

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Le cinéma militant dans le monde arabe (des années 1960 à nos jours)

REVOLTS IN THE CINEMA: LINES OF RESISTANCE

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Abstract | This article attempts to rethink the question of revolt in cinema from a comparative perspective by showing how a social phenomenon remains relatively invisible on screen in recent film history.

Keywords | Authority, cinema, history, rebellion, revolution, power.

Abstract | Cet article s'efforce de repenser la question de la révolte au cinéma dans une perspective comparative en montrant comment un phénomène social reste finalement assez peu visible à l'écran dans une histoire récente du cinéma.

Mots clés | Autorité, cinéma, histoire, rébellion, révolution, pouvoir

In memory of Zaza Khalvashi (1957-2020) Adjar director and scriptwriter'

The question of revolt has been debated more by writings, often by philosophers than by filmmakers. Paradoxically, this theme on the screen remains rather invisible in many cultures, as we will try to demonstrate here, yet the revolt in all cultures remains a universal human component. For instance, in an essay published in 1951, *Man in Revolt* appears as a response that Albert Camus, French Nobel prize of literature, makes to himself in relation to the *Myth of Sisyphus*, centered on the theme of the absurd and which was published when he was living in Algeria¹. Facing the absurdity of his existence, man must oppose the revolt to create a meaning for his life and pose his existence as a man, refusing the absurd condition of submission or slavery. Camus renews the Hegelian problematic of the *Dialectic of the Master and the Slave*². There is in Camus' writings a position of equality between the master and the slave and not an inversion of the domination process.

The individual should oppose his revolt to create sense and to affirm his existence of man. But, also, to refuse its condition of a submitted human being. In this essay Camus tries to trace the idea of revolt, associated with European culture. The revolt does not have here a real political meaning but it is rather a metaphysical revolt, facing the human condition when it is affected. Unlike Revolution, the rebel has no plan, he simply acts motivated by a sense of injustice. But the rebellion has different temporalities according to the societies. A Georgian proverb used to say: « *it is the times that govern us and not the kings.* » How can societies preserve themselves from despotic power and what is the function of rebellion³? If the notion of rebellion is present in a whole current of philosophical reflection, it seems paradoxically difficult to be represented in cinema⁴. In democratic and more complex societies, the law becomes the mediation to assure a consensus in front of the injustice; but these societies have not abolished rebellions: it becomes often a weapon (anti-colonial movement, social movement, women's movement...etc) expressed mainly in

1- Conference held at the 22 Tbilisi International Film Festival focused on Rebellion – december11, 2021. Thanks to Tamta Khalvashi co-organizer at Ilia State University (Georgia).

2- Albert Camus, *The Rebel: an essay on Man in Revolt*, NYC, Vintage, 1992.

3- In Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.

4- Pierre Clastres, a French anthropologist who studied the Guayaki society in Latin America in 1960, describes in his book *Society against the State: Essay in Political Anthropology*, published in French in 1975 translated Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990, an alternative society founded on the permanent rejection of the chief to avoid the State.

5- For instance, Claude Lefort, French philosopher, shows also how in totalitarian systems on the contrary the transparency between the State and the Society leads to impossible forms of rebellion, except for a minority: the dissent. See *The Political Form of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, Boston, MIT, 1986, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, NYC, Columbia University Press, 2007.

documentaries⁶. As pointed by the philosopher Michel Foucault power is innate to society as a micro-power and circulate through different aspect⁷. Should it be these days an invisible power, unable to be made visible or represented?

Rebellion in the light of cinema?

How could we re-read these questions in the light of cinema, through maybe the history of cinema?

