



Opening cans of Campbell's soup

Jane de Almeida

The films made by the Dziga Vertov Group are being shown in Brazil for the first time. Given their complexity and temporal displacement and that they have never been seen by most people here, a number of questions have been part and parcel of this production since this Exhibition was conceived, a little more than two years ago.

They include: how does one show a collection of films that are extremely complex and that, in simplified terms, were seen as being mere political pamphlets by the film critics, or as extravagant exercises in cinema for political involvement? How does one introduce to the Brazilian public the effects of the dialectic process produced by the proposal, a film experience that is unique in its disassociation between sound and image – whether this was successful or not –, at a time when the funding policies for cinema are being discussed on a national level in terms of public heritage and financial return as a response to the question of the type of images that should be produced? How does one talk about a proposal for collective production against that of authorship and which as a consequence generates a series of misunderstandings regarding the very authorship of the films? Not to mention the fact that one of the participants is one of the most important directors in the history of cinema and that he was one of those responsible for the phenomenon of film authorship. Finally, how does one present films that were made more than 30 years ago in a climate of intense political debate from which the Brazilian public was forced to retire?

These are questions that are put forward in this book and which the same is surely unable to answer. The articles were selected based on three different angles: the Dziga Vertov Group and its history, the relationship of Glauber Rocha with the Group and the presence of Jean-Pierre Gorin at this Exhibition.

Curadora

It is hoped that this will serve as an initial point of reference and inspiration for the new questions that are certain to arise from the explanations and misunderstandings examined by the authors.

The arrival of the Dziga Vertov Group was accompanied by the arrival of others, such as the ARC Group (Atelier de recherche cinématographique) and Chris Marker's SLON group, aided by the new technologies for capture and editing of the *ciné-tracts*, since these mini films could be edited directly on the camera, promoting the idea of the absence of authorship (or of sole authorship) in the name of a collective work. Thus, *Un film comme les autres* is the precursor of the series, while not yet being named as a Dziga Vertov Group film ¹. It is only later on, probably after *British Sounds*, that the group took on the name of "Dziga Vertov", due to the influence of Jean-Pierre Gorin. With *Vent d'Est*, the group is established and Godard announces that for the Russian filmmaker Vertov, the definition of *Kinoki* is not of filmmaker, but rather of filmhand, differentiating *moviemaker* from *film worker* ².

Alongside Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin, some other members were more frequent participants, such as Jean-Henri Roger, who is responsible for *British Sounds* and *Pravda*, writing scripts and directing with Godard; the photographer Paul Burron; Gérard Martin, who is sometimes cited as being co-director of *Vent d'Est*; and Anne Wiazemsky, who at that time was married to Godard and who acted in a number of the films of the Group. Other participants were at the fringes of this movement and their precise participation is not known. This, in a way, is a consequence of the proposal of collective filmmaking. Ironically, despite the collaborative will, the films are generally considered and analyzed as being part of Godard's filmography alone. Another consequence is that until not long ago the films appear to have been adrift among the distributors, who did not know who to ask for the rights of exhibition. For some time we had no clues as to how to obtain them, until after a festival of political films in Nantes, in 2003, when Gaumont sent us an answer ³. The same thing occurs when seeking to list the credits for the films, since the entire technical credit is resumed under the name of the Dziga Vertov Group, with one or another name attached.

¹ ¹ Godard himself admits that *Um film comme les autres* is the first in the series of revolutionary films he made, in an interview for Kent E. Carrol published in "Film and revolution: Interview with the Dziga-Vertov Group". In *Focus on Godard*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1972, p.53.

² ¹ In the same interview cited above for Kent E. Carrol given in English in 1970, p. 50.

³ ¹ The *Cahiers du Cinéma* comment on this problem when they write about the Festival of Nantes. Patrice BLOUIN. "Mémoire. Où est le cinéma politique ?" Paris, April 2003. pp. 10-12.

In extreme cases, as in the text by James MacBean on *Vent d'Est* published in this catalogue, the films appear solely as works by Jean-Luc Godard. Instead of crediting the films simply to the "Dziga Vertov Group", we decided to publish a credit guide with references to all the different sources. If on one hand this appears contradictory to the proposals of the Group, on the other it brings a little of the historicity of the process and its reception, and also enlists subjectivities somehow and examines issues related to collective work. This initiative appears to be coherent when one considers the path marked out by the films of the Group. Each film attempts to answer questions remaining from its predecessors and, almost in the end, in *Tout va bien* (which at this stage is not a film by the Group, but rather by Godard and Gorin and signed as such), the conclusion regarding the collective, arising from an initial disappointment with the workers organizations, falls more evidently upon the individual story as being that which constructs the greater history. In a way, this is also the procedure in *Letter to Jane*. Nowadays it is more common to think that the Group came into being as a result of the effort and desire of Godard and Gorin. Gorin answers, in an interview given in 1970, when he and Godard were asked how many people comprised the Dziga Vertov Group: "At this moment, two, but we are not even sure. There is a left wing and a right wing. Sometimes he is the left and I am the right, it is a question of practice".⁴ In compliment to this statement, Godard at this time declares several times that working as a group was a way to destroy the dictatorship of the director.

