



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

University of Calgary

PRISM: University of Calgary's Digital Repository

University of Calgary Press

University of Calgary Press Open Access Books

2011

Revisoning Europe: the films of John Berger and Alain Tanner

White, Jerry

University of Calgary Press

White, Jerry. "Revisoning Europe: the films of John Berger and Alain Tanner". Series: Cinemas off
centre series; 3, University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, 2011.

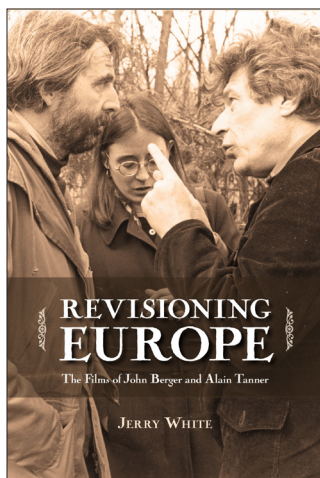
<http://hdl.handle.net/1880/48867>

book

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Attribution Non-Commercial No Derivatives 3.0 Unported

Downloaded from PRISM: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>



REVISIONING EUROPE: THE FILMS OF JOHN BERGER AND ALAIN TANNER

by Jerry White

ISBN 978-1-55238-552-4

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence.

This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY**:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU **MAY NOT**:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

JONAS QUI AURA 25 ANS EN L'AN 2000

“There is a chain of events in this best of all possible worlds; for if you had not been turned out of a beautiful mansion at the popint of a jackboot for the love of Lady Cunégonde, and if you had not been involved in the Inquisition, and had not wandered over America on foot, and had not struck the Baron with your sword, and lost all of those sheep you brought from Eldorado, you would not be here eating candied fruit and pistachios.’

‘That’s true enough,’ said Candide; ‘but we must go and work in the garden.’” – *Candide* (144)¹

“When we talked about *Jonah*,² before the script was written, we described it to ourselves as a film written about individual dreams of transforming the world. The image we used was that we would try to show this dream like a large colored square of silk on the ground, and then air would come in under the silk and blow it up, so it became almost like a tent or a canopy. Then, we said, we must take that tent down, bring it back to earth, at its four corners. In a way, that is the movement, the melody of that film. We continually are seeing a colored hope rise, and then pinned back onto the earth – the earth here functions as a kind of reality principle. This melody, this counterpoint of hope and realism, is what the film is about, but I don’t think that quite adds up to disillusionment.” – John Berger, to Richard Appignanesi (301)

It would be very easy to make both French and American analogies for *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000*, by far the most famous film that Berger and Tanner made together. It's like *The Big Chill*, but in French! It's like an Éric Rohmer talkfest, but with odd accents! It's like *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, but funnier! Such analogies would not be entirely misplaced; like these American films I invoke, *Jonas* is preoccupied with political events of the 1960s that did serve as a generational touchstone across linguistic and national borders. And like Rohmer's films, it reads these sorts of external events mostly through a series of intertwined narratives about friendship, love, failed dreams, and only occasionally addresses politics directly. But I would argue that the film is really better understood in terms of Berger and Tanner's work specifically. Berger told Richard Appignanesi that "in those three films there is a kind of development. It's not easy for me to define that development in very precise terms, but I think that from each film we learned something which we tried to apply to the next. I think the development reached a peak with *Jonah*" (306). Part of what Berger was trying to enunciate there is that all three films hold the interpersonal in a delicate balance with the political. *La Salamandre* was a kind of warm-up for this project, a film that alternated between political and personal engagements quite unpredictably. *Le Milieu du monde* was a studied, rigorous film whose backbone was a narrative about mostly personal issues: it was a complex political meditation submerged beneath a love story. *Jonas* is just the inverse: it is a film about childhood and its relationship to maturity, submerged beneath a story about the aftermath of 1968. *Le Milieu du monde* looks like a drama about sexual passion but it's really a discourse on the ideology of normalization; *Jonas* looks like a discourse on the ideology of revolution but it's really about the evolution of childhood enthusiasm and optimism. This is not to say that one is really a political film and the other really isn't. The real contribution that Berger and Tanner's films have made – right back to *Une Ville à Chandigarh* – is to blur such distinctions, to insist on the interconnected nature of harvest dances and modernist architecture (take *that*, Frank Zappa), a doctor's life as a father and a part of his peasant community, the work of a scientist in nuclear physics and anti-apartheid activism, two cheerfully bohemian writers and their genuinely marginalized subject, an alienated Italian waitress and a politically ambitious Swiss engineer. It can serve as a model for political filmmaking, even though it is missing

the sort of didacticism and ideological purity that so many 70s advocates of political filmmaking – particularly in the United States – believed to be indispensable. Some of the criticism of *Jonas* from the American left seemed to be using something like Saul Landau's *Rules for Radicals* as a starting point and found *Jonas* coming up short. This is a mistake. Rather, the film's antecedents are found, as I have argued is true of Berger and Tanner's work as a whole, in the Enlightenment. Forget Landau. *Jonas*'s roots are in *Candide, ou, l'optimisme*, and in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, ou, de l'éducation*.

The latter is obvious to anyone who has seen the film. *Jonas*'s second sequence is a slow, low-angle tracking shot around the statue of Rousseau in Geneva's old city, with the following lines on the soundtrack: "All of our wisdom consists in servile prejudices. All our practices are only subjugation, impediment, and constraint. Civil man is born, lives, and dies in slavery. At birth he is in swaddling clothes; at his death he is nailed in a coffin. So long as he keeps his human shape, he is enchained by our institutions" (43).³ This is from the first book of *Émile*, a point in the text where Rousseau is holding forth on the virtues that need to be instilled into a child in order to make a fully formed person. This is where Rousseau offers his maxims about action as the essence of life that opens this chapter. It is also where he writes about stoicism and adaptability: a few paragraphs earlier he insists, in a fully pan-European mode, that a child must be able "to brave opulence and poverty, to live, if he has to, in freezing Iceland or on Malta's burning rocks" (42).⁴ These sorts of virtues are the real meat of *Émile*. It is about education in the same way that *Jonas* is about politics; each one is a means to enter into a series of meditations on the fate of individuality in a society that demands conformism. Both *Émile* and *Jonas* are thus in keeping with a broad, humanist project at the same time that they are both sharp works of social criticism. They can both serve as rebukes to criticisms of humanism as somehow evasive or apolitical. Tanner and Berger use *Émile* to indict a capitalist society that stifles the virtues of childhood and adulthood alike, a culture that imposes a bland view of subjectivity that is stripped of all possibilities for both growth and dignified death, for both rationalism and passion. Its vision of society that is thus very close to that of *Le Milieu du monde*, even though its means of address is through humour and satire rather than drama.

Its narrative, though, bears little resemblance to the form of *Émile*, which combines philosophical rumination and imaginary dialogue. In many ways, it is closer to *Candide* and almost feels like a sequel to that work: here's what *Candide*'s characters look like a few years later, after they have decided to tend to their gardens. On one level this is a literal matter. At the centre of *Jonas*'s narrative is an organic farm. In some ways this setting seems to anticipate Berger's "Into Their Labours" trilogy of novels (1979–90), which is set in the peasant farming communities of the French Alps. But there are important differences as well; the most important is that the characters here are not the taciturn, marginalized *paysans* of those later works, but a motley assortment of bohemians and nonconformists, most of them more urban than rural. The farm is owned by the eccentrically environmentalist couple Marguerite (who also has sex with the migrant workers who live in the barracks down the road, charging them twenty francs [Swiss francs and Canadian dollars are roughly equivalent], she says in order to keep things simple) and Marcel (who is slightly obsessed with whales). This is the place that Mathieu, a typesetter who was fired because as a union militant he was at the top of the redundancy list, finds work as a farmhand, and eventually creates a short-lived alternative primary school. It is the place that Marco, a history teacher who is eventually fired because of his unconventional methods, buys his cabbages. It is the site that Max, a disillusioned '68-er who now gets most fulfillment from gambling, decides will be the beachhead in his fight against Geneva-led land speculation and suburbanization. All of these characters are, in the scene with the big dinner at the end of the film, joined by the female characters: Madeleine (a secretary who tips Max off to the speculation deals, who likes to travel through the far east in search of sensual pleasure and who becomes romantically involved with Max), Marie (a supermarket clerk who as a French national must sleep on the other side of the Swiss border and who is eventually imprisoned for intentionally undercharging elderly customers, just after becoming romantically involved with Marco), and Mathilde (married to Mathieu, who works in a factory and announces, at the film's climax, that she is pregnant with a child she is sure is a boy, and who everyone agrees, after the whale-loving Marcel's suggestion, should be named Jonas). On another level, though, *Jonas* is consistent with *Candide*'s more metaphorically expressed interest in the relationship between philosophy and lived experience. Voltaire's novel is about a young

man who, enraptured by ideas like Professor Pangloss's metaphysical-theological cosmology, goes out into the wide world to try to engage with those ideas (*Candide* is a remarkably globalized work, wherein its main character moves, as he recalls at one point, "from Surinam to Bordeaux, from Bordeaux to Paris, from Paris to Dieppe, and from Dieppe to Portsmouth. I have sailed down the coasts of Spain and Portugal. I have crossed the Mediterranean, and have spent several months at Venice" [112]⁵). *Candide* is the prototypical soixante-huitard, someone with a passion for esoteric theorizing who, given the chance to join theory and practice, ends up facing some fairly serious setbacks (the Baron and the Inquisition for *Candide*, the union-busting factory-owners, and the Gaullists for the '68-ers). What to do once such problems have completely derailed your efforts to live out intellectual engagement in Surinam (or Congo), Venice (or Prague), or Paris? Cultivate your garden, as *Candide* says in the novel's famous last line. Grow organic cabbages on the outskirts of Geneva.

