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Polyform Film: Peter Watkins and the Paris Commune

Matthew Beaumont

In the roughly 125-year history of cinema, no more than five narrative films seem to have been made about the Paris Commune. In their very different ways, all of them represent an attempt to avoid what Grigory Kozintsev, the co-director of one of them, referred to as "the detestable historical film" (Starr 2006, 176).[1] Kozintsev was referring to the "historical pictures" produced by the "Leningrad cinema factory," which "shot the costumes," as he put it in a delightful formulation, "with the actors inside them" (quoted in Leyda 1973, 202). But the phrase "detestable historical film" might also be adapted to describe the prim, corseted style of what is today called "period drama" or "costume drama." Here, I characterize this generally conservative, nostalgic genre, which has been synonymous in Britain over several decades with BBC adaptations of canonical nineteenth-century novels, as Uniform film—both because of its commitment to superficially scrupulous depictions of the past, which might be called merely costume-deep; and because of the stylistic uniformity of its *mise-en-scène*. Kozintzev, in contrast to this static, superficially respectful approach to the events of the past, hoped "primarily to replace this parade of historical costumes across the surface of the film by a feeling of the epoch, in other words purposively to replace it with a general style, and not the naturalism of details" (Leyda 1973). As the first proletarian revolution in history, seminal in its importance both to contemporary and later radical movements, the Paris Commune seems to have demanded a cinema that replaces the parade of historical costumes and that refuses the naturalism of details.

Each one of the five films whose narrative is centered on the Paris Commune, then, has responded to this demand either explicitly or implicitly, positioning itself not simply as a political but an esthetic intervention in the representation of the past. Let me list them in passing. The first,

Matthew Beaumont is a Professor of English in the Department of English Literature at University College London. He is the author of several books, including *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London* (2015), *The Walker: On Finding and Losing Oneself in the Modern City* (2020) and *Lev Shestov: Philosopher of the Sleepless Night* (2021). He has published articles in journals on Alfred Hitchcock and Steven Soderbergh, as well as chapters on the Paris Commune in edited collections.

made with the cooperative Le cinéma du peuple, was the Spanish anarchist Armand Guerra's *La Commune* (1914), an adaptation of scenes from two novels published in the opening years of the twentieth century by Lucien Descaves (namely, *La Colonne: Récit du temps de la Commune* (1901) and *Philémon: Vieux de la ville* (1913)). The single fragment of this film that has been saved from oblivion ends with a moving epilogue featuring the Fraternal Association of Former Combatants of the Commune, survivors of *la semaine sanglante* who commemorate its victims at Père Lachaise some 43 years later with a flag that reads: *Vive la Commune!* The second film about the events of March, April and May 1871, was *The New Babylon* (1929), which took its inspiration partly from Karl Marx's *The Civil War in France* (1871), partly from Émile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883). This film, directed by Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, leading figures in the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), and memorably scored by Dmitri Shostakovich, a member of the same avant-gardist organization at this time, is a fast-paced, tightly plotted melodrama whose protagonist, strikingly, is a female proletarian, one who during the insurrection slips out from behind the counter of a department store to mount the barricades. *New Babylon*, footage of which surfaces in Guy Debord's film *La Société du Spectacle* (1974), is formally very innovative—comparable in some respects, despite their generic differences, to Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), with which it is exactly contemporaneous. Certainly, it is full of the joy of making movies as well as revolutions. Other films about the Commune include Bohdan Poreba's *Jaroslaw Dabrowski* (1976), about the Polish Commander-in-Chief of the Commune's army; and Ken McMullen's *1871* (1990), another melodrama that, echoing the logic of *The New Babylon*, makes extensive use of a theatrical setting. There have also been failed attempts to produce films of the Commune, among them one that Jean Grémillon scripted in 1945, when still at the height of his reputation, in the vain hope that he could attract sufficient funding for it.

The most recent film about the Commune, and the one that perhaps most systematically replaces the parade of historical costumes, is the exiled British film director Peter Watkins' superbly inventive version of events, *La Commune (Paris 1871)*. This austere, black-and-white film, part-funded by the Musée D'Orsay, was shot in 1999 and then screened on French television, unenthusiastically enough, in 2000. Staged in an abandoned factory in Montreuil over three weeks in July 1999, it involved more than 220 actors, approximately 60 per cent of whom had no prior acting experience. Watkins recruited these performers by placing advertisements in various newspapers, including the right-wing press. In setting out to portray the events of the Commune, from 18 March to 28 May 1871, as these took place in the context of everyday life in a specific district of Paris, the 11^{ième}

arrondissement, he was keen to cast nonprofessionals who, because of their own "life experiences," to use a dubious euphemism, might be expected to make both an emotional and a political investment in the representation, or re-presentation, at the end of the twentieth century, of this first proletarian revolution. Many of them, then, were working-class men, women and children, among them illegal immigrants from North Africa, whom Watkins encouraged, in the roles of ordinary Communards or their comrades, to articulate their own experiences of social inequality—not simply as part of the production process but in the film itself. A handful of others, those who responded to the appeal printed in *Le Monde* for example, were by contrast politically conservative; and these participants were deliberately cast as comfortable bourgeois, or uncomfortable ones perhaps, who were similarly encouraged to voice their political convictions as these related both to their own lives and those of privileged Parisians in the late nineteenth century. In this respect, *La Commune* implicitly situated itself in a tradition that descended from the Soviet cinema and theater of the 1920s, when non-actors performed themselves on screen or on stage.

Before filming commenced, all those who had been cast were expected to conduct independent research into the Commune, developing carefully individualized characters during this procedure, so that—as Watkins has explained—they thereby gained both an analytical and an "experiential" understanding, first, of the inadequacies of French education, the curriculum of which has systematically marginalized the Commune, and, second, of "those aspects of the current French system which are failing in their responsibility to provide citizens with a truly democratic and participatory process."[2] Stathis Kouvelakis has remarked that, in the French classroom, "the Commune had been all but absent up to the turn of the millennium;"[3] and this occlusion of its historical importance certainly persuaded Watkins, whose insertion of didactic intertitles and even photographs of the Commune's central historical figures is itself indicative of this, that his film might function as an urgently needed site of alternative pedagogy. A pedagogy of the oppressed, then. And one that, as in Paulo Freire's model for "a form of cultural action" that teaches the oppressed "the *why* and *how* of their adhesion to reality," does not merely "de-ideologize," but rejoins "the *cognitive*, the *affective*, and the *active*" dimensions (Freire 2017[1968]). In a later phase of preparation, the research conducted by the actor-participants involved them forming strategic groups, consisting of those playing activists in the Union de femmes, for instance, or the elected members of the Commune, or the soldiers of the Versailles army, in order to cement certain moral and political solidarities. Furthermore, in an attempt to intensify a mood of mutual animosity, Watkins kept the ones playing

the Communards separate from those playing the Versailles soldiers in the run-up to the shooting of *la semaine sangliante*. He thus reinforced the actor-participants' identification with their roles and, as a result, the film's overall affective impact on its audience.