After more than 35 years since its beginning, having been immediately received with a certain furor by the first viewers and soon being relegated to limbo and qualified as being "extremist", "radical", "unwatchable" and over politicized by film lovers and also overly "aestheticizing" for political cinema made at that time, these films return together in the form of presentations or as part of the cinematography of Jean-Luc Godard, or in tributes that present films made by Jean-Pierre Gorin or within a political theme regarding the 1960's and 1970's. Rarely is there an exhibition solely of "Dziga Vertov Group" films and, for this reason, another question becomes necessary: what does it mean to watch these films today? Before attempting to frame them within a more temporal perspective,



14 | Michael GOODWIN, Tom LUDDY and Naomi WISE. "The Dziga Vertov film group in America". In *Take One. The film magazine*, vol. II, n. 10. Canada, March/April 1970. pp. 8-27. Or in "The Dziga Vertov film group in "America: an interview with Jean Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin", in *Cinefiles*. Internet version of the same interview: http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/cine_doc_detail.pl/cine_img?11165?11165?1

which obliges the receptor to try and understand the object of fruition according to what it brings from its time, these films are singular experiences regarding the ideological consequences of that which one chooses as a form. The films lead Brecht beyond alienation, lending continuity to the very Brechtian lesson that the problem of form is in itself the problem of politics. And in this they bring the breeze of the freedom with which they were made, in the bold contrast of color used by those who made films to be seen and not to be read, as Gorin insists, arguing against the proclaimed end of writing ⁵. In all of the nine films, to a greater or lesser degree, the sound and the image are independent elements that sometimes dance together and sometimes clash. In this sense, the accusation of the pamphletary verbosity is an accusation that is little reflected from a hasty point of view in that which it presents. There is a first layer containing a solid presence of spoken lines. But, perhaps given the complexity that these propose, the viewer is left in a position of admitting that there are other layers to be perceived via unexpected connections that are brought to life in them.

It is very rare to see a political film that has taken its proposal as far as the films made by the Dziga Vertov Group. Of course, after the more student based political phase, after the prolonged and risky terrorist political attempts, after the growth of the consumer ideologies, after the cultivation of an independent position as a subjective ideal, it is difficult for the common contemporary man to see himself as belonging to the "bourgeois" or the "worker" group, since he has always been a part of both. But since then, the more political films that go against the grain of power have been so focused on content, so unconcerned with the consideration of form (if we wish, to be submitted to that which Hollywood defines as form), with such simplified readings of what is power, that we appear to have lost the connecting link between what happened in the days of the Group and what is happening today. There is, in this sense of loss, a desire for evolution that does not always occur, but reviewing and rethinking these films to a point beyond that of a nostalgic feeling may stimulate chains of connections that were unperceived and connections that were already thought of as established, principally in regard to the world we have constructed since May of 1968.

The first of the films, *Un film comme les autres*, shows an explosion of images from ciné-tracts made in May 1968 in black and white, intercalating the student debate on the class struggle. It is the precursor of collective film making in the

⁵ Gorin in an interview. Christian Braad THOMSEN, "Jean-Pierre Gorin interviewed. Filmmaking and history", Jump Cut, n. 3, 1974, pp. 17-19. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC03folder/GorinIntThomson.html>

work of Godard and is born of the political discussions between Godard and Gorin⁶. The conception of this way of making films, which does not reveal identities, in as much as it favors the spoken lines in detriment to the faces of the characters, is in itself already a procedure of this way of thinking that is to take shape in the next films. However, the contrast between the colorful rural landscape and the calm of the debaters, and the images of bombs and striking workers generates, at first, two interpretations: one with regard to the differences between the classes themselves, or rather, one that poses for the film and another that “poses” for the struggle. This latter opens up the problem that was later to be questioned by the Group – as in *Lotte in Italia* – with regard to the reality of theory and the reality of practice.

The next film, *British Sounds*, was made in England, shortly after *One plus one* and from the outset the desire to film collectively was stated. Roger works with Godard and Maoism is what provides the stronger tone of the film’s political scheme. The color of the film is red and the sound is that of repetition. The seven sequences, even if declared as being political, are still presented with a certain irony and humor in the play on revolutionary clichés, such as the flag being torn at the beginning and the bloody hand grasping for the red flag at the end. The irony reveals in itself the discomfort of assuming two positions and this resource is used frequently by Godard. In fact, the nucleus of the film is loaded with ironic scenes, such as the scene with the television announcer who parts from a liberal standpoint to state prejudice and which is intercalated with scenes of a British reality that fails to bear witness to the speech of the announcer. But if we think of the seriousness of the revolutionary sound that ends the film, in synchronicity with the image, its contrast with this irony appears to reveal a certain hesitation between the Godard of *Alphaville* and the revolutionary Godard.