Gardening is also quite an important metaphor in *Émile*. Expounding on his desire to respect the natural evolution of the human spirit, Rousseau could be explaining the reason for Jonas's countryside setting when he writes, midway through the second book, that "I want to raise *Emile* in the country far from the rabble of valets – who are, after their masters, the lowest of men – far from the black morals of cities which are covered with a veneer seductive and contagious for children, unlike peasants' vices which, unadorned and in all their coarseness, are more fit to repel than to seduce when there is no advantage in imitating them" (95).⁶ These dark morals include, as we see in *Jonas*, gambling, land speculation, and political apathy. Early in the first book, Rousseau also writes that "Plants are shaped by cultivation, men by education" (38).⁷ This is clearly what Berger and Tanner are eluding to when Mathieu decides to start his alternative school in a greenhouse; he is trying to cultivate these kids, to allow them to grow on their own. In a slightly more playful tone, Rousseau also writes how "Peasant women eat less meat and more vegetables than city women. This vegetable diet appears to be more beneficial than injurious to them and their children" (64),⁸ and in an imaginary discussion (also in the second book) about respecting the property and labour of others, he has his interlocutor Robert remind both himself and *Emile* to "remember that I will go and plough up your beans if you touch my melons" (99).⁹ These passages strongly recall the

goofy hymn that Mathieu sings to the onion, which goes: “The onion is a superb and democratic vegetable. It grows everywhere. It has a tough skin to protect it from the cold.” He goes on to say (in a non-sing-song-y tone) that “It flavours everything. It lasts. You can eat it raw or cooked. It’s sweet and a little bitter too. It kills germs. It’s cheap.” Marco then declares himself aligned to cabbages (“Moi, c’est le chou”). Max, in a dubious tone, echoes the Rousseau readers everywhere when he replies “All manner of virtue in vegetables. Eat your vegetables! And you’re going retire to an old people’s home? And become a kind of leek?” (132)¹⁰

It’s not hard to see why Enlightenment types found the garden metaphor useful; its value to the European left is a trickier matter. Rousseau’s ideas about human beings living most purely when they are closest to the state of nature is a well-worn element of European philosophy: “the closer to his natural condition man has stayed, the smaller is the difference between the faculties and his desires, and consequently the less removed he is from being happy,” Rousseau writes in *Émile* (81).¹¹ A child munching on freshly grown vegetables would seem to be the very essence of the human uncorrupted by any trace of civilization, be it the technology to butcher animals or to butcher entire populations. No doubt the appeal of the image of the garden for the post-’68 left is similar; it is certainly readable as being driven by a desire to withdraw from the ravages of consumerist capitalism once the struggles to overthrow it have failed. But Jim Leach writes that “Although neither *Emile* nor *Jonah* advocates a simple return to nature to escape from social constraints, they are both concerned with the way in which ‘our institutions’ organise our experiences of life from birth to old age” (127), and this is an important point to bear in mind. None of *Jonas*’s characters are fully withdrawn from that society; the machine continues to invade the garden. Marcel and Marguerite may run an organic farm, but Marguerite is always talking about market day and is always concerned with economics. This concern leads her to fire Mathieu because his school takes away too much time from his work on the farm; he winds up working in the city again. Marie’s immigration problems are never solved. The film’s closing image may be a long shot of Jonas in 1980 (as a title card tells us) painting on the farm’s mural, but the shot that directly precedes it is of Max going into a newsstand to buy cigarettes and complaining about inflation, an image that duplicates almost exactly the film’s first sequence (the camera

setup is identical; in the first scene Max complains that cigarettes are 1.90, at the end he complains that they are 2.30). This is followed by a shot that clarifies both the film's and Rousseau's vision of the garden metaphor: another slow, low-angle track around the Rousseau statue, with the following on the soundtrack: "needs change according to the situation of men. There is a great difference between the natural man living in the state of nature and the natural man living in a state of society. Emile is not a savage to be relegated to the desert. He is a savage man made to inhabit cities" (205).¹² This, really, is the world of *Jonas*: Geneva. The countryside outside of its pale is part of this larger metropolitan existence, finally inseparable from it, regardless of whether people like Max succeed in derailing land speculation scams. The film is showing us here that Rousseau is really a harbinger of this modern consciousness, less an Arcadian poet with a fetish for primitivism than a thinker who was all too aware of the interconnectedness of wilderness and civilization.

The emergence of this sort of consciousness is at the centre of Raymond Williams's book *The Country and the City*, published in 1973, the year before the release of *Le Milieu du monde*. Evoking the seismic shifts that marked late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, Williams writes there that:

The essential connections between town and country, which had been evident throughout, reached a new, more explicit and finally critical stage. It was characteristic of rural England, before and during the Industrial Revolution, that it was exposed to increasing penetration by capitalist social relations and the dominance of the market, just because these had been powerfully evolving within its own structures. By the late eighteenth century we can properly speak of an organised capitalist society, in which what happened to the market, anywhere, whether in industrial or agricultural production, worked its way through to town and country alike, as parts of a single crisis. (98)

Criticizing *Jonas* in the pages of the American film journal *Jump Cut*, Linda Greene, John Hess, and Robin Lakes denounced what they saw as the film's tendency to sublimate political, theorize-able issues into personal dramas

and transformations: “Tanner crucifies revolutionary theory on the altar of the heart, thus eliminating most political work and class struggle. Rousseau has triumphed over Marx” (9). I quite agree with that last statement: it is Rousseau, and not Marx, that gives the film its philosophical backbone. Part of this does have to do with the use of personal development as a metaphor for political enlightenment; classrooms and farms here take the place of factories. But it is a metaphor, not a replacement. It does not mean the end of politics; very much the opposite is the case. Rousseau has triumphed in the film because *Jonas* is defined by a vision of modernity that realizes the foolishness of conscribing to the desert the naturally formed subject (Bloom’s “savage” and Rousseau’s “sauvage,” which is not quite the same thing¹³). That vision understands the inevitability that such a young person will, in some way, become part of a system which works its way through town and country alike. This becoming part does not mean that the young person will be assimilated into the system, but it does mean that some compromises with it are essential. Following Jim Leach, neither *Émile* nor *Jonas* are simply about a withdrawal from society. In that second passage from *Émile* that the film ends with, Rousseau goes on to say of Emile’s status as a savage/sauvage made to live in the cities (and this is not in the film) that “He has to know how to find his necessities in them, to take advantage of their inhabitants, and to live, if not like them, then at least with them” (205).¹⁴ This is far from an apolitical, personal-development-led analysis; Rousseau is evincing a very keen awareness of the power dynamic at work in this social experiment of his, a dynamic with obvious links to France’s imperial legacy. It’s just that it doesn’t conform precisely to the contours of an orthodox-Marxist critique of western capitalism.

Something similar is happening on the level of form, despite Tanner’s own joking about how his use of sequence shots in the films was “dogmatic.” He made that crack in a 1977 interview with François Albera for the French Marxist review *La Nouvelle Critique*,¹⁵ where he explained *Jonas*’s approach to the long take this way:

The first principle is the choice of the sequence-shot. In an almost mechanical way, there is a refusal to cut within a scene. There are 150 shots in the film, or around 170 with the shots in black and white. All of the scenes are in sequence-shot or in

two shots maximum.... The sequence-shot implies and allows a completely different kind of camera work, especially camera movements that are apparently “incongruous.” In the scene at the beginning, for example, where Rufus [the actor playing Mathieu, whose real name is Jacques Narcy] enters the farm’s kitchen, there is a sequence-shot of around four and a half minutes. The camera cuts the scene like you would with scissors, inasmuch as it films first one character, then a second, a third, then two, then three, then it moves past them following the text, coming back then and finishing in “total.” You’ve thus got *découpage* without scissors. But the viewer’s first impression is that the functioning of the *découpage* is completely different: normally, you have to change shots, axes, or focal points for a close-up. Here, there is already a distancing effect because it pulls you along but there are holes, moments where the camera isn’t on anything, where it’s between characters and it continues to move at the same speed, autonomously. (47)¹⁶

