

Introduction: *Cinéma Engagé*: Activist Filmmaking in French and Francophone Contexts

Van Kelly
University of Kansas

My co-editor, Rosemarie Scullion, remarked that the essays in this volume divide rather clearly into two groups: one that responds to public protest and militant intellectual commitment to sociopolitical causes, which might be labeled “Sartrian,” and another where activism is pursued in less overt, more individualistic ways that discreetly explore social identity, ethnicity, and gender. The title we have chosen reflects this transition, or bridge, and is intended to highlight the special issue as both a retrospective and a prospectus. A retrospective precisely because the expression “cinéma engagé” evokes Jean-Paul Sartre’s post-World War II plunge into political and social militancy, as characterized by his multipart novel *Les chemins de la liberté* (*The Roads of Freedom*, 1945, 1949) but more explicitly presented in fall 1945 in the first issue of his review, *Les temps modernes* (*Modern Times*) and in a public lecture at the Sorbonne. The lecture was published by Nagel as *L’existentialisme est un humanisme* (*Existentialism is a Humanism*, 1946) and was soon followed by a manifesto of writerly existential political engagement, *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* (*What is Literature?*). At the same time, our issue is a prospectus, and here we follow in Sartre’s steps, too, since he conceived of the literary work as a call to action, an appeal to the freedom and generosity of the Other: committed literature engages the reader in an imperfect, conflictual fictional universe, so that he or she will feel impelled to militate against injustices in the everyday world.¹ Sartre’s stand in favor of *engagement* became something of a benchmark for progressive social or political activism by writers, poets, filmmakers, and other creative artists: human nature is not a predefined essence, it is a project constructed by the individual, who in choosing a mode of life proposes it as a model for humanity, implying his or her own commitment not just to an egotistical self-crafting but to a broader liberation of humanity as well.² The notion that the intellectual, the artist, the writer, the director has an obligation to leave the ivory tower to become involved gained credibility from Sartre’s constant presence *en situation*—that is, his interventions in the sociopolitical causes of his day, both on the streets and in the

editorial committee and columns of *Les temps modernes* from 1945 through the aftermath of 1968.

Sartre's philosophy of commitment, while undoubtedly a defining episode of French intellectual activism, fits into a much larger tradition that has cinematic avatars, two of which I discuss in my article on pacifist revisions of World War I, namely Abel Gance's silent and sound versions of *J'accuse!* (*That They May Live*, 1919, 1938) and Bertrand Tavernier's more recent *La vie et rien d'autre* (*Life and Nothing But*, 1989). While Tavernier's retrospective, seventy years after the Treaty of Versailles, adopts a humane antiwar profile that has admirable if less grandiose aims than Sartre's activism, Gance's cinematography has a militant, even proselytizing dimension, centered on the desire to make WWI the last of wars. Gance's title evokes, among other things, the novelist Emile Zola's intervention in the Dreyfus Affair, the pamphlet *J'accuse!*, which first appeared on the front page of the newspaper *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898. Zola's polemical commitment indelibly marked twentieth-century French political culture and changed the intellectual's profile from that of an esthete to one of a militant, in this case left wing, since most French conservatives supported the army's attempts to scapegoat Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus on trumped up charges of dealing military secrets to the Germans. This scandal was a media event, but it also coincided with the first spectacular commercial success of cinema, the Lumière brothers' projection of ten short films to a paying public at the Grand Café in Paris on 28 December 1895.³ One of the first short films by a contemporary of the Lumière brothers, Georges Méliès, was indeed *L'affaire Dreyfus* (1899), arguably an early attempt at *cinéma engagé*.⁴

To what degree is the Sartrian model of *littérature engagée*—the committed literature exemplified in his plays *Les mains sales* (*Dirty Hands*, 1948) or *Le diable et le bon dieu* (*The Devil and the Good Lord*, 1951)⁵—directly applicable to film, which has its own exigencies (distinct from print media) and its own circuits of artistic and commercial distribution? Three articles on decolonization and postcolonial film, by Rosemarie Scullion, Mary Jean Green, and Dina Sherzer, illustrate the diversity of paths that an activist or militant cinema may take. As Scullion makes clear in her article on a work by director Paul Carpita, the prevalent and heavy censorship during French decolonization raises the issue of just how politically committed cinema should and can be. Carpita's *Le rendez-vous des quais* (*The Rendezvous on the Docks*), which the French government seized in 1955 before it could be shown, is based on a 1949 work stoppage by left-wing union dockers in Marseille. The workers often had to disboard the caskets of military casualties from the French war in Vietnam (1946–1954), and, profoundly shocked, they refused in this instance to embark outgoing reinforcements and arms on the carrier *Le Pasteur*. While protesting against French colonialism, Carpita also contested the class and gender stereotypes of his day by depicting the everyday life of working-class women who “question[ed] the order of things” and who were powerful community activists. Filmmakers like Carpita who deal with important social and political issues resemble Sartre's radically free individuals, responsible for the ideas (or in this case, for the cinema of ideas) that they are compelled to create. An unacceptable silence, or a lack of

