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Revisioning Europe: the films of John Berger and Alain Tanner

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University of Calgary Press

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

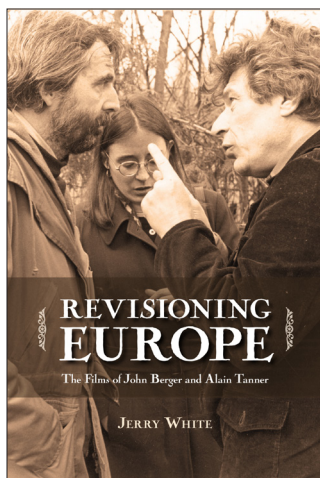
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REVISIONING EUROPE: THE FILMS OF JOHN BERGER AND ALAIN TANNER

by Jerry White

ISBN 978-1-55238-552-4

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INTRODUCTION

“The subject is European, its meaning global.” – John Berger,
A Seventh Man (7)

What constitutes political cinema? What debt does it owe simply to politics, or simply to cinema? How can its formal patterns really reflect political concerns? The 1970s were dominated by such debate among film critics and theoreticians, a lot of whom were strongly hostile to narrative, to say nothing of pleasure, and a lot of whom were under the spell of Bertolt Brecht. A lot of that is, in retrospect, easily caricatured as quaint, and these sorts of questions have faded from the main stream of Film Studies (at least in English and French). But two people active in these '70s debates never succumbed to pious, over-simplified equations of narrative identification or visual pleasure with oppression. They were neither film theorists nor film critics, although throughout their work they evince a keenly acute sense of the philosophical and aesthetic stakes of cinema and politics. They worked together only briefly, but the films they made together offered a vision of a political cinema whose rigour and accessibility remains, in many ways, unmatched. “They make one of the most interesting film-making teams in Europe today” Vincent Canby wrote in the *New York Times* on 2 October 1976.

I am talking, of course, about the English writer John Berger and the Swiss filmmaker Alain Tanner. The most well-known of their collaborations, *La Salamandre* (1971), *Le Milieu du monde* (1974), and *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* (1976), are crucial parts of postwar European cinema

and deserve a central place in its history. No doubt that the struggles that these films evoked and, in their small way, participated in, are by and large over. But Berger and Tanner's work still needs to be recovered and re-explained in terms of a world cinema that has, in the last decades, been as transformed as the political landscape of Western Europe. I want to argue in this book that the films they made together offered a vision of a political cinema that was unsentimental about the possibilities of revolutionary struggle, unsparing in its critique of the failures of the European left, but still optimistic about the ability of radicalism, and radical art as well, to transform the world.

I will examine each film, and both artists, in their turn, but some elements run throughout the discussion. The first is that these films, like the work Berger and Tanner did on their own, are both forward-looking and historically aware. The second is that the films are aesthetically innovative while still remaining close to conventions of narrative filmmaking. In this way they are actually defined by a richly complex dialectic between conservative and progressive elements, on the level of both form and content. And thus we arrive, I believe, at the nub of the matter. These films are seminal because they embody a considered and tentative experimentalism, forgoing polemics in favour of argument. This rigour, and this humility, is what points the way forward for political cinema. The fact that the political cinema of the last decades shows little sign of this sensibility makes it no less urgent to think of Berger and Tanner's work as a viable path for political cinema to follow.

By way of introduction I want to explain a few important historical and theoretical elements that frame that argument about the nature of the political cinema these two artists created together. I will talk briefly about the "Nouveau cinéma suisse" in the context of similar "New Waves" of the 1960s. I will also sketch out the landscape of 70s theorizing about cinema and political action. I want to do this because it would be very easy to place these three films in contexts like these, and I think that's a bit too simple. These films are defined by a complex combination of narrative convention and innovation; while Berger and Tanner do a lot of what 70s theorists saw as aesthetically progressive, they never fully abandoned cinematic conventions such as narrative, identification, etc. Their work together is preoccupied with the inherent tension between collective action and individual

liberty, and this is a conundrum that is, not to put too fine a point on it, seminally Swiss. Another aspect of their work that is seminally Swiss is their tendency to see the mountains not as some repository of timeless values but as a politically unstable border zone. This has a lot to do with the “separatist” conflict in Jura that strongly marked Swiss politics in the 1960s and 70s, and I will explain the way that they both implicitly and explicitly engage with that conflict. I will also try to place their work in the context of Switzerland by offering an analogy between Berger, Tanner, and two important figures of two different generations of Swiss literature: Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz (Switzerland’s most celebrated French-language writer of the first half of the twentieth century) and Jacques Chessex (who came to be synonymous with the explosion of creativity in French-speaking Switzerland starting in the 1960s). That tension between individual liberty and collective responsibility was a central conundrum of the Enlightenment as well, and that is finally what I want to point out about Berger and Tanner. They are heirs to what Tzvetan Todorov has recently elegized as “L’Esprit des Lumières.”

The fact that you can fit Berger and Tanner’s work into “70s counter-cinema” and “Nouveau cinéma suisse” but that you also need to do more to really understand the work is at the heart of the kind of political cinema they were trying to build. They didn’t seek to reject the political discourse that emerged in the wake of the 1968 strikes. They understood that the radicals of that period were, at their best moments, richly aware of the ideological and political importance of form and the potential that cinema and its allied arts had to serve as agents of social transformation. Indeed, Berger and Tanner sought to avoid the leftist pieties that marked 1968 while still *building* on its radical and largely unachieved possibilities. Similarly, I don’t believe that their films constitute a rejection of Swiss culture. Very much the opposite is true, despite what both Berger and Tanner have said in print and to me personally. I believe that their films show that they saw what was radical in Switzerland’s distinctive political culture, and I also believe that they understood how those distinctive qualities could be *built* that into their vision of a renewed European left. My verb there is key. Berger and Tanner were not nostalgic, nor were they cynics, nor were they pious scolds. Through the films they made together, and throughout the work they have done individually, they have tried to be builders.

Not nouvelle, and only partly nouveau

Although it is not a particularly well-known movement within the world of anglophone film studies, the flowering of cinema in 1960s and '70s French-speaking Switzerland did create a certain amount of excitement in the francophone world. This excitement was generated as much by the films of the movement as by the ways in which it changed the institutional situation of Swiss cinema, especially in French-speaking Switzerland. Martin Schaub, in his history *L'Usage de la liberté: le nouveau cinéma suisse 1964-1984*, recalls that during this period imported (mostly Hollywood, although some German and French) films accounted for 98.7 per cent of the films shown in Switzerland in 1960 and 99.8 per cent in 1964. He says that "it seems to me essential to recall the colonization which had a hold on all of the media of this period; just as elsewhere, it dominated music, fashion, and even literature" (8).¹ Tanner was a key part of the first sustained challenge to this cinematic imperialism, although the films that he actually made during this period are different in important ways from the work of his contemporaries.

Aside from Tanner, the best known members of "Le nouveau cinéma suisse" are probably Claude Goretta and Michel Soutter. Goretta had known Tanner when they had both lived in England during the 1950s, and the two had made a film together – the semi-vérité short *Nice Time* (1957)² – which had been an important part of Britain's "Free Cinema" movement. Goretta went on to make feature films, including *Le Fou* (1969) and *L'Invitation* (1971), as well as *Jean-Luc Persecuté* (1966), an adaptation of the Ramuz novel. He now is a widely respected figure in Swiss cinema. That's also true of Soutter, who began by making a well-received short in 1965 called *Mick et Arthur*, a jaunty piece that owes a lot to Godard's *À bout de souffle*. He followed that with 1971's feature *Les Arpenteurs*, a much more downbeat work about a mysterious woman and her hapless suitors, one whose subject matter shares a lot with Berger and Tanner's *La Salamandre*, released the same year and also starring Jean-Luc Bideau. *Les Arpenteurs* became one of the signature works of the moment.

Like a lot of the "New Waves" of the 1960s, much of the Nouveau cinéma suisse was strongly influenced by France's Nouvelle Vague of the 1950s and 60s. This is most true of Soutter, whose films are very much about the restlessness of youth and the pleasures of alternating between improvisation

and alienation in a way that would be very familiar to François Truffaut or to the Jean-Luc Godard of the early 1960s. But this is not true of Tanner's films, which are quite different from the work of the French New Wave. When *La Salamandre* was released in 1971, Tanner recalled in an interview with Guy Braucourt that when he showed his first feature-narrative film *Charles mort ou vif* (1969) to French audiences, "it was received as an 'incredibly exotic' film!" (7).³ Part of this, no doubt, is easily ascribable to the actors' accents. But a more important element of this "exotic" quality has to do with the fact that the film's characters, when faced with the alienation of bourgeois society, retreat not to a café in a hipster metropolis like Paris but to the Jura mountains, a territory whose politics and history are genuinely distinctive, genuinely unstable, and generally unknown to people outside of Switzerland. I will return to the matter of Jura, and of the "esprit jurassien" that I think is hiding just below the surface of Tanner and Berger's work together, in due time. Suffice it to say for now that there is a great deal in Tanner's films that is at odds with the nouvelle vague sensibility, and among his contemporaries, he is the least influenced by that most famous of French-language film movements. Tanner recalled to Christian Dimitriu how his time in 1958 Paris was basically unpleasant:

For me it was a bit of a shock to live in Paris after London. The generosity and warm friendship of my London circle was all over. In Paris it was everyone for themselves and knives drawn. It was a closed world, and more and more the New Wave was, for me, who had come out of a very politicized community, a bit too "right wing anarchist." I worked a bit on the *Cahiers du cinéma* but everyone was on their guard. (99)⁴

To see the *Cahiers* group cast as "anarchistes de droite" certainly goes against a lot of main-line, especially English-language histories of the period. But the fact is that *Cahiers* group were very slippery politically. Richard Brody's recent biography of Godard, for instance, is fairly explicit about the sometimes frighteningly reactionary elements of the young Jean-Luc, going so far as to recall how as a child in WWII Switzerland he "cheered on the advances of the German army and lamented its reversals" (6), and how the novelist interviewed by the Jean Seberg character in *À bout de souffle* is

named for the right-wing philosopher and novelist Jean Parvulesco, who Brody calls “his Geneva friend” (62). H el ene Logier has followed this Parvulesco connection up in great detail, chronicling the essays on the New Wave that Parvulesco wrote for the Falangist film magazine *Primer Plano* during the Franco era, essays that argued that the New Wave’s films were “profond ement impr egn es d’id eaux d’extr eme droite,” profoundly impregnated by the ideals of the extreme right (130). She wrote that in one essay Parvulesco published in 1960, “According to him, the members of the New Wave were impregnated by an ‘intellectual fascism.’ Their philosophy was nihilism. They put the mentality of youth up on the screen, having a great love of freedom and fascinated by death, violence, and crazy love.... He felt that the films of the New Wave were anti-conformist, anti-communist, anti-democratic and anti-socialist” (134).⁵ John Hess argued something similar (although slightly more gentle) about the entire *Cahiers* group of the 1950s in his massive critique of their legacy (published in the first two issues of the radical American film magazine *Jump Cut*), writing that “*La politique des auteurs* was, in fact, a justification, couched in aesthetic terms, of a culturally conservative, politically reactionary attempt to remove film from the realm of social and political concern, in which the progressive forces of the Resistance had placed all the arts in the years immediately after the war” (19). Andr e Bazin’s role as a wise father figure trying to instil some reason into his passionate young charges is well known, but there is a political aspect to this as well. Bazin was, after all, a Jacques-Maritain-inflected left Catholic, a Personalist, and a lot of his attempts to counter some of the cinephilic-auteurist enthusiasm in the pages of the magazine clearly evince a strong trace of the spiritually inflected left politics that defined the work of Maritain and his fellow travellers (that said, Hess sees Personalism as part of the problem when it comes to the politics of the 1950s *Cahiers*). Putting this in more generational than explicitly political terms, upon the 1972 release of his *Retour d’Afrique* Bernard Weiner pointed out in the pages of *Jump Cut* that “Tanner is not part of the ‘youth explosion’ of film makers. He’s 45 and paid his dues in England nearly two decades ago (working in the Free Cinema movement, and later as an editor at the BBC)” (4). It really is a mistake to think of Tanner as some sort of south-eastern adjunct of the French New Wave.

