

# A Brief History of Radical Film Collectives from the 1960s to the 80s: Interview with Federico Rossin on the Retrospective ‘United We Stand, Divided We Fall’

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David Phelps

## ABSTRACT

Taking as a point of departure the film programme ‘United We Stand, Divided We Fall’ (curated by Federico Rossin, Doclisboa, 2012), this essay addresses collective film-making. In a conversation, the author and the film curator argue that the history of collective film-making is understudied at the moment and that it is a broad field of research that should be more extensively considered by film historians and researchers. Rossin suggests that collective film-making usually emerges in periods of economic and social crisis, and comments on some of its particularities, such as the ideological relationships established between the people in front and behind the camera. According to Rossin, collective film-making can enable us to recuperate a strong and profound belief in the real, since film is not only a machine to produce dreams, but also a strong medium to comprehend and analyse reality through enquiry. Furthermore the author analyses some of the theoretical concepts of collective film-making, focusing on the work of Jean Rouch and his way of filming rituals, and identifying two poles of collective film-making: exorcism and possession films. The author also distinguishes between two kinds of collective film-making: one that aims to erase the differences between its participants in favour of a common position and a propagandistic tone, and another one that seeks to promote and make visible the differences amongst its participants, facilitating discussion and debate.

## KEYWORDS

Collective film, political film, Auteur theory, documentary, camera, ritual, ideology, Jean Rouch, possession film, exorcism film.

**I wonder if we could start by sketching out a rough history of collective cinema.**

Most of these films are now almost orphan films: I mean that very few people have studied the collective cinema phenomenon deeply. There's not a canon, there's a virgin landscape for film historians and researchers. So we have to draw this history as archaeologists and archivists. But this is only the first step. If we study the case, we find that there's a completely hidden history, and its roots are placed at the very beginning of XX century: there's the recently rediscovered case of Armand Guerra and his *Cinéma du Peuple* (1913-14). Between the twenties and the thirties we find the Prokino collective in Japan (Proletarian Film League of Japan, 1929-34), and later we have the experience of *Film-train* conducted by Aleksandr Medvedkin (1933-34) in Soviet Union and Workers Film and Photo League (1930-34), *Nykino* (1935-37) and *Frontier Film Group* (1936-42) in US. I see so many connections between the films I put in the selection and these experiences of collectivist cinema. First of all we must notice that all these collectives were born during an economic and social crisis; then we understand that these films have been made and so must be considered both as aesthetic objects and political tools; finally we must consider this history as an open path still living: in this very moment and in the last decade, collectivist cinema is born from its ashes, in Argentina, Spain, Greece, etc.

**More generally, how would these films fit into a history of cinema, particularly in wake of auteur theory and many of its proponents—Godard, Rivette, Rohmer—declaring themselves anti-auteurs in the 70s?**

It's a very delicate topic. I think that the death of the auteur theory is just simply the reverse of the auteur theory: it's just narcissism in denial, a broken mirror which hide the face, though the face is still there. I love the Dziga Vertov Group's films but they are very different films from the ones made by *Newsreel* or *Cinema Action*. I don't see a clear link between this act

of declaring him/herself anti-auteur and the act of founding a film collective. Every group and collective has its own history: and we must not be naïf. In every collective the question of power was the core. It's the human being. These young filmmakers renounced their immediate *jouissance* in order to serve a political ideal, but their desire to make personal films was strong, and many of them made personal films after their collectivist experience. Almost every film has a different story: in a case there was a desire coming from one member, in another case it was another who found the story and the way to tell it, etc. For me it's not important to find out now who made that particular film and who was hidden behind a collective name. It's the gesture of putting together their skills, thoughts, hopes, all of which touches me a lot. And it's not only a refusal of auteur theory: it's a positive act.

**More particularly, I wonder if we can posit a relationship of the actors to the filmmakers particular to collective cinema—and maybe a kind of defining feature. Throughout so many of these movies, the actors seem to take over the movie not only by determining how they act, but often by being the filmmakers themselves...**

For some of the films this is true: I think that making a collective film sometimes makes the film structure much open to the reality. Sometimes the actors just used the filmmakers to have a stronger political mean, a powerful film-weapon: on the other hand the filmmakers wanted to serve an ideal. But I think that in the best cases there has been always an exchange between actors and filmmakers. The burning life of both is the very core of collectivist cinema: they wanted to change their life, the present, the cinema itself.