This sequence moves very smoothly through the space of the kitchen (it is a series of tracking shots and pans) and also imitates *découpage* inasmuch as it frames each of the three characters (Mathieu, Mathilde, and Marcel) in medium shots or medium close-ups; a shot/reverse-shot pattern tends to have a single person in the frame and this sequence is comprised mostly of two-shots, but that’s the major difference in terms of *mise-en-scène*. The movement of the camera, however, is not tightly linked to the rhythms of the character’s exchanges the way that shot/reverse-shot rigorously synchronizes its cutting to focus on whoever is talking. At times the camera moves to frame whoever is talking. Early in the shot, Mathilde is explaining to Mathieu how rich in nutrients horse manure is, and the camera tracks and pans around a two-shot of them; but it slowly moves to the left, and just as she says that at last those useless horses do something right and gestures towards Marcel, the camera continues its slow movement to get him into the frame, just as he exclaims “they shit!” From the standpoint of smooth, “*découpage sans ciseaux*,” it’s an impressive piece of choreography. But the camera continues to move, finally re-framing a two-shot of Mathieu and Marcel, even though Marcel isn’t talking anymore (he is intently plucking

a chicken) and Mathilde continues to talk to Mathieu about his work on the farm and elsewhere; she is still talking, but her questions about why he was fired from the printer's where he was a union militant are now coming from off-screen. Moments ago, and within the same shot, she was sutured into this perfect little narrative world; now she is unseen, distant, precisely because the camera has continued to move, at the same speed, slowly away from her. This distancing effect is very real, and the film is constantly making its viewer aware that is an artifice, that the camera very literally has a mind of its own, and it not simply linked to the minds of these characters. But this distancing effect does not completely preclude identification with those characters, does not fully obscure that linear narrative. The basics of realist visual form are here. It's just that these visual patterns are a sort of starting place for the film, a base point from which visual experimentation (especially with camera movement) can take place. Tanner connected his approach to editing with his agnostic relationship to classical narrative cinema overall in a 1977 *Cahiers du cinéma* interview, stating that "I call on certain relevant elements from the 'classical' code of representation: a feeling for the real, for example recognizable characters. But these elements only appear within the strict limits assigned to them – in the guise of reference points for the audience. They are precisely circumscribed within the little 'pieces' of the film, inside the scenes, but they never operate on the level of total structure" (66).¹⁷

This is also true of the film's narrative structure, which follows certain conventions of linear storytelling but uses that set of conventions as a starting point from which the film expands. Marcel Schüpbach takes up the matter of narrative structure in his piece on the film for *Journal de Genève's* "Samedi littéraire," writing that "*Jonas* marks a new stage in the evolution of Tanner's cinema. Previously, from *Charles mort ou vif* to *Milieu du monde*, right through *La Salamandre* and *Le Retour d'Afrique*, the filmmaker, through the study of one, two or three people's behaviour, shored up solid connections between them... Now, enlarging the story through numerous main characters, he literally bursts the narration apart, privileging numerous moments and cementing them together without necessarily forming a story in the traditional sense of the term" (1).¹⁸ This is the narrative structure of montage. *Jonas* tells a single story but one that is made up of many fragments, in many "morceaux" to use the word that is invoked in that *Cahiers*

interview. Those “morceaux” come together to create something that isn’t present in any one them on their own, but that coming together isn’t a process of melting them into one big narrative blob. Their edges show; they are still visible, and still understandable, as distinctive elements. To return again to the bit from Barthes’ essay “Brecht, Diderot, Eisenstein” that I invoked in the last chapter, “all the burden of meaning and pleasure bears on each scene, not on the whole.... The same is true in Eisenstein: the film is a contiguity of episodes, each one absolutely meaningful, aesthetically perfect” (*Image-Music-Text*, 72).¹⁹ All of these small stories are fully realized (if not, perhaps, aesthetically perfect); they are autonomous narrative objects that take on new meaning when they are put together. This insistence on evoking the political struggles of the 1960s as necessarily decentred is not only in keeping with leftist idealism about collective action and the importance of understanding historical forces above individual achievement, but is also quite consistent with the leftist political filmmaking of this period, on both sides of the Atlantic.

And so here is where I offer an American analogy of my own, although I do so following a French critic. In his text on *Jonas* titled “Les huit *Ma*” (a reference to the fact that all eight of the characters’ names start with the letters “Ma,” which is the French word for “my” and thus emphasizes the degree to which the film is about individuality), Serge Daney writes that “Tanner, like that other film that also comes to us from the very heart of Capital, *Milestones*, only films *one* generation but on *many* stages, the generation that, having been born in 1968, will soon be ten years old” (48).²⁰ Daney is referring there to Robert Kramer’s 1975 epic portrait of an American left in full-on disintegration mode, as militants of various stripes wander into other forms of activism, into young families of their own, into jail or deadly confrontations with police over petty crime, or onto the streets and under bridges. This film has a truly dizzying number of characters; its entry in the catalogue of MoMA’s Circulating Film Library places the number at fifty, and their exact connections to each other are difficult to keep track of. That confusion is, of course, the point of Kramer’s analysis of the 1970s; a community of activists that had once at least tried to present a united front was now fractured into a series of smaller, and often more self-centred and sometimes mutually exclusive, battles. They once spoke about “Our” or “Notre,” but in Kramer’s vision, they all now speak in terms

of “Ma.” The militants of the 1960s thus became, in essence, a group of isolated people talking past one another, and *Milestones* is about what that condition of disconnection and true political ineffectiveness looks like. That analysis of post-’68 politics, like that of *Jonas*, takes place on the level of narrative structure.

In contrast to politically minded critics in France, where *Milestones* was greatly admired (*Cahiers du cinéma*, 258–59, published a roundtable titled “*Milestones et nous*”; it also published a poem about Kramer’s work), some segments of the American left hated the film, and their critique would resurrect itself with the release of *Jonas* two years later. The editors of *Jump Cut* (Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage, plus Michelle Citron) may have published a basically friendly interview with Robert Kramer in their double issue 10–11 (1976), but in that same issue their review of the film said that *Milestones* “doesn’t just deal in bad politics, which it does freely, but it is also basically dishonest and reductionist in its presentation of bad politics” (9). Now earlier, I used the phrase “Criticizing *Jonas* in the pages of the American film journal *Jump Cut*,” but that didn’t really do justice to the furor that the film provoked, a furor comparable to that provoked by Kramer’s film. The magazine may have published Ying Wing Wu’s favourable review of *Le Milieu du monde* in #7 (1975), but *Jump Cut* 15 (1977) had a photo from *Jonas* on its cover, with the question: “Tanner’s JONAH: Subversive Charm or Reactionary Nostalgia?” That issue paired two *very* different essays on the film: Robert Stam’s more or less positive piece (which was translated and reprinted in the French version of the film’s published scenario) and Greene/Hess/Lakes’ evisceration. The latter essay strikes a faux-conciliatory tone early on, stating that “Basically, we think that *Jonah* is a light-weight, slightly progressive, warm and charming film in which petty bourgeois actors and actresses pretend to be workers and peasants, but fail because neither they nor Tanner knows much about the daily lives of Swiss workers” (8). That’s about as nice as it gets. The sheer ferocity of the critique here is actually refreshingly polemical, even if a lot of it also seems pious, prescriptive, and ill-informed. Greene/Hess/Lakes were responding not only to Stam’s piece on the film but also to Todd Gitlin’s review in *Film Quarterly*. Gitlin’s review is, more than any of these other longer pieces, an attempt to put *Jonas* into the context of Tanner’s work overall (that’s where his criticisms of *Le Milieu du monde*, which I quoted in the last chapter,

are to be found), although a lot of what he has to say about *Jonas* itself is descriptive. Greene/Hess/Lakes open by saying that both pieces “celebrate the film’s warmth, charm, optimism, and intelligence, seeing it as a valuable contribution to radical film and politics,” and they themselves say that “the film really does have charm.” But then they pull the rug out and echo the *Jump Cut* editors’ evisceration of *Milestones* a year earlier: “It seems to us that both of them miss or choose to ignore how bad the film’s politics really are” (8).

