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TOWARD A SOCIAL CINEMA REVISITED

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In 1930, Jean Vigo stood before a ciné-club audience at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier in Paris to introduce his first film, *À Propos de Nice*, a silent short made in collaboration with the Russian cinematographer (and younger brother of Dziga Vertov) Boris Kaufman. The film begins with a spectacular explosion of fireworks. The aerial views that follow promise a totalized image of life on the ground below. Other great city symphonies of the interwar period offer machinic visions of social synchronization, *À Propos de Nice* instead fixes on moments of incommensurability and stark social disparity. Kaufman shot much of the film's footage with a hidden Kinamo camera, his kino-eye attuned to the strange energies stirred up by the arrival of carnival season in Nice. Palm trees spin; enormous papier-mâché masks come to life. Tourists strolling the famous Promenade des Anglais evoke visions of exotic animals on the loose. These wealthy leisure-seeking visitors enjoy games of chance and sport that remain a world away from the rhythms of labor and play that pervade the garbage-strewn streets of the old city. The advent of carnival upsets the clear division between the bourgeoisie and the city's immigrant underclass, but only temporarily.

"To aim at a social cinema would be to consent to work a mine of subjects continuously replenished by reality," Vigo told his audience. It would be to "stimulate echoes" other than those of the belches of the "ladies and gentleman who come to the cinema to help their digestion." This would require putting an end to tired narrative formulas, as he put it, "two pairs of lips, which take 3,000 meters to come together and almost as long to come unstuck." Vigo's vitriol was aimed as much at the conventions of the commercial cinema as it was at the avant-garde. He was skeptical of the "overly artistic subtlety of a pure cinema"; the navel gazing of "technique for technique's sake" did not, in his view, point the way forward.[1] His address, translated and published as "Toward a Social Cinema" in the inaugural issue of this journal, is subtly suggestive despite all the bombast. Wary of "strangling" his vision with a formula, Vigo insists only that what the camera records "must be considered a document" and "treated as a document during the editing." When he does offer specific directives, they are sometimes contradictory, as though he were still working out the implications of his own efforts in *À Propos de Nice*.

For example, he declares, "Conscious posing or acting cannot be tolerated." In practice however, he was much less orthodox.

À Propos de Nice is a film punctuated with droll set pieces and live-action animations. Many of Vigo's trick edits revolve around scenes of fleshy exposure: A shoeshine suddenly leaves a foot absurdly bare; a sunbather wakes to find his skin completely blackened by the sun; a woman flashes through a series of costume changes without changing her pose, ending up entirely nude in the last shot. With these manipulations, Vigo brings the bodily dimensions of social experience to the fore, juxtaposing the rituals of the leisure class with scenes of everyday life among the less privileged: Sunbathing, promenading, formal dancing — all are rendered with biting humor.

Jean Vigo, *À Propos de Nice* (1930), frame enlargements.

1 Jean Vigo, "Toward a Social Cinema" trans. Stuart Liebman, *Millennium Film Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (Winter 1977-78): pp. 21-24.

Jean Vigo, *À Propos de Nice* (1930), frame enlargements.

Quick edits emphasize and isolate socially resonant postures and movements. Vivid cine-portraits of wealthy tourists are interrupted by scenes shot at the zoo: Ladies in furs prance along the promenade like ostriches, while sun worshipers bask like crocodiles at the water's edge. Social cinema for Vigo is a cinema of revelation, a way of showing "the hidden reason behind a gesture," or "the interior beauty of a caricature from an ordinary person, chosen at random."

Another surprising aspect of Vigo's statement is the long description it offers of Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, a surrealist fever-dream that would seem to share little in common with *À Propos de Nice*. Looking past the obvious disparities, Vigo grasped "social implications" of Buñuel's attack on bourgeois pieties. In *Un Chien Andalou* he found confirmation of his own desire to deliver a "kick in the pants to macabre ceremonies." Rather than dryly dissect the activities of the leisure class, *À Propos de Nice* delights obscenely in all their grotesquery. Carnival revelers dance, their short skirts and high leg kicks filmed from below (a bawdy reversal of the distanced aerial shots that introduce the film). The frenzied celebration takes off in the form of a procession: a march of oversized masks gives way to the exuberant, libidinally charged exchange of flowers tossed and trampled along the parade route. Vigo juxtaposes this footage with scenes that disclose the otherwise invisible labor of the working-class women whose job it was harvest the flowers. Later, this dialectical montage shifts into a more symbolic register. Ominous shots of waiting warships and a funeral procession disrupt the progress of the festivities. Time bends as the dancers' movements become slow and dreamlike; increasingly, the film cuts away from the celebration to scenes of ostentatious graveyard statuary. *À Propos de Nice* not only documents social divisions, it stokes the unruly energies carnival would otherwise dispel. Vigo finds a deathly stasis lurking just below the city's flirtation with social disorder. His film builds toward the eruption of revolutionary desire, which in the final shot takes the form of an unmistakably phallic industrial smokestack.