Cinema as an act of creation is ontologically directly related to rebellion. At the origins of cinema, the film does not really arouse rebellion but fear it. The *Arrival of a train at the station of La Ciotat* (1895) by Louis Lumière rather scares the spectators. The moving image makes a man immortal on the screen and generates fear. The rebellion downstream in the cinema can be considered as a stereotyped notion if we conceive that it exists in most of the films (relations of couples, families, parents: children...etc). And finally, on another level, upstream of the cinema in its production, the film as a collective and strongly hierarchical process in a very divided world of work, this rebellion can seem non-existent: it is normalized or framed⁸. In fact, whatever the divergent interests of all the protagonists on a film, they all have an interest in seeing a film made, and they all function within a logic of arrangement in order to have to organize (from the producer to the director through the entire chain technicians, actors... to distribution, exhibition, festivals ... etc.). How then could we truly speak of revolts or rebellions in cinema because the question of the revolt does not concern only a question of representation on the screen or behind the screen.

We can also for instance note that following May 1968 and the revolt movements in Europe and in France, various film cooperatives were born⁹. The first one, more experimental, was officially created under the name of *Collectif Jeune Cinéma*. Later, other cooperatives were created, structures that still exist today such as *Cinédoc Paris Films Coop* (1974) and *Light Cone* (1982), *Slon/Iskra*¹⁰. There were also short-lived cooperatives, or those that did not survive, such as the *Coopérative des cinéastes*, the *Omnium des cinéastes indépendants*, *Ciné-femmes International*, *Ciné-Golem*, etc. It can even be said that at one point there were as many cooperatives as there were groups, or micro-groups, of filmmakers. However, if certain filmmakers remain faithfully attached to structures for their aesthetic

6- Cf my article in *Post-1990 Documentary: Reconfiguring Independence*, Camille Deprez/ Judith Pernin (ed) Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015, pp 82-94; Malin Walhberg *Documentary Time*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

7- Cf Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*, London, Penguin, 2020, published in French in 1975. Cf *The Foucault Reader* (ed) Paul Rabinow, NYC, Random House, 1984.

8- Cf. my study *The film factory* in Kristian Feigelson, *La fabrique filmique, : métiers et professions*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011.

9- Sebastien Layerle, *Caméra en lutte en Mai 68*, Paris, Nouveau Monde, 2008.

10- Cf Catherine Roudé, « L'expérience coopérative SLON (1968-1973) », in Kristian Feigelson *Chris Marker : pionnier et novateur*, Condé, CinémaAction, 165/ 2017, p 28-34.

or political lines, a great number transformed themselves thereafter into film distribution structures, often with little means. At the same time and afterwards, the revolts in the cinema were also characterized only by representations on the screen or more or less ephemeral structures of productions but also by local associations of spectators anxious to defend their theaters threatened of disappearances or of programming. These movements in recent years have concerned rather alternative theaters¹¹.

American interpretation

In the 1930s, the Hollywood industry transposed the Taylor model of the car industry based on an advanced division of labor¹². Of course, the final cut also reserved any act of submission of a director considered as a King in Europe to the studio and the powerful producer who is still behind all the process. There, in a cinematographic system dominated by money and capital, the notion of revolt or rebellion seems disconnected, out of place. Even if at its origin, the foundation of Hollywood on the West Coast was based on an act of anti-wasp rebellion by Jewish producers anxious to leave the puritan and moral climate of the East Coast to develop their own studio business¹³.

So, in the United States, since Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) based on the Civil War, there are also very few films devoted to the American Revolution. Especially since this silent fresco of two and a half hours considered a racist movie which generated at the time many revolts from its viewers. Later in American cinema, Russian revolutions are also shown in a negative light: *Ninotchka*, *Dr. Zhivago* ... or caricature without forgetting that the American cinema during the war, as well as the Soviet cinema, can adopt the most dominant theses¹⁴. For instance, Michael Curtiz's *Mission to Moscow* in 1943 is a Stalinist film, evacuating all idea of rebellion¹⁵.