What is remarkable here is that both Stam’s positive piece and Greene/Hess/Lakes’ negative piece criticize the film along the same grounds: it’s sexist, it’s insufficiently detailed about the lives of Swiss workers, especially migrant workers, and these problems come together in the subplot of Marguerite having sex with migrant workers for twenty francs a go. “Why, one wonders, have her initiate these relations, and why with immigrant workers?” Stam wonders. “Here Tanner takes two oppressed groups – women and Third World workers in Europe – and places them, for reasons that are not at all clear, in relations of mutual exploitation” (1). Remember, now, this is the writer that *likes* the film. Greene/Hess/Lakes, on the other hand, first criticize *Jonas* for paying insufficient attention to feminism: “Switzerland may be backward and lack a women’s movement, but while Tanner was making this film, hundreds of women in Italy and Portugal were taking part in mass movements, as women for women’s rights and as leftists for socialism” (9). I rush to point out that in Judy Klemesrud’s *New York Times* article on Tanner, Tanner recalled how “My wife used to have women’s lib meetings at our place in Geneva, and on those nights I’d go to a movie. When I’d get back I’d have to walk over 20 women in my living room. They’d ignore me” (B6). She was, presumably, part of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes. Julie Dardel’s history of the movement in Geneva notes that “Very active and often spectacular, the activists of the MLF quickly became one of the indispensable players of Geneva’s political life” (43). She goes on to note how active and yet also self-governing it was throughout the confederation: “On the national level, the autonomous groups of women that sprang up in Geneva, Lausanne, Basel, Berne, Zurich, Locarno and Bellinzona, weren’t connected by any formal structure, but managed to coordinate with each other on many occasions” (58).²¹ So it’s hard to know what could possibly lead Greene/Hess/Lakes

to make such a statement about backward Switzerland lacking a women's movement. I also feel some obligation to point out, as I did in Chapter 1, that Swiss women only won the right to vote at the federal level in 1971. Critics who, a mere six years later, make allusions to "a women's movement" or the lack thereof but fail to mention that little historical tidbit do not inspire much confidence either in their knowledge of the relevant historical and political situations or in their moral authority to call the film's actors and crew onto the carpet because "neither they nor Tanner knows much about the daily lives of Swiss workers." For me this ignorance of the basic historical situation is more melancholy than anything else, given that de Dardel notes on several occasions how inspirational the Swiss movement found the work of its American sisters. There were certainly opportunities during the 70s for curious American feminists to discover the movement, via book-length treatments like Susanna Woodtli's *Gleichberechtigung: der Kampf um die politischen Rechte der Frau in der Schweiz* (published in 1975) or journals like *Le mouvement féministe* (published in Geneva from 1912 to 1960). Overall, the *Jump Cut* critics of the film strike me as not knowing much about the political lives of Swiss women.

The real meat of *Jump Cut's* complaint, however, is in the film's treatment of migrant workers. Greene/Hess/Lakes go on to write that:

If possible, even more offensive is Tanner's shabby treatment of the foreign workers from the Mediterranean countries. And damn it, John Berger, Tanner's scriptwriter, should know better. He put out a book on these exploited and brutalized people (*The Seventh Man* [sic], Viking, 1975). Berger's title refers to the fact that every seventh man in Europe is a foreign worker, and Switzerland has its share of these 20th century slaves.... What does Tanner do with them? While raising great sympathy for poor Marie, who must travel a few miles to and from work in Switzerland, he completely reinforces all the vicious Swiss stereotypes about foreign workers. Since none of them become characters themselves, they remain furtive, inhuman figures seen from a distance. Since Marguerite slips off to have sex with them, Tanner reinforces the idea that all they want to do is fuck upright Swiss women. Imagine the effect on a white American

audience if the female lead in a film slipped off to have sex with blacks in a nearby shantytown. Would that help the audience understand the lot of blacks or sympathize with black people? Or would it increase racism? (9)

The stills they are referring to here are among the film's occasional inserts of black and white imagery; these represent the fantasies or imaginary formulations of various characters. The only time the film uses black and white *stills* is just after the two long-serving farmhands (who Marcel calls "the zeroes") tell Marco about Marguerite's visits to the workers' barracks, and Marcel walks in to serve the evening soup; that's when the film presents these photos of migrant workers' barracks. The pictures are thus very clearly tagged as Marco's subjective imaginings of what those barracks must be like, imaginings which, since he seems a relatively au-courant, educated European leftist, could very credibly have been strongly influenced by Berger and Jean Mohr's photo-book *A Seventh Man*, both of whom are fellow citizens of Geneva. This quality of the insert as fantasy seems to fly past Greene/Hess/Lakes; they write "Tanner shows some stills of squalid rooms in which foreign workers live (leftover photos from Berger's book?)" (9).

Um, sort of. The first photo in the montage, of four workers lounging around in a dormitory, is nearly identical to Mohr's image of two of those same workers lounging in that same dormitory (127). The next image, of two men washing clothes in a trough, is nearly identical to images of men washing clothes that are part of a contact sheet of eight images that Mohr reproduces (165); it was probably part of the same roll of film. The final image, and the one that raises all this ire about negative stereotypes of hypersexualized migrant workers, is a photo of three men in a room that is covered with pornographic pin-ups; that photo is simply from *A Seventh Man* (174), although the reproduction in *Jonas* has black bars along the men's eyes where the photo in the book does not. Stam criticizes the inclusion of this image too, again along *exactly* the same lines as Greene/Hess/Lakes: "Still shots show us the workers' quarters papered over with photographs of nude women. Such an association runs the danger of confirming racist attitudes (the immigrant workers just want to sleep with 'our' women) while it obscures the oppression of these workers" (1).

Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000 (Alain Tanner, 1976). Citel / SSR / Action Films / Société française de production. Pictured (clockwise from man facing camera): Jean-Luc Bideau, Pierre Holdener, Dominique Labourdier, Jacques Denis, Miou-Miou, Myriam Boyer, Rufus. Photo from The Kobal Collection/Art Resource, NY.

image not available

But anyone following up the film's inter-textual cue would find, in *A Seventh Man*, Berger's nuanced and sympathetic explanation of the ubiquity of pornography in barracks like these. Shortly after observing that "In situations where time is served (conscripted service, prison) and which involves absence and sexual deprivation, to sleep is a deliverance from time" (167), Berger writes:

Nine inches above his pillow he has driven a nail into the wall. On the nail he has hung an alarm clock. From there it wakes him ninety minutes before the shift begins. Around the clock is a votive frescoe of twenty women, nude and shameless. The prayer is that his own virility be one day recognized. The vow is that he will not for an instant forget now what women are like. The pictures have been taken from posters or magazines published in the metropolis. The women are unlike any he has ever spoken to. They have instant breasts, instant cunts, which propose instant sex: the proposition as rapid as the action of the press that printed them. (187)

The language here is raw, but so is the vision of alienated labour in a culture defined top to bottom by consumerist capitalism. Reading Berger's text certainly helps to solidify that vision of alienation, but that vision is also contained in those still photos that Marco imagines. These are spare images, although they are also under-lit and slightly soft of focus. What keeps these effects from being lush and homey is precisely the sparseness of the dorm room, the concrete minimalism of the washing area, the grim plastic excess of a wall covered with porn. Migrant employment in the capitalist west, these images show us, is not about the "hard" violence of forced labour or militarily regimented production. Instead, it is about the "soft" violence of loneliness, deprivation, sadness. This sort of awareness does not exclude considerations of the economic inequalities that are at work, or of the dynamics of gender that figure into these transactions. *Jonas* evokes the weird power relationship here, after all, by having Marguerite charge something for the sex (so she remains unsentimental about what she's doing for these guys and the fact that she gets something out of it too), but not so much that workers can't afford it (and not so much that it would make any financial

difference to her). Economic, gender, and material considerations are part of understanding, and they are all present here. What I object to is the idea that such analysis constitutes understanding itself, and that anything else is somehow politically suspect.

And so here, we can again see Marx giving way to Rousseau. Tanner and Berger's film is evoking the ineluctable paradoxes of society (with rich/female <> migrant/male replacing the country/educated <> city/unformed that I discussed earlier), rather than a more economically determinist vision. The film's overall analysis is that Marguerite going to have sex with migrant workers is, finally, *sad*. That sort of emotional response should not be dismissed as some sort of sentimental liberal weepiness. The film is explicit (however briefly) about the desperate *material* conditions under which this all takes place. But its analysis doesn't stop at economic materialism, just as *La Salamandre* evoked Rosemonde's alienation by iconic images of her both at the sausage maker and alone on her bed, just as *Le Milieu du monde* was about both sexual passion and economic and ideological normalization.

I linger on these *Jump Cut* essays, not only because they are the longest, most sustained analyses of the film in English (the Stam essay is quite a bit longer than most of the French-language material on the film), but because they seem to me symptomatic of the slightly ham-fisted way that political cinema was being defined by many 1970s leftist critics. The perspective of both Stam's and Greene/Hess/Lakes' pieces sounds a lot like the criticisms from French-speaking audiences of *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas* that Tanner recalls annoying him. Echoing his sense of discomfort at audiences of *La Salamandre* who seemed to laugh at the revolutionary posturing a bit too knowingly, Tanner said in that 1977 *Cahiers du cinéma* interview accompanying the release of *Jonas* that "We didn't want to hold up a mirror for this or that group so that they could crowd in to admire themselves. The extreme radicals don't discover themselves there, and they are often the most mediocre interpreters of the film: they 'learn nothing,' obviously (and above all not *how to look at* images); I 'offer no solutions,' etc." (*Jonah who will be 25*, 166).²² I wonder if Tanner has *Jump Cut* in mind here. He did seem to know of the magazine; there is, in the Cinémathèque Suisse's file on *Jonas*, a hand-written note on Tanner's stationery giving the magazine's address, along with that of *Film Quarterly* (which had published Gitlin's long and favourable review of the film) and mentioning that "Cahiers, tu

l'as" (presumably this was addressed to someone assembling the French version of the film's published scenario, which was the Cinémathèque's project and which included French translations of Stam's and Gitlin's pieces as well as a reprint of Daney's "Huit *Ma*" text). Furthermore, Tanner's crack that leftist audiences learn nothing "surtout pas à regarder des images," is quite consistent with both *Jump Cut* essays, which make no mention of form whatsoever. This is actually quite unusual for the magazine, which has always had a serious commitment to non-conventional forms and has over the years given a lot of space to discussions of the political avant garde. But the pieces by both Stam and Greene/Hess/Lakes spend most of their time trying to figure out whether the film has good politics.