The pre-production process of *La Commune*, then, which lasted some sixteen months, was a feat of organization; and, significantly, collective self-organization. The production process itself was a feat not simply of organization but orchestration. Watkins' detailed online account of it, which is by turns defensive and impressively self-reflexive, testifies to the forbidding complexity of its mechanics. The set, constructed as "a series of interconnecting rooms and spaces" that, according to a sort of synecdochic logic, transformed the disused factory into the 11*ième* *arrondissement*, was designed "to 'hover' between reality and theatricality, with careful and loving detail applied for example to the texture of the walls, but with the edges of the set always visible, and with the 'exteriors'—the Rue Popincourt and the central Place Voltaire – clearly seen for what they are—artificial elements within an interior space." The cinematographer, Odd Geir Saether, then snaked through these labyrinthine spaces, which were often packed with carefully choreographed actor-participants, using a hand-held camera to achieve "long, highly mobile uninterrupted takes." Those responsible for lighting and sound, for their part, ingeniously designed these aspects of production in order to free the camera, and the largely improvised action it recorded, to be as fluid as possible. Watkins filmed the action, as he underlined, "in long, uninterrupted sequences, following the chronological order of the events of the Commune."[4] This meant that characters developed in a semi-spontaneous form in relation to the changing political situation of the months of March to May 1871, partly as a result of discussions that took place between the cast and director—increasingly, about the conditions, and the political implications, of the production itself, which frustrated many participants because, despite its democratic ethos, it finally limited opportunities for participants to express themselves. It meant, too, that the murderous destruction of the Commune was perceived by many in the cast, at the climactic point of the action, as an almost personal defeat as well as an historical one, so involved had they come to feel in the intensive production process. As Roxanne Panchasi has remarked, "the film depicts the exhaustion of the revolutionary hopes of the Communards, as well as the fatigue of the actors who play their roles on screen" (Panchasi 2006). The resulting film, which culminates in the silent execution of Communards in the 11*ième* *arrondissement*, is 345 min long.

In part a form of documentary theater, then, one that is perhaps shaped by Watkins' formative experiences with the Playcraft group in the 1950s, *La Commune* is epic in a double sense.[5] First, in the colloquial one, because of its fabled length. Second, in a more specialist sense, because of its application of various Brechtian techniques. In 2016, Watkins offered this illuminating statement about his filmmaking practice:

> I have tried to find processes which would enable me – and the audience – to somehow burst out of the constraints of the frame, or of the traditional hierarchical documentary format. This has entailed experimenting with various alienation or distancing methods, coupled with an intense and demanding process for the 'actor', wherein history – past and present – become intertwined.[6]

In *La Commune*, these Brechtian methods include the film's didacticism; its piecemeal, episodic narrative form; its insertion of lengthy, sometimes complicated intertitles, which are full of information relating not only to the public events of Spring 1871, as these unfold off-screen, but the social and political inequalities that have prevailed or become ever more entrenched since the late nineteenth century; and its use of a series of alienation devices. What specific alienation devices does Watkins use? Apart from the intertitles, the film's action is repeatedly interrupted by, among other things, sudden freeze-frames; unexpected cuts to a black screen; and, most startling of all, actors periodically undermining the illusion of the "fourth wall" by looking directly into the camera. Watkins' characteristic use of a fictional TV crew, named TV Communale, both to record everyday events and to intervene in them, shaping the action either by interviewing participants or through the film's transmission of information relating to the Commune, is another of these "alienation or distancing methods" that is central, indeed structural, to the film's esthetic. It permits him to present the action in the dynamic, extremely involving form of live news coverage. In the film, it needs to be noted, TV Communale constitutes the proletarian alternative to another fictional media organization, the state-run channel TV Nationale, which in the comparatively undemocratic form of "talking heads" presents the bourgeoisie's perspective on the political situation as it develops. This double device—TV Communale and TV Nationale—enables Watkins to critique the role of the contemporary mass media in its representation of historical events with impressive acuity. For if, as might be expected, it exposes state-run TV, despite its superficially dialogical format, for forcibly promoting a conservative agenda, then it also reveals, rather more surprisingly, that the alternative TV run by supporters of the Communards is itself an inadequate and insufficiently democratic means of representing the complex, sometimes contradictory politics of their revolution as these evolve. In this way, Watkins constructs a genuinely dialectical critique of the media.

But the claim that *La Commune* is Brechtian must immediately be qualified since there are crucial respects in which Watkins' cinema does not conform to strict definitions of this avant-garde tradition. In contrast to the Brechtian paradigm, for example, at least in its strictest form, *La Commune* appeals as much to the spectator's feelings as to their reason.[7] This should render the film approachable, even if it does still make fairly strenuous disciplinary demands on its audience. Certainly, the film is profoundly moving as well as compelling, especially if it is seen under conditions that make distraction impossible. For this is an intensely immersive performance that, despite its application of alienation techniques, insists on its audience's unrelenting attention and on their affective involvement in its action. But, for a number of reasons, ones related not only to its length but to the history of its transmission, reception and consumption, *La Commune* remains comparatively unknown. The trouble started when La Sept-ARTE, the Franco-German TV consortium that commissioned the film, which had become increasingly reluctant to support the project, broadcast it for the first and last time between 10 pm and 4am one night, thereby ensuring that almost no one watched it, especially in its entirety. Since then, it has rarely been screened in cinemas. The film demands, however, to be far more widely and urgently discussed, both because of its contribution to the history of representations of the Commune and because of its innovation as a piece of cinema. The distinguished historian of the Commune Jacques Rougerie, who acted as a consultant on Watkins' film, has remarked that he regards it "comme l'oeuvre cinématographique la plus accomplie et la plus remarquable sur la Commune, dont elle restitue extraordinairement le climat, avec une fidélité historique remarquable" (Rougerie 2004, 282). The Marxist film-theorist Mike Wayne has made a bolder claim, proposing that, "in its mixture of steely radicalism and artistic experimentalism, *La Commune* is arguably the most important European film since the days of the great modernist cinematic provocateurs such as Eisenstein and Vertov" (Wayne 2002, 57).

This article, reaffirming both the film's cinematic and its historiographic significance, will go on to locate *La Commune* within Watkins' broader esthetic project; but it will also attempt to situate it in relation to the political turbulence that, in the broader context of the fightback against neo-liberalism, was characteristic of the last five years of the twentieth century in France, the period in which it was made. In 1996, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu remarked that "the French movement can be seen as the vanguard of a worldwide struggle against neo-liberalism and against the new conservative revolution, in which the symbolic dimension is extremely important" (Bourdieu 1998e, 53) *La Commune* can be seen from one angle as a contribution to the "symbolic dimension" of this struggle against

neoliberal capitalism. After all, "the reign of 'commerce' and the 'commercial'," as Bourdieu emphasized in another speech in 1996, exerted pressure "especially on the cinema" at this time ("one wonders," he added, in an aside that resonates with Watkins' situation at the turn of the millennium, "what will be left in ten years" time of European experimental cinema if nothing is done to provide avant-garde directors with the means of production and perhaps more importantly distribution') (Bourdieu 1998a). In part because of his critique of the ideological function of television in the climate of neoliberalism, Bourdieu offers an illuminating point of comparison in the context of an attempt to understand the *La Commune* as a political intervention in France in the late 1990s.