pre-existing ethical parameters, is perhaps what pushes the filmmaker to move transgressively beyond *cinéma d'art* into a subtle critique of dominant practices or into outright protest. Along these lines, Dina Sherzer discusses how director Moufida Tlatli, in *Les silences du palais* (*Silences of the Palace*, 1994), positions herself as “postcolonial subject,” Arab, and woman in depicting the road to liberation of Alia, a servant within the household of the Beys, nominal rulers of Tunisia under the French colonial protectorate that came to an end in 1955–1956, the revolutionary period when much of the action in the film takes place. Alia, who eventually left the palace to become a singer, seeks self-expression and a personal liberation in parallel with the Tunisian struggle for political independence. Mary Jean Green poses the dilemmas of self-expression, censorship, and *cinéma engagé* in a different way when she sounds the depths, but also the limits, of an activist African cinema. Directors like David Achkar (*Allah Tantou* [God’s Will], 1991) and Dani Kouyaté (*Keita*, 1995), in order to criticize political abuses in their own country, cultivated traditional allusive means of expression, most especially oral transmission by storytellers, or *griots*, a mode that, instead of offering criticisms openly (and dangerously), is very “participative” and asks the audience to draw for itself the political inferences of the story. Circumstances inflect the nature of one’s activism and often the very possibility of reaching the public. “Cinéma engagé” and “activist filmmaking” are terms that must be redefined for each era and culture; they do not have an eternal definition before the fact.

Sartre’s model of unabashed, militant commitment did not hold sway unabated beyond post-World War II reconstruction, the period known as the Trente Glorieuses, from 1944 to 1974. Leah D. Hewitt’s analysis of the critics’ reactions to Louis Malle’s film *Lacombe Lucien* (1974) highlights the shifting emphasis toward questions of identity, national or otherwise. Malle provocatively re-examined France’s attitudes during the German Occupation, and *Lacombe Lucien* represents what the historian Henry Rousso has called the Vichy syndrome: France’s inability to move beyond the conflicted memories of defeat and resistance that divided the nation after WWII and, in a measure, continue to do so today through the recent trials of collaborators Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon.⁶ Malle shifts our attention away from political reform toward social history and its effect on (or repression within) the collective self-image.

This turn away from overt political militancy toward more diffuse social fields provides the focus of articles by Tom Conley, Mireille Rosello, and Martine Delvaux, who deal with films produced in the 1990s where questions of identity, or what Rosello calls “international and individual exchange,” have supplanted Marxist concepts of class interest and conflict that typified left intellectuals from the Liberation (1944–1945) through the 1970s. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of accumulation and deployment of cultural capital, with the implied parallel between social mastery and the ability to learn and manipulate codes of conduct,⁷ provides a more dynamic model than Zola or Sartre for understanding films of the 1980s and 1990s where competing binaries of high culture/popular culture, *banlieue chaude/beaux quartiers* (economically depressed areas/wealthy neighborhoods), colonizer/colonized, clandestine immigrant/legal citizen,

marginalized/socialized, dominating/dominated, insider/outsider, and asylum/deportation, overlap each other but above all diversify and displace the traditional binary—proletarian/bourgeois—that continued through the 1970s to be a defining point of the Marxist and Sartrian views of the European intellectual.⁸ Today, the cinematic difference makes itself felt less through pointed interventions on policy issues than through an insistence on individual binds and dilemmas that appear (but only on the surface) depoliticized and socially disengaged. A closer look, which the articles in this issue take, reveals an important substratum of political and social thinking, an undercurrent that has simply found a different, less obtrusive outlet than the activism of Gance or Carpita, Zola, or Sartre.

Tom Conley, in discussing Kassowitz's by now classic film on social marginalization in underprivileged French suburbs, *La haine* (*Hate*, 1995), tells the story of a trio of young *banlieusards* (suburban toughs), whose dress reflects the filmic world of American simulated violence and who journey by commuter train from their outlying regions of Paris to the city's historic center. One of them, Vinz, is eventually killed by police, conjugating the tensions that characterize French society today. Conley's analysis (which evokes Villon, Montaigne, and Pascal, among other literary icons) makes it clear that only a multivocal analysis, and not a monologic one relying solely on economic criteria, can account for a conflict between self-image and social organizations that exceed their limits and powers. Mireille Rosello's analysis of Allouache's *Salut cousin!* (*Hello Cousin!*, 1996) deals with another complex problem where the question of personal identity coincides with, but also exceeds, the strictly economic or political: the legacy of immigration from former French North Africa to mainland France and (allusively) the breakdown of the Algerian civil government in the 1990s that has forced so many of that country's journalists and intellectuals, including Allouache, into exile in France.

While several articles (Scullion, Green, Sherzer, Conley, and Rosello) deal with issues that have their origins in French colonization and its aftermath in France itself or in Africa, Martine Delvaux engages in a life writing of her relationship with her mother, in an approach more social and gender-based than ideological in a Sartrian sense. She adopts as her relay point, or prism, a sympathetic critique of the French Canadian film *Tu as crié let me go* (*You Cried Out Let Me Go*, 1997) by the director Anne-Claire Poirier. Poirier's work revolves around the death of her daughter Yanne from the sequels of heroin addiction. As Delvaux indicates, alluding to the philosophies of Derrida and Lévinas, we are responsible for the life and death of the Other. Delvaux spins her own autobiographical directions out of the harmonics of the film, but the continuity with other articles in our special issue is patent, too: political or social identity is in flux whether in Gance, Carpita, Malle, Achkar, Tlatli, Allouache, Kassovitz, or Poirier, and more than one point of reference is needed to stabilize, or direct, the search for self-definition that characterizes most of these pre-, para-, and post-Sartrian films of commitment. The attempt to construct self-identity on the basis of association, polyphony, and inclusion leads the authors in this special issue, and often the filmmakers they have chosen to discuss, to adopt a double focus or metaphorical split screen, like the one we see typographically in Delvaux's article. In this vein, too, are my

discussion of Gance and Tavernier's differing approaches to pacifism; Scullion's view on the conjuncture of anticolonialism with class and gender issues in Carpita's *Le rendez-vous des quais*; Green's juxtaposition of oral transmission and sub-Saharan filmmaking; Hewitt's use of the figure of popular jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt to delve into racial stereotypes in *Lacombe Lucien*; Conley's critique of the French medieval poet Villon's self-imagined death and film antihero Vinz's downfall; Sherzer's comparison of the refined life in the Beylical palace to Proust's two ways; and Allouache's parody, through his characters Mok and Alilo, of La Fontaine's fable of city rat and country cousin, which Rosello comments on so incisively.

Society (constantly in fusion, to use a Sartrian term) searches for new appropriate languages: this is its prospectus, or forward-looking activism. In so doing, moreover, it has an epistemological need, and an ethical obligation, to inventory its past languages: thus the retrospective, or the critical glance. It is not surprising that activist filmmaking, or *cinéma engagé*, would manifest precisely this tension between past models of commitment and current needs for a different relationship between the individual, the social, and the political. The French tradition of intellectual commitment to socio-political reform has its roots in the Enlightenment and the critique which the *philosophes*, Voltaire in their forefront, directed against the "intolerance" and "tyranny" of the *ancien régime*. The abuses and dilemmas that Zola countered, demanding "truth and justice" for Dreyfus, occurred in a very different context (the final word of the title for this special issue)—that is, within a semiological environment on the verge of an audiovisual revolution.⁹ WWII produced another major paradigm shift, and the filmic art of Paul Carpita reflects Sartre's notions of "generosity" toward the Other, in this case the colonized. If Malle's films on WWII France might be assigned the tags of revisionism and nostalgia (the "mode rétro" which *Lacombe Lucien* spurred), the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the return of a less introverted perspective, not without roots precisely in Sartre's call for self-liberation and self-construction though social issues, though less strident and confrontational. Social commitment, *le social*, resurfaces within a politics less militant and more individual, a politics oriented toward smaller communities of interest and constellated around questions of interpersonal identity as much as around the greater collective. We hope that this set of essays will contribute to a discussion of how French and Francophone film has, through its past and recent efforts, increased the medium's ability to address and inflect *now* social and political issues of importance: war and peace, self and other, host and guest, dominant culture and peripheral cultures, to list but a few. Viewing a nomadic film like *Salut cousin!*, or the character Alia's search for postcolonial identity in *Les silences du palais*, or Vinz's society-driven yet self-impelled doom in *La haine*, it is clear that we have perhaps lost the pathos of a cause like the "war to end all wars" that motivated post-WWI integral pacifists and Gance. For the moment at least, the militancy that characterized Carpita and the politicized union members in Marseille during the French war in Vietnam has also fallen silent. What we have instead are other types of activism that, while distinct from Zola's advocacy or Sartre's commitment, have not let the underlying values of justice, respect for otherness, generosity, and liberation fall into abeyance.

In closing, we would like to give our warmest thanks to Richard J. Golsan for the strong support he has lent us throughout the process of bringing this special issue into print. Thanks also to the staff at the *South Central Review* for their painstaking efforts and for the technical expertise they have lent to this project.

NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, in *Situations, II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 96–100, 109–12.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946; rpt. Paris: Nagel, 1970), 21–3, 25–7, 36–7, 67–71.
3. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Histoire du cinéma français* (Paris: Nathan, 1995), 11.
4. See Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992), 38.
5. Sartre also wrote two film scenarios, *Les jeux sont faits* (1947) and *L'engrenage* (1948), centered on political engagement.
6. See Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991).
7. See Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: la critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979); *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991).
8. For Sartre's views in mid- and late 1960s, see his series of lectures, "Les intellectuels," *Situations, VIII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 373–455, where the intellectual is defined as a bourgeois technician of objective knowledge whose task it is, if committed, to turn that knowledge against the unwarranted dominance of his or her own class. The intellectual must constantly battle against his bourgeois particularisms, like racism, that lead to the rejection of otherness. He or she must expose the contradictions, or social and political disinformation, that keeps the working class from living life as an "absolute value" of freedom instead of as an alienation "which crushes us."
9. Emile Zola, *L'affaire Dreyfus. Lettres et entretiens inédits*, ed. Alain Pagès (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1994), 60.