As the film ends, Maurivard proclaims



Marker and Marret.  
À bientôt j’espère.  
1967–68. © ISKRA.

26. Muel recalls that in January 1968, while Marker and Marret were busy editing, they asked him to film inside Rhodiaceta, against the decree of the factory director. Maurivard snuck Muel and René Vautier into the factory, where they shot all *À bientôt j’espère’s* footage of the factory interior. Muel, “Les riches heures du groupe Medvedkine,” pp. 18–19.

27. In Bergsonian language, Lukács argues that under capitalism, “time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable ‘things’ (the reified, mechanically objectified ‘performance’ of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space.” Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 90.

with conviction that even after the strike's defeat, the experience of community that it fostered has persisted and will form the foundation of a successful working-class movement. Indeed, for Maurivard, this community was in itself a form of culture.

Maurivard's words delineate the central paradox faced by Marker in his first months at Rhodiaceta: How to translate the workers' struggle into cinema such that the filmmaker would not simply reinscribe the relations of domination between those who have access to culture and those who do not, between those who have the power to represent and those who are simply represented? These tensions reached a point of crisis on April 27, 1968, when Marker held the film's première at the CCPPO for the Rhodiaceta workers and the local community. While it had its defenders, Cèbe foremost among them, the film was met with a largely hostile reception, even among those who had actively participated in its production. The union leaders either refused to attend the screening or vehemently aired their protests. In response, Marker held a discussion after the projection, recorded by the soundman Bonfanti.<sup>28</sup> One worker states, "I think that the director is incompetent. . . . And I also think, and I say it bluntly, that the workers of Rhodia have simply been exploited." Another criticizes Marker for the fact that women in the film appear exclusively as wives rather than as workers and militants in their own right. In one of the most incisive comments, Georges Lièremont, a worker interviewed in *À bientôt j'espère*, proclaims, "I believe that, frankly, Chris is a romantic. He has seen the workers and the union romantically." For Lièremont, if Marker contrasted the debilitating working conditions at Rhodiaceta with the liberating experience of the strike, he conjured away the pragmatic and unromantic daily labor of organization.

Marker's response to the group, also captured on tape, is worth citing at length:

We have also carried out a parallel activity, putting cameras and tape recorders into the hands of young militants, led by a hypothesis that is still evident to me: that we will always be at best well-intentioned explorers, more or less friendly, but from the outside; and that, as with its liberation, the cinematic representation and expression of the working class will be its own work. With audiovisual equipment in hand, workers themselves will show us films about the working class, about what it is to go on strike, about the inside of a factory. We could be ten thousand times more crafty, and less romantic, and still be limited by the cinematographic reality that one experiences all the time, whether among penguins or workers, that, of course, one can only ever really express what one lives.<sup>29</sup>

28. The recording is included in ISKRA's *Groupes Medvedkine* DVD collection, and partly transcribed in ISKRA, pp. 20–21.

29. This seemingly enigmatic statement refers to *Les Pingouins*, a film that Mario Marret made in Antarctica, which won the Cannes prize for best nature documentary in 1954. Noted in Muel, "Les riches heures du groupe Medvedkine," p. 19, and Lupton, *Chris Marker*, p. 229.

The experience of the film’s rejection by the very people for whom it was intended instigated the second phase of Marker’s involvement in Besançon. Indeed, Marker titles the sound recording *La Charnière*, or “the hinge point.” While filming *À bientôt j’espère*, Marker and SLON, with the encouragement of Cèbe, began teaching basic film technique to any interested workers. Following the perceived failure of *À bientôt j’espère*, this “parallel activity” was formalized as the Besançon Medvedkin Group. Based out of the CCPPO, which was transformed into a film workshop complete with an Atlas editing table brought in from Paris, SLON provided handheld 16mm cameras and tape recorders, and began to make films in collaboration with the workers. Set against the individualism and unilateralism of culture in bourgeois society, this militant cinema would follow a collective and nonhierarchical model of production, seeking to abolish the separation between expert and amateur, between producer and consumer, a gambit that would last almost five years in Besançon before spreading to a Peugeot factory in Sochaux-Montbéliard.



CCPPO Film Workshop (left to right): Jacques Loiseleux, Henri Traforetti, Georges Binetruy, and Bruno Muel. © ISKRA.

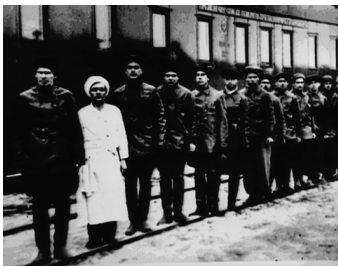
*Train of Revolution, Train of History*

In forming a collective, the workers at Rhodiaceta adopted the name of the Russian filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin, who by the 1960s was almost totally unknown outside of the Soviet Union. In order to account for this gesture of solidarity across national, political, and generational divides, it is necessary to outline Medvedkin’s project in the early 1930s and the impact that it had on Marker’s thinking at the time of his engagement in Besançon. It was, in fact, Marker’s oblique and partial confrontation with the legacy of Soviet factography, as filtered through Medvedkin’s project, that provided the impetus for the filmmaker to place the camera in the hands of those he had sought to represent.

In 1961, at a film festival in Brussels, Marker saw Medvedkin’s *Happiness* (*Schastye*; 1935), and described it as “a superb film as beautiful as Eisenstein’s, as popular as Mussorgsky’s music, deeply moving. . . . Where was the author? Dead? Alive?”<sup>30</sup> Struck by this comedy on the difficult adjustment of an incompetent yet sympathetic peasant to his new life as a collective farmer, a film whose very emphasis on satire seemed to exceed the bounds of Socialist Realism, Marker

30. Anne Philipe, “Medvedkine, tu connais? Interview avec Slon et Chris Marker,” *Le Monde* (December 2, 1971), p. 17. Translated in Nora M. Alter, *Chris Marker* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 139–44.

searched mostly in vain for any information on Medvedkin. In his research, he eventually came across *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (1960) by Jay Leyda, an American filmmaker and historian who had studied with Eisenstein in the 1930s.<sup>31</sup> Leyda's book, in under two pages, provided one of the only English-language accounts of Medvedkin's *kino-poezd*, or ciné-train, which consisted of three train carriages transformed into a film-production studio complete with projection room and living quarters.<sup>32</sup> Leyda concisely describes the "several sided task" of Medvedkin's "self-contained film studio" as they traveled the Soviet Union in 1932 under the orders of the Central Committee with the aim of making agitational films for and with local populations:



Alexander Medvedkin and  
the ciné-train team. 1932.  
© *Les Films de l'Astrophore*.

In addition to making instructional films to help local problems, for example, overcoming winter conditions to speed up freight shipments, the film crew was able to produce critical films on local conditions (bureaucracy, inefficiency, nepotism, etc.) that they or the local political workers judged to require their ungentle attention. The prime audience for these, as for the instructional films, was the local one, who would greet these barbed film vaudevilles with welcome laughs and blushes.<sup>33</sup>

In 1971, Marker writes that these pages were a dream "for a pseudo-director lost in the jungle where worldly professionalism and corporatism join in preventing the cinema from falling into the hands of the people."<sup>34</sup> For many years, Marker had to be content with these few, mysterious, and tantalizing scraps of information. In November 1967, however, while still working on *À bientôt j'espère*, Marker attended the International Festival of Documentary Film in Leipzig and was introduced by Leyda to Medvedkin. This meeting sparked a close friendship that would last until Medvedkin's death in 1989, at the age of 89. Through hours of conversation and copious correspondence, culminating in a visit to Paris in

31. The extraordinary scope of Leyda's career is outlined in Annette Michelson, "Jay Leyda: 1910–1988," *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 12–16.

32. According to Emma Widdis, the only monograph on Medvedkin until her own book from 2005 was in Russian and written during the Soviet period. Emma Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), p. 2.

33. Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 286–87.