In addition to underlining the film's politically inspiring, formally challenging reconstruction of the Commune, this article will in conclusion emphasize the utopian impulse that, in fostering solidarity among those who participated in the project, many of whom were themselves the casualties of French neoliberalism, shaped its production process. In the face of what Bourdieu described as a "profound demoralization linked to the collapse of elementary solidarities" that is typical of neoliberalism, Watkins both celebrated the solidarities dramatized in the nineteenth century by the Commune itself and inscribed alternative solidarities into the production process of his socially ambitious film (Bourdieu 1998b). As Manuel Ramos-Martínez has written in a fine article on *La Commune*, "the Paris Commune is not just appropriate subject matter for Watkins" people TV, it is also an organizational model to aspire to when constructing this or any other film' (Ramos-Martínez 2016). In this sense, Watkins' cinema, too, is *un cinéma du peuple*. Ultimately, I will summarize *La Commune* in terms of what, elaborating Watkins' own rather idiosyncratic theoretical vocabulary, to which the notion of Monoform film is central, I call Polyform film. To be sure, like *New Babylon*, a precedent to which it doesn't explicitly allude, *La Commune* is a sustained and systematic assault on "the detestable historical film." On the Uniform film. "We wanted to get away as far as possible from the external form of the costume," Kozintsev wrote of *The Overcoat* (1926), which he also co-directed with Trauberg; "we wanted to convey to the audience the atmosphere of the epoch" (quoted in Leyda 1973, 202). This might have served as the epigraph to Watkins' film.

Peter Watkins (b. 1935) remains a controversial figure in both British and European cinema—when he is not entirely forgotten. He is a year older than Ken Loach (b. 1936), the British filmmaker with whom he is probably most closely comparable, not least because, in addition to persisting in their careers for more than fifty years, both directors established their reputations by employing a *cinéma-verité* style to shoot documentary

dramas for television in the 1960s. But he has never enjoyed Loach's success—embattled though this might at times have been—either in the UK or on the continent. Indeed, in conversation, Watkins has commented that he considers Loach a far more "conventional" filmmaker than he himself is, one who plays "much more safe by the narrative rules" (Cook 2010, 233). Nor, to offer another preliminary point of comparison, has Watkins ever fully acquired the cult reputation of Alan Clarke (1935–1990), another radical director with a background in theater and television, who was born only one day before him but who died in his mid-fifties.

This is partly for biographical reasons. In 1965, famously, Watkins made a pseudo-documentary, set in a British city, about the catastrophic effects of a nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union. This "docudrama," *The War Game*, went on to win the prize for Best Documentary Feature at the Oscars in 1966, despite its fictional premise. But, by that time, Watkins had become terminally disillusioned with the state of British film and television—for, abetted by the Labor government, the BBC had in 1965 refused to screen the film it had commissioned. After this incident, and the commercial and critical failure of his next film, *Privilege* (1967), which seems to have isolated him both from the broadcasting establishment and from those of his generation with whom, if it hadn't been for his sense of disappointment and resentment, he might have been expected to form an alliance, including Clarke and Loach, Watkins exiled himself from Britain on a permanent basis. From Canada, Lithuania, Sweden and France, among other places, Watkins has continued to make films that, in contrast to Loach's, remain esthetically as well as politically provocative. Jonathan Rosenbaum has suggested that "his marginalized status seemed only to intensify his intransigence, which made it even less likely that his films would be screened or seen" (Rosenbaum 2002). The formidable length of many of Watkins' films is probably itself enough to indicate the uncompromising, almost bloody-minded attitude they embody: *The Journey* (1987), his transnational account of the anti-nuclear movement, is a staggering 873 min long; *The Freethinker* (1994), his portrait of August Strindberg, is 276 min long. In this sense, in fact, he is closer in approach to the radical Filipino filmmaker Lav Diaz (b. 1958), whose *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004) is 647 min long, than he is to his politically committed British contemporaries (for an overview of Diaz, see Adadol Ingawanij 2021, 53–71). The long running-time of films like *La Commune* is in part a strategic attempt to undermine the tyranny of what, mimicking the vocabulary of TV executives, the director calls the "Universal Clock"; that is, the televisual regime whereby (prior to the rise of Video on Demand) "filmmakers producing TV dramas or documentaries [were] usually permitted a maximum of

52 minutes – in order to allow commercials to fill up the remainder of the hour."[8]

Formally, then, Watkins' films are challenging. This is a second possible reason for his isolation and marginalization. Over more than half a century, he has remained uncompromisingly committed either to reconstructing historical episodes, as in *Culloden* (1964), his first film for television, or to constructing fantastical, dystopian ones, as in *Punishment Park* (1971), shot and set in the United States, as if they are contemporaneous events that can be captured by documentary techniques.[9] His speculative films, like those of Kevin Brownlow, with whom he collaborated in the early stages of his career, are thus effectively historical films too. Certainly, because rather than despite his critique of what Kozintsev called "detestable historical film," Watkins is a scrupulous historical filmmaker, uncompromisingly committed to reconstructing the past, or what Kozintsev called the "feeling of the epoch," with as much accuracy and objectivity as possible. J. Hoberman has noted that, "over the course of his fiercely independent career," "Watkins has more or less reinvented historical filmmaking" (Hoberman 2003). Reinvention is right. In both *Culloden* and *La Commune*, as I have intimated, he incorporates TV film crews as part of the action—in a provocative anachronism, they interview the participants on screen, interrupting them and prompting them to reflect on their situation as the narrative develops. This attempt to uncover the motivations behind historical events, as they are lived in the everyday, is one of his most notable Brechtian innovations. But this refusal to understand historical filmmaking in terms that are formally limited either to narrative or what Kozintsev called "the naturalism of details," does render his films less immediately accessible. In contrast to Loach, whose reputation was incubated in European art cinema before he found limited popular success in Britain, Watkins has rarely found an audience for these obstinately experimental productions, even on the continent. His refusal to identify his practice as a filmmaker with the canonical traditions of North American and European cinema, even when these are themselves radical or experimental, has not helped in this regard. He genuflects before no one, it seems, not even the Soviet constructivists of the 1920s and '30s or the Italian neorealists of the 1940s. Nor indeed does he seek directly to emulate his contemporaries from the French New Wave of the 1950s, namely Godard (b. 1930) and Truffaut (b. 1932). It should be added though that, despite his dogged independence, Watkins manifestly learned a good deal from all these forerunners, both in technical and esthetic terms. For example, silent Soviet cinema had a formative impact on him when he worked with Brownlow as a film assistant at World Wide Pictures in the early 1960s; and, as Watkins' use of freeze frame is itself enough to indicate, Godard's