Although a certain part of this cinema then produced films representing or feeding the notion of rebellions! But we would rather speak here of a post-Hollywood cinema on the East coast, focused on a generation of Italian immigrants (Scorsese, Coppola, Cimino... etc.) who, in the 1970s, re-examined the values of the counter-culture, the relationship to the Indians or to the Vietnam War...

11- Cf Kristian Feigelson, « Le Pestel in Die (Drôme): Quality cinema in a Semi-Rural Setting » in *Cinema beyond the City*, Judith Thissen and Clemens Zimmermann (ed), London ?BFI/Palgrave, 2016, pp 213-222.

12- From Douglas Gomery, *Hollywood Studio System*, London, BFI/ Mac Millan, 1986 to Allen J Scott, *On Hollywood*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005.

13- Neal Gabler, *An Empire of their Own*, NYY, Anchor Books, 1988.

14- Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995.

15- Cf Daniel Sauvaget « Mission to Moscow (1943), un film « américain-stalinien », in Kristian Feigelson, *Caméra politique : cinéma et stalinisme*, Théorème 8, Paris, Presses Sorbonne-Nouvelle, 2005, pp 181-191.

Soviet interpretation

If we take the Soviet point of view, the term revolution does not correspond to the term rebellion. It can be noticed that practically the Soviet cinema has made very few films about the French Revolution, which was however a familiar topic and even a reference for the Russians. For the Soviets, the French Revolution had finally ended badly with Napoleon invading them. There will be more films on this subject to show the heroism of the Russian victories¹⁶. On the other hand, to avoid making a parallel between the terror of Robespierre and later the one by Lenin, Soviet cinema produced rare films on the Paris Commune, another ideological reference for Soviet ideology. *The New Babylon* by Kozincev and Trauberg in 1929 may be the only one. Much later in the communist Poland, Andrej Wajda directed *Danton* (1982), a metaphorical way of denouncing both Bolshevism and the new Jaruzelski regime, which established a military regime in Warsaw in 1981¹⁷. The same in Hungary, with Miklos Jancso or other filmmakers¹⁸. On these questions of rebellion, the cinema of the communist countries proceeds by metaphor or transposition as if it became an ultimately taboo question. Although after 1927 some propaganda films were made about the first labor camps in the USSR. Like Nazi films, later, these films showed in extreme conditions of survival, the internalization of the model of fear and the absence of any rebellion in these camps¹⁹. Beyond the revolt against the totalitarian lie, a whole generation of filmmakers expresses its disgust with the alienation in communist societies.

Moreover, despite the censorship in these countries, what can be the degree of autonomy of filmmakers to claim rebellion? The inventiveness of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s is an example of this, since most of them, despite their differences (Dziga Vertov / Eisenstein), if they did not always represent the Bolshevik party as a driving force of history in 1920-1925 (which became a dogma), were all submitted to its main directives²⁰. For instance, Eisenstein in 1927 for *October* will be criticized in this commemorative film on the revolution for having shown the spontaneity of the masses instead of the organizational

16- Cf. Marc Ferro, *Révoltes, Révolutions, Cinéma*, Paris, éd Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989, introduction pp 9-36.

17- Cf. Tadeusz Lubelski, *Histoire du cinéma polonais*, Lille, Septentrion Presses Universitaires de Lille, 2017, Ch X p 377-390

18- Kristian Feigelson/ Jarmo Valkola, *Cinéma Hongrois : le Temps et l'Histoire*, Paris, Théorème 7, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2003.

19- Cf about the film « *SLON* » (1927) Kristian Feigelson, « Images filmiques des camps : entre mémoire et oubli » in revue *Oubli* 28/2021, La Roche /Yon, pp 59-80. Kristian Feigelson « Filmer le Goulag : entre Histoire et Mémoire », revue *Le Temps des Médias*, Paris, n°33/ 2020, éd Nouveau Monde. Voir Sylvie Lindeperg, « Le double jeu du cinéma : filmer Terezin et Westerbork », in *Revue d'Histoire de la Shoah*, 2011/2, Paris, about the film « *The Town which the Fürher donated the Jews* » (1944) ; Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda : Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, London, I.B Tauris, 1998.