Vigo modestly presented *À Propos de Nice* as "only a simple rough draft" of a social cinema still to come. This promise would be deferred indefinitely by its author's untimely death in 1934, leaving it up to later generations to consider the legacy of the cinema he proposed. Vigo's work is most often situated within the history of French cinema, or within a broader history of political filmmaking. Today, the widespread popularity of online video-sharing platforms like Youtube and Vimeo would seem to announce the return of "social cinema" under a new guise, begging the question of its history (and future) now that the means of making and distributing moving images online have become much more accessible. To pose the problem simply: How does the promise of social cinema read today? Given the explosion of new forms of social media, what new possibilities might social cinema now allow, or perhaps better, demand?

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"Hey um Youtube…It's PinkSummerCrush, I wanted to start a webshow and I need ideas for it, but I don't know…like…any ideas." So begins a recent work by Elisa Giardina Papa with the screaming title, *need ideas!?!PLZ!!* (2011). For five and a half minutes, viewers are entreated to help would-be pre-adolescent content providers figure out what content to provide. "Idea" here becomes an elusive concept: what would be a viable idea in the world of PinkSummerCrush and her anonymous audience? Content is simply something to do; something modest offered up freely in exchange for a sense of accomplishment or relief. As one user puts it, "I don't know what to do… so give me ideas. I'm trying to get more stuff done." Another whines, "I really need new vids, I have *no* time, ok?" These pleas are funny and sad and strange. They register a palpable confusion of work and play, social anxiety expressed as a preoccupation with stats and productivity. Giardina Papa gathers her clips from the vast dump of media recorded and uploaded online as casually as teenagers once picked up the phone without much of anything to say. (Many greet their viewers familiarly with some version of "hey guys.") They seem surprisingly (alarmingly) willing to honor any request, one caveat — "anything except stick something up my nose." Their candor is affecting, charming even, despite the discomforting feeling of having stumbled upon a pervert's trove of pre-pubescent innocence at risk.

In *À Propos de Nice* the games children play in the street catches the eye of the camera. Kaufman shoots a game of *morra* (a counting game similar to rock-paper-scissors) in a tight close up. A shared code of hand signals and counting gestures is all that is required to generate an intensity of concentration powerful enough to cause the world outside the boy's circle to retreat entirely from view. By contrast, Giardina Papa's video charts the psycho-geography of suburban distraction. It tells us everything we need to know about the boredom and isolation that goes on behind closed bedroom doors. The Internet solicits a fixated, but always only half attentive mode of scanning. We watch these tweens watching themselves, their faces intermittently illuminated by the cool light of the monitor. The webcam becomes a way to register one's own existence, measured as an index of one's willingness to participate, to perform. It also records a battery of nervous, funny, weird gestures and bodily affects exploited to great effect by Giardina Papa's subtle editing. Adolescent preoccupation with quantifiable status, with having some way to see and measure oneself vis-à-vis an abstract conception of others, has become a generalized state of affairs, the dominant logic of neoliberal society. These kids, we understand immediately — they are us — only more sympathetic for earnestly struggling with the transformation of social life into an economy based on attention, its value set by its increasing scarcity.

There is no unseen site of exploitation underlying these mini-dramas of self-subjection that could be revealed, as Vigo does, with parallel montage. Instead, cuts are a way to collect samples, underline patterns, isolate gestures and ticks — in one sequence, a series of girls point insistently to the imaginary comment box just outside the frame. The intimacy of video's direct address prevents these kids from becoming mere caricatures or sociological abstractions; each clip remains a compelling portrait. *need ideas!?!PLZ!!* is a catalog of moments that betray anxiety about the implicit social contract of the media format, anxiety the video allows us to feel as much as see and understand conceptually. As signs of manic acquiescence to the limits of the interface accumulate, they betray a powerful shared desire to destroy the order social media formats govern.