Les Quatre Cent Coups (1959) had an especially profound influence on him.[10]

There is perhaps a third main reason for the difference between Watkins' and Loach's reputations over the arc of their lengthy careers. This is political. Loach persists in his socialist commitments, cautiously spending the symbolic capital that, through his successes with social-realist films that have consistently captured the prevailing spirit of anti-capitalism among certain disaffected parts of the population, he has painstakingly acquired over the last couple of decades. For example, he has intervened in several public debates, especially about the future of the Labor Party, which he believes must be preserved from the almost permanent threat of a political coup by technocrats and corporate capitalists. Watkins' politics are more complicated. He remains an anti-capitalist, it appears, in that he continues to publish passionate online polemics against the forces of neoliberalism, about whose social depredations he is soberly clear, but he is not identifiably a socialist. One scholar has insisted that "Watkins" films are anarchist, engaged in patient, sometimes chaotic, but always fruitfully collective productions engaged with contemporary politics' (see Armitage 2013, 23–25). But the term "anarchist," in this context, does not denote a distinctive ideological position so much as kind of disposition, I think. It is effectively a synonym for "antinomian." For, just as he refuses to align himself with antecedents as a filmmaker, so Watkins does not identify his politics with a particular leftist tradition. His politics, in fact, pivot principally on his relationship to the television and film industries; specifically, on the mode of production of these cultural forms.

The most persistent theme in Watkins' polemics is his attack on what he terms the Mass Audio-Visual Media (which he himself abbreviates to form the acronym MAVM). This phenomenon might be characterized as a cultural-industrial complex, one that, as he put it in an online piece for a retrospective of his films at the Tate Modern in 2012, "has been growing ever since the nascent Hollywood cinema first turned to entertainment and commerce, rather than genuine communication, as its guiding principles."[11] As can be seen from this comment—which, like all his writings, bears the scars and bruises of those beatings that, ever since *The War Game* was first banned by the BBC, he feels he has received from executives in the entertainment business—Watkins does not embed his critique of MAVM within a broader understanding of the socio-economic totality of which it is one, albeit highly visible, component. It is for example noticeable that, despite the anti-capitalist thrust of his politics, he never explicitly refers to capitalism in his polemics. This ornate prophetic denunciation, to be found in his online defence of *La Commune*, can stand in for innumerable others:

> We are now moving through a very bleak period in human history – where the conjunction of Post Modernist [sic] cynicism (eliminating humanistic and critical thinking in the education system), sheer greed engendered by the consumer society sweeping many people under its wing, human, economic and environmental catastrophe in the form of globalization, massively increased suffering and exploitation of the people of the so-called Third World, as well as the mind-numbing conformity and standardization caused by the systematic audiovisualization of the planet have synergistically created a world where ethics, morality, human collectivity, and commitment (except to opportunism) are considered 'old fashioned'.[12]

There is no reference to capitalism or even neoliberalism in this complicated sentence, despite its allusions to many of capitalism's characteristic epiphenomena. Moreover, the notion of the "conjunction" here implicitly points to Watkins' refusal to explain the determinant causes of the cataclysmic problems he enumerates.

As a filmmaker, Watkins' debt to Brecht cannot be doubted, as I have already indicated, even if he is oddly reluctant to admit this. But, in the former's theory of film and other media, as opposed to in his cinematic practice, there is little trace of the latter's insistence that, because cinema "tak[es] given needs on a massive scale, exorcizing them, organizing them and mechanizing them so as to revolutionize everything," it is the archetypal capitalist art form (Brecht 1964b). In this sense, notwithstanding *Le Monde*'s sarcastic complaint that *La Commune* "développent de manière très magistrale des thèses proches de la vulgate marxiste," Watkins' political critique of cinema is not materialist (Monde 2000). Indeed, his condemnations of MAVM, which he has recently framed in terms of a "global media crisis," occasionally have the character of a rather abstract or, in philosophical terms, idealist form of critique. Watkins' humanistic commitment to individual and collective creative freedom in the face of stiflingly oppressive systems is consistently inspiring, but he lacks, perhaps, a grasp of capitalism as the system of systems. No doubt this impression is partly a rhetorical effect of the self-consciously polemical, even personal approach he takes in the writings that accompany his films. For good reason, these are often centered on those influential professionals who strategically constrain and distort the mass communication industry's relation to its audience—not least because they have dramatically impeded his own professional career. But it can still be a little disconcerting to read his slightly crude description of the commercial logic of TV executives—for whom the profit-motive undoubtedly overrides every other consideration—as "absolute fascism."[13] This sort of statement goes beyond an indictment of what Stanley Cavell once called "the money conspiracy of Hollywood production" (Cavell 1979). Moreover, it might be added that Watkins' use of the acronym "MAVM" itself, which like all acronyms effectively functions as a reification, reinforces the impression that his political

pronouncements are insufficiently concrete, insufficiently materialist. As an abbreviation, or what the Russian Formalists might have called an "algebraization," the term "MAVM" amounts to a mnemonic form of critique (Shklovsky 1990). If it stands for the object of Watkins' critique, then it also, less productively, stands in for the act of critique.

The undeniable force of Watkins' repeated, perhaps repetitious attacks on "the MAVM's promulgation of growth and the consumer society," a process that inevitably sounds rather vague, lies in the strongly focused attention he trains on its deleterious impact on the *form* of the moving image, whether in the context of film or television.[14] In a relatively recent definition of the phrase the "global media crisis" he observes that this phenomenon "relat[es] to the standardization of the mass audiovisual media, which began early in the 20th century with the development of the language form used by Hollywood to narrate and structure cinema films." Bringing this evolution up to date, he adds that "this language form, which fundamentally has never changed, was adopted by international TV in the 1950s and is now taken on by the internet, YouTube, social media, etc."[15] Watkins has a coherent and highly concrete sense of the formal crisis that this "standardization of the mass audiovisual media" has induced over the last century. And he summarizes it, neatly enough, as the Monoform. The Monoform is, in effect, the grammar of commercial cinema and television; and, according to him, its conventions are so crude and so telegraphic that, notwithstanding "academic claims that audiences have become 'media literate'," they lead to a collective state of media illiteracy.[16] It is a film language that is thoroughly commodified and reified, though Watkins doesn't use these terms. And, at an almost neurological level, not least because of its accelerationist logic, it renders critical and analytical responses to moving images virtually impossible; in short, unthinkable. In the year that *La Commune* was made, George Lucas's blockbuster sequel to his own films of the 1970s and 1980s, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999), with its extensive use of CGI technology, can be taken as paradigmatic of the Monoform.

