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French Social Cinema and the Popular Front

Elizabeth Grottle Strebel

On the night of 14 June 1930, at the Vieux Colombier Cinema House on Paris' Left Bank, a twenty-five year old film maker, Jean Vigo, made a compelling appeal for what he described as 'social cinema'.¹ In so doing he was throwing out a direct challenge to the standard commercial film of the day with its calculated avoidance of contemporary social realities. Son of Almyreda, the well-known anarchist and former editor of *Le Bonnet Rouge*,² Vigo envisaged a thought provoking cinema, which would, ultimately, champion the cause of social justice. As he himself testily put it,

To direct ourselves towards a social cinema is quite simply to comment, to make a statement and to evoke some sort of response, other than that of digesting the roast one has just eaten. And thus, we can perhaps avoid the royal spanking which M. Georges Duhamel has publicly administered us.³

The specific genre advocated by the young film maker to accomplish these ends was the social documentary, which was to distinguish itself from the more traditional documentary or newsreel by its overt subjectivity and clearly delineated position.

To illustrate the sort of film he had in mind, Vigo presented his first cinematic endeavour, 'A Propos de Nice' (1929). It was a very low budget film, made solely with the cooperation of Russian cameraman Boris Kaufman. In this film an elegant young woman poised in a beach

chair is cinematically stripped stark naked to symbolize Nice devoid of its pretences. The Nice of wealth and luxury, big hotels and casinos is dramatically contrasted with the Nice of poverty, filth and pitiful street urchins. Central to the film, as to Nice itself, is the annual carnival, with its giant dolls, grotesque with their frozen, artificial smiles. Depicted by Vigo in all its vulgarity and frenzied eroticism, the carnival procession becomes the death march of a decadent culture through juxtaposition with shots of a graveyard filled with equally garish tombstones. According to Vigo, the Nice Carnival represented 'the last convulsions of a society that renders us nauseous and transforms us into proponents of a revolutionary solution.'⁴

Social, economic and political conditions, however, were not yet ripe for Jean Vigo's radical new ideas regarding French cinema in the early thirties:

As a rule, rebels are not popular and in the motion picture industry, probably less so than anywhere else. And Vigo was a rebel on two accounts: against the screen formulas and, even more intensely, against the established order. He used the camera as a weapon, not as an anaesthetic.⁵

Because Vigo's films were seen as a revolutionary challenge to both the status quo of the film industry and, more generally, to society as a whole, they were rigorously suppressed in three ways: the refusal by distributors to give 'A Propos de Nice' a commercial running: the outright ban by the Censorship Commission of 'Zéro de Conduite' (1933)⁶; and the producers' mutilation of 'L'Atalante' (1934) by cuts and other alterations.⁷ Like the rebellious children of 'Zéro de Conduite', Vigo believed that creativity and revolt, art and social action were indivisible.⁸ And like the itinerant nomads, the young canal boat captain who, although pursuing a marginal existence on the bounds of established society, is forced to conform to the demands of his navigation company, so too was Vigo, the rebel, forced ultimately to comply with certain exigencies of the cinema industry.

Vigo's career illustrates just how difficult it was to realize the objective of a socially conscious and critical French cinema during the early thirties, given the socio-economic and political context. Politically motivated film censorship⁹, and the domination of film production by the big conglomerates of Pathé and Gaumont tended to inhibit the development of such a cinema.¹⁰ Yet the thwarting of as great a talent as Vigo only served to heighten the fervour of those who rejected the dictates of the established order of the film industry, and, given the chance, this could easily be translated into social and political activism

against a broader established order. Although Vigo's untimely death in 1934 prevented him from experiencing it, such an opportunity was forthcoming with the dramatic social, economic and political changes of the mid-thirties and the rise of the Popular Front.

First of the changes to effect French film making was the depression. With the novelty of talking pictures worn off and the economy struggling under the depression, the cinema industry was ill-equipped to weather the storm. Capital investment in film making fell dramatically from 70,259,000 francs in 1933 to 20,034,000 in 1934 to 17,327,000 francs in 1935.¹¹ There were numerous bankruptcies and liquidations at this time; in 1934 the collapse of 88 film enterprises resulted in an overall deficit of 162,200,000 francs.¹² By far the most dramatic declarations of insolvency between 1934 and 1936 were those of Pathé and Gaumont.¹³ The vacuum created by their withdrawal from film production was readily filled by smaller, independent motion picture companies stimulated to try their hand at film making by the reduction of admission prices¹⁴ the lowering of taxes on cinema receipts,¹⁵ and the interest of the government in the plight of the motion picture industry.¹⁶ By 1935, 115 films were produced by 83 different production companies and no one company produced more than five motion pictures.¹⁷ These figures should be contrasted with those of 1932 when out of a total French production of 157 films, 20 films were made by Gaumont and 23 by Pathé.¹⁸

The radical restructuring of the film industry in the mid-thirties had a marked impact on the type of film which was produced. The break-up of the conglomerates meant an end to the mass-produced film of standard plot and thematic content. The new producers tended to be less rooted to tradition-bound concepts of public preference and of commercial viability than Pathé or Gaumont which had been producing films for twenty-five years. This was but one important factor facilitating the rise of social cinema as Vigo had envisaged it.