20- Cf ; Yuri Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance : Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* Gemonia, Le Gironate del Cinema Muto, 2004.

power of the Party. But all of them will more or less support the Stalinist regime that allowed them to make their films.

If the Soviet cinema many films at that time tried to explain the causes of a rebellion and its transformation into a Revolution as for instance in Chapaev (1934) a film cult showing a father betrayed by his son²¹. On the contrary, American or European cinema would rather show the drifts of the revolution but also the strengthened values of the family.

French interpretation

The functions are reversed on that level. And as quoted about Camus, the rebel does not question the established order, but points out its excesses and injustice: a Chaplin film, « *The immigrant* » (1917), with its subject on poverty, says more about capitalism than a Soviet propaganda film on the same theme.

In fact, many films in French cinema, as elsewhere in the world, have picked up the theme of the individual and his daily life in the face of injustice. Most often, these themes feed the social imagination. They are turned towards present situations of revolt and not towards a mythical past. They best express this idea of a spirit of revolt that exists in societies that are victims of violence or have difficulty adapting to a kind of modernity. A good example is Jacques Tati who expressed between 1948 and 1971, through seven films, a popular cinema concerned by an impossible modernity. The rebellion of the individual is shown in all his films on the model of a popular hero recalling Buster Keaton pointing the alienation of the urban world and the automobile, the American model of line work, etc.²²

But these features films do not really belong to a militant cinema that Dziga Vertov inaugurated in the 1920s and that simply wanted to defend a cause. Even if in Europe at a certain time, some will seize this genre in the 1960's/ 1970's (Joris Ivens, Godard, Marker...) but most of these films sometimes seems too didactic and will not find their public²³. Moreover, even in French cinema, depicting the idea of rebellion, there are few films favorable to the idea of the French Revolution, which began already with revolts. Except may be for Jean Renoir's *Marseillaise*, which was favorable to the communist movement before he left France to work in the United States. The few filmmakers who took up the subject were more likely to criticize the excesses and cruelties of the Jacobins.

Paradoxically, this French revolution, erected as a myth, is condemned in the

21- Peter Kenez, « Le cinéma soviétique sous Staline (1928-1953) » in Kristian Feigelson (dir) *Cinéma et Stalinisme*, opus cité, pp 19-3. Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet society 1917-1953*, Cambridge, Cambridge university Press, 1992.

22- Michel Chion, *Jacques Tati*, Paris, Ed. Cahiers du Cinéma, 1987.

23- Kristian Feigelson, « Chinese Fictions in France and Shadows in China, » in *Reinventing Mao*, Cinema and Cie Vol XVIII, N°30, Spring 2018 pp 83-94.

cinema for its transgression of the basic constitutional principles “*the Human Rights*, a question linked to the foundation of France with its slogan “*liberty, equality, fraternity*”. On the contrary, most of the French historical films shows the splendors of the Royal court. The cinema remains a dream factory and the revolts are not very dreamy²⁴. Cinema works on a melodramatic mode that cannot tolerate the idea of an ultimate catastrophe to stage the King and the Queen Marie-Antoinette on a dark side. The cinema is providing very little scenes of the misery of the peasants, or about their revolts against the French King. Moreover, the individuals seem rather powerless or without real autonomy in the face of the historical movements that are taking shape and will overwhelm them.