So, the Monoform is an array of devices that, assaulting the audience with aural, visual, even physiological shocks, is designed to militate against the sort of rational reflection which is urgently needed if this audience is to question the ideological conditions that render it politically passive in the face of a cruel and increasingly anti-democratic system. It is a sort of formal-ideological assemblage. In its specifics, Watkins defines it as follows:

> The Monoform is like a time-and-space grid clamped down over all the various elements of any film or TV programme. This tightly constructed grid promotes a rapid flow of changing images or scenes, constant camera movement, and dense layers of sound. A principal characteristic of the Monoform is its rapid, agitated editing, which can be identified by timing the interval between edited shots (or cuts), and dividing the number of seconds into the overall length of the film. In the 1970s, the Average Shot Length for a cinema film (or documentary, or TV news broadcast)

> was approximately 6-7 seconds, today the commercial ALS [sic] is probably circa 3-4 seconds, and decreasing.[17]

Watkins' critique of the Monoform is no doubt insufficiently alert to its contradictions; for instance, to the fact that mainstream cinema is, under certain circumstances, capable of producing films that are politically and even formally challenging. In short, his critique of the Monoform is itself arguably monoform. He doesn't ask, as Cavell for instance did, "What is the power of film that it could survive (even profit artistically from) so much neglect and ignorant contempt by those in power over it?" (Cavell 1979, 15). But Watkins' critique of the Monoform is nonetheless immensely useful. For the esthetic he describes is something like the cinematic equivalent, or symptom perhaps, of what David Harvey, in his critique of postmodernity, characterizes as "time-space compression"—though, once again, it needs to be emphasized that it is not framed in terms of the logic of contemporary capitalism. It will be recalled that, in tracking "the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation," which today we tend to identify as neoliberalism, Harvey pointed to "an intense phase of time-space compression that has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life" (Harvey 1990). The Monoform, it might be concluded, as a "space-time grid," is the characteristic esthetic of the dream factory; and its disturbing, disabling effects, in compressing time and space, mime the cultural crisis of capitalism in it post-Fordist phase. It is the cinematic logic of late capitalism.

Watkins' films are a deliberate assault on the Monoform's "hit-and-rush tactics," to quote his expressive phrase.[18] He has his own, highly distinctive armory of techniques, some of which I have already briefly inspected: the films' inordinately long running times; their reliance on highly mobile hand-held cameras; their protracted, probing medium shots; their large, ensemble casts; their intimate close-ups of small groups of actor-participants; their inclusion of those extended, sometimes dense intertitles; and, in a tactical irony, their use of monochrome stock. *La Commune*, which deploys all these weapons, is also, implicitly, an assault on that mode of cinema, adjacent to the Monoform, or incorporated within it, which I have classified as Uniform cinema; that is, the "detestable historical film." According to one critic, if adaptations of Jane Austen's fiction are included, approximately eighty costume or period dramas set before the Second World War were produced in England between 1990 and 2000 (Higson 2004). Heritage cinema, in other words, was almost hegemonic during this decade, perhaps partly because, during the triumphant phase of neoliberalism, in the aftermath of Reaganite and Thatcherite reforms, it fostered middle-class nostalgia for the certainties of a neo-feudal class system. One

preliminary example of Watkins' critique of the form might be the way in which, in his historical films, he deliberately dismantles the opposition between central, speaking parts and peripheral, non-speaking "extras"—for if in costume dramas, where as their name rather brutally indicates they tend to be superfluous to the main action, "extras" nonetheless tend to perform an important role as something like those textual phenomena Roland Barthes describes as "reality effects," they do not exist as such in Watkins' cinema.[19] Watkins refuses to reify nonprofessional actors—whom in *Culloden* and *La Commune* he assembled in considerable numbers—as mere "reality effects." They are active collaborators both in the unfolding of action and in the ongoing construction of the Commune's political meaning, not least because they are playing themselves as well as named or unnamed historical characters. There is no "background" in *La Commune*—the absence of depth in the camera's frame makes this explicit.

As a self-consciously radical alternative to costume or period dramas, *La Commune* might thus usefully be situated alongside other leftist films from the turn of the millennium that, despite their very different forms, set out to reconstruct and thereby reappropriate significant episodes in the more recent history of European class struggle. Let me specify two. First, Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995), a political romance set during the Spanish Civil War, which contains one remarkable scene, undoubtedly indebted to Watkins' directorial method, where for some 12 min, at the center of the film, several nonprofessional actors portraying peasants debate collectivization on land that they and their families themselves inhabit. Second, Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), an installation, filmed by Mike Figgis, in which the conceptual artist restaged this brutal turning-point in the 1984 Miners' Strike using, on the one side, descendants of former miners and, on the other, for the police, so-called historical "re-enactors."[20] Both Loach and Deller, different though their approaches are, and different though the political implications of their projects were, restaged revolutionary or insurrectionary history in order to challenge the hegemony of the costume drama and the conservative ideology it articulated. Watkins' film, it might be said, comprises a synthesis, or sublation, of some of the more radical methods used in these roughly contemporaneous projects, since it combines the intimate, impassioned, improvisatory dialogue about politics that can be glimpsed, briefly, in Loach's film, with the choreography of large numbers of nonprofessional actor-participants that, in reenacting an episode of class conflict in pseudo-documentary format, shaped Deller's enterprise. In *La Commune*, it is possible to discern the dynamic that Raymond Williams once observed in one of Loach's early television dramas, *The Big Flame* (1969), since in Watkins' film too the "non-actors" employ "speech which is at once authentic and rehearsed";

that is, "it is authentic in that it is the accent and the mode of speech of men [sic] reproducing their real-life situations" and "it is also rehearsed in that it is predetermined what they will say at that point and in what relation to each other." Watkins' nonprofessional actor-participants, to take Williams' helpful formulation, are "trying to understand their own conditions, developing their consciousness within the very act of production of the film" (Williams 1977). In *La Commune*, this process is both more spontaneous and more comprehensive in its effects than in Loach's film—in short, it is more experimental and more radical—since the latter is substantially more dependent on conventional devices such as a pre-prepared script, a process of preparatory improvizations and, as a substantial proportion of their casts, professional performers.