At the institutional level, however, Tanner is inseparably linked to his contemporaries in the *Nouveau cinéma suisse*. He had been active in agitation for a properly constituted federal film body as early as 1962. He recalled the beginnings of his agitation and organization in his 2009 memoir *Cine-mélanges*:

I summarize: in 1962, a law to support filmmaking came into effect [a referendum calling for federal support of filmmaking had passed in 1956], to be applied by a federal commission, then in formation. Of 27 members, no filmmakers. The various filmmakers who worked in the country, no more than five or six, asked to be given at least one seat on the commission. But, in order to do that, you had to represent an association. We hastily created l'Association suisse des réalisateurs, in which I took the lead and then the chairmanship. *In extremis* the administration accepted to give us a spot and I found myself among the members of this newly elected body.

The nightmare began.... We had closely followed the emergence of new filmmaking practices in France, Czechoslovakia, Quebec, Poland, Brazil, and elsewhere. The cinema was in an energized state all over the world, and of this the 26 other members of the Commission fédérale du cinéma apparently knew nothing. (22–23)⁶

The law was nevertheless modestly successful in that it created some support for indigenous cinema, particularly in French-speaking Switzerland, including the weekly newsreel *Ciné-Journal Suisse*. This was no mean feat; up to this point most filmmaking in Switzerland had been done in German. Tanner, in *Ciné-mélanges*, states polemically that “In French-speaking Switzerland, there had never been any cinema” (129); elsewhere in that book he writes of the 1960s that “during this period, there was absolutely nothing in Switzerland” (42).⁷ Freddy Buache’s massive history *Le Cinéma Suisse : 1898–1998* tells a slightly different story, although it is clear that Swiss filmmaking in French was, until the 1960s, a pretty marginal affair. But Buache doesn’t see the 1962 law as having changed all that much, writing in *Le Cinéma Suisse* that it “is terribly restrictive, in that it only

foresees supporting ‘documentary, cultural or educational’ films ... and that it excludes works of fiction” (32).⁸ His overall assessment is that “The delayed birth of Swiss cinema was thus primarily less a financial problem than a problem of the intellectual and spiritual climate” (16).⁹ One attempt to remedy this spiritual and intellectual crisis was Tanner’s creation of a collective of filmmakers. In 1968, he founded, with Goretta, Soutter, Jean-Louis Roy and Jean-Jacques LaGrange (replaced, Buache notes, by Yves Yersin in 1971), the production collective known as Le Groupe cinq, the Group of Five. “The date was not just an accident,” Tanner recalled the survey he answered as part of Antoine de Baecque’s book *Cinéma 68*, published by the *Cahiers du cinéma* in 2008. “We could thus get our hands on a tool, in fact, a branch of television. We had no desire to create a film industry, to make commercial films.... But in the spirit of the times, we could invent everything from scratch: the means of production, the working relationships between the technicians, who were all very young” (108).¹⁰ This new means of production was solidified in Groupe cinq’s agreement with Société Suisse de Radiodiffusion (SSR), the public French-language television channel (now TSR, Télévision Suisse-Romande) to support the work of each member of the group, in exchange for broadcast rights. For those engaged with Swiss cinema, Groupe cinq is legendary, and it was certainly a big deal at the time. A 1974 issue of the Swiss film review *Cinema* was devoted entirely to the group, reprinting (in both French and German) interviews with and essays about the key members. That dossier recalls that the first two accords were for four films in 1969–70 with SSR contributing CHF 60,000 per production, and then for three films in 1971–72 with SSR contributing CHF 80,000 per production; Tanner’s *Charles mort ou vif* was part of the first accord, and his *Retour d’Afrique* (which he made in between *La Salamandre* and *Le Milieu du monde*) was part of the second. The key provision of the agreement was control. Claude Vallon recalled in that *Cinema* dossier that “the principal advantage that the accord between Groupe cinq and television offers (especially for Tanner) is precisely to be able to not have to worry about control over the production. Once the subject is agreed upon, the director is the producer of his own film, and he spends the full CHF 60,000” (6).¹¹ Part of what was emerging here, then, was indeed a cinéma d’auteur along the lines of what had emerged in French cinema in the 1960s. Tanner has certainly acknowledged this nouvelle vague connection in his memoirs,

even though elsewhere he had spoken in less-than-admiring terms about those glory days. Czechoslovakia, Quebec, Poland, and Brazil were just as important, if not more important, to Tanner and the reforms he was part of. Less than a simple cousin of the French *nouvelle vague*, Tanner was part of an international reconsideration of the connections between the artist, the state, and the political landscape that formed them.

During this period John Berger was reconfiguring his own work as a novelist and critic along lines that were very close to Tanner's sensibilities. Berger had begun his career as a painter in the 1950s, but shortly thereafter he began writing art criticism for various London papers and soon became disenchanted by his potential as an artist. His switch to criticism, and eventually to poetry and novels, was informed both by an intense socialist commitment and desire to recuperate the mantle of realism, both in aesthetic and political terms. His first books bear out these dual aesthetic and political commitments very clearly: the novel *A Painter of Our Time* (1958) and the art reviews and essays collected in *Permanent Red* (1960). Whereas Tanner spent the 1960s trying to forge a space where filmmakers could work independently, during this period Berger was thinking in more theoretical terms about the connection between art and collective action. Distinguishing the criticism he wanted to write from faddish, trend-setting reviewing, he wrote in the introduction to *Permanent Red* that "proper criticism is more modest. First, you must answer the question: What can art serve here and now? Then you criticize according to whether the works serve that purpose or not. You must beware of the believing that they can always do so directly. You are not simply demanding propaganda" (15). Propaganda, for Berger, was an insidious, although characteristic element, of modernity. "I am a modern painter, and I am so because I have lived all my life with propaganda – the problem of facing other men as a man" his protagonist Janos Lavin says in *A Painter of Our Time*. "I would like to write about this some time. I know about it. But now we are going to the cinema" (142). That novel imagined a socialist Hungarian painter living in London right before the 1956 Soviet invasion; straddling the traditional and the radical, he finds himself inescapably at the margins of the gallery world. His problem is not political in the conventional sense; although he is an anti-Stalin socialist, his difficulties come neither from the anti-communists in Britain nor the commissars in the east. Rather, he is a humanist, someone

who wants to protect the individual conscience, a conscience that also calls people to do right by the collectives of which they are inevitably a part, from the ravages of a materialistic bourgeois society. Berger's manifesto from this period – one that defines, however unconsciously, the critical work he was doing in books such as *Permanent Red* as well as *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965) and *The Moment of Cubism* (1969) – seems to me to be voiced by Janos:

What we mean by Socialism can be clearly defined in economic terms. But the effects, the changes in man that Socialist economic relations can bring about, are so numerous that each can make his own list.

I live, work for a state where the more honest the son the less the mother need fear; where every worker has a sense of responsibility, not because he is appealed to but because he has responsibility; where the only élite are the old; where every tragedy is admitted as such; where women are not employed to use their sex to sell commodities – finally this is a much greater degradation than prostitution; where the word freedom has become unnecessary because every ability is wanted; where prejudice has been so overcome that every man is able to judge another by his eyes; where every artist is primarily a craftsman; where every Imperialist leader has been tried by his former victims and, if found guilty, been shot by a contingent of his own General Staff whose lives have been spared for this purpose. (117)

It may seem too simple to assume that a character in a novel is speaking for his author, but the correspondence with Berger's own thought here is quite strong. Discussing Gramsci's question "what is a man?" in *Permanent Red* (published two years after *A Painter of Our Time*, although collecting essays written throughout the 1950s), Berger first points out that the question really means "what can a man become?" and then writes that "Up to about 1920 artists could answer this question confidently without necessarily being socialists. Since then, if they are to reach a satisfactory answer, socialism has become increasingly necessary for them" (209). I don't know of anywhere in his critical writing where he mentions the responsibility of

workers, the élite of the old, or the prospect of firing squads for imperialists, but the matter of women's sex being employed to sell commodities, and indeed women's sexuality *as* commodity, is a veritable obsession, running most strongly throughout his two most widely read books of the 60s and 70s: *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (which appeared five years after *A Painter of Our Time*) and *Ways of Seeing* (1972). On the matter of artists and craftsmanship, a short essay in *Permanent Red* simply called "The Glut" laments the degree to which there is just too much art in galleries, and seems to long for the ethic of the craftsman: "their artists clearly haven't the essential creative imagination to have anything to say. Many of them might be excellent craftsmen if they were working under another artist's direction – but that is a different question" (50). There is enough correspondence between this passage and Berger's work overall, and especially the work Berger was doing at basically the same time, to make an assumption of rough correspondence seem more than warranted.

This passage from *A Painter of Our Time* is, of course, supremely optimistic verging towards the romantic, and that sort of philosophical optimism seems to be no small part of what Berger brought to the "Berger-Tanner" relationship. *La Salamandre* is about a pair of friends, one a politically committed Geneva journalist who takes on a lot of hack work, and the other a slightly dreamy novelist who lives in the countryside with his wife and daughter. It is not hard to imagine that having an autobiographical character: Tanner, the founder of the Groupe cinq, the guy who gets people jobs doing *engagé* cultural work; Berger, the writer who relentlessly seeks a rigorously utopian version of socialism. This combination of the hard-headed detail work and the pensive dream-work would also come together for Tanner, in a most unlikely place: the streets of Paris in May 1968. Berger's writing of that period seems to provide a template for the way both men understood those events.

Cinéma selon les soixante-huitards

"One day, in a discussion with a class at a film school, I asked the students the following: 'Do you know why we say that continuity

cutting is “rightist” and that montage is “leftist”?’ Silence rang out. Thirty years earlier, somebody would have had the answer and today, it’s like I had been speaking Chinese.”¹² – Alain Tanner, *Ciné-mélanges* (48)

“The need for self-conscious ‘shockers’ is the natural complement to the handing out of ‘inoffensive’ platitudes.” – John Berger, reporting on the “Free Cinema” program of documentaries, which included Tanner and Goretta’s *Nice Time* (1957), for *Sight and Sound* (12)

The place “les événements” of May 1968 in the historical imagination of the Euro-American left is practically sacrosanct. And furthermore, the period’s impact on Film Studies – first in French via the *Cahiers du cinéma* and later in English, mostly via *Screen* – is formidable, more so even than in sociology or literary studies.¹³ I confess that I have always found this a little strange. I don’t doubt that 1968 was a year full of political instability in the capitalist and communist spheres alike. Furthermore, there is no doubt the alliance between workers and students that characterized the best moments of the strikes of May 1968 in Paris was a very exciting realization of leftist idealism. Nor is there any doubt the “États généraux du cinéma,” an event held as a kind of sidebar to the strikes that declared a new place for cinema in a rebuilt society, was evidence that, in Tanner’s words, “Le cinéma était en état d’ébullition dans le monde.”¹⁴ But the immediate aftermath of May ’68 was not characterized by a transformation of western capitalism; it was not even characterized by a change of the political scene in France. However unstable his government may have seemed at the height of the strikes, Charles de Gaulle’s UDR, it cannot be said often enough, not only won election of June 1968 but massively increased its share of deputies in the Assemblée nationale (it held nearly three-fourths of the seats at the end of the election, a feat without precedent in post-Revolutionary French history). Tanner told Lenny Rubenstein in a 1975 interview that “One mustn’t forget that there were ten million strikers, but nobody was prepared to seize power; the political structure was taken by surprise, as if in a play” (103). Thus it seems obvious that glorifications of the period are to be avoided. Rather, May ’68 and its immediate aftermath need to be approached just

as Berger and Tanner have done throughout their films, their writings, and their interviews on the subject, not only through the simple subject matter work they did together, but also through their sense of what was really important about those days, as well as interventions on the degree to which formal matters can be politically transformative. Jim Leach writes that “The difficulties in keeping alive the spirit of May in a hostile environment are central to all of Tanner’s films” (16), but it’s important to understand just what part of that “spirit of May” did indeed remain throughout Berger and Tanner’s oeuvre.