34. Marker, "Le ciné-ours," *Image et Son* 255 (December 1971), p. 4.

1971, Medvedkin recounted the experience of the ciné-train to Marker, Cèbe, and, by proxy, to the workers in Besançon.<sup>35</sup>

Like Dziga Vertov, Medvedkin began his career on the Bolshevik agit-trains of the civil-war years (c. 1917–1922), which traveled the breadth of the future Soviet Union, visiting Red Army outposts, distributing propagandistic pamphlets, staging small exhibitions, and screening films.<sup>36</sup> As Richard Taylor notes, the film sections of the agit-trains had a twofold task: “first, to demonstrate in the provinces agit-films produced in the centre and, second, to supply newsreel and documentary material from the provinces to the centre.”<sup>37</sup> Years later, amid the social, political, and productive transformations inaugurated by the rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture during Stalin’s First Five Year Plan (1928–1932), Medvedkin became convinced of the necessity of reviving and reconceiving the agit-train as a means of revolutionizing the consciousness of a largely illiterate peasantry.<sup>38</sup> Medvedkin’s train distinguished itself through its exclusive focus on film, which, because of its dynamism, its popular appeal, its potential for mass reproduction and distribution, and its silence (soliciting real-time interaction and discussion), was deemed ideally suited for the construction of the new Soviet collective subject.<sup>39</sup>

During its first year in 1932, Medvedkin’s ciné-train traveled to mines, factories, and collective farms across the USSR and produced 72 films.<sup>40</sup> Filming at an incredible pace, Medvedkin saw his team as “cinematic Stakhanovites”—the Soviet term used for workers who over-fulfilled production targets—following the motto “film today and show it tomorrow.”<sup>41</sup> Medvedkin’s practice was committed not only

35. In 1971, while in Paris to make a film about the superiority of Soviet environmental policy, Medvedkin met with Marker, Cèbe, and other members of the Medvedkin Group. Marker interviewed Medvedkin at the Noisy-le-Sec train depot, and included this footage in *Le Train en marche* (1971), a film made to introduce SLON’s French release of *Happiness*. Cèbe offers a short but remarkable account of his encounter with Medvedkin in Pol Cèbe, “Rencontre avec Medvedkine,” *L’Avant-Scène Cinéma* 120 (December 1971), pp. 8–9. Selections of Marker and Medvedkin’s letters were recently published for the first time in Russian in the journal *Kinovedcheskie zapiski* 49 (2000).

36. For an account of the genesis of the Soviet agit-trains, see Richard Taylor, “A Medium for the Masses: Agitation in the Soviet Civil War,” *Soviet Studies* 22, no. 4 (April 1971), pp. 562–74. For purely pragmatic reasons, Vertov will unfortunately make only brief and refractive appearances in this paper. It will suffice here to note that Vertov was responsible for editing footage shot on the agit-trains, which he incorporated into his weekly newsreels, *Kino-Nedelya*, and later into his full-length films *Anniversary of the Revolution* (1919) and *History of the Civil War* (1921). *Ibid.*, p. 568.

37. *Ibid.*

38. For an important account of the significance of “cultural revolution” during the First Five Year Plan, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 8–41.

39. Medvedkin’s initial proposal to the Central Film Committee was vetoed, partially because of the administration’s resistance to critical satire, leading him to directly petition the Party Central Committee, which agreed to fund the train and provide their assignments. See Stephen Crofts and Masha Enzensberger, “Medvedkin: Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion,” *Screen* 19, no. 1 (1978), p. 73.

40. Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin*, p. 24.

41. *Ibid.*



*Medvedkin ciné-train. How Do You Live, Comrade Miner?*  
© *Les Films de l'Astrophore.*

to high production rates but also, unlike the centralized model of the civil-war agit-trains, to an ethos of geographical contingency: the subjects of the ciné-train's films were also their intended audience. His films attempted to record the conditions of production at a given site and to encourage hard work as much as to "shame" unproductive or wasteful labor. Presenting workers at a collective farm with both their shortcomings and positive counterexamples (often through segments filmed in neighboring collective farms), the reels singled out individual workers, often by name, with a stock intertitle declaiming, "Comrades, this cannot go on!" The emphasis on the veridical potential of the camera coexisted uneasily with satirical sequences acted out by the train's crew (illustrating productive or ideological deficiencies) and even with primitive forms of animation (a "camel of shame" exposes lazy workers to ridicule). For Medvedkin, this fragile tension between realism and vaudeville, between documentation and agitation, would be sublated in the overriding orientation of the films toward effecting maximal and verifiable changes in the social contexts filmed. Medvedkin claimed with pride that as a result of his screenings, "five collective farms fulfilled the Plan's targets for grain yield." With an evident sense of vindication, Medvedkin wrote in his diary that thanks to the ciné-train's work on one collective farm, ten *kulaks*, or wealthy peasants regarded as class enemies, had their property seized and were forcibly deported.<sup>42</sup> As Medvedkin later put it, this was cinema "acting as public prosecutor."<sup>43</sup>

Medvedkin's work during the ciné-train years is intimately bound up with the Soviet discourses of factography and operativism, which developed in tandem with the First Five Year Plan

42. Ibid., p. 28. For a discussion of the role of artists in "dekulakization," see Maria Gough, "Radical Tourism: Sergei Tret'iakov at the Communist Lighthouse," *October* 118 (Fall 2006), p. 162.

43. Medvedkin, quoted in Crofts and Enzensberger, "Medvedkin," p. 73.

and were given their strongest articulation by the writer and photographer Sergei Tret'iakov. The distance between the two figures is considerable: there is no documentation of any personal relationship between Tret'iakov and Medvedkin, and satire was as unthinkable to the former as it was obligatory to the latter. Nevertheless, they were engaged in parallel projects, both traveling to collective farms in the same years, driven by a need, acutely felt by a generation of Russian artists, to abandon representation for praxis and to make themselves useful in the process of Soviet construction. For Tret'iakov, factography was a practice that sought—whether in written or photographic form—the direct “inscription of facts,” not, as with documentary, in order to capture an accurate image of the world, but as part of a commitment to transform it.<sup>44</sup> This latter aspect was described by Tret'iakov as the factographic principle of “operativism,” defined as the abandonment of detached observation for an active participation in “the life of the material.”<sup>45</sup> In Devin Fore’s words, “‘Operativity’ was the term Tret'iakov used to designate a situational aesthetics that conceptualized representation not as an objective reflection of a static world, but as an operation that by definition intervenes in the context of the aesthetic act.”<sup>46</sup> Like Tret'iakov, Medvedkin indissolubly linked “the demonstration of the fact” with “the activation of the spectator.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, both ultimately sought to hold up a transformative and coercive mirror to the people, to show them the facts of their daily existence, which, once reflected back to them, would provoke them to take their lives into their own hands and *change*. In this way, Medvedkin and Tret'iakov turned to the speed, reproducibility, and democratic accessibility of photography and film as means of realizing the avant-garde dream of a shift from spectatorial contemplation to political activation.

The factographic project was significantly driven by a commitment to deprofessionalization. For example, Medvedkin was the only member of his thirty-two-person team to possess any cinematographic experience, and Tret'iakov argued that an accumulation of photographs by any “shutter-clicking kid” (*fotomalchik*) would be preferable to the unique productions of professional artists.<sup>48</sup> Not simply a matter of increasing the rate of mimetic production, the “operativist” emphasis on deskilling and de-specialization stemmed from the conviction that representation was not “a unique individual skill” but rather “the prop-

44. My discussion here is indebted to the pathbreaking work of Maria Gough and Devin Fore on Tret'iakov and factography. See Gough, “Radical Tourism,” and Devin Fore, “Introduction,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006), pp. 3–10. The words “inscription of facts” are Fore’s and aptly echo Soviet critic Osip Brik’s phrase “the fixation and montage of fact.” See Leah Dickerman, “The Fact and the Photograph,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006), p. 134, and Natasha Kurchanova, “Osip Brik and the Politics of the Avant-Garde,” *October* 134 (Fall 2010), p. 64.

45. Sergei Tret'iakov, “The Writer and the Socialist Village,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006), p. 69.

46. Devin Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006), p. 105.

47. In Tret'iakov’s words, “capturing the fact is a task of utmost importance in the country that has presented its citizens with the long, difficult and joyous task of completely restructuring everyday life.” Tret'iakov, “Our Cinema,” *October* 118 (Fall 2006), p. 35.

48. Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin*, p. 23. Tret'iakov, quoted in Gough, “Radical Tourism,” p. 168.