So, far more persuasively than Loach's or Deller's in the later 1990s and early 2000s, Watkins' esthetic can be described not as Uniform but Multiform; not as Monoform but Polyform. By Polyform, I mean in the first instance a cinema that, committed to undermining the formal and ideological dominance of the Monoform, is heterogeneous in the methods it articulates in order to represent historical reality. Its logic is that of bricolage. To use Lévi-Strauss's celebrated distinction, the Polyform filmmaker is a bricoleur, whereas the Monoform one is an engineer. Obviously, this is a crude opposition in the present context, but perhaps it is helpful for heuristic purposes. The engineer, who is a specialist, a technician, imposes a "time-and-space grid" on the reality she films, in Watkins' phrase. The bricoleur, who "is adept at performing a large number of tasks," improvises her relationship to the reality she represents on film. As Lévi-Strauss puts it in *The Savage Mind* (1962), she "interrogates all the heterogeneous objects of which [her] treasury is composed to discover what each of them could 'signify' and so contribute to the definition of a set which has yet to materialize." Her method is diverse, improvisatory. Interestingly, Lévi-Strauss mentions one filmmaker in the context of his preliminary definition of bricolage, namely Georges Méliès, whose "stage sets," he suggests, are examples of this methodology's "mytho-poetical nature" (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 17–18). There is a neat, coincidental connection with the stage set of *La Commune* here, since the abandoned factory in which it was filmed stands on the site of Méliès' former film studios. Underlining this subterranean continuity, Watkins has not only expressed his admiration for the fact that Méliès "discovered and exploited many of the basic camera tricks used in the cinema," but observed that, like *La Commune*, the French pioneer "also filmed studio reconstructions of news events – an early type of newsreel."[21] The factory in Montreuil is thus something like a laboratory of bricolage; and of the Polyform.

But if in the first instance the Polyform evokes a diverse, improvisatory method of filming, then in the second instance it invokes a cinema of the people. For the etymology of this prefix "poly-" recalls not simply that which is multiple, from Greek *polus*, but that which is of the people, from Greek *polloi*. A Polyform cinema like the one to which Watkins aspires, then, is *un cinéma du peuple*. Or, more precisely perhaps, or more punctually, a cinema of the multitude. For the multitude is, I suspect, the proper collective agent of a Polyform film such as *La Commune*. It will be recalled that Hardt and Negri published *Empire* (2000) in the year that Watkins' film was first screened. There, they defined the "multitude," one of the central concepts of their influential reappraisal of the logic of capitalist geopolitics at the turn of the millennium, in contrast to the "people," as "a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 103). It is this crypto-utopian concept of the people as a diverse, democratic force that, incarnated both in the mass movement of the Commune in 1871 and in the cast of nonprofessional actor-participants in *La Commune* in 1999, shapes the politics of Watkins' remarkable enterprise.

La Commune was made, on the eve of the new millennium, at approximately the mid-point between the 100th and the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune. This was an interesting moment of transition in the history of the Commune's reception. In 1971, in the aftermath of the global rebellions of 1968, this revolutionary event was still self-evidently a vital point of reference for the Left, especially in France. "The 1871 Paris Commune," as Hardt and Negri put it in *Multitude* (2004), "was the primary example of a new democratic experiment of government for Marx, Lenin, and many others;" (Hardt and Negri 2004) and this continued to be the case for almost a decade after the celebrations of it by Lefebvre, Debord and many others in the mid- to late 1960s. By 2021, though, if not long before, this paradigmatic status could no longer be taken for granted. The mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, after all, was the epoch of *la pensée unique*. As Kouvelakis has commented, "the working classes" retreat from the political, cultural and symbolic stage,' which was exacerbated by the crisis of bureaucratic socialism from the late 1980s, culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union, meant that the history of alternatives to capitalism "disappeared from the horizon" and "the foundations of this history, the Paris Commune first among them, dropped back into a past that suddenly became alien."[22] In this sense, *La Commune* represents the last gasp of the tradition of more or less polemical appropriations of the Commune that started with the contemporaneous responses of commentators such as Marx and Engels themselves. Or perhaps it was their

postscript. In another sense, though, the film constitutes a beginning rather than an ending. For if the 25 years or so that succeeded the 100th anniversary of the Commune was shaped, in Europe and the United States, by the ruling-class counter-offensive against all that 1968 and its aftermath stood for, a politico-economic counter-offensive known by the name of neoliberalism, and that might be said symbolically to have commenced with the Nixon Shock of 1971, then the mid- to late 1990s marks the moment at which, in France at least, this hegemony first came under sustained attack from the working class. The second half of the 1990s was in France defined by a series of more or less combative efforts to impede the neoliberals' systematic destruction of the state and civil society. Indeed, even in the United States, where the so-called Battle in Seattle took place at the end of 1999, during the period in which Watkins' film was in post-production, the mood seemed to be shifting. These contradictory currents—capitalism triumphant, anti-capitalism militant—comprise the riptide of class politics that shaped *La Commune*.

In France, the crucial moment came with the public-sector strikes of November and December 1995, little more than six months after the election of Jacques Chirac, who had in his presidential campaign promised to heal *la fracture sociale*. "For the first time in a rich country," *Le Monde* announced that month, "we are witnessing today what is in reality a strike against 'globalisation', a massive and collective reaction against financial globalization and its consequences" (quoted in Wolfreys 2006). These strikes, which proved highly effective, were a collective response to the brutal cuts that Chirac's Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, planned to impose on the social security system. But, although the pattern of resistance was uneven, as the decline of strike action in 1998 for instance indicated, they can be understood in retrospect as the start of a more sustained struggle against neoliberalism, both in France and abroad. From 1996 to 1999, when the Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin accelerated the privatizations initiated by his conservative predecessor, there were additional mobilizations—not only by medical professionals, teaching staff and transport workers, but also, more surprisingly, school students, the unemployed and *les sans-papiers*. This mood of resistance then persisted beyond the turn of the millennium. In 2002, there were general strikes in both Italy and Spain. In 2003, there were strikes in France by air-traffic workers, by schoolteachers, and by electricity workers protesting the privatization of their industry. "November/December 1995 was a turning point, not just in France but internationally," Jim Wolfreys argued a decade later; "It marked the end of a long cycle of defeats for the labor movement, and the beginning of an ongoing period of resistance to neo-liberalism which has found expression in a series of anti-capitalist protests, beginning in Seattle in November

1999, and in the development of a critique of contemporary capitalism that traditional social democratic parties were no longer capable of providing" (Wolfreys 2006).

The "critique of contemporary capitalism" to whose development in France at this time Wolfreys refers can be identified with the appearance of several books that, in addition to their theoretical or political importance, proved immensely popular with the reading public. In a piece published in early 2000, Sebastian Budgen observed that "publishers continue to find, rather to their surprise, that books denouncing the free market, globalization, labor flexibility, poverty and inequality are best-sellers" (Budgen 2000, 149). Alongside Boltanski and Chiapello's *Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (1999), the subject of his review-article, he pointed to Viviane Forrester's *L'Horreur économique* (1996), Labarde and Maris's *Ah! Dieu que la guerre économique est jolie* (1998) and, published in advance of the decisive demonstrations of resistance to neoliberalism, *La Misère du monde* (1993)—all of which, challenging the fatalism of contemporary capitalist ideology, sold tens if not hundreds of thousands of copies in the late 1990s. This last book, produced under the editorial direction of Bourdieu, collected testaments of "social suffering," as the book's English subtitle framed it, from members of the French proletariat and of the subproletariat or "precariat." Despite consisting of almost one thousand pages, *La Misère du monde* sold some 80,000 copies by the turn of the millennium. This success placed Bourdieu in a comparatively influential position as a public intellectual at the point when concerted opposition to neoliberalism commenced in November and December 1995; and, more and more convinced that it was his political and moral duty to expend the symbolic capital he had accumulated over the course of his professional career, by publicly intervening in strikes and other forms of fightback, Bourdieu became probably the central spokesperson for the French anti-capitalist movement from within the academic establishment. Refusing the false choice between neoliberalism and barbarism, he consistently expressed his "solidarity with those who are now fighting to change society." In a speech at the Gare de Lyon during the strikes of December 1995, for example, speaking on behalf of other leftist intellectuals, he declared their "support to those who have been fighting for the last three weeks against the destruction of a *civilization*, associated with the existence of public service, the civilization of republican equality of rights, rights to education, to health, culture, research, art, and above all, work" (Bourdieu 1998c, 27, 24).