One way that this spirit of May manifests itself in Berger and Tanner’s work is at the level of form, and this is a matter that I will return to again and again throughout my discussions of *La Salamandre*, *Le Milieu du monde*, and *Jonas qui aura 25 ans dans l’an 2000*. The connection of formal practice to revolutionary idealism was, during this period, a crucial matter for Tanner, and for Berger as well. Tanner recalls in *Ciné-mélanges* that:

In the 1960s and 70s, I read a lot of theoretical work on cinema, as well as that of Brecht on the theatre, which you could apply perfectly to our work. We were in the period where folks were trying to deconstruct the traditional narrative that reigned in dominant cinema, and to then reconstruct it along another schema, which is to say to pull out the elements of the story, to put them back in order and in perspective, so that they could clearly create their meaning, according to the rules of the now relevant dialectic, rather than those of classical dramaturgy. (82)¹⁵

It is crucial to note, however, that Tanner never fully abandoned this classical sensibility, never crossed over fully into the realm of the anti-narrative militant cinema in the way that, say, Jean-Luc Godard did during his Dziga-Vertov period. Those films, most of which Godard co-directed with Jean-Pierre Gorin and all of which they signed under the name “Groupe Dziga Vertov,” were not narrative in any way. Instead they integrated interviews, direct address to the camera, extremely artificial single-shot sequences, etc. It is the part of Godard’s work where he stands the furthest from conventional cinema. He didn’t make that many films like that, and he made them all pretty close together; in all they are *Pravda* (1969), *British Sounds*

(1969), *Vent d'est* (1970), *Lotte in Italia* (1970), and *Vladimir et Rosa* (1971). Until recently they had been basically impossible to see, although they are now available as part of DVD set called "Godard: El Grupo Dziga Vertov," issued by the invaluable Barcelona-based company Intermedio (they have Spanish subtitles only). None of these films have been released on DVD in France or North America, and despite Intermedio's good efforts they still strike me as excellent examples of Tanner's sardonic remark in *Cinémélanges* that "All the militant films of that period have become invisible today."¹⁶ They are invisible today in large part because so many of them are so intensely dated, wedded inseparably to the fleeting moment of revolutionary idealism that produced them. Tanner argues that something similar is true of the films that he made with Berger, as I will discuss in due time. But I think that Tanner is being too hard on himself with that assessment because I agree with Jim Leach's sense that "Tanner's response to cinematic and political difficulties foregrounded by the failure of the May revolution was neither to break completely with the existing cinematic models nor to adapt the 'popular' genres to new political ends" (21). The three feature films that Berger and Tanner made together are excellent examples of this sort of "middle course" between combative obscurantism and bland commercialism, between the Groupe Dziga Vertov and a commercial film about politics such as Costa Gavras' *Z*,¹⁷ which is exactly the way that Dimitriu formulates his cinema: "Tanner, lui, se situe quelque part entre les deux" (32).

This hanging on to popular forms is, of course, the heart of an actual Brechtian practice – that is to say that it follows the writings and plays of Bertolt Brecht himself. It's easy to lose sight of this if you read some of the writings or see some of the films of his more diehard advocates. Trying to explain the self-awareness of *Jonas* in her *New Yorker* review of the film, Pauline Kael wrote that "I hesitate to invoke the word 'Brechtian' because, except for a few sixties films by Godard, that has generally meant a didactic pain" (76). I cannot help but chuckle with some recognition at that assessment, but I think it is important to pay closer attention to critics like the late Robin Wood, who writes that:

Brecht's plays (at least those which I am familiar with), never *cleanly* dissociate themselves from the basics of "Realist" theatre:

they retain strong narrative lines, with identifiable and evolving characters, and they don't wholly preclude a certain degree of identification. The principle of "alienation," or, as I prefer, distancing ("making the familiar strange"), operates to counter this without obliterating it (to do so altogether seems virtually impossible within a narrative work): the plays operate on a fine balance between sympathetic involvement and analytical (or critical) distance. (13, italics his)

This is completely consistent with the experience of seeing Brecht's plays performed, an experience that will always include a fair bit of realist representation. The narrative line of, say *Threepenny Opera*, is just as strong as its eighteenth-century predecessor, John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, and it no more obliterates spectacle than Gay's work does; it just insists that its narrative, and its sense of spectacle, be understood for what they are. Moreover, this acceptance of narrative illusionism is consistent with Brecht's own writings, so important to Tanner (and, as we will see in the discussion of *Une Ville à Chandigarh* in the next chapter, to Berger) during this period. Defending epic theatre from charges that it's boring, Brecht said in a 1949 dialogue with Friedrich Wolf (published in 1952, as part of the East German publication *Theaterarbeit*) that "It is not true, though it is sometimes suggested, that epic theatre (which is not simply undramatic theatre, as is also sometimes suggested) proclaims the slogan: 'Reason this side, Emotion (feeling) that'" (*Brecht on Theatre*, 227).¹⁸ Brecht's practice is a genuinely populist one, an approach to aesthetics that integrates the real power of popular forms (such as realist-illusionist spectacle) at the same time that it tries to move *beyond* them. It does not go to the side of popular forms; it helps them to move forward. But it does so by rejecting the simplicity both of "light" entertainment *and* audience-flattering liberal reformism. Indeed, Tanner was quite explicit about his hostility to the latter in a 1978 interview he gave to *El Pais's* Fernando Trueba and Carlos S. Boyero; echoing Jean Narboni's denunciation of *Z* in the *Cahiers du cinéma*, he told them that "For me the films of Tavernier or Costa Gavras are the worst in all of cinema. This commercial, consumption cinema, which falls along the lines of Hollywood but with leftist political ideas, seems to me detestable" (12).¹⁹

When Tanner recalls reading theoretical material during the 60s and 70s, he is clearly referring to the reborn *Cahiers du cinéma*, a magazine that in the wake of 1968 vigorously threw off its traditional mantle as a haven for intense cinephilia and adopted a series of militant positions that often had a distinctly Maoist, but also frequently Brechtian, flavour. And Jean-Louis Comolli, then co-editor of the magazine, was clearly an important figure for Tanner. When Lenny Rubenstein asked him about the slow pace of *Le Milieu du monde*, he replied that “There have been studies published in France, by Jean-Louis Comolli amongst others in *Cahiers du cinéma*, about the relations between ideology and technique. I did a lot of research as to the language in this film, and my presentation of the theories may be schematic” (99). I take Jim Leach’s point that “Tanner’s political perspective corresponds more closely to that of the *Positif* critics than to that of the New Wave filmmakers” of *Positif*’s arch-rival magazine, the *Cahiers du cinéma* (15). But by the time we arrive at 1968 the only new-waver still actively contributing to the *Cahiers* was Jacques Rivette, who was always something of a maverick in the group. And anyway, Leach is referring here to the 1950s *Cahiers*’ advocacy of André Bazin’s belief in the aesthetic and spiritual supremacy of a cinema based on long takes and *mise-en-scène*. Tanner was indeed impatient with this, just as he was impatient with the scene he discovered in 1950s Paris overall. The situation of the 1968 *Cahiers* is significantly different, and much closer to Tanner’s overall political outlook, especially during the period of the late 1960s and 70s. For the most part the “anarchistes de droite” had either changed their politics dramatically (as Godard did) or stopped writing for the magazine (as Truffaut had, although he remained on the board). Texts by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, who together edited the magazine from 1966 to 1971, were seminal in changing the magazine’s orientation towards explicitly political work, especially their two-part “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” published in nos. 216 and 217 (October and November 1969). The first part of that essay was translated in 1974 and is still widely used in English-language undergraduate courses as an example of the militant criticism of the 1970s.²⁰ It is in part one of the essay that the two famously declared that “*tout film est politique*,” and that moreover, the realism of classical Hollywood was always political in, ahem, a certain way. “But the tools and techniques of filmmaking are a part of ‘reality’ themselves, and furthermore ‘reality’ is nothing but an

expression of the prevailing ideology. Seen this light, the classic theory of cinema that the camera is an impartial instrument which grasps, or rather is impregnated by, the world in its 'concrete reality' is an eminently reactionary one" ("Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," 30).²¹ Tanner wrote in exactly these terms in a text based on interviews given around the release of *Le Milieu du monde*. He wrote there that "It has today become evident that the technique of a story is inseparably linked to its ideology, and not only to the story itself.... It [the ideology] corresponds exactly to the type of relations established by an industry looking for the biggest audience possible" ("Le pourquoi dire," 14).²² The key connection here is via form; the problem of ideology is in the "*technique du récit*" and not just the subject matter of the film. Tanner affirms this early in the same text when he says, simply "Le contenu est tout entier dans la forme" (13), a formulation he would return to in interviews again and again. This matter of form is a crucial one for the film theory that emerges in the wake of May 1968; overall, it is really an attempt to reclaim the mantle of formalism for a political project that had been renewed by the idealism of those days of May.

The most ambitious of this material is probably the massive text simply titled "Montage," published in no. 210 (March 1969), which its introduction describes as "not a debate, nor a round table, nor a collection of articles, nor a single discourse in many voices, but a 'montage' of critical fragments" (17).²³ Its "authors" (I tremble in using the word!) were Narboni, Jacques Rivette, and Sylvie Pierre, and the films they discussed included work by Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, D.W. Griffith, Kenji Mizoguchi, Jean Rouch, Pierre Perrault, Alain Resnais, Phillippe Garrel, Godard, Straub-Huillet, Vera Chytilova, Fernando Solanas, and John Cassavetes. But a lot of this theoretical work has, like Godard's Groupe Dziga Vertov films, taken on the air of the dated. Its persistence is practically an anthropological issue, a matter of its ability to illustrate a more idealistic and committed time in film criticism and aesthetics. What was all that stuff about montage being leftist but continuity editing being reactionary? Ah yes, every film is political....

It's easy to be so dismissive, but Tanner was a serious intellectual and it's clear that he was reading pretty widely in this material. Because if you do read widely then there is some very intellectually nourishing stuff to be found. Comolli wrote a great, two-part essay (published in *Cahiers du*

cinéma 209 and 211, February and April 1969) called “Le détour par le direct” that enunciates very clearly the political excitement that was part and parcel of the rise of lightweight camera gear in the late 50s and 60s and which, like the “Montage” text, draws on a *very* wide range of films to illustrate not only a technical shift but an ethical, political, and theoretical one as well; I’ll have cause to discuss both essays in more detail in the next chapter, when I talk about the television films Tanner made in collaboration with Berger. Indeed, the sheer cinematic voraciousness of the “Montage” essay is an fine example of this theoretical moment’s intellectual vitality, as is Sylvie Pierre’s refreshingly hard-nosed assessment that “what you can, on one hand, call in Eisensteinian montage ‘progressive’ is paradoxically that which is most dictatorial: movements from one shot to another that preclude the spectator from ever escaping reason, because of the need to put the shot in a position of reflexive distance” (25).²⁴ This is valuable for understanding the relationship that Tanner and Berger’s films have with 70s film theory for two reasons. One is that, as Jim Leach says, “‘Brechtian’ cinema is normally associated with ‘montage’ ... and this approach is not absent from Tanner’s films. But their basic unit is the shot-sequence, which is more usually associated with a contemplative cinema based on a Bazinian respect for the integrity of time and space” (42). But Tanner, in his “pourquoi dire” text, written for the published screenplay of *Le Milieu du monde*, distinguishes between “le montage à l’intérieur d’une scène ou simplement entre les scènes” (17), noting that in that film he was attached to the second. Both are montage, though, different enunciations of the same belief in complexity, dialectics, and, as Tanner writes there, “un travail de déconstruction à opérer sur le langage traditionnel” (17). I will discuss this “montage of long takes” in more detail in the chapters on the feature-narrative films Berger and Tanner made together, especially *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas*. Furthermore, as Sylvie Pierre helps us to understand, montage is, in some forms, just as oppressive, just as manipulative, as *découpage*, just as long takes can, chez Tanner and Berger, be self-reflexive and politically charged in a way that is fully consistent with the “spirit of montage” that Narboni, Rivette, and Pierre were trying to explore in their text. This insight of Pierre’s is also important for Berger and Tanner’s cinema because it presents reason as something that must, from time to time, be escaped from. *La Salamandre*, *Le Milieu du monde*, and *Jonas* are self-aware, challenging

films, but they are not didactic, not dictatorial. They allow for emotion, for humour, for the possibility of occasional escape from reason and into the realm of passion. And that sort of slippage, really, is everywhere present in the *Cahiers* of the late 1960s and 1970s, just as it was in Brecht's own writings and interviews on the theatre. By *ideology*, Comolli and Narboni seem to mean something that is flawed, tentative, *human*. In the second part of "Cinéma/idéologie/critique" they write that "*cinema is an ideological product*; its defining and active field is ideology, and not science" (148; emphasis in the original); elsewhere they write that "A camera filming itself ... contributes nothing in the way of science nor theory, or even 'materialist cinema'; the most one can say of it is that it is a reflection of a reflection, the ideology mirrored in itself" (150).²⁵ This is not exactly a model of lucid reasoning, but it is an attempt to lay out a separation between the cold clarity of science and the tricky, slippery, and ultimately pleasurable actions of the human spirit, of which ideology is a formative part. Furthermore, it is in the second part of Jean-Pierre Oudart's "Suture" essay that we find the statement (appended at the end "pour corriger quelque peu cet extrémisme") that when it comes to reading a film, "something is said which can only be discussed in erotic terms, and which is itself given as the closest representation of the actual process of eroticism" ("Cinema and Suture," 47).²⁶ This kind of intellectualized eroticism is at the very heart of Berger and Tanner's *Le Milieu du monde*, and it is certainly part of *La Salamandre* and *Jonas* as well. So when one moves beyond the awkward language and occasional self-confessed *extrémisme*, it is possible to find some surprisingly passionate and still very relevant material in the theoretical writings of the late 60s and 70s *Cahiers*. Tanner and Berger's films are greatly enriched for the effort.