*Medvedkin and Cèbe,*  
1971. © ISKRA.

erty of public education.”<sup>49</sup> As cultural production dissolved itself as a specialized *métier* and assumed a utilitarian role in shaping consciousness, it would become, in Tret’iakov’s words, “an actual weapon in the revolutionary, operative activity of the huge masses who have been summoned to socialist construction.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Medvedkin argued, “Cinema can be not only a weapon ‘in general’ but a very real weapon in the Party cells, in concrete areas of socialist construction.”<sup>51</sup>

“The ciné-train is somewhat of a myth for us—train of revolution, train of history,” Marker states in *Le Train en marche*, a short film made during Medvedkin’s 1971 visit to Paris, “but the biggest mistake would be to believe that it had come to a halt.”<sup>52</sup> That same year, in an interview about the significance of Medvedkin’s project for his own, Marker claimed,

The train was not bringing art to the people; its function was to incite the people to intervene in matters with which they were concerned. . . . The experience remains unique. The Medvedkin team is alone to have achieved this type of instantaneous invention of a film, with people associated with its creation and interested in its immediate utilization because it was dealing with problems that had to be solved immediately.<sup>53</sup>

Medvedkin, for his part, was happy to emphasize the aspects of his project that were most enthusiastically received by the militants in the West, writing, “I am very glad that our experience has proved useful to French film-makers and has not disappeared without a trace. . . . Having long choked on the bitterness of defeat, I have now tasted the unfamiliar bitterness of victory.”<sup>54</sup> Indeed, in his correspondence with Pol Cèbe—who signed each letter “Medvedkinement” rather than “*amicalement*”—Medvedkin encouraged the group, and also emphasized to them the power of film to intercede in local concerns: “To see yourself, your friends, your street on screen is always a disconcerting event in the life of anyone. In our time we realized this quickly, and used it as the most powerful lever in the search for genres of active political cinema.”<sup>55</sup> The degree of Medvedkin’s influ-

49. Tret’iakov, “The Writer and the Socialist Village,” p. 69.

50. Ibid.

51. Medvedkin, quoted in Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin*, p. 22.

52. Marker, quoted and translated in Alter, *Chris Marker*, p. 86.

53. Marker, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 141.

54. Medvedkin, quoted in Crofts and Enzensberger, “Medvedkin,” p. 75.

55. Widdis, *Alexander Medvedkin*, p. 122.



ence at Rhodiacta is already manifest in Cèbe’s defense of Marker after the first screening of *À bientôt j’espère*, recorded in *La Charnière*. Indeed, Cèbe explicitly evokes the factographic tropes of de-professionalization and the pervasive description of cinema as a “weapon”: “Maybe you believe that the audiovisual language, like the written language, requires years of study, but we are convinced that this is not the case. . . . We have so many things to say and we have a new way to say it, a new medium, a new weapon.”

That the coercive ciné-train of Medvedkin—a lifelong Stalinist and propagandist for the state that executed his former peers, including Meyerhold and Tret’iakov—could be read as a figure of cultural self-determination in the French 1960s involved a historical misprision of no small significance.<sup>56</sup> While factography, in the hands of Tret’iakov and Medvedkin, had been developed as a means of reconciling collective farmers to their new productive conditions, the French filmmakers and workers seized upon these techniques to challenge the colonization of everyday life by the logic of production. It was, therefore, precisely the mythic distance separating the reception of Medvedkin from the realities of state socialism that permitted the recovery of the radical kernel of the Soviet factographic project, resistant to the Stalinist call for idealizing images of “life as it is becoming, rather than life as it is.”<sup>57</sup> For the Medvedkin Group, factography and operativism, as filtered through a partial understanding of a unique moment in Medvedkin’s work, were seized upon for the principles of deprofessionalization, situational contingency, the fixation of the fact, simultaneous collective production and reception, and a conception of cinema as a dialogic relation between the film and the filmed.<sup>58</sup> In the ciné-train, Marker glimpsed the possibility of exceeding the role of “well-intentioned explorer,” and to move from a cinema of *auteurism* to one of *autogestion*.

#### *Class of Struggle*

The first collective film by the Besançon Medvedkin Group is *Classe de lutte*, begun during the wildcat strikes and occupations of May 1968. The title—a rever-

56. In 1993 Marker released *The Last Bolshevik*, a film that explores Medvedkin’s life as a means of grappling with the history of Russian Communism from the revolutionary élan of October 1917 to the cultural and political repression under Stalin to *perestroika*. The film, in many ways, also represents Marker’s coming to terms with the excessive naïveté of the initial French reception of Medvedkin’s project and with the place of the USSR within the European left’s imaginary.

57. On the resistant dimensions of factography, see Gough, “Radical Tourism.” A strong distinction between Marker’s mythic Medvedkin and the historical Medvedkin is developed in Kristian Feigelson, “Regards Croisés Est/Ouest: L’histoire revisitée au cinéma (Medvedkine/Marker),” *Théorème* 6 (2002), pp. 119–31. This description of Socialist Realism is borrowed from Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 9, quoted in Gough, “Radical Tourism,” p. 174.

58. Benjamin Buchloh describes factography as instantiating “systems of representation/production/distribution which would recognize the collective participation in the actual processes of production of social wealth, systems which, like architecture in the past or cinema in the present, had established conditions of *simultaneous collective reception*.” Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From Faktura to Factography,” *October* 30 (Autumn 1984), p. 94.



Medvedkin Group.  
Classe de lutte.  
1968–69. © ISKRA

sal of “lutte de classe” (class struggle) with dual implications of a pedagogy of struggle and of a class defined by its struggles—was, according to Cèbe, itself a critique of representation, forgoing “enormous fresco[es] on the class struggle” for a factographic focus on local concerns.<sup>59</sup> The group, from the beginning, associated filmmaking with the daily labor of militant organization and the communal structure of a strike committee. Thus, the credits list in alphabetical order forty-five *auteurs*, including the Besançon worker-cinematographers (among them, subjects of *À bientôt j’espère* such as Lièvreumont, Maurivard, and Henri Traforetti), Marker, Marret, the SLON crew (including soundman Bonfanti and cinematographer Lhomme), and several fellow travelers who did not participate directly in the film’s production (Juliet Berto, Godard, and Ivens, for example). Set apart in the credits, and evidently responsible for most of the film’s production, are the names of Géo Binetruy, Pol Cèbe, Bruno Muel, and the editor Simone Nedjma Scialom.<sup>60</sup>

*Classe de lutte*, like *À bientôt j’espère*, focuses on the subjective transformation of a single figure as a metonym for wider changes in class consciousness. The film follows Suzanne Zedet, a young worker at the Yema watch factory in Besançon. She is introduced in footage shot in December 1967 for *À bientôt j’espère*, expressing her desire to become a militant, but being told by her husband that it would put unbearable strain on their already difficult family life. Five months later, Zedet has joined the CGT and is filmed in front of a crowd delivering an agitational speech in favor of a strike. *Classe de lutte*, therefore, seeks to rectify the major—and legitimate—critiques of *À bientôt j’espère*, namely, its romanticism, its abstraction of quotidian struggle, and, most significantly, its occlusion of the role of women in the militant syndicalist movement. Over a montage of images of timepieces (including Dalí’s melting clocks), a voice-over states that Besançon produces a third of all French watches, and that thirty-two percent of the city’s active working population is composed of women: “This, without humor, translates thusly: precision work requires an agile and docile hand, so the bosses of the clock factories make an appeal to little hands. But, more and more, these little hands hold large banners.” The film cuts from shots

59. Pol Cèbe, “Le Groupe Medvedkine,” *Cinéma* 151 (December 1970), p. 94.

60. Marker’s role in the production of the Medvedkin Group films tends to be overstated in the literature, scant as it still is. It is important to clarify that although he worked closely with the collective following its foundation, Marker was no more central a participant than any of the Rhodiacta worker-cinematographers or members of SLON. Bruno Muel attests that Cèbe was the primary editor of the Group’s films, with Scialom’s assistance for *Classe de lutte*. Muel, “Les riches heures du groupe Medvedkin,” p. 23.

of women’s hands in a magazine advertisement for Yema watches, to a close-up of Zedet’s hand, to the hands of a woman waving a flag in a protest. Echoing Marker’s juxtaposition of the exploited hands and the liberated hands in *À bientôt j’espère*, this montage links with striking visual economy the role of women in the circuits of consumption and production.