Though it pervades much of daily life, particularly within the American suburban terrain charted by Giardina Papa, social media is still relatively new, not much older than the kids who populate her video. Omer Fast's *CNN Concatenated* (2002) explores television's role in shaping visibility (or invisibility) of the social body on screen before a billion personal news feeds on Facebook took over. Fast recorded hours of CNN broadcasts in the weeks and months after the attacks of September 11th and then painstakingly parsed this footage into short segments to create a database of ten thousand single spoken words and phrases. Familiar newscasters deliver a disconcerting address, spoken as if channeling a voice from elsewhere. Each talking head appears intermittently in a brief flash; spoken words are stitched together like the letters of a ransom note. Vigo's crosscutting in *À Propos de Nice* maps urban space to make economic and social disparities readily visible, while Giardina Papa's sampling in *need ideas!?!PLZ!!* shows us the casual self-exploitation of a carefully selected online demographic. Fast uses editing to different ends: he cuts with little interest in setting up contrasts or grouping like with like — concatenation here is an operation of massification.

In *CNN Concatenated* we witness the last gasps of media's mass address. It begins as an incantation or a curious poem written in the idiom of advertising copy:

> *Between/eastern/daylight/savings/and/our/west*
> *coast/viewers*
> *This just in/and/coming soon*
> *Between/commercial breaks/and/breaking stories*
> *Between/the Gallup polls/and/eye witness/*
> *testimonies*
> *Between/town hall meetings/chat rooms/websites/*
> *surveys/figures/numbers*
> *expert analysis/statistics/and/their/partisan/*
> *priorities*
> *Between/the Middle East/and/Far/West*
> *Between/the Midwest/and/the Far East*
> *Between/the coasts/and/the swing states…*

A series of virtual, geographic, and political sites (chat rooms, the Midwest, swing states) are linked together one word at a time, suggesting a cable news network boasting of its far-reaching coverage. Repetition of the word "between" spoken by different newscasters emphasizes the process of concatenation — the linking up of one speaker to another.

> *Between/what/used/to be/between/us/and/what/*
> *may/have/only/been/a border*
> *Between/the sheets/between/each bite/between/*
> *desire/and/confusion*

"Between" marks a space of intimacy, no longer simply a physical or abstract interval, but also a state of being or coming undone. Here the social is not mapped in the contrasts between already recognizable and clearly defined social classes or spaces. It appears only in the form of an unrepresentable negativity, everywhere and nowhere at once. Tension builds as the narration slides into an erratic one-sided rant directed at an intimate partner who may or may not be present in the flesh.

> *You/are/so/hypocritical/self/absorbed/and/*
> *pathetic/that/I/wonder/sometimes/just/how/*
> *much/it/takes/to/move/you.*

Fast exaggerates to the extreme a pervasive anxiety about an absent or inattentive audience that Anne M. Wagner has identified as the most significant feature of many early works of video art, but which persists, for example, in more recent works like *need ideas!?!PLZ!!.*[2] Comically, absurdly, but also viciously, Fast goes after his wayward viewers, excoriating the audience for its passivity, weakness of character, and disavowed dependence on cable news, especially in moments of crisis.

Concatenation creates a figure that conjures the unrepresentability of the mass in negative form — an invisible force powerful enough to coordinate the chorus of talking heads into a singular expression of venom. In Fast's drama, CNN plays the role of the scorned intimate, an unhappy and unfulfilled partner. The work could be a rejoinder to Jean Baudrillard, who argues that the masses have long been misrecognized as the dupe of power, when in fact they wield their passivity as a form of strength "superior to any power acting upon them." They are not a reserve of "potential energy," their force, he insists, "is actual, in the present, and sufficient unto itself."[3] It takes the form of silence, a withdrawal, which in *CNN Concatenated* is made palpably infuriating. In Fast's work however, the power of the silent majority is less impeachable than Baudrillard makes it out to be. Ultimately, it becomes difficult to distinguish the newscasters' tirade from a paranoid, self-punishing interior monologue.