Another factor was the rising social and political consciousness on the part of certain cinema directors, actors, cameramen and film critics, reflecting the more general politicization in France in the mid-thirties. With the rise of Adolf Hitler and the pro-fascist Concorde riots of 6 February 1934, which had dramatically underscored the close connection between domestic and international fascism, the French Left felt a particular urgency to counter fascist ideology. By 1934, the Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR), founded by a group of communist intellectuals resolved to forge a united front of the intelligentsia against fascism, could count among

its members film critics Léon Moussinac, Georges Sadoul,¹⁹ Georges Altman, Pierre Unik, and film directors Jean Lods, Man Ray, Jean Vigo and Luis Bunuel.²⁰

Another indication of the new social and political consciousness on the part of certain members of the cinema world was an informed society known as the Groupe Octobre.²¹ Its principal aim was the promotion of a proletarian cinema and theatre. Jacques Prévert, former surrealist, and poet of the Left Bank Cafés was its chief animator; he was later responsible for a number of movie scripts which reflected a social consciousness.²² Other members of the group included assistant-director Jean Paul Dreyfus (Le Chanois), assistant-director and photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, composer Jo Kosma, set designer Alexander Trauner, actors Jacques Brunius, Guy Decombe, Marcel Duhamel, Sylvain Itkine, Pierre Prévert and actress Sylvia Bataille. The Groupe Octobre was in fact affiliated with a larger organization known as the Fédération du Théâtre Ouvrier, which was sponsored by the Communist Party. Very often it was called upon for artistic presentations at political rallies. In addition, as early as 1932, it had made its own film, 'L'Affaire est dans le Sac', a rare instance to that date of co-operative film making.

The growth of political consciousness was further reflected in the cinematic endeavours of the political parties and trade unions of the French Left, which, in 1935 and 1936, for the first time took an active interest in the cinema as a vehicle for promoting their ideological cause.

The initiative in the Socialist Party came from Marceau Pivert, who had the idea of capturing on film the demonstration at the Wall of the Communards on 19 May 1935²³ and the historic march of 14 July 1935, in which Socialists and Communists officially joined forces in a Popular Front. The relative success of these films led to the creation of the Cinematographic Service of the Socialist Federation of the Seine under Pivert's direction.²⁴ Between 1935 and 1937 this Service made thirteen films, 20 to 35 minutes long, which were rented to Socialist groups throughout France for projection at Party meetings. These films were frequently advertised in *Le Populaire*,

You can render your propaganda more lively, more attractive, more efficacious, by adding a cinematographic hour to your meetings and rallies. You can, even in the smallest communities, thanks to the utilization of talking pictures, in reduced format, have your projections in a café, school-yard or barn without any danger of fire since the films are nonflammable.²⁵

Some of the films, such as the first two mentioned, were raw newsreels, others like 'Le Retour à la Vie', which dealt with such topics as the paralyzing effect of hoarding on the economy and the need for public works projects, were of a documentary nature.²⁶ Although technically primitive, these low budget films provide valuable insight into Socialist Party propaganda priorities. Undoubtedly their most prominent feature was an emphasis on the omnipresent fascist danger and the need for support of the Popular Front as an insurance against this threat.

In addition to producing films, the Cinematographic Service maintained a circulating library of some thirty-five commercial films, which it had selected on the basis of their social content.²⁷ Many of the films chosen for the library focused directly on contemporary social and economic problems, most notably the depression and its impact on the working class. For example, Slatan Dudow's 'Kuhle Wampe' (1932), based on a film script by Berthold Brecht, portrays a community of unemployed workers driven to despair by the economic crisis. Also, King Vidor's 'Our Daily Bread' (1934) about a young couple who inherit a farm which has been ruined by the depression and try to make it viable again on a cooperatively run basis. The Cinematographic Service exhibited a marked preference for films showing the positive role of working-class solidarity and socialism in resolving social problems. Also featured in the library were G.W. Pabst's 'Kameradschaft' (1931)²⁸ with its stress on working-class solidarity across national boundaries and Jean Renoir's 'Le Crime de M. Lange' (1935) about a workers' co-operative which rises against a corrupt exploiter named Batala.

Another theme which was prominent in this film library was international pacifism, as seen by the choice of G.W. Pabst's 'Vier von der Infanterie' (1930), Lewis Milestone's 'All Quiet on the Western Front' (1930), Victor Trivas' 'Niemandland' (1931) and Leontine Sagan's 'Mädchen in Uniform' (1931). It is significant that, at a time when the entire French Left was beginning to re-evaluate the concept of pacifism in the light of the international fascist threat, such films could only serve to reinforce traditional socialist pacifism.²³ And it is important to note that these films remained in circulation until the outbreak of war in 1939.

The Communist Party's cinematographic activities were, at the time, even more extensive than those of the Socialist party, and it was able to

produce a number of feature films specifically for its electoral campaigns. The first of these films was 'La Vie est à Nous', financed by some 50 kilos of coins amounting to approximately 70,000 francs collected at a mass Party meeting. The film was shot in February-March 1936 for the forthcoming April elections. Although it first appeared without credits, the perfect testimony to the collective nature of the production, those who did collaborate on the film had impressive credentials.³¹ Louis Aragon had the idea of entrusting the overall direction of the film to Jean Renoir. Although Renoir was basically not a 'political person', he was in sympathy with the general social and political thrust of the Popular Front and he consented to direct the film. Communist Party writer and intellectual Paul Vaillant-Couturier worked with Renoir on the script and Jean-Paul Dreyfus (Le Chanois), André Zwoboda, Jacques Becker, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Maurice Linée, Marc Maurette, Jacques Brunius and Pierre Unik served as assistant-directors. This unusually high number of assistant-directors was again a function of the film's collective nature.

'La Vie est à Nous' represented an unprecedented effort in French cinema history both in terms of the complexity and sophistication of its propaganda appeal.³² The film is a true product of its historical context, focusing directly on fascism, unemployment, unequal distribution of wealth, poverty, the need for old-age pensions. It is an engaged documentary in the sense that Vigo had envisaged emphasizing montage³³ and political commentary, and blending documentary and fictional elements. Incorporated into the film are Jean Eiffel's caricature of the infamous '200 families', which according to leftist ideology ruled France, documentary footage of the pro-fascist leagues, featuring a goose stepping Colonel de la Rocque, and the Concorde riots of 6 February 1934, shots of Hitler haranguing the masses and newsreel excerpts of the Ethiopian War. Subsequently there are three fictional vignettes concerning an old worker from Gennevilliers who has just been laid off without pension after twenty-three years service, a farmer who faces foreclosure because of his inability to pay taxes, and an unemployed worker who is driven to joining the bread lines.