Beyond these formal and theoretical innovations that came in its wake, May '68 was also important to Tanner, of course, because he was present for a lot of the strikes themselves. In 1968 he was working as a journalist for SSR, making documentaries all over Switzerland and throughout Europe and elsewhere (Belgium, Wales, Israel). His film on the Paris strikes was called *Le Pouvoir dans la rue*; it was broadcast on 6 June 1968, and its opening voice-over states that its shooting began when the strikes had been on for two weeks (Tanner recalls in *Cine-mélanges* that "J'avais filmé tout le mois de mai 1968 à Paris" [43]). Christian Dimitriu argues that the film is "precious for Tanner, in that May '68 is the realization of a long questioning

of society, of himself and his work as a filmmaker, and the beginning of a new creative period. Precious for television and for researchers, because the images are rich in information. The film is formally more sober, with an agile camera, a minimum of tracking shots and zooms, and quick editing” (26).²⁷

I take Dimitriou’s point here, but to my mind *Le Pouvoir de la rue* is most important precisely because of its sobriety and its tendency to plunge deeply into the details of the how students especially plan to transform their existence (the film centres on actions at and around the Sorbonne). Frédéric Bas is, I believe, a lot closer to the mark when he writes of *La Pouvoir dans la rue* (in his afterword to Tanner’s *Ciné-mélanges*) that “This is not to say that the filmmaker was a militant; very much the opposite is the case. In Paris in May ’68, he was working as a reporter for Swiss television. He was almost forty years old and he had for quite a while rejected the high priests of the extreme left and their leaden ideologies. Unlike others, he didn’t think – and has never thought – that ‘the camera is a gun’” (162).²⁸ Indeed, the film doesn’t really go all *vérité* and montage until towards the end, when we do indeed get fairly visceral and crisply edited footage of night-time confrontations with police. The bulk of it is made up of an examination of the alternative university that students were trying to set up. Those students, as well as sympathetic faculty members, hold forth to Tanner’s camera about the degree to which universities are or aren’t compatible with the capitalist system, on the power relationships between teachers and students, and the role that students can or can’t play in the formation of a fully functioning socialist society. Looking back on his memories of 1968, Tanner told the *Cahiers du cinéma*’s N. Heinic in a 1977 interview that “68 (or really May 68) was a big piece of street theatre.... And what was important, more so than ‘les événements,’ was the fallout, simply in the way that this theatre staged the hopes and allowed the flowering of hidden desires, which since then have stayed at the surface” (“An Interview with Alain Tanner,” 42).²⁹ He said something very similar thirty years later (and forty years after ’68) in *Ciné-mélanges*: “May ’68 in Paris was a big *happening*, a big piece of street theatre, playful, a liberation of speech” (128).³⁰ He basically said the same thing in English, in that 1974 interview with Lenny Rubenstein, where he struck a more sceptical tone: “May ’68 in Paris was an enormous event; it may have had no political significance but it was a tremendous happening.

I covered the events for Swiss television – people were performing revolution without being shot at. All the ideas germinating since then show how important May '68 was for cultural and social life.” (103). But *Le Pouvoir dans la rue* isn't about idealistic street theatre or performance at all. Instead, it is about the nuts and bolts of organization, the serious ideological and political implications inherent in education, and perhaps most importantly although more implicitly, the need to reconcile ideology – the assumptions that form our view of the world – with politics – the arrangement of resources, responsibilities, and power. It is about putting ideas into action.

Because of the way that *Le Pouvoir dans la rue* visualizes the complexities and ambiguities of ideologically complex political action, it belongs not alongside militant May '68 films liked the famed *ciné-tracts* that were shot and then projected during the strikes themselves, but alongside other Tanner television films such as *Les Trois belgique*. This was a work about events very similar to the strikes of May '68: disputes between Flemish and Walloon students at Université Catholique de Louvain.³¹ It opens with protest footage that, if the voice-over were removed, would be indistinguishable from the protests at the Sorbonne in May. And it was broadcast a mere eight weeks before *Le Pouvoir dans la rue*, on 6 April 1968. *Les Trois belgique* is, formally, more conventional than *Le Pouvoir dans la rue*; it includes some talking heads with maps, explaining the geographical and linguistics splits in Belgium, and also has a lot more talking-heads-style debates between ostensibly opposing factions (here represented by a Walloon and a Flemish journalist, both speaking in French). But as these journalists are allowed to speak together and at length, both wind up being fairly self-critical; the Walloon journalist, for instance, notes that Flemings are a majority but have a minority complex, whereas the Walloons are a minority but behave like an entitled majority. Tanner also spends time with a family whose young son is in a bi-lingual school but who tells his interviewers that he rarely speaks Flemish for more than an hour a day, as well as with a Walloon priest assigned to a Flemish parish. The portrait that emerges is one defined by paradox, uneasy but sometimes hopeful attempts at mixing, and most importantly an uncertain future. *Les Trois belgique* is very close to *Le Pouvoir dans la rue*, and just as strongly a part of the spirit of '68, if not exactly of the spirit of May, in that through a sober focus on detail and

complexity, it imagines not only the world transformed but also the process of transformation.

I allude here to Berger's famous 1969 essay "The Moment of Cubism," collected in his anthology *The Sense of Sight*. He wrote there that "The Cubists imagined the world transformed, but not the process of transformation" (171). He was picking up there on some of the work that he had done in his equally celebrated and reviled critical biography *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (1965), in which he tried to take account of the degree to which Picasso's true significance has been distorted by the myths that surround him. "The Moment of Cubism" is more broadly philosophical, although like *The Success and Failure of Picasso* it is split between genuine admiration for the radical aspirations of the revolutionaries who are its subject and palatable displeasure with the ways that they have failed to understand that revolutionary idealism in all its complexity and ambiguity. Berger could very well be talking about the stone-throwing student militants of May '68 when he wrote in "The Moment of Cubism" that "the Cubists – during the moment of Cubism – were unconcerned about the personalized human and social implications of what they were doing. This, I think, is because they had to simplify. The problem before them was so complex that their manner of stating it and their trying to solve it absorbed all their attention" (183). Tanner's televisual representation of May '68 is looking for a way past this kind of absorption, towards an understanding of how these events would affect the lives of individual students and faculty members and how it would affect the everyday lives of the people of France. That concern for "the personalized human and social implications" of politics is a driving force of the films that Berger and Tanner made together, and this kind of engagement with these kinds of unpredictably human rather than systematic matters can also be found, as I have tried to show, in some of the theoretical material that Tanner was reading.

Berger has also addressed the legacy of 1968 explicitly, although the fact that he was doing so five years after the events rather than at the moment of their unspooling accounts for the fact that his tone is more defeated than Tanner's in *Le Pouvoir dans la rue*. Writing in 1973, Berger recalled in an essay called "Between Two Colmars" (collected in *About Looking*) how "In 1968, hopes, nurtured more or less underground for years, were born in several places in the world and given their names: and in the same

year, these hopes were categorically defeated. This became clearer in retrospect. At the time many of us tried to shield ourselves from the harshness of the truth" (127). Berger was actually writing there about Grünewald's sixteenth-century altarpiece depicting the life of Christ, a work of art that he believes embodies a very radical understanding of love, a vision at odds with a technocratic, "normalized" society. This essay, really, is a blueprint for *Le Milieu du monde*, a film that is precisely about the tensions between love, passion, and "normalization," and I will return to the essay in more detail in Chapter 3, by way of explaining just how closely linked to the memories of 1968 that film really is. But the vision of the possibilities of 1968 that Berger lays out in this "Between Two Colmars" text is also important for coming to terms with the way that both Berger and Tanner understood these events and their legacy. No doubt that the possibilities that were released during that year were very radical. But an acceptance of the failure of that idealism comes with its own radical possibilities. "In 1963 the light in the other panels seemed to me frail and artificial," Berger writes of Grünewald's representation of Alsatian peasants fleeing across an empty, dark plain. "In 1973 I thought I saw that the light in these panels accords with the essential experience of light" (132). That kind of rigorous attention to the political, historical, and ethical quality of formal matters is consistent with a lot of idealism that we find in the pages of the *Cahiers* in the period directly following the strikes of May '68. Berger's understanding of the crisis at the heart of these images is transformed not by their subject matter but by his ability to read the image as a semi-abstract portrait of people looking for light *as such*, rather than inadequately realistic depiction of a part of Europe's historical narrative. But the reason that Berger is so valuable for a politically conscious theory and criticism is because he is unwilling to abandon criticism, unwilling to abandon what Susan Sontag, in the slightly cryptic final sentence of her 1964 essay "Against Interpretation," called the erotics of art (14), the sensation that occurs when two bodies – the viewer and the work of art – come into sensual, fully aware contact with one another. The following year Berger wrote in just these terms in *The Success and Failure of Picasso*, arguing that painting "is the most immediately sensuous of the arts. Body to body. One of them being the spectator's" (208). Berger's method – in his criticism, his novels, and his films – has always eschewed didacticism, focussing instead on just this fluid, shifting nature

of understanding. He has shown throughout his career the insight that he offered upon reviewing one of Tanner's first films for the British film magazine *Sight and Sound* in 1957: cultivating righteous outrage over injustice by trying to "shock" the viewer or reader is a product of the same mindset that tries to normalize social relations by handing out bland platitudes. Art cannot change the world directly; that is mere propaganda. Berger, who like Jonas Lavin, has lived with propaganda for his entire life, rejects such sterilization. For him and Tanner, as for the *Cahiers* critics, "eroticism is the essentially figurative reality of the cinema that unfolds before us."

La Suisse

"[As] a people, the Swiss are among the least revolutionary in Europe. They do not believe in *ex nihilo* constructions on an empty slate. Their temperament inclines them and their economy obliges them to reform what already exists and 'what's always worked,' rather than expose themselves to the risks of destroying best practices through abuse." – Denis de Rougemont, *La Suisse, ou l'histoire d'une peuple heureux* (135–36)³²

"The motif that ties together these diversified forms of inquiry over fifteen centuries is one of an enduring struggle to preserve the special freedom that came to characterize the self-governing alpine community – a struggle that pitted a handful of uniquely autonomous villages against feudalism, ecclesiastical tyranny, empire, corruption, foreign aggression, confederal integration, centralizing federalism, and finally against modernity itself as expressed in the aspirations of materialistic consumer capitalism in its most centralized, egalitarian form." – Benjamin Barber, *The Death of Communal Liberty: A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton* (18)

Of course, France was not the only place where one has to look to understand the work that Tanner and Berger were doing together. During the

1960s and 70s both men lived in Geneva – Tanner’s family had been established in Geneva for several generations, while Berger had moved there following his then-partner, who worked as an interpreter at the UN. It is a truism in Switzerland the Genèvois tend to look to France, being surrounded on all sides by it as they are. Certainly this is true to some extent of both Tanner – keenly interested in theoretical writing that was basically coming from France, and in the events of Paris 1968 – and of Berger – who now lives in a small alpine village in France, where he has produced major works of literature about the region. But like most truisms, this sense of the non-Swiss-ness of the Genèvois is not really true at all, and not true of the films that Tanner and Berger made either. We can see this in a few key areas: a politics that is caught between individual liberty and the very real demands of collectives; their interest in Switzerland’s distinctive landscape and the politics that go along with that landscape; and the explanatory value of making an analogy between their work and that of two great (but very different) Swiss novelists, Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz and Jacques Chessex.