I have emphasized Bourdieu's significance not simply because he was central to the refusal of neoliberal orthodoxies to which, in the cultural field, *La Commune* also made a meaningful contribution in the late 1990s, but because he was also one of the most trenchant critics at this time of

the role of the mass media, and especially television, in perpetuating these orthodoxies. In some important respects, Bourdieu's critique of television is comparable to Watkins' attack on the Monoform. It makes its fullest appearance in his short, polemical book *Sur la Télévision* (1997), which itself sold more than 100,000 copies. Based on two television programmes that formed part of a series of courses curated in 1996 by the Collège de France, where Bourdieu was Chair of Sociology, this book elaborated his claim both that television "poses a serious danger for all the various areas of cultural production" and that it "poses no less of a threat to political life and to democracy itself." In his prefatory remarks, Bourdieu asserted the need for what he called "intellectual discourse" to resist television's manipulations and affirm "freedom of thought"; but he admitted that this discourse is "a less effective and less amusing substitute for a true critique of images through images – of the sort you find in some of Jean-Luc Godard's films." Bourdieu then went on to quote Godard's argument that, in order to begin a political "questioning of images and sounds, and of their *relations*," it is a matter not of "saying, 'That's a Union officer on a horse,' but, 'That's an *image* of a horse and an officer'." Watkins' critique of the image is quite different, in formal terms, to that of his contemporary Godard, but it too is meta-cinematic, so to speak. The introduction of an anachronistic TV news crew to mediate the events of March to May 1871 in *La Commune* is in this context the crucial component of his campaign against the ideology of the image. The film repeatedly insists that its representation of the Commune is a representation of the Commune. Bourdieu concludes his Preface to *On Television* by stating that his hope is to "furnish some tools or weapons to all those in the image professions who are struggling to keep what could have become an extraordinary instrument of direct democracy from turning into an instrument of symbolic oppression" (Bourdieu, 1998d, 10, 11–12; see Godard 1985, 366). Watkins is one of those in the "image professions" who, fashioning tools or weapons of his own, is committed to this same struggle.

Because of his singular sophistication as a sociologist, Bourdieu's critique of television and the mass media provides a more robust theoretical basis for Watkins' critical practice as a filmmaker than he himself is able to offer in his polemics against the Monoform—even though it is no doubt limited by its pedagogic function as a piece of programming. Bourdieu's account of the "mechanics that allow television to wield a particularly pernicious form of symbolic violence" is part of a systematic attempt, across many decades, to grasp the interlocking logic of a tessellation of distinct, semi-autonomous "fields" of production (Bourdieu, 1998d, 17). It is this totalizing sociology that enables him to develop a structural analysis of "all the anonymous and invisible mechanisms through which the many kinds of censorship operate

to make television such a formidable instrument for maintaining the symbolic order" (Bourdieu, 1998d, 16). For Bourdieu, then, the "television field" is, "of course, a subfield within the larger journalistic field," which is itself part of a broader field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1998d, 52). For Watkins, cinema and television are the constituent components of the MAVM, which is itself a sort of field of production, albeit one that is necessarily cruder in its delineations than those tabulated by Bourdieu. Bourdieu's insistence that "in order to understand what goes on at TF1 or Arte, you have to take into account the totality of objective power relations that structure the field" thus helpfully offers to supplement, as well as contextualize, Watkins' attacks on the Monoform as the cinematic or televisual logic of postmodernism (Bourdieu, 1998d, 40). It was Arte, after all, in the form of La Sept-ARTE, that commissioned and reluctantly screened *La Commune*. So Bourdieu's point that, thanks to the commercial logic that underpins television, "the cultural network Channel 7 (now Arte) moved from a policy of intransigent, even aggressive esotericism to a more or less disreputable compromise with audience ratings," and that "the result is programming that makes concessions to facile, popular programming during prime time and keeps the esoteric fare for late at night," resonates closely with Watkins' experience in the late 1990s (Bourdieu, 1998d, 52–53). But, if it sharpens Watkins' critique, Bourdieu's critique is itself incapable of fully grasping television as the logic of late capitalism, principally because, in his tessellation of different fields of production, the economic field does not play the sort of determinant role that might enable him to grasp this logic as, precisely, capitalist.

There are political as well as theoretical limitations to Bourdieu's critique of television. Bourdieu emphasizes in the final paragraph of *On Television* that, "enslaved by audience ratings, television imposes market pressures on the supposedly free and enlightened consumer"; and, furthermore, that "these pressures have nothing to do with the democratic expression of enlightened collective opinion or public rationality" (Bourdieu, 1998d, 67). His focus on the "habitus"—the mode of being whereby the individual absorbs the conditions of their domination, both mentally and physically, as a kind of disposition—means that, politically speaking, he is relatively pessimistic. "Dominated individuals," as he noted in a comment on the attitudes inculcated as a result of education in a class society, "assent to much more than we [as intellectuals] believe and much more than they know." This, he adds, is "a wonderful instrument of ideology, much bigger and more powerful than TV or propaganda" (See Eagleton and Bourdieu 1992, 114).[23] But the implication here is that, to differing degrees, the school system, the mass media including television, and "propaganda," all relegate the individual, atomized as he or she is, to a state of political

impotence. So, if Bourdieu's theoretical account of the ideological implications of these market pressures is for obvious reasons more sophisticated than Watkins' polemics against the Monoform, then the latter, as a filmmaker, is far better positioned than the former to explore paradigms for "the democratic expression of enlightened collective opinion." He is politically more optimistic than the Frenchman, too, precisely because in making his films with a collective of nonprofessional actors he is involved in a form of experimental, potentially emancipative praxis.