Indeed, what they are really trying to figure out is whether the film's characters have good politics, as though they were real people. "Although Marcel does seem politically aware in the scene with the land speculator," they write at one point, "there is not a shred of evidence that he ever participated in any progressive political activity, or ever will" (9). A bit later they describe Mathieu as "a skilled craftsman, a typesetter, one of a group of European workers who have tended to struggle to maintain their own privileged position within the working class rather than for the working class as a whole." They then lament that "Clearly, this alone does not discredit Mathieu, but it does raise questions and doesn't allow us to accept his political work and union activity as automatically progressive. As with Max, Tanner denies us the information we need to assess Mathieu's politics – past, present, and future" (9). All this invocation of the future activities of these characters really does make it sound like they are real people, with lives that began before the film started and will continue after the film is over. To which it is incredibly tempting to say: relax, comrades, it's just a movie. That is to say, it is obviously essential to accept all films – and especially a film like *Jonas*, which works so hard at the level of visual form to resist easy, Hollywood-style identification with these characters – as constructions, not as reflections of an idealized reality.

That sort of idealized reflection is the stock in trade of illusionist narrative, of course; it's also the stock in trade of the segment of left film criticism informally known as "positive images." Positive images criticism was big in the 1970s, and it's certainly easy to see how it might have seemed useful in raising consciousness about the ways popular Hollywood representation

distorted oppressed groups and led to undesirable political consequences (*Barbarella* made women look like simple-minded sex kittens and undermined the ERA! *The Deer Hunter* made the Vietnamese look mean and made the public think it had been right to keep fighting them all those years! A film with a subplot of a white woman having sex with black workers in a shantytown would increase racism!). But in retrospect its shortcomings seem equally clear: it is patronizing in the extreme, starting as it does from the assumption that audiences are basically at the mercy of the images on the screen, and thus need to be led along in politically positive directions, without the burden of contradictory or politically paradoxical behaviour on the part of any of the characters (a female farm owner fighting against capitalist developers but also having sex with migrant workers for twenty francs, say). Diane Waldman offered a critique of positive image criticism along these lines, in the pages of *Jump Cut* no less (about a year after the essays on *Jonas* appeared). Writing of Linda Artel and Susan Wengraf's 1976 book *Positive Images: A Guide to Non-Sexist Films for Young People*, she asserted that "The notion of 'positive image' is predicated upon the assumption of *identification* of the spectator with a character depicted in a film. It has a historical precedent in the 'positive hero' and 'heroine' of socialist realism.... Yet the mechanism of identification goes unchallenged, and introduces, I think, a kind of complacency associated with merely presenting an image of the 'positive' heroine" (9). Expecting left films to provide this kind of positive reinforcement, so close to the sort of coddling that, following Waldman, both Hollywood and Socialist Realist films specialize in, is anathema to the thematic and formal project of all of Berger and Tanner's work together and alone, and *Jonas* for sure. It was important to many sectors of left filmmaking in the 1970s, precisely because it was a blow against the sort of complacency that Waldman is identifying and that Artel and Wengraf are symptomatically taking for granted. "Critics have frequently called Mr. Tanner's films 'political.' Does he agree?" Klemesrud asked in her aforementioned *New York Times* article. "In form, rather than content," he replied. *Jonah* is an example of what I mean. It breaks up completely the sort of plot obsession of traditional filmmaking" (B6). There were sections of the left that were just as prone to obsession over matters of plot, and prone to a blindness to matters of formal complexity, as mainstream interpreters were.

This doesn't have to be part and parcel of a left critique of the film. The French film magazine *Positif* – whose parochialism I groused about in Chapter 1 but whose leftist credentials are unimpeachable – didn't like *Jonas* either, but for very different reasons. After complaining a bit that the film is too sentimental about May '68, their reviewer, Frédéric Vitoux, wrote that “The tremendous rigours of the production – the careful layouts, the warm quality of the direction of actors – are here put at the service of a limp and simple writing that has only minimal effect” (73).²³ I don't particularly agree with that assessment, but I respect it inasmuch as Vitoux is mounting a critique of an aesthetic object that he sees as operating in an unsophisticated way, not of characters who have some sort of moral obligation to be pronounced and unambiguous in their radicalism. These *Jump Cut* essays seem to me exemplary of a literalist tendency that is too common in American political criticism generally, especially that of the 1970s. It is a vision of political cinema to which Berger and Tanner's work has always been vigorously opposed.

At the same time, the equally leftist Canadian journal *Ciné-Tracts* was paying close attention to Berger and Tanner's work, especially *Jonas*, and the difference there illuminates the tension in political film circles between a less concrete (or more theoretical) approach and one that was more explicitly activist. *Ciné-Tracts* published, in its very first issue, the English versions of the letters that Berger had written to the two lead actors in *Le Milieu du monde* (French versions appeared simultaneously in the Swiss film journal *Cinema*). Their third issue featured Ron and Martha Aspler Burnett's translation of part of the scenario of *Jonas* (before Michael Palmer's full translation was published by Berkeley's North Atlantic Books in 1983, which is the version I am using in this book), along with a short introduction by Martha Aspler Burnett. “The film leaves open the question of growth, change, political action,” she writes. “Rather, it tries to point out the false scenarios that can be followed, scenarios which confuse the issues rather than clarify them” (8). The journal seems drawn to both *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas* because, like the best parts of film theory, they are intellectually and formally ambitious attempts to consider questions that can only be posed through the means of cinema, questions that are connected to the material world but still inseparable from the workings of a specific medium. *Ciné-Tracts*, during its brief existence (17 issues, some

of which were double issues, from 1977–82), published a great deal of this kind of theoretical writing; Stephen Heath’s “Film and Nationhood” essay, also published in the same issue that reproduced the *Jonas* screenplay, is an example, as is Bruce Elder’s exchange with Bill Nichols on the possibilities and limitations of structuralism, also in that same issue (Elder criticized Martin Walsh’s *Jump Cut* essay on Rossellini along some of the same lines I did their critique of *Jonas*).

Being honest, though, there isn’t much more about formal matters in these *Ciné-Tracts* considerations of Berger and Tanner that there were in the *Jump Cut* essays. Indeed, these aren’t really examples of interpretation at all; Martha Aspler Burnett’s sense of *Jonas* as ambiguous and interested in blind corners is certainly true, but her note here is just that, a note on the film rather than a sustained analysis. That interest in ambiguity and blind corners was consistent with *Ciné-Tracts*’ editorial orientation as a whole, and the way in which they “adopted” Berger and Tanner is similar to how *Screen* “adopted” Straub-Huillet in the 1970s. In an essay called “The Place(s) of Danièle,” arguing that what each filmmaker brought to the collaboration remains something of a mystery, Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote that “I think the fact that their work provokes silence more often than discussion – a tribute in some ways to its continuing radicality and difference – may be partly to blame for this. The same sort of syndrome was responsible for magazines like *Screen* reproducing some of their scripts at the same time that they chickened out of grappling with any of their films critically.” Something very similar was going on with the Berger-Tanner/*Ciné-Tracts* relationship. Films like *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas* provoke way more questions than they answer, and while I wouldn’t call the journal chicken, I do think that this intense radicality and difference accounts for some of why they chose to publish *materials* from the films – letters, screenplays – rather than sustained critical analyses.

One of the barriers to such interpretation may have been precisely Tanner’s constant insistence that his films’ politics are to be found on the level of form. The sort of complex tracking shot that I described earlier, where Mathieu, Mathilde, and Marcel all discuss the work he will do, requires work of the viewer too, and, most importantly, forces the viewer to recognize the usually hidden work of film interpretation, just as three of the “Ma”s are bringing to the fore the usually hidden work that surrounds food

and its production. Recognizing interpretation as work need not include trivializing assumptions to the tune of “following a long sequence-shot with a complex sound-image relationship is just as much labour as shovelling horse manure onto cabbage patches,” although it’s easy to see how left critics would want to avoid the appearance of such conflation. But what is true of both visual interpretation and manure-shovelling is that capitalist modes of production try to conceal both, presenting the final product – the story, the cabbage – as something that has come about completely naturally, without the intervention of human, and thus ideologically formed, actors. Making both explicit, and doing so with a single cinematic gesture, does indeed constitute an oppositional stance, a stance that opposes not just a specific political or social problem (the use of chemical fertilizers in agriculture, say, or the hierarchical nature of farm work), but that opposes the naturalization of choices that, far from being natural, are at the core ideologically motivated. Such naturalization is, of course, the first step in that watchword of *Le Milieu du monde*, normalization. “You have to make that spectator who dominant cinema turns into a sleepwalker do some work,” Tanner said in that *Nouvelle Critique* interview with François Albera. “The scene, the shot, I conceive of them in a way that will make the spectator active on the level of the ‘why’ of things” (47).²⁴ Naturalization under capitalism, be it on the level of cinematic form, agricultural production, etc., is all about obscuring that “niveau du pourquoi des choses.”