One of the central themes of the film is deprivation amidst plenty. This is dramatically introduced by slow disclosure at the beginning of the film: a succession of shots of fields of grain, forests, hydro-electric plants, factories, Paris with its haute couture and luxury products, illustrate the great richness of France, while a commentary almost as in a travelogue provides the appropriate, impressive

statistics. Presently, the camera reveals the commentary to be coming from an elementary school teacher lecturing his young pupils. The tragic irony of the scene is that while France indeed may be wealthy in terms of its resources, these poorest of poor children are only perplexed by the obvious social contradictions.

The message of the film is that such blatant contradictions can only be resolved by collective action via the Communist Party. The propaganda becomes more and more direct, culminating in the speeches of Party leaders Paul Vaillant-Couturier, Renaud Jean, Martha Desrumeaux, Marcel Cachin, Marcel Gitton, Jacques Duclos and Maurice Thorez. But more effective than this blatant propaganda was the film's broad-based appeal, through its vignettes, to the young and old, to both industrial and agricultural workers, to migrant labourers, to artists, to those who cherished intellectual freedom and to those who felt the need for group solidarity. To all of them 'La Vie est à Nous', as the title suggests, held out the possibility of transforming objective social conditions through collective action.

The message of collective action was soon to be realized with the electoral victory of the Popular Front. Indeed, the newly politicized French proletariat couldn't even wait for the Popular Front to take office for its grievances to be redressed, and one week after the elections, a wave of sit-down strikes and factory take-overs swept the country.³⁴ June 1936 saw numerous motion picture studios occupied by striking workers, including GM Films Pathé-Cinéma, L'Alliance, Eclair-Triage, Cinématographique, Warner Brothers, Les Films Osso, Fox Film, Metro-Goldwyn, Hakim, Sedif and Universal.³⁵ Because these strikes coincided with the severe financial crisis within the motion picture industry, film artists and technicians had more leverage when it came to drawing up social legislation to meet their grievances. As Charles Le Fraper, editor of the trade journal *Le Courrier Cinématographique*, bemoaned, 'By what singular aberration has this moment been chosen for us to promise and especially to accord these social gains at the very height of the depression.'³⁶ Thus, French film artists and technicians, who had been quick to affiliate themselves with the major trade union of the French Left, the CGT, were able to win their own 'Contrat Collectif' along the lines established by the Matignon Agreements of 7 June 1936.

The provisions of the 'Contrat Collectif' of the film industry reveal the extent to which film workers were dissatisfied with their working conditions and the degree to which they had become politicized.³⁷ Prior to the signing of this contract, under the pressure of rigid

production schedules, the shooting of a film often extended far into the night, only to resume early the next morning. Article 15 of the contract specified that work would be eliminated on Sundays, holidays and nights, while daily working-hours would be regulated in accordance with the delegates representing studio personnel, cameramen, set designers and production crew. For those sequences which of necessity had to be filmed at night, workers were guaranteed a rest of twelve hours before and after the shooting.³⁸ Among the other stipulations on working conditions was the provision of meals which were to be the complete responsibility of the producer and could not fall under 20 francs and on travel arrangements which were to be first class.³⁹

In addition to ameliorating working conditions for film workers, the 'Contrat Collectif' gave new autonomy to the director vis à vis the producer: 'When the film director is the author of the film script, he will be in complete charge of the film and director of editing.'⁴⁰ In addition, the director was to have absolute freedom of choice in selecting his team of technical collaborators. Furthermore, the script, once accepted, was not to be modified except by the contracting workers' delegates. All of these innovations were significant in terms of the evolution of French social cinema. The film director, potentially less directly and strongly tied to big financial interests, would be at greater liberty to express himself sociopolitically. Secondly, having the freedom to select his own collaborators, a director would be able to choose those with similar views.

The Popular Front Government itself gave a certain amount of support to the growing social consciousness amongst film makers and to the burgeoning movement for social cinema. Léo Lagrange, head of the newly created Ministry of Sport and Leisure Activities, called for a needed transformation in the objectives of the cinema as a medium.

Until now in France, no attempt has been made to utilize the cinema as a vehicle for transcending class or as a means to education. Children, workers, peasants thus absorb, without choice and under the most deplorable conditions, an irregular assortment of films, many of which are inspired by the basest of sentiments. Therefore, the cinema, which could be a marvellous instrument of popular culture if it was used with such purpose, is alas, and why deny it, one of the counter-currents of this culture. My wish is that the cinema, excellent activity of leisure time, become instrumental in the intellectual and moral education of the masses.⁴¹

According to Lagrange, films of high artistic calibre should not be relegated to specialized art theatres where they would only be seen by an intellectual elite, but a concentrated effort must be made to dis-

tribute such films to working-class cinemas. To accomplish his objectives, Lagrange set out to incorporate the cinema under his vast programme for the organization of popular leisure.⁴² Because of the short duration of the Popular Front Government, however, his endeavours vis à vis the cinema were, of necessity, limited.

It is thus to the trade union movement that one must turn to find more of an impetus behind French social cinema and more specifically to Ciné-Liberté, a co-operative film group sponsored by the CGT. Ciné-Liberté was a direct outgrowth of Les Amis du Cinéma Indépendent (ACI), founded in 1934 by cinema technicians of the CGT, who sought to encourage an alternative to that cinema promoted by big finance capital. By 1936, social conditions were particularly favourable to the growth of the ACI as the ranks of the CGT swelled from one to five million in a matter of a few months. Ciné-Liberté in effect superseded the ACI as ciné-clubs formed around workers, syndicates, notably the Builders Syndicate, the Metallurgist Syndicate and the Railway Workers Syndicate. Other Ciné-Liberté groups met in cafés or bistros in working-class districts: in Paris at the Brasserie du Cercle on Boulevard St. Germain, at a Café in Place Vauban, and at the Brasserie Dorée on the Boulevard Barbès in the XVIII^{ième}.⁴³ Branches also sprang up in Champigny, Nîmes, Tunis, Lyons, Grenoble, Antibes, Rouen, Le Mans, Lille, and Nantes⁴⁴ and within a few months membership had reached 100,000.⁴⁵

Although trade-union members continued to be the mainstay of the organization, membership was in fact open to anyone for five francs, and at half-price for the unemployed. A number of well-known figures from the cinema world were key participants. Film director Jean Renoir was President of the Administrative Council of Ciné-Liberté and the versatile actor Gaston Modot, who often collaborated with Renoir, served as its Secretary General. The Council was made up of assistant directors Jacques Becker and Jean-Paul Dreyfus (Le Chanois), production director André Zwoboda and cameramen Jacques Lamarre and Raymond Burbonnet.