**But is there a danger, in collectivist cinema, that as much as the movies might promote local voices, normally suppressed by mainstream paradigms, they might also stifle these individual voices for the sake of a collective message?**

If we take the example of *El Pueblo se levanta - The Young Lords Film* (The Newsreel Collective, 1971) and *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, Rene Lichtman y John Louis Jr., 1970) we can say that the exchange between the filmmakers and the actors was subtle and multi-level: there's an authoritative voice-over trying to direct the dialogue, but there's a sort of resistance of the actors which used their accents and personal voices. I have tried to put in the selection collectivist films made by people who were able to bear responsibility for both the propaganda message and the people they worked with. The more the film was considered as a weapon, the less it would concern real people: the political imagery is then taking over. We must not idealize collectivist cinema: I have seen many really bad movies, absolutely not interesting from a formal and political point of view. I feel that this problem you underline it's true for the first phase of post May 68 collectivist cinema: in the 70s the films became more and more portraits of singular people, *So that You Can Live* (Cinema Action, 1982) and *A Pas Lentas* (Collectif Cinélutte, 1979) are the best examples.

**I guess it comes down to the age-old question of political documentary, whether collective cinema can offer any sort of propaganda cure, when it has only the tools of reality to work with. So many of the films feature**

**traditional ceremonies and rituals, almost Rouch-like, as if, in these movies, the actors were not only capturing the problems of reality, but offering a performance that is a cure of sorts.**

Ideology is a kind of collective ritual and performance: the more the collectives were capable of absorbing the reality in a dialectical way, the more their films are living objects for us today. The comparison with Rouch is very interesting: the problem is belief. I mean that Rouch really believed in the rituals he was filming, and you can feel this kind of magic in his films. He was not distant from his actors, he was trying to see the invisible with his mechanized eye. It's the same case with the best collectives I have chosen for the retrospective. The post-modern ideology has pushed us to refuse belief, faith, ideals, putting all this in the "old way of thinking". The trap of post-modernism is the end of the reality itself. So the cure we can take from collectivist cinema can be a coming back to a strong and deep belief in the real, in the world, in the people. Cinema is not just a dream machine: it can be a strong mean to understand, analyze and change reality: the formal researches of these films is an open factory in which we can find old but perfectly functioning tools. We have just to polish them, and to adapt them to our present situation.

*This interview was held over email and edited by David Phelps on 23–24 November 2012.*

## Afterword. On Collective Cinema

Le seul film intéressant sur les événements, le seul vraiment fort que j'ai vu (je ne les ai évidemment pas tous vus), c'est celui sur la rentrée des usines WONDER, tourné par des étudiants de l'IDHEC, parce que c'est un film terrifiant, qui fait mal. C'est le seul qui soit un film vraiment révolutionnaire. Peut-être parce que c'est un moment où la réalité se transfigure à tel point qu'elle se met à condenser toute une situation politique en dix minutes d'intensité dramatique folle.

C'est un film fascinant, mais on ne peut dire qu'il soit du tout mobilisateur, ou alors par le réflexe d'horreur et de refus qu'il provoque. Vraiment, je crois que le seul

rôle du cinéma, c'est de déranger, de contredire les idées toutes faites, toutes les idées toutes faites, et plus encore les schémas mentaux qui préexistent à ces idées : faire que le cinéma ne soit plus confortable.

J'aurais de plus en plus tendance à diviser les films en deux : ceux qui sont confortables et ceux qui ne le sont pas ; les premiers sont tous abjects, les autres plus ou moins positifs. Certains films que j'ai vus, sur Flins ou Saint-Nazaire, sont d'un confort désolant : non seulement ils ne changent rien, mais ils rendent le public qui les voit content de lui ; c'est les meetings de "l'Humanité."