In Natalie Bookchin's recent work, *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012), like Giardina Papa's video, made from material found on YouTube, we encounter a world in which CNN's hegemony has been eclipsed by the rule of TMZ and Twitter. Here the cultural logic of social media transforms the silent majority into a chattering crowd. Like Fast, Bookchin uses recombinatory editing of appropriated material, but rather than hijacking the recognizable representatives of the commercial media to perform a script written by the artist, she mines anonymous online archives to excavate the ready-at-hand scripts that people reproduce themselves. *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* takes the form of an 18-channel installation. Faces appear and disappear on screens floating throughout a dark room. Without naming any specific celebrity, politician, or public personality, isolated individuals speak directly to the viewer. They reflect on the consequences of actions taken by someone whose identity seems difficult to pin down, an ambiguity bound up with markers of social significance — class, gender, and especially race. Sometimes a single voice speaks a line that is almost seamlessly picked up by someone else. "I don't know what race you are…/…Even his name is a mystery." At other times an entire host of speakers appear simultaneously, underlining a single word ("facts," "racist," "human" etc.) that functions as the hinge between each of their monologues. Details that seem to belong to the narrative of one familiar media figure, judged for his adultery for example, slide into discussions that allude to a contested birth certificate or plastic surgery, suddenly recalling the tabloid narratives of other prominent and highly scrutinized public figures. Bookchin doesn't manufacture these slippages as Fast does in *CNN Concatenated*, rather she imports them as found social documents.

Bookchin's orchestration exploits moments of synchronicity and dissonance. This style of editing is closer

Natalie Bookchin, *Now he's out in public and everyone can see* (2012), installation view. Courtesy the artist.

to conducting than concatenation. There's a powerful musical quality to the work, particularly when voices ring out in unison. Bookchin transforms these individual speakers into a Greek chorus for our own age of celebrity and political scandal, a precarious collective, whose members often use the same words to express very different sentiments. Her installation creates an echo chamber full of reverb and crossed signals. The danger of social media is that it allows us to share what we have to say with those who are already most likely to agree. Bookchin's work upsets boundaries between people who might not otherwise tune into each other's channels. What they share in common is the act of passing judgment on the public figures they discuss and dissect. Viewers are invited to respond in kind by finding ways to classify and situate each speaker within a larger social matrix: this one a tea partier, that one a Tiger Woods apologist or perhaps a Michael Jackson super-fan. By transforming these found documents into a series of linked portraits, Bookchin takes up the functions of social media, the tools it offers (linking, hashtags, indexing) to reimagine the idea of the social graph. But

this is no utopian vision of the people's media, rather it reminds us that the social is a category largely based on the policing of difference and maintaining order. The work plays with the unconscious slippages that reveal the seams of that order, but stops short of shifting into the kind of revolutionary high gear that comes at the conclusion of Vigo's film. Bookchin's work tells us something about the affective experiences generated by new forms of online protest, for example the testimonies about personal debt that spread during the Occupy uprisings or the statements of solidarity behind the "I am Trayvon Martin" campaign. These strategies exploit powerful forms of resonance and repetition immanent to a format that underlines isolation and individuality.

2 Anne M. Wager, "Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence" *October* 91 (Winter 2000) pp. 59-80.

3 Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1978), pp. 6-7.

The work that feels most relevant to the ongoing continuation of Vigo's project today takes up a convention rarely used in the cinema, direct address. It belongs to a history of video used as a medium of self-reflection and interaction, a history that sits alongside the political cinemas that usually claim Vigo as an influence. Importantly, video is a medium bound up with television's formal codes and demographic modes of address. Television is an important bridge between the social understood as referring to the structures of social life — a signifier for a world of relations qualified by class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc., and social as description of modes of interaction, exchange, and communication. To speak of a social cinema today is to reckon with the slippage between these two meanings. These two registers of "social" are connected, but more and more, the meaning of the former is occluded by the later. Vigo proposed a cinema that would generate a provocative image of a social world characterized by division and inequality, a vision that would serve as a spur to political awakening and revolution. To piece together this picture, he set about recording people engaged in everyday forms of labor and leisure. His style of montage was primarily dialectical, if sometimes executed anarchically: each shot taken as a document — a social truth, and treated like a document in the editing. Today filmmakers and artists are as likely to work found documents drawn from television or uncovered online, as they are to shoot material themselves. Leisure and labor are still the categories of everyday life that have the most to tell us about our social world, even more so as clear distinction between the two breaks down. I suspect this breakdown has something to do with the shift away from dialectical editing toward forms that mimic the functionality of databases and search engines. Despite these differences, it is possible to find traces in contemporary work of some of Vigo's most significant innovations, particularly his attention to the bodily dimensions of social life, especially as it appears in the terrain between portraiture and caricature. Social cinema today (broadly understood to incorporate artist's video and installation) cannot do without individuals if it wants to show us something about the conditions of social visibility, and by extension, the shape of social life in our own moment. How individuals come to be constituted as individuals, how they forge connections, what those connections mean — what they are, but also what they could be — these are the questions that keep us moving toward a social cinema today.

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