The objectives of Ciné-Liberté were both to fight against cinema censorship, especially that which was politically motivated, and to present a radical alternative to the standard commercial film of the day. Politically motivated censorship was a particularly burning issue at the time, because the Sarraut Government had formally forbidden the

public projection of 'La Vie est à Nous'. Indeed many Ciné-Liberté members became politicized by this censorship. Renoir, Becker, Dreyfus, Modot and Zwoboda had all worked on the film and were incensed that the fruit of their labours should be banned. One of the first acts of Ciné-Liberté was to organize private showings of 'La Vie est à Nous' for its members. The organization also published a monthly journal from May 1936 called *Ciné-Liberté*, which attempted to raise consciousness on issues of film censorship, in addition to keeping members informed of the organization's activities.⁴⁶ It is significant to note, however, that despite all this activity, the Popular Front Government maintained the ban on the Communist Party's documentary.⁴⁷

Ciné-Liberté's second aim could only be realized through independent film production. Thus, it became officially constituted as a workers' co-operative for the production of films, based at 12 Rue de Navarin, Paris.⁴⁸ Ciné-Liberté's first films were a series of documentaries on the strikes of June 1936. Its cameramen went around to a number of factories which had been occupied by workers, recording daily activities of the strikers as they ate, slept and amused themselves at their assembly lines. Then with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, a Ciné-Liberté crew was off to the front to shoot footage which would hopefully enlist support for the Spanish Republican forces.

In 1937 and 1938 Ciné-Liberté made three films in conjunction with workers' syndicates of the CGT, 'Les Métallous', 'Les Bâtisseurs' and 'Sur les Routes d'Acier'. Although copies of these films have disappeared, their approach can be reconstructed through contemporaneous film reviews. 'Sur les Routes d'Acier', made for the Metallurgist Syndicate and directed by the Russian cinematographer Boris Peskine, focused on the daily lives of railwayworkers, while stressing the importance of the railway network to France.⁴⁹ Apparently, as well as constituting a fine documentary, it could also claim a high degree of cinematic artistry. According to Germaine Decoris, film critic of *La Lumière*,

To show the regions of France criss-crossed by railway lines, the conditions in which the box cars full of commodities are directed to their appropriate lines, the arrival of a train from the station at the Gare de l'Est, the orphans from the Railway Workers' Orphanage playing in the courtyard, the workers placing joint-plates, wouldn't one conceive of these as the most ordinary of themes, the most mundane activities? For most of us yes, but not for Peskine . . . Through Peskine we are witness to a life of rhythms . . . earth, air, eye, muscle, wheel, steel, blend into one universal movement . . . For Peskine the cinema is above all shadow and light.⁵⁰

'Les Bâtisseurs' was another film of high artistic calibre with music by Arthur Honeger, graphics by Griffoul, and the overall direction by Jean Epstein, a prominent French film maker of the silent era. The film's strong ideological message was that those who throughout history have been the actual buildings of great palaces, monuments and cathedrals have themselves most often been housed in the poorest of abodes.⁵¹

In February 1937, it was announced that the Committee for the Coordination of Film, made up of representatives from the CGT and Ciné-Liberté would sponsor a film on the French Revolution.⁵² 'La Marseillaise' would be a cooperative venture, drawing upon the CGT for actors and film technicians, while the overall direction of the film was to be entrusted to Jean Renoir. It was Renoir's idea to finance the film by popular subscription. Tickets would be sold to the public at two francs apiece, to be reimbursed upon release of the film. By August 1937, some 350,000 tickets had been purchased and the co-operative venture was well on its way to success.⁵³

The choice of the French Revolution as subject matter for this film was clearly grounded in the social and political realities of the day. By 1937, enthusiasm for the Popular Front had already begun to wane. Although wages had been increased through the Matignon Agreements of June 1936, prices had spiralled and the net gain to the average working man had been wiped out. Moreover, many bitter feelings had been created over the Popular Front Government's decision not to intervene in the Spanish Civil War. It was hoped that a historical documentary on the French Revolution could help perpetuate and where necessary rekindle the fervour of May and June 1936.

One of the central objectives in Renoir's approach to 'La Marseillaise', as he himself revealed in an article published in *Regards*, was to negate the stereotype of the revolutionary, propagated by counter-revolutionary propaganda, as a 'sort of ravenous, hirsute, dirty, ragged bandit.'⁵⁴ In the article, he cited a number of slanderous descriptions of the Marseillais 500 by eighteenth century royalist historians such as one Peltier who wrote,

The Revolution of 10 August was the product of a band of a hundred conspiring brigands who after having unsuccessfully tried to arouse the nation for a year through their writings and speeches, having declared war to serve their ends to arouse passions, called upon Maltese, Genoese, Piedmontese, upon some 250 Italians under the auspices of Petion and Santerre, who suddenly became masters of the General Assembly . . .⁵⁵

To realise his objective, Renoir carefully undertook to research the social backgrounds of the 500 members of the Marseilles Battalion of 1792 in the archives of the city of Marseilles. By analysing the archival material, he was able to disprove the charges which had been levelled against them.