Jacques Rivette  
*Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 204, September, 1968

A tangle of contradictions, to be traced if not untied:

Since "collective cinema" might designate any collaboration between a man and his camera, stock, and subject from the Lumières on, the term might yield meaning less as a type of cinema than a type of lens for seeing cinema: a distillation of one component, collectivity, inherent in any movie's grab-bag of hybrid elements, which only becomes refined into a genre of its own when amateur movies turn their perspectives onto themselves—and make their own collective production the subject in front of the camera. In other words, when the lens becomes the subject: but a description that might as well apply to Stan Brakhage or Chuck Jones. For though the "collective film" or "collectivist film" shares with so many "underground" films this sense of attempting to crystallize a single facet of cinematic praxis—the fact of collaborative film production, alternately a microcosm of society and alternative to it—the very term supposes the kind of hybridity that makes nonsense of a pure genre, or of critic's concentrated attempts to slot these movies into preset terms.

So instead the terms and origins have to be invented as if out of thin air. Appropriately, too, since the collective film might just as much engage in an exorcism of historical facts as in a speculative history. One that counts on a reality of discontents, even between the filmmakers, to be mobilized by propaganda into a new utopia.

This Great White Man's notion of history, marshaled to happy heights by the farsighted ideas of progressive individuals, might even seem to double as a view of cinema for the Great White Man who, one could argue, marshaled collective cinema into the era of Rivette and Godard: Jean Rouch. Impulsively, one hopes, Rouch would despise such claims: he did not originate "collective cinema" (the critics, if not the Lumières, would do that); he would evince little concern for The Great White Man except as His Image was to be refracted into the self-images of so many countrymen; and he would develop a cinema of rites and rituals in direct opposition to all notions of individual agency, on the part of subject and filmmaker both, to determine any part of the action other than its articulation. And yet that articulation is everything in Rouch—the ability of the camera to weave its subjects

into the unified choreography of a conjuring dance, and in doing so, to seem to conjure the characters' motions even as it follows them. And here, a type of modern cinema, belonging as much to Cassavetes as to Rivette and as to the collectivist film, is articulated as well: one in which the film's production is openly inscribed on-screen (documentary time, located within the shot) against the story being staged as a rite and ritual (narrative time, located as much in the montage). Tradition, in Rouch, bridges these two timeframes, as we watch one articulation of an eternal rite. But Rouch's films are also last records of traditions about to be destroyed.

The flip-flops continue. For the collective films programmed by Federico Rossin in «United We Stand, Divided We Fall»<sup>2</sup> are so outwardly opposed to the status quo of society's ceremonies of violence that they might at first seem like Rouch inverted—films that are alternately revolutionary or militant (incompatible terms), but in any case devoted to challenging the traditions of the age. Yet as Rivette suggests of Jacques Villemont's *La reprise du travail aux usines Wonder* (*The Resumption of Work at the Wonder Factories*, Jacques Villemont, 1968), it is the workers' own enactment of their *mise-en-scène* in a 10-minute, single-shot debate in the middle of the street, that makes the film so revolutionary. In other words, it's the workers' own efforts to stage the hierarchies and traditions of their workplace they despise in the street, which is revolutionary: not only because they fail in fully grafting workplace politics onto the road, but also because they partly succeed, and the film enables them to stage this demonstration of the same politics they all agree they oppose. This is revolutionary *mise-en-scène* because one just glimpses, in this hardening crystallization of a decade's politics into ten minutes of open-air improvisations, the possibilities for how history might be staged—or rather, how history might have been staged instead. A speculative history, like Rouch's after all, whose politics is not that of its subjects but of the *mise-en-scène* of the ways they might come into contact, discussion, and debate with each other.

Rossin, below, talks about Rouch trying to tap into the invisible through his ceremonies, to believe in the action as a force of its own of which the camera is only the final performer: a beautiful thing. But Rouch is no formalist, and neither his ceremonies nor his filmmaking is remotely ossified—for both are responses to the energy at a particular time and place, both ceremonial forms for finding the chaos of nature and civilization alike. For all their treatments of traditions, their violence is an act of the here-and-now, a vortex warping historical energies into the madness of a moment at which all relations become undone. And the same might be said of so many collectivist films. In some sense, the concerns of Rouch's cinema, possession and exorcism both, provide the terms of his filmmaking as well, the ability to give life to physical vessels like his camera-eye, even through his camera-eye—and just as quickly to take it away. Possession: Rouch's eye is one that can possess the people on-screen not simply by leading them on in a dance, but also by performing the dance alongside them for a viewer to live vicariously decades later; not simply their acts, but the entire vision of the film is conjured by Rouch's eye (traces of Brakhage). Exorcism: yet it's also an eye that exorcise some deeper, violent force within whatever it encounters on-screen (and this only by imposing a steady ritual). The important thing, of course, is that the camera must be possessed by these rituals as much as it “possesses” the people by having them enact the most modern ritual: making a movie.