Throughout the film, the potential of montage to link disparate images is employed to emphasize the indivisibility of economic, political, domestic, and cultural concerns in Zedet’s lived experience. In one significant sequence regarding the day-to-day labor that Zedet undertakes as a union militant to break out of what she calls the “individualism” imposed upon workers, images of family life, work, and activism are spliced together, accompanied by a Spanish psychedelic rock song. The sequence cuts rapidly between shots of Zedet speaking to crowds, writing tracts, and establishing lines of communication among her co-workers; between posters advertising a screening of Ivens’s *Terre d’Espagne* “in solidarity with the Spanish people” and entreaties to “Help Vietnam”; between Zedet’s daily commute to the Yema factory and the family life of her husband and her child. The montage and the song end with Zedet typing in her family home, with a poster for Brecht’s *Homme pour Homme* and photos of her child on the wall, when a voice off-camera asks her what she’s doing. She smiles and replies, “*Bien, je milite!*”

One focal point for the politics of cinema in *Classe de lutte* is therefore the technical capacity of montage to integrate dialectically the alienated shards of the lifeworld. Just as important, however, is the Medvedkin Group’s operativist emphasis on the potential of the camera not simply to record a preexisting, extra-cinematic reality but to participate in its transformation. In the opening scene of *Classe*



*Medvedkin Group.*  
Classe de lutte.  
1968–69. © ISKRA.



Top two images: Medvedkin Group.  
*Classe de lutte*. 1968-69.

© ISKRA.

Bottom image: Marker and Marret.  
*À bientôt j'espère*. 1967-68.

© ISKRA.

*de lutte*, Zedet walks into the CCPPO, past an array of placards and banners, and into a back room where an editor (most likely Scialom) works on an Atlas 16mm film-editing table under a poster of Fidel Castro. The editor is pictured splicing an interview with Zedet together with a scene of crowds of women in the demonstrations of May. Zedet watches her flickering image on the screen with evident interest and pleasure. A quick cut reveals Géo Binetruy filming the two women with a handheld camera. Cutting back to Binetruy's camera, the shot pans from the editing table to a manifesto painted on the wall of the room, framed like an intertitle: "Cinema is not magic. It's a technique and a science. A technique born of a science and put to the service of a will: the will that the workers have to liberate themselves." *Classe de lutte* begins with a self-reflexive image of its own simultaneous collective production and reception.

Effectively, the central subject of the Medvedkin Group's film is the operative entry of cinema itself into the events and lives that the film sought to document. In this way, the films made by the Rhodiaceta worker-cinematographers radically expand upon the critique of documentary objectivity developed by Marker since *Le Joli Mai* (1963). In this film, Marker and his collaborator Lhomme exploited new developments in lightweight portable film equipment (the handheld 16mm camera) in order to capture the city of Paris and its inhabitants in the summer of 1962, in the wake of the massacre at Charonne and the signing of the Évian peace accord. Against documentary film's aspiration to capture a reality unaffected by its observation, *Le Joli Mai* emphasizes the filmic apparatus's ineluctable mediation of social reality by

employing disjunctive montage, critical voice-overs, and estranging camerawork.<sup>61</sup> Likewise, *À bientôt j’espère* programmatically makes manifest the social dynamic between the filmmakers and the filmed subjects—for example, when a Rhodiaceta employee being interviewed in his kitchen gets up to go to work and awkwardly shakes hands with each member of the crew behind the camera.

In contrast to *Le Joli Mai*, however, *À bientôt j’espère* is cut through with a degree of authorial self-effacement, with Marker and Marret simplifying the disjunctive quality of montage and largely reneging on the critical relationship of commentary to image. In a sense, the film’s willful asceticism before the task of representing the struggles at Rhodiaceta evinces Marker’s confrontation with the limits of the “cinematographic reality” subtending the practice of documentary: the inevitable distance inscribed by the camera between the subject and the object of representation. Conversely, the pervasive reflexivity of *Classe de lutte* is less a modernist form of representation critique, and more a shift parallel to the one described by Tret’iakov from journalism to operativism: “Working in this way means that you can’t set yourself apart, without accountability, from the object of labor. You can’t just observe the object. Instead, by constant work with it, you have to become organically connected with the object.”<sup>62</sup> Effectively, the labor of the Medvedkin Group represents the attempt to forge just such an “operative relation,” and to accede from detached representation to “participation in the life of the material itself.”<sup>63</sup>

The group systematically seeks to register the consequences of this operational shift within the structure of the film itself, whether by reflecting on the processes of cinematic production and reception, or by investigating the effects of this shift on the order of subjectivity. In the latter mode, the film ends not with the disillusionment of June 1968’s return to order, but with the liberatory consequences felt by its participants in the *longue durée*. Zedet’s union activity during May results in a significant pay cut, a demotion, and warnings from the directorate to keep politics and work separate—though, of course, the entire May movement was based on the critique of such false distinctions. Zedet emphasizes, however, that concurrently with her political struggle she has won a new relationship to the field of culture. During an interview in the CCPPO, in front of a poster of Picasso’s *Portrait of Sylvette David in a Green Armchair* (1954), Cèbe, offscreen, suggests, “Tell me about Picasso.” Zedet

61. Although Marker acerbically referred to *cinéma vérité* as “*ciné ma vérité*” (*ciné my truth*), *Le Joli Mai* could productively be compared to contemporaneous efforts to turn “the ethnographic gaze back upon the *métropole* at the moment of decolonization,” as Tom McDonough describes Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronique d’un été* (1961). McDonough offers a compelling account of *Chronique d’un été* and of the French *cinéma vérité* project more generally from the point of view of a comparison with the cinema of Guy Debord. Tom McDonough, “Calling from the Inside: Filmic Topologies of the Everyday,” *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007), p. 7. Citing Marker’s pun, Lupton also usefully distinguishes *Le Joli Mai* from *cinéma vérité*, specifically from Rouch and Morin’s project, in Lupton, *Chris Marker*, p. 84.

62. Tret’iakov, “The Writer and the Socialist Village,” p. 68.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 69.



*Medvedkin Group.*  
*Classe de lutte.*  
 1968–69. © ISKRA.

cites Jacques Prévert's poem "La Lanterne Magique de Picasso" (1944), and states that she discovered culture at the same moment that she discovered the workers' movement. "Workers believe," she contends, "that poetry or painting are not for them, we believe that it is reserved for the bourgeoisie." But, she continues, her confrontation with Picasso and Prévert proved to her that poetry and art had a social meaning that bore directly upon her own experience. She then argues that practical struggles such as the union's fight for higher wages must be paired with cultural struggle, and that a poem by Paul Éluard is just as important as a discourse on politics. The inter-

view, and the film, ends with Zedet recounting the significance of her discovery of Maxim Gorky's *Mother* in the factory library run by Cèbe.<sup>64</sup>

*Potential Consciousness*

*Vertov, of all of them, he was the closest to you [Medvedkin] in terms of ambition and sincerity. You would be endlessly compared to each other and sometimes opposed. "Isn't that so, Mr. Godard?" You fought on the same propaganda fronts, you had the same enemies, which should be a good bond, you even once lived in the same building. . . . And yet all testimonies confirm that in your whole lives you barely exchanged a few words.*

—Chris Marker, *Le tombeau d'Alexandre*  
 (*The Last Bolshevik*), 1993

Of course, the Medvedkin Group was not alone in its claim for the relevance of Soviet cinema in the French 1960s. In early 1969, following years of indifference to Soviet film on the part of the circle orbiting the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard founded his own experiment in collective agitational filmmaking and adopted the name of the filmmaker Dziga Vertov.<sup>65</sup> Vertov, who had famously proclaimed the death of cinematography in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution, developed a vast arsenal of "intricate camera pyrotechnics," in Leyda's words, as a means of

64. One should pause to note, if only in passing, the extreme anachronism of the set of coordinates put forward by the Medvedkin Group as a historically available heritage for oppositional culture in the late 1960s: the Communists Picasso and Éluard, the Prévert of the Popular Front, the canonical text of Socialist Realist literature, and the ciné-train of a Soviet octogenarian.

65. *Cahiers du Cinéma's* relationship to Soviet film is complex and cannot adequately be dealt with here. However, partly because of the journal's Oedipal struggle with Georges Sadoul's so-called Stalinist criticism, it took until *Cahiers du Cinéma's* issues on Eisenstein, published between April 1969 and February 1971, for the editors to explicitly reflect upon Soviet cinematic experiments. See Emilie Bickerton, *A Short History of Cahiers du Cinéma* (London: Verso Books, 2009), pp. 26, 65–66.

remaking vision and, indeed, consciousness itself through the camera—just as society would be remade through Communism.<sup>66</sup> Vertov, therefore, emblemized for Godard the synthesis of formal and political revolution, and provided a cinematic model with which to counter Marker’s claim on the legacy of Medvedkin.