To answer the charge that the Marseillais were foreigners, particularly Italians, he examined the list of names and ranks of the volunteers and found that their nationality was unquestionably French.⁵⁶ To establish them as honourable citizens, he offered as evidence the conditions under which they were admitted to the Battalion, for in order to join, it was necessary to prove that one had sufficient financial resources to support one's family while serving as a volunteer, to have never been indicted before a court of justice, and to have had some sort of military background. Finally, by examining the professional backgrounds of the volunteers, Renoir showed that far from being social outcasts or misfits, the band of *Fédérés* were former officers from the royal army, city magistrates, stone-masons, carpenters and agricultural workers.⁵⁷ In defending the revolutionaries of 1792 and in proving them to be rational, respectable human beings, Renoir was making an indirect defence of the French left of 1937, which was continuously under attack from the French right. As he himself put it, 'Let us hope that by frequenting this friendly troop, our revolutionary comrades of today will be consoled in the face of calumnies, which a certain press continues to thrust upon them.'⁵⁸

Complementary to the essentially political aspect of 'La Marseillaise' is the striking social realism of the film. Renoir's revolutionaries eat, sleep, have amorous escapades, watch a performance at a shadow theatre and develop sore feet. Even Louis XVI is seen in the rather mundane acts of trying to get his wig on straight and savouring Provençal tomatoes. A worker from Paris' 19th arrondissement, A. Loubel, wrote in a letter to *Regards*, 'It would have been easy to use symbols . . . Jean Renoir has given us real men.'⁵⁹ What Renoir wanted to avoid at all costs was stereotyping. In 'La Marseillaise', all characters are treated with respect and understanding, as a function of their particular social backgrounds. The aristocrats are portrayed as objectively and as sympathetically as the revolutionaries. The king is neither diabolical nor stupid and bungling as history has often portrayed him, but rather a sensitive and reasonably intelligent monarch who was swept along by historical events. Because of this, 'La Marseillaise' bears more of the imprint of Jean Renoir than does 'La Vie est à Nous' where, under the

more direct influence of the Communist Party, enemies are identified and battle lines are clearly drawn.

The reflection of Popular Front consciousness can be found not only with regard to Party and trade union films but also in relation to the commercial cinema of the period. Beginning in 1935, a number of commercial films seemed to exhibit a greater social awareness and a greater social concern. They began to document contemporary social and political issues like unemployment ('La Belle Equipe', 1936), migrant workers ('Toni', 1935), exploitation and class conflict ('Le Crime de M. Lange', 1935), pacifism and antisemitism ('La Grande Illusion', 1937), the plight of the aged ('La Fin du Jour', 1939), social distintegration ('La Règle du Jeu', 1939), and they chose to focus on the working class, a long neglected subject of cinematographic concern.

The influence of Popular Front consciousness on commercial cinema was limited. Indeed those films that did reflect the spirit of the Popular Front are essentially the products of three film directors, Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné and Julien Duvivier,⁶⁰ and their technical teams, largely drawn from the old Groupe Octobre.⁶¹ On the other hand, a number of these films had a high degree of popular success. Renoir's 'La Grande Illusion' in fact topped the list in terms of box office receipts of all films projected in France in 1937.⁶² Nonetheless, the fact that social cinema represented but a small percentage of the total production, underscores the extent to which the cinema industry continued to be controlled by big finance capital whose interests were antithetical to those of the Popular Front. The ephemeral existence of the movement for social cinema correspondingly testified to the ephemeral duration of the political movement.

One of the most striking features of social cinema was its treatment of the working class. Previously, the working man had been very much relegated to the background in French cinema. As film critic Georges Altman wrote in 1931 in his now classic indictment of commercial French cinema, *Ça C'est du Cinéma*,

The working man?
 He opens doors
 He carries the baggage
 He says 'Madame is served'
 He says 'Thank you for the tip'
 He shouts 'Vive la France' in the newsreels.⁶³

Now the working man became more central to the cinematographic statement, as seen with the printers and laundresses in 'Le Crime de M. Lange' the sandblaster of 'Le Jour Se Lève', the railway worker of 'La Bête Humaine', the Spanish and Italian migrant workers of 'Toni', the unemployed workers of 'La Belle Equipe', the miners of 'Grisou' (1938) and the mechanic of 'La Grande Illusion'. In a sense a veritable 'proletarian hero' had emerged, incarnated by the omnipresent Jean Gabin.

Very often, social cinema's view of the worker was highly romanticized, justly meriting the epithet most film historians ascribe to the movement, namely 'poetic realism'. Nowhere is this more evident than in Carné's 'Le jour Se Lève' (1939). Here Jean Gabin plays the sandblaster, François, who murders for the love of a woman and finally commits suicide after a barricaded siege against the police. Already, the plot has all the adventure and drama of a Hollywood film, hardly the plight of the average worker. The first glimpse of the sandblasting factory is a long shot of smoke stacks silhouetted graphically against an ever brightening morning sky. As the camera penetrates the factory, an attempt is made to depict the poor state of working conditions. The noise from the blasting is deafening, as it manages even to drown out the music of Maurice Jaubert, and a cloud of sand saturates the working area. François is continually making references to the unhealthy environment. All the same, one is undoubtedly just as conscious of the visual beauty of the sparks emanating from his blasting torch. François' girlfriend in the film is also a member of the proletariat; she works for a greenhouse and delivers flowers, once again rather satisfying from the graphic point of view.

The language of the proletarian hero in this and in all of Carné's films of the thirties is that of the poet-philosopher, most understandably so since the poet Jacques Prévert collaborated on nearly all of his film scripts of this period. At one point in 'Le Jour Se Lève' François is contemplating the crowd which has gathered to watch the drama unfolding as he holds out against the police, and he shouts,

A murderer! I'm a murderer . . . A murderer! They're not so rare you know, murderers. You probably pass one in the street every day . . . everyone kills. Everyone kills a little bit . . . but gently . . . so you don't notice . . . It's like sand . . . The sand gets inside you! Right inside! But if you walk quickly you don't notice it . . .

Here indeed is the voice of the poet-philosopher.