For Rouch, perhaps more than any other filmmaker, understand the singular power of the collectivist cinema to mediate, quite beautifully, two dangerous poles: the ossification of a social ritual on one hand (possession), and the release of a mob's energy against it on the other (exorcism). And we live in an age now in which these two poles must constantly be opposed: the desperate violence of Haneke, Breillat, or suburban teens on *Jackass* (Johnny Knoxville, Spike Jonze, Jeff Tremaine, 2000-2002), vying for the attention of shock-value across youtube and the media, videotaping themselves constantly,

seems a logical response to the NSA's bland, invisible surveillance, designed to make its citizens conform to the protocol of politically correct rituals with the unconscious knowledge that they're being filmed at all moments. For, as another collectivist film, *Red Squad* (Howard Blatt, Steven Fischler, Joel Sucher, 1972) makes clear, citizens will always be expected to conform to the image, to reenact the images they've seen for the camera, so that the NSA can ensure that citizens are following the "correct," operational image. Each action becomes protocol for the next; the NSA insists that everything can be seen except the NSA itself.

*Red Squad* turns this total possession into a kind of exorcism with an empty center: the amateur filmmakers decide to film the law-enforcers who are filming them, and, as in Oshima's *The Man Who Left His Will on Film* (*Tôkyô sensô sengo hima*, 1970), the only transgressive act being caught by the camera is of course the filmmaking itself. A fascinating movie, since the Red Squad's fear of being filmed only reveals the utter violence of what they're doing in the first place: filmmaking is a way to ensure that subjects act "properly," and of course this is why the Red Squad doesn't want to be filmed—ensuring that everyone else acts according to a code of behavior would excuse them from having to follow one as well. The comedy is of the amateur communists, with zero resources, who end up parodying the entire "home movie" operation of the police in an attempt to inhibit the inhibitors. The Rouchian model already seems impossible in this calculus of operations to be eternally-repeated: for while Rouch insists on participating in the action, the Red Squad's cameras are necessarily invisible in order to leave its subjects—any activist in New York, and possibly anyone at all—in constant paranoia.

Here we can ask if the collectivist film might risk stifling individual voices as much as promote them. And we might, perhaps, make a distinction between two types of collectivist films, without any idea which side *Red Squad*, as a kind of

surveillance state *Duck Amuck* (*Looney Tunes' Merrie Melodies: Duck Amuck*, Chuck Jones, 1953), might fall on: 1) one that seeks to erase the differences between its members in favor of a propagandistic position and pitch, and 2) one that seeks to promote differences by facilitating discussion and debate among members. This isn't quite as simple a distinction as "cinema of the cure" vs "cinema of the diagnosis," since both are critical against the status quo. *Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm Collective, 1972), for example, takes an obvious stance against the abuse of soldiers in Vietnam, until that stance comes under question in a hallway debate near the end of the film: suddenly it's not enough to get evidence without offering criticism of why things have happened and how they have to be improved. So the film starts from a point of collective agreement before turning into a collective debate about what the film should be about.

The important point is that both types of collective film—"possession" and "exorcism" if one likes—assume the camera's position to stage the action. The suggestion here—both in the films and Rossin's programming—is that the collectivist documentary might entail a collapse not only of individual authorship, but authorship altogether, so that the subjects of the film, whether or not they're holding the camera, obligate and determine the filmmaking. Regional films like *Finally Got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, Rene Lichtman and John Louis Jr., 1970) and *El Pueblo Se Levanta* (The Newsreel Collective, 1971) entangle themselves between these modes: both seem to want to be propaganda bulletins about local problems that would erase the participation of individuals in the project. But the authorial, authoritative voice-over is always written in a kind of street dialect, and told by members with local accents: sometimes the testimony of locals within the film becomes the voice-over of the film itself. So a much more interesting process is enabled—instead of a standardized, correct authorial position, the films only offer us the voices of individuals from a precise circumstance, place and time.