The tension in Tanner and Berger’s work between individualist and collectivist sensibilities is, in many ways, at the heart of Swiss political life. Switzerland is made up of twenty-six cantons, to which most political responsibilities are devolved. As federations go, Switzerland is an exceptionally weak one, with the central government having relatively little authority beyond monetary, foreign, and military policy.³³ Denis de Rougemont, in his widely popular history of Switzerland, *La Suisse, ou l’histoire d’un peuple heureux*, imagines a chance meeting of “A peasant yodeler from Appenzell, a socialist worker from Berne, and a comfortable banker from Geneva” at some train station cafe, a meeting which he jokes is basically impossible. Although they would have little to say to each other, de Rougemont argues, “The three each know they are Swiss, not because of some common quality, whether natural, cultural (language, race, religion, character, etc.), which they would indeed be lacking, but because they are placed in the same *grouping* that we have called ‘Swiss,’ and which they agree to. And when you understand that, you understand federalism” (122).³⁴ I suspect that this looseness is part of what has led Tanner to say things like “The Swiss do not form a people, and do not have a culture, but attach themselves to a bunch of others” (*Ciné-mélanges* 84), or that “francophone Swiss grouchiness or this unfortunate ‘Swissness’ doesn’t interest anybody anymore, least of all me”

(Dimitriu interview, 109).³⁵ For his part Berger, when I spoke with him on the phone on 20 October 2009, said that when he was living in Geneva in the 1960s and 70s he was interested in Switzerland just as anyone would naturally be interested in the place where they lived, but that the culture and history of the country were not especially important to his work of the period. And while he said in a 1985 interview with Richard Appignanesi that “it’s very easy to knock Switzerland” and that there were some interesting aspects to the country (such as the fact that “this is a civilian people’s army, one in which the soldiers keep their own arms, democratically, in their homes”), he finally concluded that “Switzerland, as a country, interests me less” than it did Tanner, whom he saw as having “a love/hate relationship” with the place (302). Indeed, Tanner told Lenny Rubenstein in that 1975 interview that “I think the center of my films will always be Switzerland” (104). But he was quite dismissive about the matter of Swiss identity with me during a phone conversation of 7 November 2009, even more so than he was in *Ciné-mélanges* or his interview with Dimitriu. He told me, in a very kind and jovial way, that the idea of Swiss culture meant absolutely nothing to him and that my desire to read his work as having very Swiss qualities was, basically, ridiculous. When I told him that his attitude towards Swiss identity sounded a lot like the way many English-Canadians, and many English-Canadian filmmakers for sure, talk about Canadian identity, he seemed delighted by the analogy. It is one that had already been offered by James Monaco, thirty-five years earlier, in his interview/article on Tanner about the North American release of *Le Milieu du monde*. Describing the state of French-language Swiss filmmaking in the early 1970s, Monaco wrote that “The situation is not unlike the relationship between English-speaking Canadian filmmakers and the U.S. film industry, and Geneva may yet become just another training ground for workers in the French film industry” (31).

But just as I reject the idea that there is no English-Canadian identity outside of bland pieties about infinite diversity, I don’t accept the idea that there is no Swiss identity outside of everyone agreeing that there is no Swiss identity. Barber writes that “the decentralization of Switzerland presents us with a paradox: in attracting us to the land as a fit subject for study, it repels our attentions with the reality that, by the very nature of its diversity and decentralization, it does not exist.... Diversity is Switzerland’s essence,

drawing our interest, yet defeating our inquiries” (11–12). But I am not easily defeated, and neither, I hasten to add, is Barber. One crucial aspect of the Swiss experience is the way that its political life has been a non-stop challenge to liberalism: sometimes from the right, and sometimes from the left. Barber argues that this is one of the reasons that those interested in political philosophy have a lot to learn from the Helvetic Confederation. He writes that his task in his study of the canton of Graubünden is to explain “the Swiss vision of political reality that, while it evolved within the familiar framework of Western political history, is strikingly inhospitable to the familiar predilections of Western political theory – at least in its liberal variations” (9). One of these challenges to liberalism, and the one that is most interesting for the purposes of Berger and Tanner’s work together, is the way in which the needs of individuals are always held in difficult balance with those of collectives. This is at the very heart of *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas*, and it underwrites a great deal of *La Salamandre* as well; it is also an important part of the television work that the two did together. Barber argues that it is at the heart of Switzerland’s political culture as well, writing that “in Switzerland, freedom has been understandable only in the context of community” (11). At the macro-political level “community” can be taken to mean canton, or, really, commune (in French, the word “commune” is often taken for city, town, or village), which de Rougemont is at pains to point out is the real basis of the Swiss political system (his history has a section called “La Commune : un petit état” [109–23]). But the word can also mean the sorts of informal collectives that people form for reasons of friendship or shared marginalization (as in *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l’an 2000*), or simply the connections between strangers and casual friends which must be recognized and maintained in the name of social harmony (as in *La Salamandre*). Each of Berger and Tanner’s films are about the quest for individual expression and fulfillment, but they are equally about the ties that (sometimes improbably, sometimes passionately) bind people together, and the dialectics between those ties and those individual quests. What is clear throughout is the inseparability of those two elements of the dialectic. In all of their work together, freedom is only understandable in the context of community.

Another aspect of Berger and Tanner’s work together which is inescapably Swiss is the way that they have looked upon the nature of militant

political action; it seems to be defined precisely by the seemingly contradictory politics embodied by the two quotes that open this section. In fact these two senses of Swiss politics are not contradictory at all; de Rougemont's belief that the Swiss are Europe's least revolutionary people is quite consistent with Barber's sense of Swiss history as being a constant struggle for freedom. The part of modern Swiss history that illustrates this most vividly was everywhere in the air, at least in Switzerland when Berger and Tanner were starting to work together: Jura.

The Jura mountains are in both France and Switzerland, and on the Swiss side, in the 1960s and 70s, they were synonymous with the spectre of political instability. From the period following the Napoleonic wars until 1974, most of the Swiss Jura had been part of the canton of Berne. Berne, however, is a German-speaking canton, and the population of the Jura is overwhelmingly francophone. Claude Hauser has written an invaluable history of the movement to separate Jura from Berne, which did indeed occur following an initial referendum on 23 June 1974, a series of smaller referenda in the next few years which allowed communes to opt out of the new canton, and a final referendum at the federal level in 1978 (the canton officially came into being on 1 January 1979). In that book *L'Aventure du Jura*, Hauser traces the progression from a basically conservative, sometimes ultra-Catholic semi-nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century to a left-of-centre movement which sought "contacts with 'brother' movements struggling for the defence of French-speaking minorities, be they in Belgium, Italy, or even in Quebec" (92).³⁶ It is necessary, though, to distinguish between, say, Quebec separatism and Jurassian "separatism." I put "separatism" in scepticism-quotes because, although that is the term (*séparatisme*) that is always used when discussing the push for a canton of Jura that was indeed separate from the canton of Berne, the idea that Jura would separate from Switzerland was more or less never part of the discourse. Indeed, very much the opposite was the case. Jura separatists often stressed their Swiss patriotism, sometimes pointing to the particularly strong tradition of military service in the area. One influential bloc of the movement styled itself as "helvétistes," and it was comprised mostly of young left-of-centre activists and intellectuals; in Quebec of the same era they'd have been péquistes, except that in the Swiss case the idea of leaving confederation was unthinkable.

I remind the reader here that Tanner had, in 1968, made a television film about the French-speaking minority in Belgium in that most *luttant* year of 1968, and I point out now that three years earlier he had also made a film for SSR called *L'Indépendance au loin* (broadcast on 30 September 1965), which dealt with the rise of “separatism” in Jura. Tanner’s Jura film is structured basically as a montage, with interviews of a few young “separatists” being cross-cut with an anti-“separatist” cantonal councillor from Berne and the editor of the *Gazette de Lausanne*, who is basically supportive of “Jura Libre” but who has a slightly sceptical tone. Dimitriu writes of the film that “what counts is not what is said but what is left out. It’s above all through montage that the filmmaker expresses his point of view” (23).³⁷ I’m not quite sure what Dimitriu is alluding to here, although I suppose it could refer to Tanner’s not reporting on the sectarian violence that had characterized a lot of mainstream media coverage of the Jura conflict. The film overall is basically pro-Jura-libre, with the Bernese councillor coming off as slightly uptight and paranoid, especially in contrast with the younger “separatists.” But overall it is relatively even-handed and is, like *Le Pouvoir dans la rue*, a very sober analysis of a situation that, in the French and Swiss press of the 1960s and 70s, had been reported in a way that was often quite sensationalistic, emphasizing the violence of the movement (an example of this would be SSR’s own report of 5 October 1963 on the bombing of the Berner Kantonbank in Delémont, which would become the eventual capital of Canton Jura³⁸). Tanner presents Jura as a place where identity is genuinely shifting and a struggle against centralization is definitely unfolding. But there are no revolutions here.

In the Switzerland of the 1960s and 70s, the term “Jura” connoted challenges to traditions of Swiss federalism along with an insurgent view of the possibilities of *la Francophonie*. Berger would go on to write about the region in these terms, in a 1978 essay called “Courbet and the Jura” (collected in *About Looking*). Here he is talking about the French side of the Jura mountains, but his view of it is certainly consistent with the significance that it held for most Swiss in the period leading up to the creation of the new canton. “To grow up surrounded by such rocks is to grow up in a region which is both lawless and irreducibly real,” Berger writes of Courbet’s sense of place as reflected in his paintings (137–38). A bit later Berger writes that “The hunter from the Jura, the rural democrat and the bandit painter

came together in the same artist for a few years between 1848 and 1856 to produce some shocking and new images" (140). Is this spirit of rebellion, like the mixture of democracy, banditry, and self-sufficiency that Berger saw coming together in Courbet, so far from the idealism of May '68? I don't think so, and I am struck by the way that Tanner casually invoked the region when he reflected, in 2008, on the way that "les événements" had affected his work. Linking the success of *La Salamandre* to memories of the period, he recalled that "Just before, there was *Charles mort ou vif* which, made 500 kilometres from Paris, with Jura as its setting, echoing it" (107).³⁹ *Charles mort ou vif's* anti-hero Charles Dé not only retreats to the Jura mountains in search of an escape from his captain-of-industry lifestyle (he owns a successful watchmaker), but also recalls how his *horloger* grandfather was part of an anarchist commune in those mountains in the nineteenth century (Jura is equally famous for its traditions of radical politics and watch-making).

Thus it is not surprising that two of the three films that Berger and Tanner made together have some connection to "the Jura," although not explicitly to the canton of Jura. There is a long section in *La Salamandre* that takes place in an area that the film describes as the mountains on the French border; although this could very well be the canton of Vaud, Neuchâtel, Jura/Berne (this being 1971 a canton of Jura didn't exist yet), or Basel, this can only be the Jura mountains. *Le Milieu du monde* is set in the canton of Vaud, but again, the mountains that loom so heavy over the film's visuals are the Jura. Thus I am not trying to say that Berger and Tanner were dealing explicitly with the specifics of the Jura situation; you cannot glean, from the work they made together, a sense of whether Jura-Sud should or should not remain part of Canton Berne. Rather, their films visualize the mountains, not as some repository of timeless, unchanging purity, but instead as border zones, places where the culture is strongly anti-conformist and the politics, more often than not, quite unstable. To invoke the Jura as the signifier of such volatility is a very Swiss way of seeing the landscape.

Another Swiss author who saw the mountains as the home of a culture that was engaging with modernity head-on was Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz (1878–1947), probably French-speaking Switzerland's most celebrated novelist. Ramuz's place in Swiss letters is roughly equivalent to that of W.O. Mitchell's in English Canada, Dylan Thomas' in Britain, or J.M. Synge's

in Ireland. His interest was in rural communities and the landscapes that surrounded them, and he moved beyond the romanticism of the late nineteenth century to offer a poetic but often mournful, and in many ways critical, vision of the ways that modernity was intruding on these places and the people who lived in them. One of his clearest literary heirs is, I would argue, John Berger. Berger's novels have evoked the Alpine peasantry in ways that owe a lot to the richly detailed dialogues of Ramuz, to the ways in which the Swiss master tries to lay out social and cultural realities by patiently evoking his characters as they chew over the details of their everyday lives. Illustrating the alienation of old men in from the village life that they spent a lifetime creating, Ramuz's 1946 short story "Vieux dans une salle à boire" (collected in *Les Servants et autres nouvelles*) describes the following scene:

— Hey, Gailloud, you've got a son, you've even got two. What do you think of this?

— They didn't turn out too bad.

— Yeah, but tell us now, their habits, the way they dress. What do they smoke?

— Cigarettes.