In terms of the language of the proletarian hero and in fact of all his

characters, Renoir was able to achieve a much greater degree of realism. But Renoir's aim was to capture not only an authentic language, but a whole social milieu. To do this, he would take his actors and, together, they would live in and experience the social environments which would be the focus of a particular film. They lived amongst printing presses for 'Le Crime de M. Lange', around the railway yards for 'La Bête Humaine' and out in the wild and barren hunt country of the Sologne for 'La Règle du Jeu', so that they would all understand these milieus thoroughly. As Gaston Modot, who acted in several of Renoir's films described the experience,

The actor undergoes an authentic transformation, a complete mutation. Soon he knows how to operate a printing press, is capable of driving a Pacific locomotive, knows how to set traps or conduct the hunt. He speaks the jargon of his profession. His gestures are those of a specialist, not simulated.⁶⁴

Renoir's grasp of the workingman's milieu, which derived from this approach and also undoubtedly from his involvement with the trade unionists of Ciné-Liberté, is perhaps best epitomized by the opening scene from 'La Bête Humaine' (1938). Here Renoir places a camera at the very front of the engine to achieve a cineramic view of the track and tunnel network on the railway line from Paris to Le Havre. It is a railwayman's perspective and has the quality of pure documentary.

French social cinema's character portrait of the worker was generally a very positive, wholesome one. Both in 'Le Jour Se Lève' and in 'La Bête Humaine' there are shots of the hero drinking milk, this to counter the popular myth of the proletarian as a habitual wino.⁶⁵ The railway worker in 'La Bête Humaine' goes off in his free time to visit his aging mother in a three piece suit, while the hero of Duvivier's 'La Belle Equipe' has the savoir faire to give grandmother a whirl around the dance floor at the opening of the pleasure resort. Paradoxically, however, no less than five proletarian heroes are driven to commit murder, notably in 'Toni', 'Le Crime de M. Lange', 'La Bête Humaine', 'Le Jour Se Lève', and 'Quai des Brumes'. Only in the case of 'Le Crime de M. Lange' is the crime tied directly to a social environment of exploitation, but in all of the films, such supreme anti-social behaviour is indicative of a profound sense of social alienation.

Perhaps one of the most revealing characteristics of the proletarian hero was his political impotence. In the majority of instances, the proletarian hero had no political recourse whatsoever. In the two films where workers were able to set up cooperative enterprises, 'Le Crime de M. Lange' and 'La Belle Equipe', the end result is collapse

and failure.⁶⁶

The unemployed workers of Duvivier's 'La Belle Equipe' do not transform their social environment through political activism, but by a pure stroke of luck when they win a lottery ticket which enables them to set up a holiday resort on the Marne on a cooperative basis. There is very little evolution beyond René Clair's same quixotic solution of a lottery ticket in 'La Million' (1931). From the outset, the 'Belle Equipe' co-operative is beset by countless difficulties. One of the men is a Spanish refugee and is forced to leave France for political reasons, a storm threatens to ruin all of their hard labour, and two of the men quarrel bitterly over a woman. Symbolically, even the French Tricolor which the workers have planted on the roof, blows to the ground. How reflective of the Popular Front itself, catapulted to victory by the narrow electoral victory of May 1936, as dramatic and unprecedented a win as a lottery ticket, plagued by numerous problems from its outset, most notably the question of the Spanish Civil War and the constant bickering and infighting between the various member parties of the tenuous Front coalition.

The present study has attempted to show the extent to which social, economic and political circumstances can influence the process of film making and also, as a direct consequence, film content and aesthetics. All films reflect their times to some degree, from the fashions currently à la mode to the Weltanschauung of the financiers of a given film production. However, the degree to which French social cinema mirrored its times is particularly striking. The parallels between the growth of the cinematographic movement and its corresponding socio-political movement, the Popular Front, are extremely close. Both found their origins in the economic crisis of the mid-thirties and in the rising tide of domestic and international fascism, both were supported by an expanding trade union base, both were caught up in a wave of idealism that led to the romanticization of the working class, both were highly defensive of revolutionary ideals, both were characterized by their political impotence and ephemeral existence.

The close parallels in this particular case study must be seen firstly as a function of the specific group of individuals, directors and their teams, who were responsible for social cinema and those immediate economic, social and political conditions which influenced them. This group was eager to take up Vigo's challenge of a thought provoking, 'engaged' cinema but was thwarted in the early thirties, as he had been. Because the battle to realize a more socially conscious cinema was in effect a microcosm of the larger struggle for social justice in

society as a whole, this group of film makers became progressively politicized, as they came to realize that their own aspirations were congruent with those of the Popular Front. This politicization is evident from their participation in the Groupe Octobre, the AEAR, Ciné-Liberté and Socialist and Communist Party film making. It was further reflected in the thematic content of the films they made.

The second reason why French social cinema was so representative of its times was its collective orientation. The cinema is inherently a collective popular art form, and yet this collective nature has generally been submerged under the hierarchical dictates of the producer. Under the Popular Front, new forms of film making were promoted: cooperative ventures, finance by popular subscription, with an emphasis on full team participation. This collective orientation made environmental influences all the more important as French cinema, for a brief moment in its history, became an expression of group and political consciousness.

NOTES

I would like to express my thanks to Messieurs Jordan, Chevailler and most especially Conservateur Freddy Buache of the Cinémathèque Suisse for facilitating the screening of many relevant films. I am also grateful for the assistance of M. Bernard Ferran of Pathé Cinéma, M. Louis Daguin, M. Talpain, Mme Georges Sadoul, Mme Léon Moussinac, the late Jean Lods and Henri Langlois, and M. JeanPaul Le Chanois.

1. The text of Vigo's discourse, which was entitled 'Vers un Cinéma Social' has been reproduced in *Ciné-Club*, no. 5, (February 1949), 1.

2. The best biography of Vigo and one of the finest social biographies of any film maker is Paulo Emilio Salès Gomès, *Jean Vigo* (Paris 1957). Also see Pierre l'Herminier, *Jean Vigo* (Editions Seghers 1967).