Let's articulate one more fault line along which this simplified distinction of the cinema of possession and the cinema of exorcism operates: the blurry line between collective films regulating action according to a party line, and enabling actions that might not have been possible without the camera, against the system of oppression. Some of the later, grassroots films, like *So That You Can Live*, (Cinema Action, 1982), seem even to have retreated to some kind of left-wing conservatism: attempts to work within the system to reform it and recover the home values that capitalism has sold them but rarely provided.

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Ultimately, almost all the collectivist films leave us with a sense of History far beyond the local politics they meant to engage: of course it's history, like Rouch's camera, that inscribes roles and registers them, and one goes nowhere with the philosophical truism that men write history and history writes the place of men. The collective film itself becomes a phenomenon, symptomatic of its time even as it meant to provide a revolutionary exception to the rule. The positioning of the collectivist film as a historical

product of the 60s-80s seems obvious enough politically: the era of radicalism and splinter cells, now incorporated into arthouse iconography by Olivier Assayas, in which collaborative politics could be seen as a reaction (and action) against a hopelessly hegemonic state, rather than a miniature attempt to mirror and work within the democratic system (the kind of attempts seen, sometimes disastrously, in the films of Frederick Wiseman).

But it's another question how the collectivist film would fit in a history of cinema. We could obviously draw a parallel history: that this was the point at which the collaborative, democratic movements of the Lumieres, French avant-gardists, Soviet activists, etc, had given way to a kind of Hollywood hegemony, which could only be opposed by amateurs and regional filmmakers. But it's also the point when auteur theory has taken hold among many of the same critics opposed to flavorless, factory-made Hollywood items, and "authorship" has become the surest standard of quality that individual voices can speak against the status quo (as well as through it).

And here I'd rather give way to Rossin as another voice. ●

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**Films included in the programme 'United We Stand, Divided We Fall', curated by Federico Rossin (Dolisboa, October, 2012):**

*La Reprise du Travail aux Usines Wonder* (Jacques Villemont, 1968)  
*Classe de Lutte* (Groupe Medvedkine de Besançon, 1969)  
*À pas lentes* (Collectif Cinélutte, 1979)  
*Vladimir et Rosa* (Groupe Dziga Vertov, 1970)  
*Winter Soldier* (Winterfilm Collective, 1972)  
*Off the Pig* (San Francisco Newsreel, 1968)  
*Finally got the News* (Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, Rene Lichtman and John Louis Jr., 1970)  
*El pueblo se levanta* (The Newsreel Collective, 1971)  
*Red Squad* (Howard Blatt, Steven Fischler, Joel Sucher, 1972)

*Un peuple en marche* (Colectivo cinematográfico de alumnos argelinos, 1963)  
*Caminhos da Liberdade* (Cinequipa, 1974)  
*L'Aggettivo Donna* (Collettivo Femminista di Cinema di Roma, 1971)  
*Women of the Rhondda* (London Women's Film Group, 1973)  
*Maso et Miso vont en Bateau* (Nadja Ringart, Carole Rousopoulos, Delphine Seyrig and Ioana Wieder, 1976)  
*Night Cleaners Part 1* (Berwick Street Collective, 1972-1975)  
*So that you can Live* (Cinema Action, 1982)  
*The Year of the Beaver: a Film about the Modern 'Civilised' State* (Poster Film Collective, 1982)  
*Territoires* (Isaac Julien, 1984)  
*Handsworth Songs* (John Akomfrah, 1986)  
*Vai Viegli Būt Jaunam?* (Juris Podnieks, 1987)

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**DAVID PHELPS**

David Phelps is a writer, translator, and programmer. He serves as an editor-at-large for *Lumière, desistfilm*, the MUBI Notebook, and *La Furia Umana*, for which he co-edited (with Gina Telaroli) *William Wellman: A Dossier*. His short films include *On Spec* and an ongoing *Cinetract* series,

both released online. He works as a private tutor in New York City and is currently engaged in Fritz Lang project and retrospective on the history of Portuguese cinema.

davidpphelps@gmail.com