— You see; me, the pipe, and you, the cigar. Cigarettes, they cost a lot, they don't last, and moreover, they're stringy. You light your pipe once and you stick it in the corner of your mouth, and you don't have to think about it anymore. What's more, a pack of tobacco costs forty centimes. Lads today spend up to a franc and more for a packet of these paper things that get burned up ten times as fast. Lads today, they smoke while they work. They always have their hands busy. I don't like that so much. You? (*Les Servants et autres nouvelles*, 27)⁴⁰

Berger's 1979 novel *Pig Earth*, which evoked the lives of peasants in a French alpine village, has a very similar tendency to spin out larger themes of alienation and loneliness that stem from a change in everyday patterns of life: in how you spend your money, how busy you keep yourself, and your habits:

My sons won't work on the farm. They want to have free weekends and holidays and fixed hours. They like to have money in their pockets so as to be able to spend it. They have gone to earn money, and are mad about it. Michel has gone to work in a factory. Edouard has gone into commerce. (He used the term commerce because he did not wish to be harsh towards his youngest son.) I believe they are mistaken. Selling things all day, working forty-five hours a week in a factory is no life for a man – jobs like that lead to ignorance. (74–75)

The analysis of how working patterns have changed in the young is, between the two authors, basically opposite, even if their analysis of the importance of money is more or less the same. What is striking, though, is Berger and Ramuz's shared desire to evoke the spiritual crises of the European peasantry through detailed accounts of their material existence. Where do they work, how do they work, and why? How do they choose to spend their money, and why? These are far from trivial questions, matters added in for "local colour" or simply to flesh a character out. Berger inherits from Ramuz an abiding engagement with the uses of realism for the purposes of vigorous, often critical social analysis.

But the Berger-Ramuz connection that is most relevant for the purposes of a discussion of Berger's work in cinema is certainly that between Berger's paean to the power of cinema "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" (collected in *Keeping a Rendezvous*, and originally published in English in *Sight and Sound* in June 1991) and Ramuz's 1924 novel *L'Amour du monde*. The earlier work concerns the arrival of cinema in a small mountain town in Vaud, and the simultaneous appearance of a mysterious man whom the villagers believe is Jesus Christ. "It was towards the end of May; all the windows were open. The man walked down the street: heads in each place turned to look out those windows. He was tall, he was handsome, he had broad shoulders; he had a full beard, he had long hair" (14).⁴¹ This is how Berger, in that "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" essay, describes Giotto's chapel paintings of the life of Christ: "Everywhere the expressions and gestures are charged with intense meaning – like those in silent films. Giotto was a realist and a great *metteur en scène*. The scenes, which follow one after another, are full of stark material details, taken from life" (13). That's true of Ramuz's prose

in the passage I just quoted as well as throughout this book, a book that is about the simultaneous convergence of silent cinema and images of Christ. Berger and Ramuz also talk about cinema's power to transport in very similar terms. In "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye," we read:

Imagine a cinema screen being installed in the Scrovegni Chapel and a film being projected on to it. Let's say the scene where the angel appears to the shepherds to announce Christ's birth at Bethlehem.... Watching this film, we would be transported *out* of the chapel to a field somewhere at night, where shepherds are lying in the grass. The cinema, because its images are moving, takes us *away* from where we are to the *scene of action*. (Action! murmurs or shouts the director to set the scene in motion.) Painting brings home. The cinema transports elsewhere. (14)

Sixty-six years earlier, Ramuz had discovered in cinema a very similar power. Early in *L'Amour du monde*, he writes of how at the cinema, "there, we start with a bit of piano, and then a window is opened, at the head of the theatre, on the world" (26).⁴² Later on, recalling the sensations of the projector starting up, he writes that:

Because now, the whole world is ours, if we want; all the centuries are ours, all of space; it's dizzying, but it's good, it makes us turn our heads, but it's good; in the heat, under the low sky, under the dark sky, between the houses with darkened windows; coming out around eleven o'clock, in small groups, man and woman, two or three young people together, girls and boys together, solitary men, solitary women; they are quiet, they talk all of the sudden.... (104)⁴³

This collision between the insularity of the village or the chapel is, of course, a sort of echo of the collision between ancient religious imagery of Christ and the modernity of the cinematic image. In Berger's and Ramuz's work alike, this collision is creative, evocative of a world that is struggling to be born, struggling to reveal its riches. It is a rejoinder to critics of either Berger or Ramuz who would paint them as nostalgic or backward-looking,

on the basis of passages that I quoted earlier. Both wrote novels that were defined by a dialectic between tradition and modernity, novels that were struggling, however incompletely, to evoke the synthesis that comes about when the two concepts come into collision.

Although one of Tanner's first films was about Ramuz (the poetic 1961 documentary *Ramuz : passage d'un poète*, where we find Tanner's most affectionate treatment of the Swiss landscape), there is a better literary analogy to be made with his work: that of Jacques Chessex (1934–2009). Chessex is a *very* different writer from Ramuz. Whereas Ramuz was a figure stuck between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chessex was very much a child of the twentieth and was writing not about the ravages of modernity but about the ways in which the bourgeoisie – sometimes in Switzerland, sometimes elsewhere – had evolved into a class that was essentially parasitic, unable to create and unable to reflect. I feel some obligation to recall at this point that in our phone conversation of 7 November 2009, Tanner identified (again, in a very pleasant, jovial way) my desire to link him with the work of Jacques Chessex as the single most ridiculous part of my plans for this book. He said that he recalled reading only one novel by Chessex many years ago; he couldn't remember which novel that was, but he said he found it utterly foreign.⁴⁴ But like Tanner's disavowal of Swiss identity, I remain convinced that there is a connection in his work to what was going on around him; Chessex, whether Tanner recalls reading him or not, was a very big part of what was going on in French-language Swiss literature during the period that he was working. Schaub, in *L'Usage de la liberté*, has pointed out that "It's at the beginning of the 1960s that the young Swiss literature began to more sharply observe the everyday life of Switzerland, the 'malaise' to use the term that belongs to that moment, even when they choose themes that are not of that period" (8–9), and for him this is indicative of the wider restlessness in Swiss culture, of which the Nouveau cinéma suisse, very much including Tanner, is a part.⁴⁵ Schaub then rattles off an entirely German-language list of prominent authors of the period, which wouldn't be so surprising given that his book was originally written in German, except that he also claims that "le mouvement était plus timide en Suisse romande" (9–10). I'm not sure what leads him to say that, for it was during this period in French-speaking Switzerland (generally known as Suisse Romande) that Chessex, who was a youngish novelist (he was four

years older than Tanner), was rising to prominence. He remains the only Swiss author to have won the Prix Goncourt, which he was awarded in 1973 for his novel *L'Ogre*. Chessex's books were not usually set "hors du temps," as Schaub writes, but they were sometimes set outside of Switzerland. That is true of his first novel, 1963's *La Tête ouverte*, which I think has a very real kinship with Tanner's work of this period. The novel is about a young man stuck living in a cheap pension near the French seaside, a young man who chafes both at the uprightness of his landlady and at the philistinism of the lower-middle-class people with whom he shares the pension. At one point Chessex reproduces the angry note that the landlady leaves for her slacker boarder: "Sir, This isn't working anymore, I cannot have in my home someone who doesn't come to meals, we prepare only enough for the number of people we have here and after this consideration we have to throw out the food and also we can't make your bed at the same time as everyone else's because you get up at noon. This is to say nothing of the guests who have seen you come in during the night with someone think of the impression that this gives to customers in a respectable and reputable House" (58).⁴⁶ As an evocation of the self-confident pettiness of the petite-bourgeoisie this is quite efficient, and its run-on sentences and careless errors in grammar hint at the philistinism of the class as well. Passages like this one lead me, almost viscerally, to the scene in *La Salamandre* where the young journalist Pierre interviews the small-town, petite-bourgeois uncle who the title character has claimed to have shot. He recalls how Rosemonde, a.k.a. The Salamander, had been sent to live with him by her parents at the age of fifteen, "so she could take her classes in the town. And also because it was one less mouth to feed (*pause*). At fifteen, she started hanging around with little hoodlums, ... was getting up at ten o'clock in the morning, and, finally, that leads to crime" (*L'Avant-scène cinéma*, 17).⁴⁷ That the spectre of sleepy young people would provoke such fear and loathing is a fairly sharp indictment of the state of the middle class in the French-speaking world of the 1960s and 70s. Tanner, like Chessex, sees this sort of neurotic small-mindedness as central to what had to change in Swiss society of the 1960s. But both are equally critical of the way that it was being changed by the youth of the period. Chessex's young anti-hero is self-absorbed and a bit paranoid, and in many ways is little better than the burgers who torment him. Likewise, The Salamander's actions are far from being revolutionary, and really end

up signifying little more than the disconnection that lies at the heart of contemporary Swiss life. Both Tanner and Chessex are thus consistent with what Schaub saw as a sensibility that was found in literature and cinema alike: a new attention, not only to the everyday life of Switzerland, but to her relentlessly everyday malaise as well.

What I have been trying to argue here is in no way inconsistent with Tanner's own indictment in *Ciné-mélanges* of the Office fédéral de la culture's desire to create a Swiss cinema that "tried to re-launch the idea of a ridiculous cultural patriotism that now gave us back our winning spirit, exactly like you did for soccer players" (85), or his statement in his interview with Dimitriu that "The Swiss landscape is terribly domesticated, marked out by clean-scrubbed indicators of a nearly hysterical passion for petite-bourgeois values and the order that follows from them" (109).⁴⁸ The fact that Berger and Tanner's work is utterly free of the "moral de gagnieurs" that Tanner invokes does not mean that it is unaffected by the distinct history and culture of Switzerland, and his and Berger's representation of the Swiss mountains as spaces of political and cultural instability is a direct challenge to the – yes, very Swiss! – notion of a domesticated landscape. One finds throughout their work a palatable tension between individual liberty and shared obligation, between responsibility and agency. The fact that such concepts are held in permanent tension is a big part of the work's connection to Swiss culture. And they are far from the only Swiss artists to see the world in this way, even if they are still offering slightly different analyses or emphases from those of Ramuz and Chessex. Switzerland is a complex country whose distinctive political culture offers, and certainly offered in the 1970s, a very vigorous challenge to liberalism. That Berger and Tanner were offering such a challenge from a critical-left position does not make them any less a part of this Swiss project.

Enlighten me

The way to synthesize all of these concerns that I have argued here are central to the work Berger and Tanner did together is, I believe, to see them as part of the legacy of the Enlightenment. The desire to balance the rational and the emotional, and to do so in a way that requires sustained critical

activity on the part of the reader, is a seminal part of the Enlightenment idea. And the desire to marshal this critical activity towards an experience that is educational in the best sense (as in without any trace of reductive didacticism) is as central to the product of the Enlightenment as it is to that of Berger and Tanner. There is no doubt that the shadow of Rousseau, and specifically his 1762 treatise on education, *Émile*, hangs heavy over Berger and Tanner's collective work. Rousseau's *Du Contrat sociale* is one of the many texts quoted in the commentary of *Une Ville à Chandigarh* and is the only non-twentieth-century work that is invoked in this quotation-rich film. But it is especially true, of course, of *Jonas*, a film which is set in Rousseau's hometown of Geneva and its surrounding countryside, which self-consciously evokes *Émile*, and where Rousseau is often evoked explicitly through images of his statue or mentions from the characters. I will deal with the Rousseau connection in the chapter on *Jonas*. But the comparison that I think is more fecund for all of the work Berger and Tanner have done together, and to which I will return, is that of Voltaire, and specifically his 1759 *Candide, ou, l'optimisme*.⁴⁹

Frédéric Bas also poses this *Candide* connection in his afterword to Tanner's *Ciné-mélanges*, which he titles "Tanner ou l'optimisme." He recalls there that *Candide* was one of Brecht's favourite books, partially because its sustained irony offered a blueprint for his ideas about distanciation, but also because it is defined "on one hand, by the innocence and optimism of the characters; on the other, by the horrors of the world. Between these two states, the space that is opened up for the reader is that of a conscience. At the same time, Tanner's cinema evinces a fundamental innocence, freed from the desires of its characters at the same time that it denotes extreme fragility. Tanner, 'cruel and kind, naïve and cunning.' Tanner, ou l'Optimisme" (170).⁵⁰ The tension between innocence/optimism and horror has an echo in the tension between tragedy and comedy, a dialectic that is also at the core of all of Tanner and Berger's work and that is explicitly part of *Candide*:

Imagine every possible contradiction and inconsistency, and you will find them in the government, the law-courts, the churches, and in the whole life of this absurd nation.

“Is it true,” asked Candide, “that people in Paris are always laughing?”