3. Jean Vigo, 'Vers un Cinéma Social' in *Ciné-Club*, no. 5. Vigo's remarks refer to author Georges Duhamel's violent attack against the cinema in his *Scènes de la Vie Future* published in 1930. Duhamel had written that the cinema was a form of entertainment 'which demands no effort, presupposes no chain of ideas, asks no questions, fails to seriously attack any problem, illuminates no desire, gives no enlightenment, excites no hope other than the ridiculous one of one day becoming a star in Hollywood'.

4. *Ibid.*

5. These were the words of Vigo's friends Vladimir Pozner cited by Siegfried

Kracauer in 'Jean Vigo' in *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. II, no. 3, April 1947 (the article was first published in the *National Zeitung*, 1 February 1940). Kracauer is known chiefly for his highly significant pioneering work, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton 1947), which is one of the earliest attempts to integrate a cinematographic movement with the broader socio-political context, and which constitutes a basic source of inspiration for the present study.

6. According to Jean Bancal, a redactor at the Ministry of the Interior in the twenties and early thirties and author of the informative, first-hand study of French film censorship *La Censure Cinématographique*, (Paris 1934), 'Zéro de Conduite' was banned because it 'attacked the prestige of the French educational system.' It was among the 11 out of 583 films projected before the Censorship Commission in 1933 that was banned in its entirety. See the cited work 250-51.

7. The title was changed to 'Le Chaland qui Passe' and a hit tune of the same name was interpolated throughout the film. The total effect was saccharine and ruinous to Vigo's intentions.

8. One of the most cinematically creative scenes in the entire film is one in which the children prepare for their rebellion. It takes place at night in the school dormitory and opens with a clamorous fight between all the boys. Pillows fly about and break open to let loose a blizzard of feathers. Then, with Vigo's masterful touch, the camera slows down. Feathers drift delicately through the air. Boys leap and float as in a dream. One of them is raised in a chair, borne in procession like some great religious leader or Buddha. The proctor Bec de Gaz, miraculously still asleep, is raised in his bed, a crucified oppressor. The slow motion cameras and suggestive music of Maurice Jaubert bring the film to its high point artistically, surrealism at its best.

9. Politically motivated censorship in France was sparked by the introduction of the new Soviet films beginning with the 'Battleship Potemkin' in 1926. Throughout the late twenties and thirties, however, it was also directed at those films deemed injurious to domestic social and political institutions. In this regard, a valuable monograph of film censorship relating to the Stavisky scandal is Rémy Pithon's 'Le Scandale Stavisky et la Censure du Cinéma: L'Affaire de la Banque Nemo (1934)' in *Etudes de Lettres*, (Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Lausanne, April-June 1975), 29-52.

10. For an examination of these factors see E.G. Strebel, *French Social Cinema of the Nineteen Thirties; A Cinematographic Expression of Popular Front Consciousness* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, June 1973).

11. *Le Tout Cinéma*, 1936-37, 359. This is a major statistical yearbook of the French film industry.

12. *Ibid.*, 359.

13. See Paul Léglièze, *Histoire de la Politique du Cinéma Français, Le Cinéma et la III^e République*, (Paris 1970), 105-13 for an analysis of the crisis of the French film industry.

14. Pierre Autre, 'The French Film' in *International Motion Picture Almanac*, 1936-1937, 1112-16.

15. Details of the Decree of 25 July 1935 concerning this reduced taxation can be found in *Le Tout Cinéma* 1936-37, 274-75.

16. For example, a Parliamentary Committee on the cinema was set up at the end of 1936 by Jean-Michel Renaitour, Deputy for the Yonne. See *Ou Va le*

Cinéma Français? Enquête Menée par M. Jean-Michel Renaitour, (Paris 1937).

17. Autre, op. cit.

18. Computed from *Le Tout Cinéma 1932*, publicity pages for Gaumont, and *La Technique Cinématographique*, July-August 1934, 185-87.

19. Georges Sadoul served as film critic for the AEAR journal *Commune*.

20. See 'Ceux qui ont choisi. Contre le fascisme en Allemagne. Contre l'impérialisme français', a brochure published by the AEAR in 1933, cited by Nicole Racine in 'L'Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires, La Revue "Commune" et la Lutte Idéologique Contre le Fascisme' in *Le Mouvement Sociale*, January-March 1966, 29-47.

21. For a description of the *Groupe Octobre* by one of its members see Jean Paul Le Chanois, 'De la Rue Dauphine au Studio' in *Ciné-Club*, no. 4, January 1949.

22. These included scripts for Renoir's 'Le Crime de M. Lange' (1935) and for Carné's 'Jenny' (1936), 'Quai de Brumes' (1938) and 'Le Jour se Lève' (1939).

23. A copy of the film 'Le Mur des Fédérés' exists at the Cinémathèque Suisse in Lausanne.

24. Details of the Cinematographic Service of the Federation of the Seine were procured from the private papers of M. Talpain. Also advertised in *Le Populaire*, 16 May 1937.

26. The complete list of titles, giving an indication of thematic content, included 'La Commune', 'Les Bastilles 1789-1935', 'L'attentat contre Léon Blum', 'Le Deuxième Paris Roubaix Travaille 1936 et Réception de Salengro, Lagrange et Lebas à Roubaix', 'Pourquoi la Crise?' 'Anniversaire de la Mort de Jaurès (Juillet 1936)', 'Boulogne Socialiste', 'Le Retour à la Vie', 'L'Inoubliable Manifestation de Vélodrome du 7 Juin 1936', '14 Juillet 1936', 'Les Faucons Rouges chez Eux', 'La Vie et la Mort de Roger Salengro'. Descriptions of these films can be found in the above-mentioned brochure 'Cinéma Socialiste'. The last six films were licensed by the Minister of National Education and Fine Arts and could be shown publicly. The Socialist Party, however, did not take advantage of the right to project its films publicly because state taxes for this were so high.

27. A complete list of these films is available in the brochure: 'Grands Films Procurés Par le Service Cinématographique' from the private papers of M. Talpain.