With the founding of the Dziga Vertov Group, which was the culmination of a period of increasingly explicit politicization (evident in the transition from *La Chinoise* and *Week-End* [1967] to *Le Gai Savoir* and *Un film comme les autres* [1968]), Godard sought to jettison the “bourgeois” auto-critique of cinema for a committed cinematic critique of society. Toward this end, he partnered with the journalist and student militant Jean-Pierre Gorin (editor, with Robert Linhart, Jacques-Alain Miller, and Jacques Rancière, of the journal *Cahiers Marxistes-Léninistes*) and undertook a collaborative project lasting until 1972 to make “political cinema politically.”<sup>67</sup> For Godard, the relationship with Gorin was founded on a productive contradiction between the activist seeking new forms of communication and the jaded filmmaker seeking to break out of avant-garde hermeticism: “one wanted to make cinema, the other wanted to leave it.” Their project was “to try to make a new unity of these two opposites, according to a Marxist concept.”<sup>68</sup> Godard explains that the rupture of May ’68 revealed to him that his cinematographic work up to that point had merely represented an “individual revolt” and that it was necessary to “link” himself “to big social movements.”<sup>69</sup> However, he critiqued the “utopia” of an “egalitarian” model of production, and retained creative control over the group’s films.<sup>70</sup>

Over the course of the next four years, the Vertov Group produced eight films committed to expedient production and diffusion in militant circles for purposes agitational and educational. The first two films, *British Sounds/See You at Mao*, an English-language film on British political struggles, and *Pravda*, filmed in Prague, were made in 1969 with Jean-Henri Roger, a Marseillais militant, and the following four films (*Le Vent d’est*, *Luttes en Italie*, the unreleased film *Jusqu’à la victoire*, and *Vladimir et Rosa*) were conceived and filmed with Gorin between 1969 and 1971. The final film made in collaboration with Gorin, *Tout va bien* (1972; accompanied that year by a pendant, *Letter to Jane*), is a comparatively big-budget film starring Yves Montand and Jane Fonda as bourgeois intellectuals (a filmmaker and a journalist, respectively) whose attempts to ally themselves with the working class end in disillusionment. In this way, the film allegorizes the perceived failure of the Vertov Group’s model of political cinema during the disappointments of the post-’68 years, a failure that Godard would work through for the rest of his career.

66. See Dziga Vertov, “WE: Variant of a Manifesto,” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 7. Leyda, *Kino*, p. 251. On Vertov’s “language of cinema,” see Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera*,” in *The Essential Cinema*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 95–111, and more recently, Malcolm Turvey, “City Symphony and *Man with a Movie Camera*,” in *The Filming of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 135–61.

67. Jean-Luc Godard, “Le Groupe ‘Dziga Vertov,’” *Cinéma* 151 (December 1970), p. 82.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.

In a rare acknowledgement, Godard credits Marker's *ciné-tracts*, produced in May '68, as having provided the initial model for the Vertov Group:

The *ciné-tracts* are Chris Marker's idea. The video camera and all these short films, it was a simple and cheap means to make political cinema for a *section d'entreprise* or an action-committee. . . . For, in the same way as in the classroom, we re-write the films with students, and likewise I believe we must make films with those who watch them.<sup>71</sup>

With the Vertov Group's goal to remake the fundamental relations of cinematic production and reception, Godard faced a set of contradictions similar to those that Marker encountered in Besançon: how could cinema construct an image of "the people" that would exceed mere documentation? How could cinema actively participate in forming a collectivity? And what historical value might the repertoire of avant-garde tactics in film—and the modernist paradigm of self-reflexivity itself—still possess in the face of the exigencies of class struggle?

The profound difference between the positions that the two filmmakers would develop in response to these questions can already be glimpsed in an interview given by Godard in the months following the March 1967 strikes at Rhodiaceta. Here, Godard speaks candidly of the unbridgeable separation between the struggles of the proletariat and the specific demands of the cinematic medium, and implicitly cites Marker's work at Rhodiaceta as a counterexample:

[T]he one movie that really ought to have been made in France this year—on this point [Philippe] Sollers and I are in complete agreement—is a movie on the strikes at Rhodiaceta. . . . The thing is, once again, the men who know film can't speak the language of strikes and the men who know strikes are better at talking Oury than Resnais or Barnett. . . . If it were made by a movie-maker, it wouldn't be the movie that should have been made. And if it were made by the workers themselves—who, from a technical point of view, could very well make it, if someone gave them a camera and a guy to help them out a bit—it still wouldn't give as accurate a picture of them, from the cultural point of view, as the one they give when they're on the picket-lines. That's where the gap lies.<sup>72</sup>

71. Jean-Paul Fargier and Bernard Sizaïre, "Deux Heures avec Jean-Luc Godard," *Tribune Socialiste* 396 (January 23, 1969), p. 18, reprinted in Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Alain Bergala (Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, 1985), p. 332.

72. Godard, "Struggle on Two Fronts: A Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard," *Film Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1968–Winter 1969), pp. 21–22. Although the Medvedkin Group would not be founded until six months after this interview was first published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in October 1967, it is almost inconceivable that Godard would not have known of Marker's involvement at Rhodiaceta. Not only had the CCPPO screened *La Chinoise*, but the premiere of *Loim du Vietnam*, to which Godard contributed a sequence, was held in Besançon in October 1967 while Marker was filming *À bientôt j'espère*. Further, his credit in *Classe de lutte* indicates a period of rapprochement or mutual regard between the two directors—one that would end or at least be put under strain with the foundation of the Groupe Dziga Vertov.



Godard identifies a “gap” between the forms of expression proper to the filmmaker and to the working class. The highly specialized language of the cinema is profoundly alien to that of the factory, and a film on the strikes would risk reifying or distorting the class struggle. Conversely, those who speak the “language of strikes” lack the training and fluency to translate the pressing issues of a labor dispute onto celluloid, and were they to try, they would risk falsifying their own experience in the process.

The strategies that Godard deployed in the Vertov Group to address this gap were developed in a dialogical relation with Marker’s work, one just as frequently disavowed as stated explicitly. While in January 1969 he affirms the influence of Marker’s *ciné-tracts*, in the Vertov Group film *Pravda*, filmed in Prague during March 1969, Godard critiques Marker’s involvement at Rhodiaceta. Reading a fictional letter from Lenin to Rosa Luxemburg, a voice-over intones,

Like Delacroix in Algiers or Chris Marker in the strike-torn factories of Rhodiaceta. The *New York Times* and *Le Monde* call it news. And I agree with you, Rosa, that it isn’t enough. Why? Because it’s only the knowledge perceived by our senses. Now one has to make the effort to rise above this perceptual knowledge. One needs to struggle to transform it into rational knowledge.<sup>73</sup>

With the conversation between Lenin and Luxemburg, Godard formulates his cinematic opposition to Marker’s project through an allegorical reconciliation of two historically opposed forms of communism: where Luxemburg stands for the affirmation of revolutionary creativity from below, Lenin represents its formalization in the advanced “scientific” theory and centralized power of the party apparatus. Concretizing his earlier stance on the fissure between the working class and the artist/intellectual, Godard charges Marker with an exoticism of the proletarian other and with naive pretensions to documentary realism.<sup>74</sup> By rephrasing the pedagogical metaphor of the *ciné-tract* cited above, Godard argues that the task of militant cinema would be to translate the working class’s primary or phenomenological experience of their social world into rational knowledge of social contradiction. In this way, Godard imagines a Leninist intellectual vanguard theoretically prior to its fall into disciplinary bureaucracy, a dialectical materialism with an organic connection to the working class.<sup>75</sup> For his part, Marker recalled decades later his desire to produce a film consisting of an hourlong *plan fixe* of Godard and Cèbe sitting in silence across a

73. Dialogue translated in James Roy MacBean, “Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group: Film and Dialectics,” *Film Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Autumn 1972), pp. 35–36.

74. MacBean summarizes Godard’s view of the difference between his and Marker’s projects in this way, “Godard and Gorin have repeatedly emphasized that unlike other militant film groups such as . . . Chris Marker’s SLON . . . the Dziga Vertov Group rejects the ‘reflection of reality’ notion of the cinema and therefore refuses the ‘go out and get footage’ approach . . . which invariably emphasizes the ‘you are there’ immediacy quality of events at the expense of a thorough analysis of the causes, effects, relations and contradictions of events.” MacBean, “Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group,” p. 34.