“Yes,” said the *abbé*, “but they are laughing through vexation; for they complain of everything with loud bursts of laughter, just as they laugh while they commit the most detestable crimes.” (99–100)⁵¹

The contradictions of the state, the political sphere, the marketplace, and the media are the basically parallel concerns of the films Berger and Tanner made together. But it is not only their subject matter that is Voltairian; their sensibility is just as close to their eighteenth-century predecessor. Like Voltaire they approach these collisions between the horrible and the possible, not through didacticism or manipulated outrage, but through humour and pathos. Yes, you often laugh in these films, but you are laughing through vexation, laughing at the most detestable crimes.

This tension between laughter and criticism is something that Tzvetan Todorov places at the heart of the Enlightenment’s ideology. He writes in his book *L’Esprit des Lumières* that among Enlightenment thinkers, “Reason is valued as a tool of understanding, not as a motive for human behaviour; it is opposed to faith, not passion” (13).⁵² Thus we come back to Sylvie Pierre’s ideas about what is really important about montage: it allows occasional escape from reason into the realm of passion. Berger and Tanner’s work (and this is true both of the films they made together and their production independent of one another) uses the fragmented aesthetic so often associated with montage as often as it insists on an intense, studied realism. What is consistent throughout, though, is this “spirit of montage,” this openness to contradiction and complexity that allows the opening up, in the mind of the spectator, of a third space of synthesis: the space of conscience. Recognizing this “opening up” allows us to see them not only as products of Swiss culture (which I will to continue to argue is the case) but also as the product of a deeply European sensibility. “Thus we can say without exaggeration: without Europe, no Enlightenment; but also, without the Enlightenment, no Europe,” writes Todorov (139).⁵³ This European-Enlightenment heritage begins with Voltaire but also moves through the drafters of the modern Swiss confederation (which, while having roots that go back as early as the thirteenth century is basically a nineteenth-century creation;

the federal constitution that created modern Switzerland was finalized in 1848), through Eisenstein, Ramuz, Brecht, the rebels of 1968, and, indeed, John Berger and Alain Tanner. Their work together was genuinely distinctive, but it also needs to be understood as part of this continuum. To put it in Benjamin Barber's Swiss terms, their innovative filmmaking can only be understood in the context of their communities. Without the richness of both European and Swiss culture and history, no Berger and Tanner; but without Berger and Tanner, European and Swiss culture alike would be nowhere near as rich.

Notes

- 1 “... il me paraît essentiel de rappeler la colonisation qui pesait sur tous les médias de cette époque, comme d’ailleurs sur la musique, la mode et même la littérature.”
- 2 *Nice Time* deserves a chapter unto itself, in no small part because of this *semi-vérité* quality. Like a lot of early vérité, it feels a lot more direct than it really is. The key element of cinéma vérité, or direct cinema, or whatever one wishes to call the more spontaneous documentary practice of the late 1950s and 1960s, is synchronous sound. And like contemporary films such as Michel Brault and Gilles Groulx’s *Les Racquetteurs* (Quebec, 1959) or Robert Drew’s *Primary* (USA, 1960), there is actually a fairly small amount of synch sound in *Nice Time*. Like *Primary* or *Les Racquetteurs*, it is mostly comprised of *wild* sound, obviously taken in the same locations as the images but very rarely in actual synchronization with those images. The *aesthetic* gestures of vérité are present in all of these films – long takes, hand-held camera, complex and sometimes over-crowded compositions – but the actual technology of spontaneous sound documentary is clearly still something of a work in progress. I will discuss this transitional quality of Tanner’s early films in the next chapter.
- 3 “Pourtant, lorsque j’ai présenté *Charles* au public français, il a été reçu comme un film « incroyablement exotique »!”
- 4 “Mais ça était un peu choc de vivre à Paris après Londres. Terminées la générosité, la chaleur amicale des cercles londoniens. A Paris c’était chacun pour soi et le couteau tiré. Un monde clos, et plus la nouvelle vague pour moi qui sortait d’un bain très politisé c’était un peu trop « anarchiste de droite ». J’ai collaboré aux *Cahiers du cinéma* mais tout le monde était sur ses gardes.”
- 5 “D’après lui, les membres de la Nouvelle Vague sont imprégnés d’un « fascisme intellectuel ». Leur philosophie est le nihilisme. Ils mettent en scène la mentalité de la jeune génération, farouchement éprise de liberté et fascinée par la mort, la violence, l’amou fou.... L’auteur considère que les films de la Nouvelle Vague sont anticonformistes, anticommunistes, antidémocratiques, et anti-socialistes.”
- 6 “J’abrège : en 1962, une loi d’aide au cinéma est entrée en vigueur, devant être appliquée par une commission fédérale, alors en formation. Sur vingt-sept membres, aucun cinéaste. Les quelques réalisateurs qui travaillent alors dans ce pays, pas plus de cinq ou six, demandèrent d’occuper au moins un siège dans cette commission. Mais pour ce faire, il fallait représenter une association. En toute hâte, nous avons alors créé l’Association suisse des réalisateurs, dont j’avais pris l’initiative et donc la présidence. L’administration accepta de nous donner *in extremis* un strapontin et je me retrouvai dès lors membres de cette commission fraîchement élue. Le cauchemar commençait.... Nous avons suivi de près l’éclosion de nouvelles cinématographiques en France, en Tchécoslovaquie, au Québec, en Pologne, au Brésil, et ailleurs. Le cinéma était en état d’ébullition dans le monde, et les vingt-six autres membres de la Commission fédérale

- du cinéma n'en savait apparemment rien."
- 7 "En Suisse romande, il n'y avait jamais eu du cinéma... À cette époque, il n'y avait rien du tout en Suisse." Tanner gives a much more interesting and well-informed discussion of the history of Swiss cinema in the interview he gave to *Cahiers du cinéma* upon the release of *Charles mort ou vif*. He points out there, for instance, that during WWII a Swiss cinema in *Schweizerdeutsch* the Swiss dialect of German, was relatively strong, because the country's borders were sealed off. He notes that this sort of cinema ceased to exist after the war, and that it never really existed in French. See Delahaye, Eisenschitz and Narboni interview, 26.
- 8 "Tout de suite, on remarque à la lecture de cette loi d'aide qu'elle est terriblement restrictive, puisqu'elle ne prévoit une aide à la réalisation qu'aux films 'documentaires, culturels, ou éducatifs'... et qu'elle excepte les œuvres de fiction."
- 9 "La naissance d'un cinéma suisse relève donc moins, d'abord, d'un problème financier que d'un problème de climat intellectuel et spirituel."
- 10 "La date n'est pas un pur hasard. On a alors pu mettre la main sur un outil de travail, en fait, une branche de la télévision. Nous n'avons aucune envie de créer une industrie du cinéma, de faire du cinéma commercial... Mais dans l'esprit de l'époque, on pouvait tout inventer à partir de zéro : les moyens de production, les rapports de travail avec les techniciens qui étaient tous très jeunes."
- 11 "L'avantage principal qu'offrent donc (pour Tanner en particulier) les accords Groupe 5 et TV, c'est précisément d'ignorer le contrôle sur la production. Une fois le sujet admis, le réalisateur est le propre producteur de son film et il dispose de 60,000 francs sonnants dans le cas du premier accord passé avec la Télévision en 1968."
- 12 "Un jour, en discutant avec une classe d'une école de cinéma, je posai aux étudiants la colle suivant : « Savez-vous pourquoi on dit que le découpage est 'de droite' et le montage 'de gauche' ? » Silence effaré dans les rangs. Trente ans plus tôt, quelqu'un aurait eu la réponse, et aujourd'hui, c'est comme j'avais parlé chinois."
- 13 Good introductions to the specifically cinematic legacy of May '68 can be found in both French and English; see Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1980) and Antoine de Baecque et al., *Cinéma 68*, which I mention a bit later.
- 14 The conference produced a document, collectively authored by a group led Jean-Louis Comolli, which outlined in considerable detail (there are a number of charts) the role that cinema would play in a revolutionized society. That was published in *Cahiers du cinéma* 203 (August 1968), and was translated into English in *Screen* 13, no. 4 (1972).
- 15 "Dans les années 1960-70, j'ai beaucoup fréquenté les écrits théorétiques sur le cinéma, et ceux de Brecht sur le théâtre, mais qu'on ne pouvait parfaitement appliquer à notre travail. On était alors à l'époque où l'on cherchait surtout à déconstruire la

- narration traditionnelle en vigueur dans la cinématographie dominante, et à la reconstruire ensuite selon un autre schéma, c'est-à-dire à remettre à plat les éléments du récit, à les remettre en ordre et en perspective, afin qu'ils produisent clairement leur sens, selon les règles relevant davantage de la dialectique que celles de la dramaturgie classique."
- 16 "Tous les films militants de l'époque sont devenus invisibles aujourd'hui."
- 17 Jean Narboni's review of *Z* in *Cahiers du cinéma* (published in 1969 as "Le Pirée pour un homme") is legendary because it argued that Costa-Gavras' commercially popular and critically acclaimed film was a perfect example of what an emerging political cinema should not be. "Militant?" scoffs Narboni. "Maybe like singers' shows can be, but like them it's mystifying, because it has defined neither an object of study, nor the means to produce it" ["Militant? Comme peuvent l'être peut-être les spectacles de chansonniers, mais comme eux mystifiant : pour n'avoir pas défini un objet d'étude, ni les moyens de le produire" (55)]. He and Comolli also mention the film in "Cinéma/ idéologie/critique," complaining that it is a bad example of a cinema with political content, "its presentation of politics is unremittingly ideological from first to last" ("Cinema/Ideology/ Criticism," 26–27) ["la politique y étant dès le départ représentée – sans recours – idéologiquement" ("Cinéma/idéologie/critique" 13)].
- 18 "Es ist nicht der Fall – wiewohl es mitunter vorgebracht wurde –, daß episches Theater, das übrigens – wie ebenfalls mitunter vorgebracht – nicht etwa einfach undramatisches Theater ist, den Kampf frucht „hie Vernunft – hie Emotion" (Gefühl) erschallen läßt" ("Formprobleme des Theaters," 254).
- 19 "Para mí las películas de Tavernier o de Costa Gavras son lo peor que existe en cine. Ese cine comercial, de consumo, que retoma los esquemas hollywoodenses, pero con ideas políticas de izquierda, me parece detestable."
- 20 Equally exemplary, although not as well known, are the texts on cinema, technology, and ideology that Comolli published from 1971 to 1972. These were in nos. 229 (May–June 1971), 231 (September 1971), 233 (November 1971), 234–35 (December 1971/January–February 1972), and 241 (September–October 1972). They have recently been collected in his collection *Cinéma contre spectacle*, the first half of which is a sort of intellectual memoir, which makes for very interesting reading. "In short, the question of alienation was, for the *Cahiers* group of the 1970s, a *truly* political matter," he writes, explaining that the post-68 break with its past was not as severe as it might seem in retrospect ["Bref, la question de l'aliénation était pour le groupe des *Cahiers* dans les années soixante-dix une question *vraiment* politique" (78)]. Comolli also recalls in that first section that "Ces six articles ont été traduits en anglais (*Screen* 1974, *Film Reader* 1977)" (12n2).
- 21 "Mais cette « réalité » susceptible d'être reproduite fidèlement, reflétée par des instruments et techniques que, d'ailleurs font partie d'elle, on voit bien qu'elle est idéologique tout entière. En ce sens, la théorie de

- la « transparence » (le classicisme cinématographique) est éminemment réactionnaire” (“Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” pp. 1, 12). I think this is a very strange translation of this passage; as you can see here, Susan Bennett not only embellishes quite a bit from the original but also imposes some serious changes to Comolli and Narboni’s style. It is utterly beyond me how the fairly crisp and clear (if polemical) “la théorie de la « transparence » (le classicisme cinématographique) est éminemment réactionnaire” becomes the florid “the classic theory of cinema that the camera is an impartial instrument which grasps, or rather is impregnated by, the world in its ‘concrete reality’ is an eminently reactionary one.” That would, in a colder translation, simply be “the theory of ‘transparency’ (cinematic classicism) is eminently reactionary.”
- 22 “Il est aujourd’hui évident que la technique du récit est étroitement liée à une idéologie, et pas seulement le récit lui-même.... Elle [l’idéologie] correspond exactement à un type de relations établi par une industrie à la recherche du plus large public possible.”
- 23 “Ni débat, ni table ronde, ni rassemblement d’articles, ni discours unique à plusieurs voix, mais « montage » de fragments critiques.”
- 24 “Ce en quoi, on peut, par opposition, qualifier de « progressiste » le montage eisensteinien, c’est paradoxalement par ce qu’il a plus dictatorial : les passages d’un plan à un autre ôtent au spectateur toute possibilité d’échapper au raisonnement, à la nécessité de se mettre par rapport au plan en état de distance réflexive.”
- 25 “... *le cinéma est un produit idéologique*, son champ de définition et d’exercice est l’idéologie, et non la science” (8).... “Une caméra qui se filme ... cela ne donne ni la science, ni de la théorie, ni du « cinéma matérialiste » : tout au plus est-on en droit de dire que, reflet du reflet, l’idéologie se mire en elle-même” (9).
- 26 “... quelque chose se dit, dans le procès même de ce qui est à la fois la jouissance et la « lecture » du film ... dont on ne peut parler qu’en termes d’érotisme, et qui se donne lui-même comme la représentation la plus approchante du procès même de l’érotisme” (“La Suture, Deuxième partie,” 55).
- 27 “Précieux pour Tanner, pour qui Mai 68 est l’aboutissement d’une longue mise en question de la société, de soi-même et de son métier de cinéaste, et le début d’une nouvelle ère créatrice. Précieux pour la télévision et pour les chercheurs, car les images sont riches d’informations. Ce film est formellement plus sobre, avec un caméra agile, un minimum de travellings et de zooms, un montage plus rapide.”
- 28 “... il est à Paris en mai 1968, où il travaille comme reporter pour la télévision suisse. Il a près de quarante ans et il y a bien longtemps qu’il se méfie des curés d’extrême gauche et de l’idéologie de plomb. À la différence de beaucoup d’autres, il ne pense pas – et il ne pensera jamais – que « la caméra est un fusil ».”
- 29 “Car 68 (ou plutôt mai 68) fut un grand théâtre de rue, avec l’intendance en grève qui attendait que

ça se passe. Et ce qui importe, bien davantage que « les événements », ce sont les retombées, dans la mesure justement où ce théâtre mis en scène des espoirs et fit affleurer les désirs cachés, qui depuis sont demeurés à la surface.”