Middle-Easter interpretation

In the Middle East, the notion of rebellion on the screen is ancient and is reflected in a whole cinematography. For instance, in Iran as well as in Turkey or Kurdistan, cinema has become a popular entertainment. But this cinema also knew how to overcome the Islamic prohibitions of the representation. Despite censorship or periods of restriction, the rebellion is often in the background²⁵. Without doubt, the Egyptian director Youssef Chahine in his films was able to embody a cinema committed to social topics but remaining a cinema of entertainment. But his cinema remained complex: he could attack Islamism while defending the Muslim world, oppose Nasser while fighting Mubarak, defending the rural life facing a new modernity (*Earth*, 1969)²⁶. In Israel, too, cinema has often served as a vehicle for protest to show the dimension of a democratic society that refuses the excesses of its governments²⁷. But how to consider a more recent production in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, or the Palestinian territories from this angle of revolt in cinema²⁸? Quite a few films are done, both for the difficulty of shooting in insurrectionary or war situations over the past 10 years and also for production reasons. Most of them were coproduced with France, Belgium or Germany. This filmography ultimately includes less than fifteen films as “*18 days*” (*Tamantashar Yom*, 2011) by Yousri Nasrallah, “*How Facebook Changed the World: The Arab Spring*” (2011) by Mishal Husain, “*Occupy Wall Street in Arabic*” (2011) by Sherif

24- On these subjects, Sylvie Dallet, *Guerres révolutionnaires. Histoire et Cinéma*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1985 and *La Révolution Française et le cinéma*, Paris, ed L'Herminier, 1988 ; Michel Cadé, *L'écran bleu*, Perpignan, Presses Universitaires Perpignan, 2000 ; Stéphane Haffemeyer, *Révoltes et révolutions à l'écran, Europe moderne, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle*. Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015 ; and Marc Ferro (dir.), *Révoltes, révolutions, cinéma*, éditions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989, opus cité.

25- Among many books on these subjects, Hormuz Key, *Le cinéma iranien*, Paris, Karthala, 1999 ; Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001; Kristian Feigelson et Mehmet Ozturk (dir) *Les écrans turcophones*, Lille, Presses Septentrion Université de Lille, 2002.

26- Marie-Claude Benard, *Le Caire et le cinéma Egyptien des années 80*, Le Caire, Cedej, 1989.

27- Cf. Nuri Gertz, *Myths in Israel Culture*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, publisher, University of Southampton, 2000; Miri Talmon/Yaron Peleg, *Israeli Cinema: identities in motion*, Austin, Texas University Press, 2011; Anat Y Zanger, *Place, Memory and Myth in Israeli Cinema*, London, Valentine Mitchell Publishers, 2012.

28- Nuri Gertz/ Georges Khleifi, *Palestinian Cinema: Landscape, Trauma and Memory*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008.

Sadek, “*Tahrir: Liberation Square*” (2011) by Stefano Savona,” *Chicago Girl: The Social Network Takes on a Dictator*” (2013) by Joe Piscatella, “*Cairo Drive*” (2013) by Sherief Elkatsha, “*Al midan*” (2013) by Jehane Noujaim, “*The Return to Homs*” (2013) by Talal Derki, “*The Uprising*” (2013) by Peter Snowdon, “*A Revolution in Four Seasons*” (2016) by Jessie Deeter, “*City of Ghosts*” (2017) by Matthew Heineman, “*The Nile Hilton Incident*” (2017) by Tarik Saleh, “*According to Damascus time*” (Be Vaghte Sham, 2018) by Ebrahim Hatamikia... etc. A film by Mourad Ben Cheikh « *La Kahoufa baada al'yaoum* » (2011) on the protest movements that led to the fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia showed the commitment and militancy of men and women who participated in the Arab Spring of protest. The most emblematic place of the Egyptian revolution was Tahrir Square « *Tahrir Liberation Square* » (2011), later filmed in a Sicilian documentary by Stefano Savona, showing the square occupied day and night, the cries and songs of thousands of Egyptians despite the repression of the regime that fueled these revolts. Tahrir becomes a place of resistance to defy the army or preserve the territory of freedom conquered. But this space will be ephemeral as other places in other countries around the Mediterranean. The weight of censorship as well as self-censorship also explains the lack of films about large-scale social movements in the Middle-East. Since many of these films are made by foreigners and remain films with a confidential audience, often shown in festivals. Even if many of these themes have been relayed by television reports.