An even better example of the intersection of form and content, of tracking shots and morality, to follow Godard’s well-worn phrase, is when Marco delivers one of his first history lectures. This is a single tracking shot, lasting almost three minutes, with a very simple soundtrack (made up entirely of Marcel lecturing and some ambient noise of students shuffling). The camera follows him as he moves up the centre of the room, explaining that, although he is no determinist, “In an acorn are already present the creases which will give the oak its shape. What you are, each one of you, was present in the chromosomes at the moment of my conception. Excuse me, your conception!” (*Jonah who will be 25*, 41–42).²⁵ The real meat of the lecture, though, develops when Marco reaches the head of the room and draws a diagram on the chalkboard, to illustrate what he calls the holes that great thinkers create in time, holes that reach forward and backward to connect with other historical forces. At first the camera is still when he

draws the diagram, and then pans only slightly to the left as he sits at his desk to elaborate. But then, in good “*découpage sans ciseaux*” fashion, the camera tracks towards him slowly, getting him into a medium close-up as he really makes his point about why prophets are always misunderstood: “They exist between times. No one understood much about Diderot until an entire generation screamed ‘monster’ at Freud. That much time was needed to pass through the hole.” But as he gets into the overall relevance of the metaphor, the camera does not simply hold him in close-up for a visually simple emphasis, as would be common in a classical system. Rather, the camera moves *away* from him, up the middle of the classroom and into the student body, by way of visually emphasizing that Marco is speaking about everyone, not just about two specific historical figures like Freud and Diderot but about history, and indeed about the film’s overall view of history. The camera slowly moves him into a long shot as he says: “The holes prophets make for looking into the future are the same through which historians later peer at the stuff of the past. Look at them leering through the holes dug by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in order to explain the eighteenth century to us” (all *Jonah who will be 25*, 42).²⁶ Here is an intensely Brechtian moment in the film, where the filmmakers’ overall analysis, including their philosophical touchstone, is laid out explicitly. The words of that analysis are in the mouths of a character, in keeping with the limited cooperation with classical modes of narration that Tanner (like Brecht) has spoken of being willing to provide. But the most important of these words come as the camera is literally distancing us from that character, as it is physically moving away from him.

This sequence is not only important for understanding the film in terms of what Tanner brings (Brecht), but is *Jonas*’s most “Bergerian” moment. Tanner affirmed to François Albera that this part of the film was especially close to Berger’s own thought; he said that “All that reflection on time belongs to John Berger, who works on these problems, especially political time, the absence of the notion of time in Marx’s thought. Since we were headed towards the year 2000, he proposed to me that we integrate that into the film. The history teacher Marco’s course was written completely by him” (48).²⁷ This is no surprise, for any devoted reader of Berger’s work knows of his love of diagrams to illustrate abstractly philosophical topics. Towards the end of *A Seventh Man* (176–77), Berger (sounding a bit like

he did at the beginning of *Mike ou l'usage de la science*) holds forth on time and space, writing that “Just as the measures of exterior times – hours, days, seasons, years – are dependent upon the solar system, so the self’s time is constructed like a system rotating round a sun or a nucleus of self-consciousness. The felt space of a life’s time may be represented by a circle.” Below this is a (clearly hand-drawn) circle. Then he writes of how “the circle is filled at any given moment with past, present and future,” and on the facing page there is the circle again, now filled with little lines, as well as tiny circles both hollow and solid, with text next to it reading “Elements of past and future free to form an amalgam with the present.” At the bottom of the page is that circle again, with the lines now forming a smaller circle within the circle, and the smaller circles all clustered together at the centre; text next to that diagram reads: “In bereavement the past becomes fixed and the future withdraws.” In his 1978 essay “Uses of Photography” (reprinted in *About Looking*), he writes that “Normally photographs are used in a very unilinear way – they are used to illustrate an argument, or to demonstrate a thought which goes like this:”; below is a long arrow pointing left to right. He goes on to write that “Memory is not unilinear at all. Memory works radially, that is to say with an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event. The diagram is like this:”; below is a circle made up of eight lines, all radiating out from a central point (60). Berger’s 1979 novel *Pig Earth* concludes with a “Historical Afterword” that tries to explain the difference between modernity’s “culture of progress” and the peasantry’s “culture of survival.” He writes of the former that “The future is envisaged as the opposite of what classical perspective does to a road. Instead of appearing to become even narrower as it recedes into the distance, it becomes ever wider.” He writes of the latter that it “envisages the future as a sequence of repeated acts for survival. Each act pushes a thread through the eye of a needle and the thread is tradition.” Below both, there are diagrams made up of lines and circles that illustrate these concepts; on the next page Berger puts two slightly different diagrams of each culture face-to-face to reinforce his point (all 204–5). So while Todd Gitlin, in his *Film Quarterly* review of the film, writes of this scene that “One finds a close similarity in Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophies of History,”” it seems clear to me that the relevant intertextual connection is with Berger’s own writing. For Benjamin may indeed have seen history as a series of interactions between,

in the words of his famous formulation, angels facing backwards towards the future, Berger sees it somewhat differently. What is always at stake for Berger is a tension between the immediately present – material and historical reality, economic inequities, gender relations – and the ineffably time-bound – memories of the past, anticipation of the future, and misapprehension of the present. The tensions between these elements (which he seems to relish explaining via abstract line-diagrams) are what form our understanding of history; focussing on any one of them to the exclusion of the others can only lead to trouble (the existential malaise of the migrant worker, the misuse of photography in newspapers, the barely noticed disappearance of the European peasantry).

The connection between childhood and adulthood is, of course, the most basic, universal dialectic of history, and in many ways *Jonas* is wrestling with this fundamental problem and the questions it poses. What do the young and the old owe one another? What sort of society would insist that such debts be paid, and what sort of society makes it easy to forgive such debts? What do people retain of their youth when they age? George Orwell memorably evoked this connection between history and growing up when, in his 1940 essay “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius” he used it as a metaphor for the evolution of English identity: “What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person” (13). Jim Leach sees a comparable search for continuity between childhood and adulthood as key to *Jonas*, writing that:

... the birth of Jonah testifies to the possibility of achieving the communal goal of creating conditions in which subjective desires can be objectivized. Childhood is seen as the time during which this harmony is achieved and normally destroyed; and through a network of interconnected images dealing with such issues as time, food, nature, education, and money, the film explores the relationship of nature and society and the struggle to re-define this relationship so that the harmony of childhood can be carried into adult life. (126)

Marco's professional evolution is one way that the narrative signals that this relationship between nature and society, between subjective desires and objective reality, could be realized via a reconciliation between adulthood and childhood. After admitting to his students that his fantasy is to sleep with two women at the same time, he is fired from his job teaching at the college.²⁸ The next time we see him he is working in a retirement home, leading old-timers in a song and telling Mathieu and Max, in another densely Bergerian reflection on time, that this is actually better than teaching children, which only allows you to influence the present. "Old people take time for what it is, because they have so little of it. Having a lot makes you believe that time is the future and the past. Of course, their present is full of memories of the past. All the world's memories are in the present. And all its hopes too. But these memories and hopes are a creation of the present, and not what destroys it. That's why I like old people and want to play with them" (*Jonas Who Will Be* 25, 135).²⁹ This is part of a sequence made up of three lengthy, complex tracking shots (in contradiction to Tanner's statement to Albera that "All of the scenes are in sequence-shot or in two shots maximum") where the three guys are making supper (it's the same sequence as where Mathieu sings his ode to the onion). But when Marco delivers this little soliloquy, the camera stops moving and holds him in a medium-long shot, emphasizing that this is an important part of the dialogue without resorting fully to a dominant film language. And it is important; this desire to *play* with the old is a paradox that sums up the film's ideology very neatly. Those who have experienced the fullness of life are more aware of the need to fully integrate the experiences of childhood: curiosity, openness, playfulness, freedom. These experiences are not all that there is to life, but they are important, and they are easily lost, especially in a capitalism-led culture where a sterilizing normalization is the dominant ethos.