- 30 “Mai 68 à Paris fut un grand happening, un grand théâtre dans la rue, ludique, une libération de la parole.”
- 31 The strife at Université Catholique de Louvain is a sort of microcosm of the struggles Belgium has had with linguistic co-existence. The university had historically (as in since the 1400s) been French-speaking, but starting in the 1960s Flemish-speaking students began agitating for greater linguistic rights. This eventually led to the 1968 split of the university into French-medium and Flemish-medium versions. A famous metaphor for the absurdity of the split is that Université Catholique de Louvain got the library holdings whose call numbers ended with an odd number, with Katholieke Universiteit Leuven taking the even-numbered material.
- 32 “... dans son ensemble, le peuple suisse est l’un des moins révolutionnaires de l’Europe. Il ne croit pas aux constructions *ex nihilo*, sur table rase. Son tempérament l’incline et son économie l’oblige à reformer ce qui existe et « qui peut toujours servir », plutôt qu’à s’exposer aux risques de détruire le bon usage avec l’abus.”
- 33 This accounts for the important role of the Swiss military as a means of national cohesion. Continuous service is obligatory for all able-bodied male citizens resident in Switzerland from the age of 18 to 30, with officers and specialists serving until the

age of 50 (women can serve, but are not conscripted). Everyone does two weeks of training a year and is required to report to that training with what is officially known as their “arme personnelle,” which is issued to everyone upon intake and kept, along with ammunition, at home (it must be turned in once a member is discharged from service, although de-mobbed members can opt to have the automatic part of the rifle disabled and keep it for “raisons sportifs”). This comes up explicitly in *La Salamandre* when the mysterious young woman known alternatively as Rosemonde and “The Salamander” seems to have shot her uncle with his own gun – his “arme personnelle,” which he calls his “fusil militaire” – which as he tells Pierre, the engagé young journalist who has come to interview him, was doubly traumatic since it is a symbol of their liberty. I spent the fall and winter of 2009 and 2010 in the Swiss city of Fribourg, a commune of about 50,000 people with no exceptionally central role in the military, and, except for the week between Christmas and New Year’s, not a single day went by without my seeing someone in uniform. Walk through any public square in Switzerland and you will find posted, in German, French, and Italian, the year’s mobilization schedules. This, I say especially to my American readers, is what a “well-regulated militia” looks like. John McPhee’s wonderful book *La place de la concorde suisse* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1984) is, despite its title, an English-language discussion of the place of the army in Swiss society that unfolds as an account of a few weeks that McPhee spent with a French-speaking unit.

- 34 “Un paysan jodleur d’Appenzell, un ouvrier socialiste de Berne et un banquier anglo-mane de Genève, s’ils se rencontraient par hasard – et j’allais dire par impossible – autour d’un demi de blanc dans quelque buffet de gare, n’auraient pas grand-chose à dire. Mais qu’importe! ... Tous les trois savent qu’ils sont suisses, non pas à cause de quelque qualité commune, soit naturelle, soit culturelle (langue, race, confession, caractère, etc.) qui justement leur fait défaut, mais parce qu’ils sont placés dans la même *ensemble* que l’on a baptisé du nom « Suisse » et qu’ils l’approuvent. Et quand on a bien compris cela, on a compris le fédéralisme.”
- 35 “Les Suisses ne forment pas un peuple, n’ont pas une culture, mais se rattachent à plusieurs autres” ... “Le spleen suisse romande ou la « suis-situde » malheureuse, ça n’intéresse plus personne et moi en dernier.”
- 36 “... contacts avec des mouvements dits « frères », luttant pour la défense des minorités de langue française, que ce soit en Belgique, en Italie, ou même au Québec.”
- 37 “... ce qui compte n’est pas ce qui est dit mais ce qui est tu. C’est surtout par le montage que le cinéaste exprime son point de vue.”
- 38 This is a very short news clip (just under a minute) available for viewing at <http://archives.tsr.ch/dossier-juralibre/jura-attentat> (6 May 2010).
- 39 “Avant, il y a eu *Charles mort ou vif* qui, réalisé à 500 kilomètres de Paris, avec le Jura au milieu, s’en fait l’écho.”
- 40 “— Voyons, Gailloud, tu as pourtant un fils, tu en as même deux. Qu’est-ce que tu en penses ?
- Ils ne tournent pas trop mal.
- Oui, mais, dis donc, leurs habitudes, leur manière de s’habiller. Qu’est-ce qu’ils fument ?
- La cigarette.
- Tu vois bien; moi, la pipe, et toi, le cigare. Les cigarettes, ça coûte cher, ça ne dure pas et puis c’est nerveux. Une fois que tu as bourré ta pipe et que tu te l’es vissée au coin du bec, tu n’as plus besoin d’y penser. Et puis, un paquet de tabac, ça coûte quarante centimes. Les garçons d’aujourd’hui dépensent dès un franc et plus pour un paquet de ces choses en papier qui est brûlé dix fois plus vite. Les garçons d’aujourd’hui, ça fume en travaillant. Ils ont tout le temps les mains occupées. J’aime pas tant ça. Et toi ?”
- 41 “On est vers la fin de mai; toutes les fenêtres étaient ouvertes. L’homme s’avançait dans la rue : une tête, de place en place, se penchait hors d’une ces fenêtres. Il était grand, il était beau, il était large d’épaules; il portait toute la barbe, il avait des cheveux longs.”
- 42 “... là, on a commencé par un morceau de piano, puis une fenêtre a été ouverte, au fond de la salle, sur le monde.”
- 43 “Car maintenant le monde entier est à nous, si on veut; tous les siècles sont à nous, tout l’espace; ayant le vertige, mais c’est bon, ayant la tête qui leur tournait, mais c’est bon; dans la chaleur, sous le ciel bas, sous le ciel noir, entre les maisons aux fenêtres

noires, sortant vers onze heures, par petits groupes, l'homme et la femme, deux ou trois jeunes ensemble, des filles et des garçons ensemble; des hommes seuls, des femmes seules; se taisaient, parlant tout à coup....”

- 44 I asked him if this was Chessex's 1987 novel *Jonas*, but he didn't think it was. *Jonas* is a semi-autobiographical portrait of a novelist who winds up back in Fribourg, the city where he had gone to school (Chessex was educated at Fribourg's Collège St-Michel, where his father taught chemistry). Chessex's *Jonas* returns to that city of giant cathedrals, that home of the country's only bi-lingual university, to get his chops as a writer back, although he ends up mostly prowling the grubby cafés of the lower town. The book's title and its narrative of lost intellectual idealism strongly recall Tanner and Berger's *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000*, and I dare say its revisiting of that narrative is a lot more compelling than Tanner's own return to the character of *Jonas*, *Light Years Away* (1980), which I discuss in Chapter 5.
- 45 “C'est au début des années 60 que la jeune littérature helvétique se mit à observer de façon plus aiguë la vie quotidienne suisse, le « malaise », selon le terme consacré du moment, et cela même lorsqu'elle choisissait des thèmes hors du temps.”
- 46 “Monsieur, Ça ne va plus, je ne peux pas admettre chez moi une personne qui vient pas aux repas, on prépare juste pour le nombre alors après avec cette chaleur il faut jeter la nourriture et puis on peut pas faire votre lit en même temps que les autres parce que vous vous levez à midi. Sans compter

que des pensionnaires vous ont vu entrer ici la nuit avec quelqu'un vous pensez l'impression que ça fait sur les clients dans une Maison respectable et réputée.”

- 47 “On me l'a confiée, quand elle avait quinze ans, pour qu'elle puisse suivre ses classes en ville. Et puis aussi parce que ça faisait une bouche de moins à nourrir (*un temps*). A quinze ans, ça se laisse tourner autour par des petits voyous,... ça se lève à dix heures du matin et, pour finir, ça verse dans le crime.”
- 48 “... on essaie de relancer l'idée d'un patriotisme culturel ridicule qui nous redonnait un moral de gagneurs, exactement comme on le fait pour les joueurs de football” “Le paysage suisse est terriblement domestiqué, quadrillé par les signes bien nettoyés d'une passion presque hystérique pour les valeurs petites-bourgeois et par l'ordre qui en découle.”
- 49 *Candide*, first published in 1759, has something of a Swiss pedigree. Voltaire had, from 1755 to 1760, a home in Geneva that he called “Les Délices.” José Lupin's notes to the version contained in Gallimard's 1972 *Romans et contes* state that “Voltaire definitely wrote *Candide* throughout 1758, at first in Lausanne then around Mannheim.... He published it, anonymously, in Geneva, with the Cramers, in February 1759.... The book was condemned in Geneva and Paris, seized by the police, and its success was confirmed” (552) [“Voltaire a sans doute rédigé *Candide* au cours de l'année 1758, à Lausanne d'abord, puis aux environs de Mannheim.... Il parut anonymement, à Genève, chez les Cramers, en février

1759.... Le livre est condamné à Genève et à Paris, saisi par la police ; et son succès s'affirme”]. It should be pointed out, though, that at this time Geneva was not part of Switzerland; until 1815 it was basically a city-state with some loosely governed countryside outside its pale. This was, of course, part of its appeal for Voltaire; the city's eighteenth century reputation as a sort of model republic seemed attractive, although its harsh clerical authorities gave the lie to this idealism, as Voltaire fairly quickly discovered. Geneva's status as a “late arrival” to the Swiss confederation is part of what leads to the *idée reçue* that Geneva is the least Swiss part of Switzerland. I reject this idea, in no small part because I see Tanner – who is a citizen of Geneva *par excellence* – as a seminally Swiss filmmaker.

50 “... d'un côté, l'innocence et l'optimisme du personnage; de l'autre, les horreurs du monde. Entre ces deux états, l'espace laissé au lecteur est celui d'une conscience. De même, le

cinéma de Tanner exprime une innocence fondamentale, libère des désirs des personnages en même temps qu'il en désigne l'extrême fragilité. Tanner, « gentil et méchant, naïf et rusé. » Tanner ou l'Optimisme.”

51 “Imaginez toutes les contradictions, toutes les incompatibilités possibles, vous les verrez dans le gouvernement, dans les tribunaux, dans les églises, dans les spectacles de cette drôle de nation. — Est-il vrai qu'on rit toujours à Paris? dit Candide. — Oui, dit l'abbé, mais c'est en enrageant; car on s'y plaint de tout avec de grands éclats de rire; même on y fait en riant les actions les plus détestables” (*Romans et contes*, 200).

52 “La raison est mise en valeur comme outil de connaissance, non comme mobile des conduites humaines, elle s'oppose à la foi, non aux passions.”

53 “De sorte que l'on peut dire sans exagération : sans l'Europe, pas de Lumières; mais aussi, sans les Lumières, pas d'Europe.”