The cinema of rebellion: a counter-cinema?

Is the cinema of rebellion, if we call it like that, a main-stream cinema? Moreover, the Russian and Georgian cinema of the USSR and the post-USSR period is full of these themes. A rebel later becomes a dissident, isolated individual who challenge an entire Soviet system. In Tengviz Abouladzé's film *Repentance* (1984), the rebel refers to a schizophrenic position, dividing public and private life²⁹: as totalitarianism has invaded the family sphere, there are no longer any political issue. Digging up the father's body is no longer for instance a sacrilege: at the same time, he is « *dead and alive* » In a Freudian sense, the father as a figure of power became a *disturbing strangeness*, a figure of the double, preventing any possible rebellion³⁰. The figures are duplicated and this is also the power of cinema. *Repentance* works almost like a counter-fiction cinema at the time to show a kind of history or small stories in a documentary mode or mood. Most of these films participate more and less in a social criticism as did the *New Wave* cinema of the late 1960s in Europe. Later the eruption of the movement of May 1968 was at that time a real movement of rebellion, a kind of revolts against all the institutions from families to the state... etc. In these cinematographically imaginaries and utopian representations, revolutions and revolts thus remain

29- Kristian Feigelson, « Le Repentir (1984), une inquiétante étrangeté » in *Cinéma et Stalinisme*, opus cité, p 269-277.

30- Sigmund Freud, *L'inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988.

both close and distant to a spectator. But the filmmaker is not an historian and is able to show anything. The writing of history is not approached in the same way and cannot be articulated in the way of expressing the problems of the past or making them understood in the present. Visual writing and writing history can be contradictory³¹. This implies thinking about the role of cinema in relation to history. How can we take into account the more autonomous centers of history where revolts are developed? How to film them? Although very rare filmmakers can also become revolutionaries in the way they write their own language of cinema. And as in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, life and films are in an eternal restart to escape from their real condition. Maybe could we reconsider the real lines of resistance? We could use other examples from the cinema of independence or post-colonial from Africa, Asia or Latin America...

Rebellion against an invisible power?

Again, as in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, there is a moral aim: restoring a moral order to a virtual world today³². This “no” of rebellion is then an attempt to create value in a world without reference points. This question remains relevant today, if we consider the Covid pandemic that paralyzed the whole world in the last two years has finally generated very few reactions (except today with some groups against vaccination). As a result of this global pandemic, movie theaters were closed, festivals were suspended, and filming was stopped for nearly two years. There were few protests as the priorities were elsewhere, in the hospitals. The whole film sector was weakened by this situation, but the digital film distribution platforms became then hegemonic: an invisible micro-virus was and still is the subject of all the television channels and commentaries in an enclosed world, without generating any rebellions.

Finally, with the climate changes, the pandemic has made us aware of the imminence of a catastrophe on a global scale. Humans have disrupted the planet's regulations and the virus is one of the consequences. There has been little revolt in this area, even if we understand that these major events could be the origin of a profound revolution to redefine the life on the planet. Yet these crises are visible, but they are not present in the movies, except for few documentaries. What can the cinema still do between the regime of fiction and the principle of reality? If rebellion remains an inherited phenomenon, the cinema that expressed it, points in this context its own limits.

31- Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History*, Detroit, Wayne State University, 1988. Antoine de Baecque, *L'Histoire-Caméra*, Paris, Gallimard, 2008.

32- In a prophetic approach, it was one of the concepts developed by Marc Ferro in his book *Les sociétés malades du progrès*, Paris, Plon, 1999. About cinema and this topic, see Kristian Feigelson « Crises et paradoxes de la création filmique : la souffrance au travail » in *Le cinéma art du collectif*, Paris, éd AHRHC, 2022.

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كلمات مفتاحية | سلطة، سينما، تاريخ، تمرد، ثورة

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