Really, though, the fullest embodiment of this childhood-adulthood dialectic is the character of Marie, and the sequences where she plays with a retired French train engineer named Charles could be seen as icons of the film's search for a reconciliation of childhood and adulthood. This is most true of a scene late in the film, after Marie has served a year in prison for purposely undercharging senior citizens (and Marco) at the grocery store where she is a migrant worker of sorts (she has a work but not a residence permit for Switzerland, and so must go home to France every night). She

goes to visit Charles, and he asks to resume the role-playing games that they had so enjoyed before her incarceration. She agrees, but when he goes to get his engineer's goggles, she says she only wants to play a game about prison. This sequence is made up of two shots of about ninety seconds each, and again it uses stillness (and thus a lack of *découpage*, with or without scissors) to emphasize the importance of what is going on. The only movement in the first shot is a pan as Marie gets up from the table to go into the living room; following a cut to a reverse angle, the only movement is a slight track in as Marie becomes horribly upset about her memories of prison. Both Charles and Marie throw themselves into the game, into the "pretending," in a way that is so complete as to seem utterly childlike. But there is something fully adult about this performance as well. Charles asks detailed questions about her life in the slammer and Marie gets impatient when he gets some of the details wrong in his performance. She is particularly annoyed that he plays the part of the priest as a doddering old man, telling him that "The chaplain wasn't an old fruitcake. He was young. Every time he was there I'd imagine him making love" (*Jonas Who Will Be 25*, 146).³⁰ Her final collapse into tears is childlike in its intensity but is preceded by her declaration that Charles can't possibly understand the sheer desolation of prison life, an adult sentiment if ever there was one.

Seeing scenes like this one as the bearer of *Jonas's* meaning, rather than more sentimental moments with actual children, seems to me crucial for understanding the film's overall analysis. Christian Dimitriu writes that "The film's central sequence-shot is a veritable redemption scene which unfolds through Max's crucifixion. The general theme of *Jonas* is ideology, or rather how ideology's fragments reorganize themselves, seven or eight years after May '68, into a new project. The undercurrent of this theme is naturally economy, to which is opposed, as a new possibility, ecology" (65).³¹ Now, this is an important scene for sure. During the shot's three minutes of almost constant movement, all eight of the "Ma"s eventually gather around as kids paint an outline of Max, who has stretched out his arms onto a stone wall. As the camera cranes up slightly towards the end of the shot, both Max and then Marcel start to sing a song to the tune of non-diegetic accordion music, a moment of sound-image fracturing that recalls comparable scenes in *La Salamandre*, such as when Pierre and Rosemonde listen to the jukebox in a café and it becomes unclear whether the music is

really supposed to be diegetic. From the standpoint both of subject matter (collectivity) and formal patterns (long take, complex camera movement, eccentric sound-image relationship), the sequence contains a lot of what is important about *Jonas*. But I do not accept the contention that film is basically about ideology, and I accept even less the idea that it is mostly about May '68 and the shift towards ecological sensibilities. Rather, the film is using occasional references to May '68 (and they are very occasional; Max is the only character with any lived experience of the strikes, and he is also the most politically cynical of the group), and frequently tongue-in-cheek references to ecological frameworks (recall Max: "All manner of virtue in vegetables. Eat your vegetables!") as *means* to evoke the way ideology changes over time. Seeing *Jonas* through the lens of childhood/adulthood rather than '68 or environmentalism as such actually allows us to see it as more ideologically sophisticated. The film is not so parochial as to see May '68 as some sort of transcendently significant date; it's just one among many. Nor is it so romantic as to see ecological movements like organic farms as the new solution to everything; indeed, such romanticism is the subject of frequent jokes and is clearly laced with just as much irony as Voltaire's famous summary of self-satisfied defeatism "il faut cultiver notre jardin." What is instead at issue in the difficulty of finding a way of being in the world that is both aware of the socio-political realities around you, while keeping faith with both the historical forces that led to those realities and the hypothetical future which those realities will in turn help to form.

The quest to allow history, in the fullest sense of the word, to guide the assumptions that form our view of the world (assumptions which are also known as ideology) is what lies at the core of *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000*. As a subject for a film that is as *engagé* as anything (cinematic or otherwise) that emerged from the idealism of the 1960s, and it is a great deal more philosophically nuanced as well. It is also as true to the spirit of Brecht as anything to have emerged during this period. In an early essay on Brecht's theatre and an ideal Brechtian criticism (1956's "Le tache de la critique brechtienne," reprinted in *Essais critiques*), Roland Barthes sets out "les plans d'analyse où cette critique devrait successivement se situer" (84). These *plans* are sociology, ideology, semiology, and *morale*. This is a stunningly precise summary of the film's concerns: a film about the specific moment of the 1970s and the social conditions that led to it, a film about ideology's

debt to history, a film whose visual language is rigorously constructed along non-dominant lines but which nevertheless remains lucid, and a film which is, finally, about responsibility. For *Jonas* is a film about the ways that time acts on everyone, and the responsibility that this action in turn demands of everyone: responsibility to the past (struggles and victories, half-forgotten though they may sometimes seem), responsibility to the present (to the people you live in community with now), responsibility to the future (to kids who are just being born, and whose experiences at the age on 25 can only be vaguely imagined). To see it as a celebration of dropping out could not be more wrong. It is, instead, a film about conscience, a conscience that lies in the synthesis of the dialectic between childhood and maturity.

Notes

- 1 “Pangloss disait quelquefois à Candide : « Tous les événements sont enchaînés dans le meilleur des mondes possibles; car, enfin, si vous n’aviez pas été chassé d’un beau château à grands coups de pied dans le derrière pour l’amour de mademoiselle Cunégonde, si vous n’aviez pas couru l’Amérique à pied, si vous n’aviez pas donné un bon coup d’épée au baron, si vous n’aviez pas perdu tous vos moutons du bon pays d’Eldorado, vous ne mangeriez pas ici des cédrats confits et des pistaches. – Cela est bien dit, répondit Candide, mais il faut cultiver notre jardin. »” (234).
- 2 The film’s French title is *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l’an 2000*. It was released in English as *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*. Almost all of the discussion of the film in English uses the spelling “Jonah,” which I don’t really understand; that seems a half-step away from releasing a film like Godard’s *Pierrot le fou* as *Crazy Pete*, and then always referring to the main character as Pete. Anyway, I use the abbreviated title *Jonas*; references to *Jonah* come only when I am quoting discussion of the film that is originally written in English.
- 3 “Toute notre sagesse consiste en préjugés serviles; tous nos usages ne sont qu’assujettissement, gêne et contrainte. L’homme civil naît, vit et meurt dans l’esclavage : à sa naissance on le coud dans un maillot; à sa mort on le cloue dans une bière; tant qu’il garde la figure humaine, il est enchaîné par nos institutions” (43). The translation in the subtitles and the English version of the published screenplay (26) both vary slightly, and in different ways, from Allan Bloom’s 1979 translation, which I am using throughout this book.
- 4 “... à vivre, s’il le faut, dans les glaces d’Islande ou sur le brûlant rocher de Malte” (43).
- 5 “... passer de Surinam à Bordeaux, d’aller de Bordeaux à Paris, de Paris à Dieppe, de Dieppe à Portsmouth, de côtoyer le Portugal et l’Espagne, de traverser toute la Méditerranée, de passer quelques mois à Venise” (209).
- 6 “C’est encore ici une des raisons pourquoi je veux élever Émile à la campagne, loin de la canaille des valets, les derniers des hommes après leur maîtres, loin des noirs mœurs des villes, que les vernis dont on les couvre rend séduisant et contagieuses pour les enfants; au lieu que les vices des paysans, sans apprêt et dans toute leur grossièreté, sont plus propres à rebuter qu’à séduire, quand on n’a nul intérêt à les imiter” (115).
- 7 “On façonne les plantes par la culture, et les hommes part l’éducation” (36).
- 8 “Les paysannes mangent moins de viande et plus de légumes que les femmes de la ville; et ce régime végétal paraît plus favorable que contraire à elles et à leurs enfants” (64).
- 9 “Mais souvenez-vous que j’irai labourer vos fèves, si vous touchez à mes melons” (121).
- 10 “MATHIEU (il chantonne). L’oignon est un légume superbe, démocratique. Il pousse partout. Il a la peau dure pour se protéger du froid. On le

trouve vulgaire. Il donne du goût à tout. Il dure. On peut le manger cuit ou cru. Il est doux et aussi un peu amer. Il tue les microbes. Il coûte pas cher. (*musique sur la 1^{re} partie*)

MARCO. Moi, c'est le chou.

MAX. Toutes les vertus dans les légumes. Mangez des légumes! Alors tu va te retirer dans un asile de vieillards ? Et devenir une sorte de poireau ?" (172).

- 11 "... plus l'homme est resté près de sa condition naturelle, plus la différence de ses facultés à ses désirs est petites, et moins par conséquent il est éloigné d'être heureux" (94).
- 12 "Or, les besoins changent selon la situation des hommes. Il y a bien de la différence entre l'homme naturel vivant dans l'état de nature et l'homme naturel vivant dans l'état de société. Emile n'est pas un sauvage à reléguer dans les déserts, c'est un sauvage fait pour habiter les villes" (267). Again, the translation in the film's subtitles and the English version of the published screenplay (162) vary slightly from Bloom's, and in slightly different ways.
- 13 I think that the whole Rousseau-derived idea of "the savage," "savage man," etc., has emerged because of an overly phonetic translation of Rousseauian concepts such as "l'homme sauvage," which is found in his 1755 text *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*. It seems obvious to me that Rousseau means "sauvage" as being "wild" or "natural," akin to "les fleurs sauvages" or wildflowers. Translating "l'homme sauvage" into English as "savage" is to import a pejorative and

often violent connotation that the French word does not possess. The English word "wild," of course, carries these connotations when it refers to a person (although not when it refers to a flower). I would thus prefer to see terms such as "l'homme sauvage" or "un sauvage" translated as something like "uncultivated man," which seems to me much closer to the spirit of these Rousseau texts. Nobody would translate the term "les fleurs sauvages" as "the savage flowers," so I genuinely do not understand why the widely accepted translation of "L'homme Sauvage" is "Savage man."

- 14 "Il faut qu'il sache y trouver son nécessaire, tirer parti de leurs habitants, et vivre, sinon comme eux, du moins avec eux" (267).
- 15 This was first published in the 27 November 1976 issue of *Voix Ouvrière*, the newspaper of the Swiss worker's party (Parti suisse du travail).
- 16 "Le premier principe est le choix du plan-séquence. De manière presque mécanique, il y a refus de couper dans une scène. Il y a cent cinquante plans dans le film, cent soixante-dix environ avec les plans en noir-blanc. Toutes les scènes sont en plans-séquences ou en deux plans au maximum.... Le plan-séquence implique et permet un travail de la caméra tout à fait différent, dans les mouvements d'appareil surtout, apparemment « incongrus ». Dans la scène du film située au début par exemple, où Rufus entre dans la cuisine de la ferme, il s'agit d'un plan-séquence de quatre minutes et demie environ. La caméra découpe la scène comme on le ferait avec des ciseaux puisqu'elle filme

- d'abord un personnage, un deuxième, un troisième, puis deux, puis trois, puis elle passe derrière chercher la suite du texte, revient et finit en « totale ». On a donc un découpage sans ciseaux. Mais la première incidence sur le spectateur, c'est que le fonctionnement de ce découpage est complètement différent : normalement, on changerait de plan, d'axe, de focale au besoin pour un gros plan. Là, il y a déjà un effet de distance parce que ça traîne, il y a des trous, des moments où la caméra n'est sur rien, elle est entre les personnages et elle continue à bouger à la même vitesse, de manière autonome."
- 17 "... je fais appel à certains éléments relevant du code de représentation « classique » : effet de réel, personnages reconnaissables par exemple. Mais ces éléments n'interviennent que dans les limites précises qui leur sont assignées – en guise de repères pour le spectateur – et qui sont circonscrites avec précision dans les « morceaux » du film, à l'intérieur des scènes, mais n'opèrent jamais au niveau de la structure globale" (Heinic, 38).
- 18 "*Jonas* marque bien une nouvelle étape dans l'évolution du cinéma selon Tanner. Précédemment, de *Charles mort ou vif* au *Milieu du monde*, en passant par *La Salamandre* et *Le Retour d'Afrique*, le cinéaste, à travers l'étude du comportement d'une, de deux ou de trois personnes, nouait des liens solides entre elles à propos d'un fait précis.... Aujourd'hui, élargissant le récit à de nombreux personnages principaux, il fait littéralement éclater la narration, privilégiant plusieurs moments et les imbriquant les uns dans les autres sans former
- nécessairement une histoire au sens traditionnel du terme."
- 19 "... toute la charge, signifiante et plaisante, porte sur chaque scène, non sur l'ensemble.... Même chose chez Eisenstein : le film est une contiguïté d'épisodes, dont chacun est absolument signifiant, esthétiquement parfait" (187).
- 20 "Tanner, lui, comme dans cet autre film qui nous vient aussi du cœur du Capital, *Milestones*, ne filme qu'une génération mais sur *plusieurs* scènes, la génération qui, d'être née en 1968, aura bientôt dix ans."
- 21 "Très actives et souvent spectaculaires, les militantes du MLF deviennent rapidement des actrices incontournables de la vie politique genevoise.... Au niveau national, les groupes autonomes de femmes qui ont fleuri à Genève, Lausanne, Bâle, Berne, Zurich, Locarno et Bellinzone ne sont reliés par aucune structure formelle, mais tentent à plusieurs reprises de se coordonner."
- 22 "Nous n'avons pas voulu tendre un miroir à tel ou tel autre groupe pour qu'il puisse se dévouer en s'y admirant. Les ultra-gauches ne s'y retrouvent pas et ils sont souvent les plus médiocres lecteurs du film : ils « n'apprennent rien », évidemment, et surtout pas à regarder des images, je « n'offre pas de solution », etc." (Heinic 38; emphasis in the original).
- 23 "La grande rigueur et les moyens importants de la production – le soin des cadrages, la qualité chaleureuse de la direction d'acteurs – sont ici mis au service d'une écriture limpide et simple qui se refuse aux moindres effets."

- 24 “Il s’agit de faire travailler le spectateur que le cinéma dominant transforme en somnambule.... La scène, le plan, je les conçois de telle sorte que le spectateur soit activé au niveau du pourquoi des choses.”
- 25 “Dans un gland il y a déjà les méandres qui donneront la forme du chêne. Ce que vous êtes, chacun de vous, était déjà là dans les chromosomes au moment de ma conception. Je vous demande pardon, de votre conception !” (89).
- 26 “Ils sont entre les temps. Personne de comprit grand chose à Diderot jusqu’au moment où une génération entière cria ‘Monstre’ ! à Freud. Il fallait ce temps-là pour passer au travers du trou. Les trous que font les prophètes pour regarder le futur sont les mêmes par lesquels les historiens lorgnent ensuite vers les vieux meubles du passé. Regardez-les lorgner à travers les trous creusés par Jean-Jacques Rousseau pour nous expliquer le dix-huitième siècle” (89).
- 27 “Toute cette réflexion sur le temps appartient à John Berger qui travaille sur ces problèmes, notamment le temps politique, l’absence de cette notion de temps dans la pensée de Marx. Comme on était parti sur l’an 2000, il m’a proposé d’intégrer cela au film. Le cours du prof d’histoire, Marco, est complètement écrit par lui.”
- 28 In a strange life-imitates-art side story, Tanner and Berger found themselves in a bit of hot water for the scenes involving the students. Marco’s classes were shot at Geneva’s Collège Calvin (Tanner’s own alma mater), and upon the film’s release, the daily *24 Heures* reported (on 3

February 1977) that Hermann Jenni, a councillor for the Parti vigilant, protested to Geneva’s Conseil d’état that “There are scenes that are an insult to good morals, an invitation to sexual license” [“Il y a des scènes qui sont une attaque aux bonnes mœurs, une invitation à la licence sexuelle”]. On 3 March 1977 the daily reported that the Conseil had voted down his motion “to use all means at its disposal to have those scenes and references that deal with Collège Calvin cut from the film” [“à user de tous les moyens à sa disposition pour faire couper du film toutes les scènes et mentions impliquant le Collège Calvin”]. The paper went on to report that “The councillor responsible for public education, Mr. André Chavanne, responded that it wasn’t Calvin College in Tanner’s film, inasmuch as it was its theatre group who was doing the acting, and that there had been no complaints or attacks that had come from the parents of students, who had all given their approval to the filming” [“Le conseiller d’État chargé de l’instruction publique, M. André Chavanne, lui a répondu que ce n’est pas le Collège Calvin en tant que tel qui figure au générique du film de Tanner, mais son groupe de théâtre, et qu’aucune plainte ni attaque n’est parvenue de parents d’élèves, qui ont tous accordé leur autorisation au tournage”]. In other words: Relax comrade, it’s just a movie.

- 29 “... les vieux prennent le temps pour ce qu’il est, parce qu’ils en ont peu. Quand tu en as plein tu fais croire que le temps c’est le futur et le passé. Bien sûr que leur présent est plein de souvenirs du passé. Tous

les souvenirs du monde sont dans le présent. Et tous les espoirs aussi. Mais ces souvenirs et ces espoirs sont la création du présent, et non pas ce qui le détruit. C'est pour ça que j'aime les vieux et que j'ai envie de jouer avec eux" (174).

- 30 "L'aumônier n'était pas un vieux gâteux. Il était jeune. Chaque fois qu'il était là je l'imaginai en train de faire l'amour" (183).

- 31 "Le plan-séquence central du film est une véritable scène de rédemption qui se réalise à travers la crucifixion de Max. Le thème général de *Jonas* est l'idéologie, ou plutôt les fragments d'idéologie qui se réorganisent, sept ou huit ans après May 68, dans un nouveau projet. L'arrière-fond de ce thème est naturellement l'économie à laquelle s'oppose, comme nouvelle donnée, l'écologie."