75. Indeed, *Pravda* was conceived as a critique of both the so-called “revisionism” of the Prague Spring and of Moscow’s bureaucratic Communism. See *ibid.*, p. 36.

table from each other. This film, in Marker's words, would capture "the first time in his life Godard laid eyes on a worker," and picture the polarization between the intellectual and the worker reinforced by the Vertov Group.<sup>76</sup> More than simply anecdotal relics of a cinematographic rivalry, these mutual critiques delineate the rift separating the Medvedkin Group from the Vertov Group, drawn along the division of competences structuring the field of culture in class society.

Effectively, the determining question of the Vertov Group films was how to establish solidarity with the working class without renegeing on the highly differentiated form of epistemological critique developed by avant-garde film. Godard's militant films insistently take as their point of departure the repertoire of formal tactics that he had developed over the course of the previous decade, namely those of "narrative intransitivity, estrangement, foregrounding, multiple diegesis, aperture, unpleasure, reality," as enumerated by Peter Wollen in 1972.<sup>77</sup> However, these strategies do not remain unaltered by the demands of militancy; rather, in the Vertov Group films, each is systematically imbued with overt political signification. For example, the opening shot of *British Sounds* (1969) references the famous eight-minute continuous tracking shot of a traffic jam from *Week-End*, soundtracked with deafening car horns and ending with mutilated bodies strewn across the road. *British Sounds*, conversely, opens with a ten-minute continuous tracking shot of the production line in a British auto-manufacturing plant, accompanied by screeching mechanical sounds and a voiceover reading passages by Marx on the alienation of labor. Regarding the extreme and unrelenting volume of the factory sound, Godard stated, "The workers have to listen to that sound all day, every day, for weeks, months, and years, but bourgeois audiences can't stand to listen to it for more than a few seconds."<sup>78</sup> Whereas the traffic jam in *Week-End* mapped the demolition of cinematic convention onto the apocalyptic decrepitude of consumer society, *British Sounds* associates the camera with the revelation of the conditions of production under advanced industrial capitalism.

Likewise, from the intertitles of *Vivre sa vie* (1962) to the black screen of *Le Gai Savoir* (1968) Godard increasingly explored the use of blank sequences—the interstitial space between shots—that no longer served a merely grammatical role as cinematic "punctuation marks" (transitioning between sequences and expressing the passage of time), but that dialectically engaged with cinematic structure, as Noël Burch argues.<sup>79</sup> For Gilles Deleuze, following Burch, this practice severed montage from its traditional role of establishing rational linkages and sensory-motor continuity, and

76. Marker, quoted in Min Lee, "Red Skies: Joining Forces with the Militant Collective SLON," *Film Comment* 39, no. 4 (July–August 2003), p. 39. Marker's scenario is complicated by an anecdote related by Bruno Muel, who recalls Cèbe's account of occasional dinners with Godard in Paris, which would usually be spent in amicable silence. Muel, "Les riches heures du groupe Medvedkine," p. 22.

77. Peter Wollen, "Counter Cinema: *Vent d'Est*," *Afterimage* 4 (Autumn 1972), p. 6.

78. Godard, quoted in Richard Brody, *Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), p. 345.

79. Burch writes, "The absence of an image on the screen traditionally constitutes a simple 'punctuation mark' used to 'signify' the passage of time in the same way a dissolve does." Conversely, in Godard's use of the blank, "the opposition of an image and its absence" assumes a dialectical role as "an essential structural element." Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Praeger, 1973), pp. 56–7, 60.

instead emphasized the purely disjunctive value of the filmic interstice. In Deleuze’s words, “the interval is set free, the interstice becomes irreducible and stands on its own.”<sup>80</sup> In this view, the stretches of blank white or black screen, which display nothing but the distance between images, are the ciphers of materialist cinematic practice at its limits. However, in the Vertov Group films, this degree zero of cinema is recuperated as a source of positive and didactic meaning.<sup>81</sup> In a programmatic manner, Godard metaphorically reconceives the cinematic frame as a blackboard in a classroom, an empty surface upon which militant students will inscribe the theory of revolution. In *British Sounds*, over a scene of student activists making posters, a voice-over states:

During the projection of an imperialist film, the screen sells the voice of the boss to the viewer, the voice caresses and beats into submission. During the projection of a revisionist film, the screen is the loudspeaker for a voice delegated by the people which is no longer the voice of the people. In silence people see their own disfigured face. During the projection of a militant film, the screen is no more than a blackboard, the wall of a school offering concrete analysis of a concrete situation. In front of that screen, the living soul of Marxism, the students criticize, struggle, and transform.

If the black frame of avant-garde film reduced the cinematic medium to an empty set, thus providing, in Deleuze’s words, a “pedagogy of the image,” in the Vertov Group films the black frame is metaphorized into the militant blackboard, providing a pedagogy of revolution.<sup>82</sup> “So, for once, this black screen really means something,” as the narrator states in *Vladimir et Rosa* (1970).<sup>83</sup>

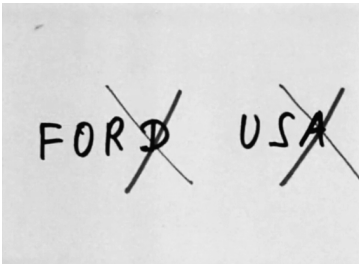
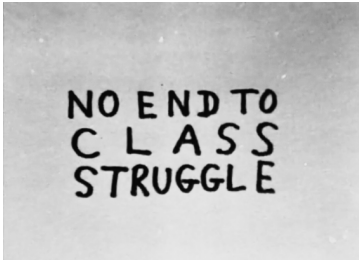
In the trope of the screen as the “living soul of Marxism,” Godard makes a claim for the militant film as the structural correlate within culture of the vanguard party within politics. As explicitly stated in *Vladimir et Rosa*—“Ours is a vanguard party,” the narrator proclaims—the Vertov Group adopts the Leninist posi-

80. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone, 1989), p. 277.

81. A similar shift could be traced from Godard’s formula of coloristic materialism (“it’s not blood, it’s red”) to the Maoist metaphors of red in the Vertov Group films.

82. “There is a pedagogy of the image, especially in Godard . . . when the frame serves as an opaque surface of information, sometimes blurred by saturation, sometimes reduced to the empty set, to the white or black screen.” Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone, 1986), p. 13.

83. The black screen as a site of metaphorical projection is deployed differently in *Vladimir et Rosa*, a film about the distinction between theory and practice in cinema and in revolution that ostensibly portrays the famous 1969 trial of the “Chicago Eight.” In a sequence regarding the severance of Black Panther militant Bobby Seale’s trial after Seale is held in contempt of court, Godard employs the blank as a means of imaging Seale’s very removal from visibility before the law. In a voice-over accompanying a black screen, Godard links the “black leader” of cinema with the “black leader” of the Black Power movement, arguing that this was “not a black image, but an image of a Black.” Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, “À Propos de Vladimir et Rosa,” in *Jean-Luc Godard: Documents*, ed. Nicole Brenez (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2006), p. 163.



*Dziga Vertov Group.*  
British Sounds/See  
You at Mao. 1969.

tion that the “role of the vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by an advanced theory.”<sup>84</sup> As with the relationship established by Lenin between the working class and the advanced theoretical position of the party, Godard’s militant films attempt to translate “the People’s” experience into a form of rational knowledge—exceeding mere documentation for “a concrete analysis of a concrete situation”—and, at the same time, to teach that same “People” about their own experience. Godard aligns the formal innovations of “vanguard” cinema with the theoretical positions of the “vanguard” militant student *groupuscules*, whose tracts he appropriated for dialogue. But Godard found that the people never quite seemed to recognize themselves on the blackboard of militant cinema. The class consciousness (and the cinematic tastes) of the masses inevitably lagged behind the vanguard works presenting to them the rational knowledge of their own objective conditions; as Godard lamented in *Pravda*, “workers talk like Henry Ford, not the Black Panthers.”

