

EDITORIAL

The Prospects for Political Cinema Today

In Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's provocative film, *Vent d'est* (*Wind from the East*, 1970), there is a famous scene in which a pregnant young woman is shown walking toward the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha as he stands at a crossroads with arms outstretched. "Excuse me for interrupting your class struggle," she asks politely, "but could you tell me the way toward political cinema?" Rocha proposes some options before the woman sets off down the path previously described as the "unknown" cinema of "adventure."

This is a memorably amusing moment in a work that nonetheless remains one of Godard's most difficult films to watch because of its abandonment—and refusal to employ—virtually all of the devices traditionally associated with "mainstream" cinema. While the film is certainly not the most distinguished example of political filmmaking imaginable, the scene nevertheless looks back to an era when "political cinema" emerged as a viable enough category to become the subject of a vigorous debate in which critics and directors advocated various esthetic options: the agitational documentary, the social-realist drama, the "political thriller," "Third Cinema" (associated with Rocha), and Godard's own uncompromising brand of "counter cinema" all had their proponents.

It is, of course, a debate that subsequently lost much of its potency in the face of changes in the economic and political climate and the resulting shift away from more overt forms of political filmmaking. While political cinema may not command the same profile that it once did, any announcement of its "death" would undoubtedly be premature. The extraordinary resurgence of the political documentary in the last ten years is one of the most obvious signs of life. Political films of varying types and genres have continued to be made around the world by filmmakers of differing generations and outlooks. The changes in political mood in the current period have also encouraged a revival of critical interest in the project of political filmmaking as well as a reassessment of the relevance of old debates. Given these developments, *Cineaste* believes that it is the right time to publish a Critical Symposium on what political cinema currently means—and where it might be headed.

Of course, defining political cinema is not an easy task. As many of our respondents suggest, all films may be regarded as political. For some, it means an activist cin-

ema that seeks to intervene in current social and political campaigns; for others, it takes the form of a more reflective, even poetic, approach. The rise of the World Wide Web is certainly a crucial component. For some commentators, the Web clears the way for a new democratic space through which new forms of political film may reach an audience in ways that were hitherto unavailable. For others, however, these same cultural and technological developments have generated the need for a different kind of political cinema that distinguishes itself from the Internet's tendency to offer instant analysis and promote sensory overload by instead addressing political issues in a more nuanced and complex fashion.

What is also apparent, however, is that these options need not, and should not, constitute a simple "either/or." One of the weaknesses of an earlier round of debates about political cinema was the way in which polemicists often set up stark oppositions between disparate approaches to filmmaking (documentary versus fiction, realism versus modernism, third cinema versus counter cinema, Costa-Gavras versus Godard). There is not, however, and never has been, one "correct" path to political cinema. Instead, filmmakers have adopted (and adapted) a range of methods according to the political and industrial circumstances in which they have found themselves. In this respect, the form chosen by political films not only varies according to the issues to be addressed, and the stories to be told, but also reflects specific social and political situations and modes of production and distribution.

For nearly forty-five years, *Cineaste* has also avoided formulating monolithic notions of political cinema. Since the magazine's inception, we have been sympathetically disposed toward work that challenges received ideas and assumptions. Yet we have never simply championed films because of their good intentions. Despite the many obstacles preventing political films from being distributed and screened theatrically, the contributors to our Critical Symposium, despite coming from various backgrounds and adhering to a host of cinematic traditions, all affirm the appeal of a filmmaking practice that is both artistically and politically challenging. As we confront a world plagued by an ongoing economic crisis, environmental devastation, and political uncertainty, we will continue to encourage the inventive, adventurous spirit embodied by Rocha and his cinematic descendants.—**The Editors**

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Manufactured and Printed in
the United States of America

Cineaste (ISSN 0009-7004) is published quarterly at 243 Fifth Avenue, Suite 706, New York, 10016, phone (212) 366-5720, web address www.cineaste.com, e-mail cineaste@cineaste.com. Subscription address: P.O. Box 2242, New York, NY 10009-8917. All articles represent views of their authors and not necessarily those of the editors. Copyright © 2011 by *Cineaste* Publishers, Inc. Indexed in *International Index to Film/Television Periodicals*, *Art Index* and *Film Literature Index*. For permission to photocopy material from *Cineaste*, write Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923, phone (978) 750-8400, info@copyright.com, www.copyright.com. Microfilm editions of *Cineaste* are available from Bell & Howell Information and Learning, 300 North Zeeb Rd., Ann Arbor, MI 48106. A full-text edition of *Cineaste* is available online from ProQuest Information and Learning, www.il.proquest.com. This issue published in December 2011. Publication of *Cineaste* is made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency.