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## Revisoning Europe: the films of John Berger and Alain Tanner

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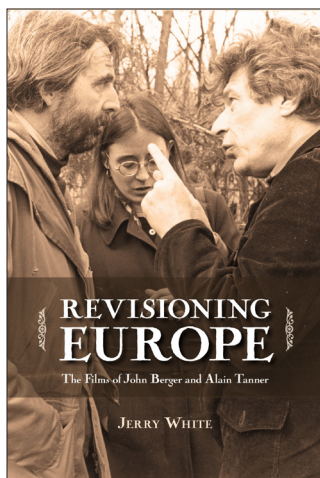
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## REVISIONING EUROPE: THE FILMS OF JOHN BERGER AND ALAIN TANNER

by Jerry White

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## “VERS *LE MILIEU DU MONDE*”

by John Berger

**Translation Note:** This text was originally written in English, but has only appeared in French as “Vers « Le Milieu du monde »” as part of Michel Boujut’s published version of the *Milieu du monde* screenplay (the translator is not given). Basically all of the material in quotes, however, can also be found in Berger’s letters to the film’s actors, specifically to Phillippe Léotard who played Paul). These letters were, as I mentioned in Chapter 3, published in English as “On ‘The Middle of the Earth’” in *Ciné-Tracts* 1 (1977) and in French as “Le milieu du monde” in the Swiss film annual *Cinema* (1974). For this material in quotes I have copied from those letters directly. I give page numbers and descriptions of any variations in the endnotes. Because Berger informed me that he no longer had the original English version of the text, I translated the remainder from the version found in the Boujut book and sent my translation to Berger for editing and revision, which he very generously provided.

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I had gone to the cinema. When I came out it was cold and damp. It was hard to see the cathedral’s tower against the sky.

Between the cathedral and the station in Strasbourg, there are a lot of shabby cafés and bars. I went into one of these places; there was a crow in

a hanging cage, next to the bottles behind the counter. Then I worked on my first ideas for the film *Le Milieu du monde*, and that led me towards an analysis of the nature of passion, something I had jotted a few notes about on a school tablet. My back to the wall and a rum tea on the table before me, I began to read what I had written.

“The beloved is the self’s potential; this remains mysterious, even though it has been written about thousands of times. The self’s own potential for action is to be loved by the beloved again and again. Active and passive become reversible. The love of the beloved ‘completes’ – as though we were talking of a single action instead of two – the love of the lover.”<sup>1</sup>

The waitress sat down to have supper. She had long hair, the colour of straw.

“With all those with whom we are not in love we have too much in common to be in love. Passion is only for the opposite. There is no companionship in passion. But passion can confer the same freedom on both lovers. And their shared experience of this freedom – which is astral and cold – and gives rise to an incomparable tenderness. The dream of desire gives birth to its opposite every time”<sup>2</sup>

A man, whom by all indications comes in every night, enters. He is around 60. Civil servant. He heads for the cage to talk to the crow. He speaks bird language to him.

“The actual modalities of the opposition are not, however, easily calculable from the outside by a third person. What is more they are continually undergoing processes of transformation within the lovers’ shared and subjective relationship. Each new experience, each fresh aspect revealed of the other’s character, makes it necessary to re-define the lines of opposition. This is a continual imaginative process. When it ceases, there is no more passion. Another kind of love may remain.”<sup>3</sup>

I pay the waitress with the straw-coloured hair, I say farewell to the regular who was talking to the crow, and I head for the train station. Starless night.

“To conceive of the loved one as all that the self is not means that together you form a totality. Together you can be anything and everything. This is the promise which passion makes to the imagination. And because of this promise the imagination works tirelessly drawing and re-drawing the lines of opposition.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a twenty-minute wait at the train station. My eyes wander across the big departure hall. Three men find shelter there. One sleeps standing up against the ticket window, his head against a poster of a chateau in the Loire valley. Another, hands on his knees, sleeps sitting on a scale. Its rubber mat is colder than the floor. Even though there is no luggage on the machine it has registered a weight, and because he hasn't bought a ticket, two lights flash, relentlessly indicating a charge of 50 centimes. The happiest of the three men is sitting on the ground, his back pressed up against the only radiator. He is wearing a cap and a bright red jumper. The soles of his shoes have holes the size of eggs. As they sleep, the wind howls.

“Subjectively the lovers incorporate the world into their totality. All the classic images of love poetry bear this out. The poet's love is ‘demonstrated’ by the river, the forest, the sky, the minerals in the earth, the silk worm, the stars, the frog, the owl, the moon.”<sup>5</sup>

The man who was sitting on the ground puts his knees back up against his stomach.

“The aspiration towards such ‘correspondence’ is expressed by poetry, but it is created by passion. Passion aspires to include the world in the act of love. To want to make love in the sea, flying through the sky, in this city, in that field, on sand, with leaves, with salt, with oil, with fruit, in the snow, etc., is not to seek new stimuli, but to express a truth which is inseparable from passion.”<sup>6</sup>

The man in the red cap sits up and pulls himself to his feet. Without a word the man of the chateau takes his place by the radiator. As he heads for the exit, the man in the red cap stops to pull up his pants, which were slouching. He takes off his belt, several shirts, and a jersey. His stomach and torso are tattooed. He signals me to approach. He is fat, and his skin seems surprisingly soft. The tattoos are of couples making love in different positions; the contours are black, and the sexual organs red. On his stomach and waist are outlines of Michelangelo's Last Judgement. Next to his nipple a woman sucks a man, who is leaning back. The tattooed man shivers. Does that surprise you? he says. He doesn't bother to put the coin in his pocket, but closes his hand with it until he is before the café.

“The lover's totality extends, in a different manner, to include the social world. Social action, when it is voluntary, is undertaken for the sake of the beloved. That action, that choice, is inevitably an expression of the lover's love.”<sup>7</sup>

The man in the red cap comes on through the front door of the café. “However, passion is a privilege; an economic and cultural privilege.”

The train enters the station. I settle in a compartment where two men are seated, one on each side of the window. One is young, with a round face and black eyes, and the other is a bit closer to my age. They are both Spanish. We greet each other. Outside, the rain becomes snow. I find a pencil in my pocket; I want to change some of the lines I just wrote.

“Many attitudes are incompatible with passion. But this is not a question of temperament. A cautious man, a mean man, a dishonest woman, a lethargic woman, a cantankerous couple may all be capable of passion. What makes a person refuse passion – or be incapable of pursuing a passion which has already been born, thus transforming it into a mere obsession – is his or her refusal of its totality. But within that totality – as within any – there is the unknown: the unknown which is also conjured up by death, chaos, extremity. If a person has been conditioned or has conditioned himself to treat the unknown as something exterior to himself, against which he must continually take measures and

be on his guard, that person is likely to refuse passion. It is not a question of fearing the unknown. Everyone fears it, it is a question of where it is located. In our culture today most things encourage us to locate it outside ourselves. Even disease is thought of as coming from the outside: which is a necessary, pragmatic truth, but an incomplete one. To locate the unknown as being out there is incompatible with passion. Passion demands that the unknown be recognized as being within.”<sup>8</sup>

The Spaniard my age was playing with a piece of paper ripped from a magazine cover. With his big thumbs and nicotine-stained hands, he tore it up gently. The young man watched with the pride of an impresario. But there were no spectators. Only the small hours of the morning. As he tore up the paper, a silhouette appeared. Head, shoulders, bum, feet. He folded it out, long and large. Then, clearly delighted, he ripped a bit out of the centre of the figure and folded it out again. The paper became a man ten centimetres long. When he opened the folds, a penis stood up. When he closed them, the penis fell. He showed it to me, and I looked. All three of us smiled. He said he could do better than that. Almost painfully, he scrumpled up the paper figure in his hands. Under the little table was an ashtray; he threw the paper into it and let the lid fall down with a smack. Then, arms crossed, he looked out of the train window, deep into the night.

## Notes

- 1 From Berger's letter to Phillippe Léotard: "But this is because the loved one represents the lover's completion. The beloved is the self's potential; The self's own potential for action is to be loved by the beloved again and again. Thus love creates the space for love. The love of the beloved 'completes' – as though we were talking of a single action instead of two – the love of the lover" (17).
- 2 This quote is found verbatim in Berger's letter to Léotard (17), except for the sentence "The dream of desire gives birth to its opposite every time," which is not found there.
- 3 This entire quote is found verbatim in Berger's letter to Léotard (18).
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- 6 This entire quote is found verbatim in Berger's letter to Léotard (18).
- 7 From Berger's letter to Léotard: "The lover's totality extends, in a different manner, to include the social world. Social action, when it is voluntary, is undertaken for the sake of the beloved; not because the results of that action directly affect the beloved; but because that action, that choice, is inevitably an expression of the lover's love; anything that the lover changes in the world pertains to the beloved" (18).
- 8 This is from Berger's letter to Léotard (19), although the *Ciné-Tracts* version includes a few statements that are not found here.