This delay or discrepancy between the proletariat in theory and the proletariat in practice—a gap that both the Vertov Group and the Medvedkin Group faced—has a long history in Marxist thought as the trope of “potential consciousness,” stretching from Marx’s *The Holy Family* (1844) to Lukács to the postwar French philosopher Lucien Goldmann. For Marx, the actually existing consciousness of the proletariat as a class had to be distinguished from the historical

84. Vladimir Lenin, “What Is to Be Done?,” in *Essential Works of Lenin*, ed. Henry M. Christman (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), p. 70. Further, for Lenin, “By educating the workers’ party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat which is capable of assuming power and of leading the whole people to socialism, of directing and organizing the new order, of being the teacher, guide, and leader of all the toiling and exploited in the task of building up their social life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie.” Lenin, “The State and Revolution,” in *Essential Works of Lenin*, p. 288.

disposition of this same class: “it is not a question of what this or that proletariat, or even the whole proletariat, *regards* as its aim at the moment. It is a question of *what the proletariat is* and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do.”<sup>85</sup> Following Marx, Lukács argues, “Class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions ‘imputed’ (*zugerechnet*) to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class.”<sup>86</sup> To distinguish the “actual, psychological state of consciousness of the proletariat” (that is to say, a false consciousness mystified by ideology and dulled by suffering) from its potential consciousness (the historical awareness of its revolutionary mission) is, for Lukács, precisely the task of dialectical materialism.<sup>87</sup> Consequently, the promise of revolutionary change depends upon “closing the gap between the psychological consciousness and the imputed one,” a synthesis achieved in the vanguard party.<sup>88</sup>

This is why, for Lucien Goldmann, a philosopher whose influence in the 1950s and 1960s weighed heavily on francophone Marxist artists and intellectuals such as Marcel Broodthaers and Guy Debord, “the *possible* is the fundamental category for understanding human history.”<sup>89</sup> In his essay “The Revolt of the Arts and Letters in Advanced Civilizations,” (1968) which discusses Godard’s *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*) (1963) and Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* (1957), Goldmann offers a remarkably apposite metaphor for differentiating the Vertov and Medvedkin groups, arguing that the dialectical philosopher or historian is not concerned primarily with developing “the most exact and meticulous possible photography of the existing society” but rather with isolating “the potential (*virtuelles*) developing tendencies oriented toward overcoming that society.”<sup>90</sup> Following Lukács, Goldmann’s cultural criticism identifies the fundamental dialectic of class consciousness as that between the “class-in-itself” and the “class-for-itself.”<sup>91</sup> Where the *class-in-itself* represents the actually existing “empirical” consciousness of the proletariat as a

85. Karl Marx, “The Holy Family,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Lloyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 368. Translation modified as quoted in Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, ed. Andrew Parker, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 80.

86. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 51.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

88. *Ibid.*

89. Lucien Goldmann, “The Revolt of the Arts and Letters in Advanced Civilizations,” in *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, trans. Bart Grahl (St. Louis: Telos, 1976), p. 57.

90. *Ibid.*

91. Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, trans. Hayden V. White and Robert Anchor (London: Cape Press, 1969), pp. 118–19. The difference between the in-itself and the for-itself was explored at length in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, in which, as Martin Jay explains, “the ‘in-itself’ was fully self-sufficient, a completed positivity that was identical with itself, [whereas] the ‘for itself’ was totally dependent on what it was not and yet desired to be. Rather than identity, it implied non-identical difference.” Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 338.

social group defined by its penury, the *class-for-itself* represents the potential revolutionary orientation of this class toward its simultaneous self-abolition and realization in the process of ushering in a classless society.

In Goldmann's schema, it is the historically significant work of art or philosophy that acts from within this aporia. In this sense, the role of the artist or philosopher is to embody the "*maximum of potential consciousness*" of a class, to express its worldview. Goldmann argues,

World-views are social facts. Great philosophical and artistic works represent the *coherent* and adequate expressions of these world-views. As such, they are *at once individual and social* expressions, their content being determined by the *maximum of potential consciousness* of the group, of the social class in general, and their form being determined by the content for which the writer or thinker finds an adequate expression.<sup>92</sup>

The worldview of a class thus finds its authentic voice, its "*coherent, exceptional expression*, in great works of philosophy and art, or even in the lives of certain exceptional individuals. (The latter plane corresponds more or less to the maximum of *potential consciousness*.)"<sup>93</sup> In contrast to Goldmann's avowedly "social" model of subjectivity as a "transindividual" construction,<sup>94</sup> his cultural concept of maximum potential consciousness reaffirms a mythology of the artist as exceptional individual. Further, his theory of culture effectively substitutes the advanced work of art for the role of the Communist vanguard party as the embodiment of an authentic historicity that remains unconscious in the rest of the social world. In this substitution, a number of contradictions are intensified. The maximum potential consciousness of the proletariat must paradoxically come from outside its own ranks, from a professional class of almost exclusively bourgeois artists; and, being that the working class's ideal consciousness is by necessity of its own disappearance, this class consciousness would approach the metaphysical condition of a presence that can only assert itself as absence. For Jacques Rancière, this model invokes an impossible paradox: "It is too hard a task, even for the best dialecticians, to prove to communist proletarians that they are not communist proletarians by invoking a communist proletariat whose only fault is that it does not yet exist."<sup>95</sup>

In Godard's view, the Medvedkin Group's project of cinematic de-specialization was subtended by a credulous faith in cinema as a putatively unmediated technique that could simply be transferred from the bourgeoisie to the working class.

92. Goldmann, *Human Sciences and Philosophy*, p. 129.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

94. Goldmann argues, for example, "*Every manifestation is the work of its individual author and expresses his thought and his way of feeling, but these ways of thinking and feeling are not independent entities with respect to the actions and behavior of other men. They exist and may be understood only in terms of their inter-subjective relations which give them their whole tenor and richness.*" Emphasis in the original. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

95. Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, p. 85.

Were the camera to fall into the hands of the people, they would at best merely reflect their own alienated consciousness. Conversely, in the isomorphism of the blank screen and the militant blackboard, the Vertov Group posits that the tactics of cinematic negation, intransitivity, and estrangement are the adequate and appropriate means to represent the potential consciousness of a class destined to abolish itself. As the Vertov Group proclaims in *British Sounds*, militant cinema “doesn’t mean bringing films to the people, but making films from and through the people.” While Godard conceived of militant film as the vanguard expression of the working class’s revolutionary sublation, his model also depended on and reinforced a separation between the maximum potential consciousness of the working class and its “empirical” life context. For, as Godard laments, the proletariat inevitably prefers the popular comedies of Gérard Oury or, at best, the “revisionist” cinema of the “bourgeois” Eisenstein to the school lessons of militant film.<sup>96</sup>

The divergent claims made by Marker and by Godard for the possible legacy of Soviet film reflect their polarized responses to the dialectics of class consciousness. Godard nominally adopted Vertov because of his cinematic mission “to open [people’s] eyes and to show the world in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat.”<sup>97</sup> Marker, conversely, turned to Medvedkin because “he had put the camera in the hands of the people” so they could “make films to show things as they felt them to be from their own experience.”<sup>98</sup> On the one side, a project that sought to transform the inchoate consciousness of “the People” into the rational cinematic knowledge of their potential liberation, and, on the other, a challenge to the structuring principles of culture and to the class division between those who have the power to speak and those who do not.

### *Rencontres*

If, as Godard contended, the Medvedkin Group did not accept the task of representing the proletariat-for-itself, i.e., of portraying its potential to be realized in a post-revolutionary future, neither did the collective affirm the converse position and hypostatize the proletariat-in-itself by asserting that class identity had stable contours that could be empirically described and valorized only by card-carrying members. Rather, the Medvedkin Group “unworked” integral categories of identity through a political claim to sectors of experience previously deemed inaccessible to a working

96. In an interview regarding the Vertov Group, Godard argues, “We took Vertov’s name not in order to apply his program, but to take him as a flag-bearer in relation to Eisenstein, who... is already a revisionist filmmaker. . . . The only films that the proletarians truly accept today are still [Eisenstein’s *Battleship*] *Potemkin* or [Herbert J. Biberman’s] *The Salt of the Earth*; these are the only films that touch them profoundly, the film of a bourgeois carried along by the revolution and that of a liberal American. . . . [Even if] this boosts [the proletarian’s] morale, it gives him no indication of the political forces at play where he is struggling.” Godard, “Le Groupe ‘Dziga Vertov,’” pp. 82, 85.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