28. The preponderance of German films distributed by the French Socialist Party is interesting in that it constitutes a possible link between French Social Cinema and the school of German Realist Cinema which flourished in the twenties and early thirties.

29. The classic study of the important reversal of traditional positions of both the French right and left on the question of pacifism is Charles A. Micaud's *The French Right and Nazi Germany 1933-1939*, (Durham, N.C., 1943).

30. Georges Sadoul Collection, Renoir Folder: Brochure: 'L'Avant-Scène Cinéma Présenté en exclusivité au Studio Gît le Coeur 29/36'.

31. Credits for 'La Vie est à Nous' have since been established in *L'Avant Scène*, January 1970, 51, after the film had just been 'rediscovered' in the Moscow film archives.

32. The most thorough analysis of this film as political propaganda is the collectively written text 'La Vie est à Nous, film militant' in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 218, March 1970, 44-51.

33. Vigo had acknowledged the importance of montage and thus his debt

to Sergei Eisenstein in his address 'Vers un Cinéma Social'.

34. See Georges Lefranc, Juin 36 'L'Explosion Sociale', (Paris 1966). Of special interest is the section 'Les Grèves vues de côte des grévistes', 181-225.

35. *Le Courrier Cinématographique*, 6 and 13 June 1936, 3.

36. Charles Le Fraper, 'Au Seuil du Paradis' in *Le Courrier Cinématographique*, 15 September 1936, 3. The facetious title of the article is indicative of industry's attitude towards the strikes and the workers' demands.

37. *Contrat Collectif des Techniciens et Spécialistes de la Production du Film*, (Paris: 1936), from the private papers of film director Louis Daquin.

38. *Ibid.*, 7.

39. *Ibid.*, 10.

40. *Ibid.*, 16.

41. Léo Lagrange, 'Le Cinéma et les Loisirs', *La Critique Cinématographique*, 5 December 1936, 3.

42. For an outline and analysis of the programme see Juliette Pary, 'Le Temps des Loisirs, Une Grande Enquête Reportage' in *Regards*, 14 October 1937, 19.

43. *Ciné-Liberté*, no. 5, 1 November 1936, 2. This was the short-lived journal of the organization of which unfortunately few copies have survived.

44. *Ibid.*, 2.

45. Denis Marion, ed., *Le Cinéma Par Ceux Qui Le Font*, (Paris 1949), 387.

46. Editors in chief were Jean Renoir, script writer Henri Jeanson and *l'Humanité* film critic Léon Moussinac.

47. *Ciné-Liberté*, no. 5, 1 November 1936 contained a renewed plea by film critic Georges Charensol to allow the film to circulate: 'Nouvelle lettre ouverte et non-censurée à M. Jean Zay.'

48. *Petites Affiches*, 14 August 1936.

49. It is quite possible that this film served as an inspiration for Renoir's 'La Bête Humaine', which similarly documents the railway worker's milieu.

50. Germaine Decoris, 'Sur les Routes d'Acier' in *La Lumière*, 12 November 1937. *La Lumière* was a major literary and artistic review of the French left in the nineteen thirties.

51. For a critique of this film see Georges Sadoul, 'Les Bâtisseurs' in *Regards*, 24 February 1938, 16.

52. *Regards*, 15 February 1937, 17.

53. Georges Sadoul, 'Jean Renoir parle de la Marseillaise' in *Regards*, 19 August 1937, 18.

54. Jean Renoir, 'Honneur aux Marseillais' in *Regards*, 10 February 1938, 3-5. This article is an excellent source for ascertaining the director's motivation in making the film.

55. *Ibid.*, 4.

56. The parallel with the mid-thirties is striking. A virulent campaign was waged in the rightist press against Popular Front leader Léon Blum. The charge was made that he was an alien element, because he was Jewish and therefore somehow un-French.

57. *Op. cit.*, 5.

58. *Ibid.*, 5.

59. 'Le Public Juge "La Marseillaise"' in *Regards*, 10 March 1938, 16.

60. A rare exception is the little known film 'Grisou' whose alternative title

'Les Hommes Sans Soleil' is indicative of its social thrust. This film, first released in Paris on 12 May 1938, directed by Maurice de Canonge and based on a play by Pierre Brasseur, focuses on the plight of the miners of Lens.

61. In the case of Jean Renoir, these Groupe Octobre team members included actors Jacques Brunius, Guy Decomble, Marcel Duhamel, Sylvain Itkine, actress Sylvia Bataille, assistant-directors Henri Cartier-Bresson and Jean-Paul Dreyfus, composer Jo Kosma and scriptwriter Jacques Prévert. In the case of Marcel Carné, they included composer Jo Kosma, scriptwriter Jacques Prévert, actor Marcel Duhamel and actress Sylvia Bataille and also set designer Alexandre Trauner and actor Pierre Prévert.

62. La Cinématographie Française, 25 March 1938. The film's overwhelming success with the general public was complemented by a parallel success with the critics, as it won both the prize for the best foreign film in New York and the best artistic work at the Venice Biennale of 1937.

63. Georges Altman, *Ça C'est du Cinéma*, (Paris 1931), 48.

64. Gaston Modot, 'Jean Renoir Vu Par un Acteur' in *Ciné-Club*, no. 6, 8.

65. Prévert's original script for 'Le Jour Se Lève', in a scene that was not incorporated into the final version, called for a woman in the crowd to verbalize this myth by shouting, 'these workmen nowadays think they can do anything they like . . . they drink, they get drunk, and they commit these dreadful crimes', cited in *Le Jour Se Lève, A Film by Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert*, English trans. Dinah Brooke and Nicola Hayden, (New York 1970), 111.

66. With both 'Le Crime de M. Lange' and 'La Belle Equipe', the collapse of the co-operative reflected the director's original intentions. In both cases, however, alternative endings were shot, on the urging of the producer, in which the co-operate ultimately succeeded. These 'happy endings' were shown in working-class districts while the original version was projected to theatre audiences on the Champs Elysées. For further information on the dual endings of 'Le Belle Equipe' see *Premier Plan*, no. 50, 1968.