Vent d’Est, after *Pravda*, is the next in the series. It is entirely taken by the voice of the malign genius which, with the exception of *Tout va bien*, was to remain until *Ici et Ailleurs*. In reality it is a number of voices (and in the case of *Vent d’Est*, female), but one especially fulfills the role of dialectic differentia, and as a main thread guarantees the structure of the films. It also guarantees the deconstruction of the same in a more formal sense. Little by little, the characteristic disconnection between sound and image is what guides the films and also, gradually, gives a life of its own to the sound. *Vent d’Est* is a more vigorous work, with open questions. The voice of the malign genius answers *British Sounds* with no hesi-

† 6 | Affirmation by Gorin in *Jump Cut*.

tation and opens up an entire pathway of experiences, of which one was made with the participation of Glauber Rocha. Gorin explains that when working on the scene with Isabel Pons, the pregnant girl with the camera, it became a metaphor for the difficulties and hopes of the time that encountered at the crossroads the impossibility of a meeting between the tropicalists of the Third World and the conceptualists of the First in the question of class revolution. This impossibility is marked by the three hesitant steps taken by the pregnant girl towards Glauber and soon after her return by the same path ⁷. The voice of Glauber sings and indicates the way of the “dangerous, divine and wonderful cinema” – of that time.

Brazil was entering the most terrifying phase of the political dictatorship. Our cinema came under the censor, our thinkers were arrested, tortured and exiled; and Brazil was left with no dialogue between the inside and the outside that it had just taken up again with the modernist tradition. Glauber did not stop filming and his *Der leone have sept heads* is clearly an influence for the Dziga Vertov Group, as noted by Jean-Pierre Gorin and José Carlos Avellar, who in an article in this book also suggest a tighter exchange of influences with des-encountered solutions between the cinematographies of Glauber and Godard, of the First and the Third Worlds.

Watching these films today is like being able to see a lost part of an important discussion that may perhaps have fed a line of film making somewhat abandoned by film goers and film producers, whose aesthetic project includes the reflectivity of the apparatus and a formal experimentation in cinema. A line that unites Mário Peixoto with Júlio Bressane and which, ironically, has nothing to do with so called “political” cinema. This line includes Glauber, but it appears that the “political” side of Glauber, in terms of the more commercialized interpretation of his *Hunger Aesthetic*, has been cultivated in our cinema. This is a shame, since it diminishes the diversity of readings on the complexity of the world.

The films of the Dziga Vertov Group, which have less political importance today – in terms of the more evident political aspect, since in a way the aesthetic choice is

171 E-mail correspondence. “It is my girlfriend of the time, Isabel Pons, I enlisted to meet Glauber at the crossroad and whose pregnancy I transformed as a metaphor of our difficulties and our hopes by loading her with a camera; Glauber is in that scene because Raphael Sorin and I went to look for him in Rome; and the procedure, the ‘script’ that enabled Glauber to improvise his lines, the idea to have him stand at the crossroad and riff on the ‘cinema do Terceiro Mundo’ is mine; and this impossibility to meet for the Tropicalists of the Third World and the conceptualists of the First in quest of a revolution of the medium marked by Isabel’s three hesitant steps in the direction indicated by Glauber and her return to the path she came from, I articulated it...”

in itself a political act – are more experimentally interesting. They are what the cinema may consider as being a threshold situation, in as much as that they are still considered to be films and that they make use of the basic cinematographic apparatus: film, projector, screen, seat, dark room, tickets to enter, traditional cinematographic time. However, what one sees on the screen is much closer to that which today is frequently seen in museums in a shorter time frame: the so called installations, that were more often seen in video and today are made with digital material. There are several films within each individual film, made according to the availability of low cost material, creating images of images recycled within the films themselves. There is nothing more “pop” than the impressions of sunlight on the dark screen, the cards with handwritten schemes, the red frames and the strips of film in *Vent d’Est*. The economical material movement of the cinema and the plastic arts are opposite. While cinema has high costs and is sold at low prices, the plastic arts generally cost very little and are sold at high prices. In this sense, the films made by the Group follow contemporary art in using as much everyday material as possible, instead of proposing the careful finishing that is demanded with increasing intensity by the modern film industry. Kent Jones, in an article published in this catalogue, uses Gorin’s metaphor of the “can-opener” (“We made this film in the same way that you would make a can-opener”) to describe the process used to make these films. To make a film like a can-opener is to lend it the power to serve as an instrument for opening something that is hermetically sealed, such as the image of Jane Fonda in Vietnam. If thought of as being a “pop” artefact, the films are not content to simply present the new culture or reveal the reality of consumption. Even cans of Campbell’s soup need to be opened.

In interviews made in the days of the Group, generally represented by Godard and Gorin, several questions were asked with regard to the audience for which the films were made. The duo demonstrated a true concern for this issue when they made *Tout va bien*. Despite the presence of famous actors or of the care taken in the finishing, the film was not a public success, and neither was it well received by the critics. Seeing it today, this preoccupation becomes senseless and we are grateful for its existence. Without wishing to say that the film has finally reached its audience, or that the works of the Dziga Vertov Group have now found a public, it would be good if, when considering the policies of support and funding for films, it would also be possible to argue in the sense of the paradigmatic axis and ask: how many generations will watch these films?