98. Marker, “Le ciné-ours,” p. 4.

class that had its essential nature and prospects rooted exclusively in labor. Consequently, in the “impossible identification”<sup>99</sup> between Parisian filmmakers and striking workers from Besançon, and in the alternate circuits of production and distribution established by SLON, the Medvedkin Group is intrinsically bound up with the most radical dimension of the contestations of May 1968. Specifically, the films of the Medvedkin Group are determined at the level of production and reception by what Kristin Ross describes as the pervasive logic running through the general strike, occupations, and demonstrations that overtook Paris for nearly an entire month: that of the *rencontre*, or encounter. For Ross, the *rencontres* that proliferated in May—epitomized by the *Comité d'Action Travailleur/Étudiant*, which invited workers into the occupied Sorbonne and students into the factories in order to establish common social spaces of discussion—consisted of

meetings that were neither magical nor mythical but simply the experience of incessantly running into people that social, cultural, or professional divisions had previously kept one from meeting up with, little events that produced the sense that those mediations or social compartments had simply withered away.<sup>100</sup>

The *rencontre*, thus, did not represent what Nancy describes as the typical conception of community as a “project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project.”<sup>101</sup> Rather than aim toward the abolition of difference or the affirmation of identity, as Ross argues, these meetings sought “to contest the domain of the expert, [and] to disrupt the system of naturalized spheres of competence.”<sup>102</sup> In the ebullient communication between workers and intellectuals, artists and militants, a form of community was organized that contested traditional separations between specialized social sectors, yet rejected assimilation into any mythically coherent class, mass, or party. It is firmly within this historical moment, with all its vicissitudes, that the Medvedkin Group must be situated.

During the month of May, however, the organs of the official left, especially the CGT and the PCF, rejected the union between students and workers as a dangerous form of sociological ataxia.<sup>103</sup> For example, adopting the language of reac-

99. For Rancière, political subjectivization almost always involves such an “impossible identification.” Giving the example of the May slogan “We are all German Jews,” Rancière writes, “We could act as political subjects in the interval or the gap between two identities, neither of which we could assume.” Jacques Rancière, “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” *October* 61 (Summer 1992), p. 61.

100. Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, p. 103.

101. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 15.

102. Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, p. 6.

103. For Guy Debord, the unions and the party contributed more to the *retour à l'ordre* than could any amount of police repression. According to Debord, the institutions of the left conceived of “a sort of being-in-himself worker who, by definition, would exist only in his own factory, where . . . the Stalinists would force him to keep silent,” and therefore undermined “the essential need whose vital urgency was felt by so many workers in May: the need for coordination and communication of struggles and ideas, starting from bases of free encounter outside their union-policed factories.” Situationist International, “The Beginning of an Era,” in *The Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 239.



tion, the PCF echoed de Gaulle in labeling students “*pègres*.”<sup>104</sup> Likewise, it was primarily the left bureaucracy that instigated the dissolution of the Besançon Medvedkin Group. Medvedkin Group members Binetruy and Traforetti recall being confronted by local PCF representatives who demanded that they stop making films in order to engage in more “serious” militant activity: “It wasn’t the content of the films that was aimed at. The more serious transgression was that they accepted working with ‘*intellos*’ without going through the Party’s hierarchical structures. ‘*Intellos*,’ even worse, from Paris.”<sup>105</sup> As a result of this confrontation, certain members of the Medvedkin Group left the Communist Party, while others abandoned their cinematic experiments to entrench themselves within the traditional institutions of working-class representation.<sup>106</sup> The divisions were just as virulent on the side of the Parisian *intellos*. Marker recalls how forcefully the PCF rejected the group’s activities and how his erstwhile collaborator, the director Mario Marret, left the group in order to start a parallel project linked directly to the Communist Party. Marker emphasizes the “*langue de bois*,” or stereotyped party-speak, of these films as opposed to the liberty of expression in the Medvedkin Group.<sup>107</sup> At the heart of the conflict was the implicit challenge presented to the ideology of the party—centered as it was on a fetishization of labor and a mythical conception of “the worker” as a synecdoche of a homogeneous class, of which the party was the privileged representation—by the *rencontre* between artists and workers, who all of a sudden refused to be ventriloquized and demanded to speak for themselves.

For a worker to claim the right to create—to theoretically “unalienated” labor—was a gesture as threatening to the factory bosses as it was to the official organs of the left, with their vision of the worker acceding to a state of *being-in-oneself through work*. Regarding this form of sociological indeterminacy, Rancière argues that “perhaps the truly dangerous classes are . . . the migrants who move at the border between classes, individuals and groups who develop capabilities within themselves which are useless for the improvement of their material lives and which in fact are liable to make them despise material concerns.”<sup>108</sup> Further, for Rancière, “Working-class emancipation was not the affirmation of values specific to the world of labor. It was a rupture in the order of things that founded these ‘values,’ a rupture in the tra-

104. Ross cites an editorial in the Communist Party newspaper *L’Humanité* that describes protesters as “*pègres*,” which she translates as “riff-raff, scum, the underworld.” See Ross, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives*, p. 107–8.

105. Recounted in ISKRA, p. 37.

106. Georges Maurivard recalls that during the strikes of 1967, the party and unions openly welcomed student groups and filmmakers, though “this all changed in 1968.” Maurivard claims that the PCF was “afraid of the dynamic of this period” and told the Medvedkin Group to stop associating with “leftists” (*gauchistes*) such as Marker. Maurivard, “‘Classes de Lutte,’ luttes de classes,” pp. 96–97.

107. Marker, “Pour Mario,” in ISKRA, p. 12.

108. Jacques Rancière, “Good Times, or Pleasure at the Barriers,” in *Voices of the People: The Social Life of ‘La Sociale’ at the End of the Second Empire*, ed. Adrian Rifkin and Roger Thomas, trans. John Moore (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 49.

ditional division [*partage*] assigning the privilege of thought to some and the tasks of production to others.”<sup>109</sup> Binetruy affirms this rupture, recalling that while initially wary of “these Parisians who came stuffed with film and cameras,” he quickly realized that “they did not come to teach us any lessons, but rather to transmit technical training that would liberate our spirits through our eyes. Once you have put your eyes behind a camera, you are no longer the same man, your perspective has changed.”<sup>110</sup>

The consequences of this perspectival shift were explored in the subsequent films made by the Besançon Medvedkin Group before its dissolution in 1971 and the departure of Cèbe in 1970 to found a second Medvedkin Group at a Peugeot factory in Sochaux-Montbéliard, which would continue until 1975. These films range from a series of short *ciné-tracts* entitled *Nouvelle Société* (1969–1970), which sought to counter Prime Minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas’s harmonious vision of a renewed French society; to *Lettre à mon ami Pol Cèbe* (1971), a radically discrepant and self-reflexive film made by Rhodia laborers in a car en route to screen *Classe de lutte* at a factory in Lille; and to *Le Traîneau-échelle* (1971), a montage of *détourned* photos, illustrations, and film-reels accompanied by a poem written by a young worker, Jean-Pierre Thiébaud, which dispenses with the languages of agitation and documentary altogether to investigate the mnemonic potential of sound-image relationships.

If the form of cultural politics “from below” that the Medvedkin Group practiced was first developed by their namesake as part of a state-sponsored project of social engineering, the recovery of factography in the 1960s paradoxically propelled the group outside the bounds of the Communist bureaucracy. Indeed, in their challenge to sedimented divisions of competence and consciousness, the Communism of the Medvedkin Group approaches Maurice Blanchot’s definition, written in the throes of May: “Communism is what excludes (and excludes itself from) any already constituted community.”<sup>111</sup> The Medvedkin Group excluded itself not only from the traditional institutions of working-class representation but also from those of culture conceived as a compensatory *promesse de bonheur* serving to stabilize the excesses of capitalism—a model exemplified today by the sham reconciliations proffered by Sarkozy. The cinematic debate between the Vertov and Medvedkin groups on the social role of the intellectual emerged from the shared conviction that this conception of culture was no longer historically tenable amid the various challenges to specialization and to social atomization put forth by the CCPPO, among many others. Rather than deferring the utopian universalization of creativity into a potential postrevolutionary future, Marker and the worker-cinematographers at Rhodiaceta claimed that the operative entry into culture of a class of people previously denied access to it constituted not simply an intervention into the superstructure but the destabilization of a social order based upon the division of labor.

109. Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, p. 219.

110. ISKRA, p. 5.

111. Maurice Blanchot, “[Communism Without Heirs],” in *Maurice Blanchot: Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 93.