On his website, Watkins records in some detail the extent of the historical and political discussions involving the cast that took place during both the pre-production and production processes of *La Commune*. These were deliberately intended to foster "the democratic expression of enlightened collective opinion." If he rightly congratulates himself for the success of this challenge to the standard, anti-democratic practices of the MAVM, on the grounds that "many found this filming method to be dynamic and experiential, for it forced them to abandon pose and artifice, and led to an immediate self-questioning on contemporary society," then he is also sufficiently self-reflexive to recognize that the "hierarchical practices" that he nonetheless retained, not least in insisting on his role as director, led to frustrations on the part of the cast. So did some of his filming methods, including the use of a camera that, despite the long sequences it sustained, simulated the rapid movements and interrupted rhythms of the TV news crew it deployed in order to mediate the events of the Commune. "Certainly," he has admitted, "there were aspects to the filming of the long sequences which resembled the hit-and-rush tactics of contemporary TV."[24] Ramos-Martínez has reinforced this point rather severely, noting that "to watch the film is to witness again and again a form of forceful participation, where the rapidity with which the re-enactors have to articulate their thoughts under the threat of the microphone's withdrawal made it extremely difficult for them to communicate anything other than despair, banalities or unconvincing slogans" (Ramos-Martínez 2016, 212). But Watkins, who is admirably ready to criticize his own practices when they restrict the democratic ambitions of his esthetic, rightly defends himself too, conceding that, though he necessarily limited individual cast members' access to speech, "this was balanced by scenes where space was given to individual expression, and by the sheer length of the final film." "Since an overall objective of 'La Commune' was to present a collective voice," he concludes, "I believe that the filming achieved this in a way which is highly unusual in the MAVM today."[25]

One lasting testament to this achievement was the formation, in the aftermath of the filmmaking process, of Le Rebond pour la Commune, a democratic association of actor-participants designed to maintain

opportunities, on the one hand, to extend the social relationships they had cemented with one another on set; and, on the other, to promote both the film and, more broadly, political discussion of the Paris Commune. In March 2000, Le Rebond issued a statement explaining that it had instituted an association for promoting and distributing the film. Pointing to "the difficulties which a film of such scope encounters," including "the insidious censoring by ARTE on TV and their refusal to distribute the film on video, the marginalizing of the work, the refusal of French film distributers to release the film, the silence in the media," it conceded that "this asks questions of our capacity to prolong and develop the process of resistance and participation." And it stated:

> This is why our Association also sets itself the objective of developing communal experience by the creation of places and spaces where discussions which propose thought, reflection, and organization against the abuse of power by the dominant mass media can take place. To initiate, propose and organize collective projects and debates around the questions which *La Commune (Paris 1871)* raises for us. To create free speech, with or without the institutions … A 'wide-angle' vision rather than 'tele-objective'.[26]

In this refusal of the "tele-objective" both as a cinematic and a social vision, Watkins' film is Polyform in the double sense to which I have adverted—it is multiple in its methods of representing the past and multitudinous in its mobilization of actor-participants. Here, in other words, is the utopian dimension of Watkins' project, which emerged organically from the democratic relationships he had fostered in making the film. In this sense, *La Commune* presented, in its rendition of the events of Spring 1871, not simply a powerful historical example of the kind of proletarian agency that the contemporary discourse of neoliberalism dismissed as unimaginable, but a social and cultural mechanism capable of rendering the sort of solidarities this revolution has inspired in the past a concrete possibility in the present. This is Polyform film. It refuses the esthetic of the costume or period drama that I have referred to as Uniform film, with its "parade of historical costumes," in Kozintsev's vocabulary, and its "naturalism of details." And, in mobilizing its cast as actor-participants, that is, as a kind of multitude, it presents a democratic political alternative to the hierarchical, merely populist practises of Monoform cinema.

If the Paris Commune itself, as Jacques Rancière has remarked, demonstrated that workers were capable "not only of administering a city but of building a new world, a new mode of being together," then *La Commune* dramatized the fact that, during a period of class resistance to capitalism like the fightbacks seen in France in the second half of the 1990s, radical filmmaking too can nurture "a new mode of being together" (Rancière 2021, 166). In the process of making the film, and of reappropriating the

history of the Commune in thus representing it, Watkins and his cast created what might, in the retrospect afforded by more recent political developments in France, be characterized as the conceptual equivalent of *une zone à defendre* (ZAD). The territory it occupied—itself physical and political as much as conceptual of course—was not geographical but historical. The Paris Commune, then, as a ZAD: this is the achievement of Peter Watkins' *La Commune*.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1. My thanks to the editor of this journal and to the anonymous referees he commissioned, as well as to Steve Edwards, for their thoughtful and insightful responses to the first draft of this article.
2. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
3. Kouvelakis adds that, though the Commune "made its entrance into some 'lycée general' courses in 2002, and then in the eighth-grade curriculum in 2008," in 2011 the Commune was again erased from the curriculum, in a teaching framework that all but skipped over the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century—i.e., France's period of wars and revolutions. See Stathis Kouvelakis. "On the Paris Commune: Part 1." Translated by David Broder. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5039-on-the-paris-commune-part-1
4. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
5. On his involvement in the Playcraft group, see Cook (2010, 230).
6. See Peter Watkins. "Introduction to the Listing of My Films." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/part2_home.htm
7. "The essential point about epic theatre," Brecht wrote in November 1927, "is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason"—see Brecht (1964a, 23).
8. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
9. Jared Rapfogel has argued that it is his "speculative films that show Watkins, for better or for worse, at his most aggressively provocative – these are films designed to shatter the audience's false sense of security, to shock them with visions of the sickness at the heart of society and of the possible consequences of this corruption"—see Rapfogel (2007).
10. For these important details I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees of this article, whose comments on the first draft were as constructive as they were perceptive.
11. Peter Watkins. "The Media Crisis: A Perspective." see https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/peter-watkins-films-1964-99/media-crisis-perspective-peter-watkins

12. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
13. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
14. Peter Watkins. "The Media Crisis." see https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/peter-watkins-films-1964-99/media-crisis-perspective-peter-watkins
15. See Peter Watkins. "The Global Media Crisis." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/dsom.htm
16. Peter Watkins. "The Global Media Crisis." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/dsom.htm
17. Peter Watkins. "The Global Media Crisis." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/dsom.htm
18. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
19. Like "Flaubert's barometer" or "Michelet's little door," as Roland Barthes analyses them, "extras" in a period drama "say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity"—see Barthes (1989, 148).
20. For a critique of Deller's project, see Dave Beech's review, which argues that it was effectively captured by the logic of the historical re-enactment societies on which it relied: "The impression of light recreation was inevitable. The political content of the event was dissipated at every turn' – 'Jeremy Deller, *Orgreave*,' *Art Monthly* (July-August 2001), p. 39. For a more neutral account, see Bishop (2012, 30–36). On *La Commune*'s resistance to 'the norms of reenactment as traditionally defined," see Panchasi (2006, 562–564).
21. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
22. Stathis Kouvelakis. "On the Paris Commune: Part 1." https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5039-on-the-paris-commune-part-1
23. Note that, though this critique of Bourdieu's theory nonetheless stands, the discussion cited here does predate the shift in his political outlook that took place after the strikes of 1995. On this shift, see Callinicos (1999, 87).
24. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
25. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm
26. Peter Watkins. "La Commune (de [sic] Paris, 1871)." http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm

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