

REVISIONING EUROPE: THE FILMS OF JOHN BERGER AND ALAIN TANNER

by Jerry White

ISBN 978-1-55238-552-4

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LE MILIEU DU MONDE

“The soul of ‘le milieu du monde’ is in the reflection of running water; in the apple shed – shutters drawn – of an old house. It’s in the peasant’s gestures and in the turning of the mill-wheel; in the smiles of yesterday’s and today’s grandmas and aunties, who keep house, and thanks to whom we have fresh bread in the oven. It’s in the smallest flower and in every seed; in the school-bell and the graveyard’s slope. It’s the soul of a living country, rich in markings and rich in beauty.” – Georges Duplain, introduction to Pierre Deslandes’ and Fred Schmid’s 1943 photo book *Milieu du Monde* (39)¹

“It was very clear from the beginning, for example, that we would use very long shots, that the film was built as a series of a hundred little short films each done in one take – and this of course is directly influenced by Brecht’s epic theatre. This is, in a sense, epic cinema.” – Alain Tanner, on the film *Le Milieu du monde* (Monaco 33)

Perhaps it was simply a stroke of dumb luck that the day after I watched Berger and Tanner’s second feature-length film *Le Milieu du monde* (1974) at the Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire Fribourg, the Cinémathèque Suisse, just down the line in Lausanne, was showing new films by Jean-Marie Straub and the recently deceased Danièle Huillet, with Straub in attendance. First on the docket was *Itinéraire de Jean Bricard* (2008), the last film that the couple had made together; the other two films were the

first works Straub had made by himself in thirty-five years: *Il Ginocchio di Artemide* (2007) and *Le Streghe* (2009). Of these three, the most rigorous, and the most pleasurable to watch, was definitely *Itinéraire de Jean Bricard*, a richly visual study of the landscape of the Loire valley. Shot mostly from a riverboat, the film is made up largely of movements around a small, forested island, over and over again; midway through there is a slight digression, with a complexly composed sequence shot: a few people climb aboard a boat at dusk, with a small town and a bridge visible in the extreme background; the boatman looks directly at the camera, and starts the motor; the boat putters away, the motor still audible long after the boat itself has left the frame. In addition to completely still long takes such as these, though, the film is also filled with jump cuts to slightly different angles of more or less the same landscape formation, 180-degree pans across fields and brushy forests, and slight re-framings that bring out important elements of graphically striking elements of either the scenery or the things built on it (fences, ramshackle sheds, etc.). It is entirely typical of the work the pair did together, and wonderfully so: it is a lush, highly demanding meditation on a landscape, one that is never taken as some sort of unspoiled arcadia but is instead, as good Marxist-materialists would demand, marked by the cultures and economies that have existed as part of the landscape and continue to mark it. The Cinémathèque Suisse's new director Frédéric Maire gave an introduction that spoke of the institution's great affection for Straub and Huillet's work, and he's certainly not the only Swiss to speak in those terms. In his history of the "Nouveau cinéma suisse," Martin Schaub writes that "It's no surprise that Jean-Marie Straub² has exercised a particularly profound influence on Swiss cinema. Straub has stripped from his films (*Not Reconciled*, *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, *History Lessons*, *Moses and Aaron*, etc.) all the myths and clichés of a cinema of consumption, to find a language that is lucid and perfectly intelligible" (15).³ Renato Berto, the cinematographer on all three of the films that Berger and Tanner made together, has recalled in the texts that accompanied the film's published screenplay that "After *Charles mort ou vif*, the most enriching experience for me was Straub's *Othon*, for which I was an assistant-cameraman" (Boujut, 148).⁴ In that same book, the actress who stars as Olympia in *Le Milieu du monde* recalls that she had played Camille in *Othon* (139). Responding in a 1976 interview to James Monaco question about the influence of Jacques

Rivette, Tanner himself said that “Politically I would be much closer to Godard or Straub” (33).

In another stroke of basically dumb luck, while browsing the shambling stacks of the Fribourg used bookstore Le Book’in as I procrastinated writing this very chapter, I happened upon a 1943 photo book called *Milieu du Monde*, by Pierre Deslandes and Fred Schmid. In some ways it is close to the sorts of books that Berger did with Jean Mohr from the 1960s to the 80s, and which I discussed in Chapter 1 or will discuss in Chapter 4: *A Fortunate Man* (1967), *A Seventh Man* (1975), and *Another Way of Telling* (1982). Like those books, which were first published for the members of Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, *Milieu du monde’s* back leaf states that this is an “Edition hors commerce réservée aux membres de la Guilde du Livre.” It is a mixture of text and photographic image, with the text basically talking around the images rather than directly explaining them. There is a simple explanation for this; the text was originally published as a series of letters by Delandes in *Le Gazette de Lausanne*; the book itself, along with Schmid’s photos, was only published after Delandes had died. Those newspaper columns were titled “Lettres du milieu du monde,” and took as their subject the landscapes and cultural practices of the same place where Berger and Tanner set their film: that part of the canton of Vaud at the foot of the Jura mountains known as La plaine de Moruz but also known as Le Milieu du Monde, which, as the extra-diegetic voice-over in the opening scene tells us, “marks the watershed-divide between the south and the north of a continent” (Boujut 46).⁵ There are a few of Schmid’s photos – a close-up of a man staring off (38), an awkwardly composed and shadowy shot of a woman working in her kitchen (59), a shot of a dense forest at dusk with a shaft of light, seemingly from a headlight, filling the middle of the frame (136) – that have a Mohr-esque quality to them. But overall the tone both the text and the images is nostalgic and sentimentally pastoral.

One way to understand *Le Milieu du monde* is as an attempt to steer between these two poles, between the spare intensity of Straub-Huillet and the sentimental nostalgia of writers like Pierre Deslandes. On one hand, the film is unmistakably a work of Brechtian-influenced counter-cinema, of epic cinema, to follow Tanner’s formulation. But the film’s first images, including the credit sequence, are landscape shots that, in a way, strongly recall the photos of the book *Milieu du monde*: the film’s very first image, of

fog rolling over a field, looks a lot like that book's photo of a field next to a wood (124), and the film's second image, of a small bridge over a creek, looks a lot like Schmid's photo of a creek that runs between a few trees (18). But the shots that follow this credit sequence could not be further away from those of the book *Milieu du monde*. They are of a film crew working on *Le Milieu du monde* itself (you can see that they are shooting an image of the two lead characters, Paul and Adriana, walking across a bridge), and an extra-diegetic female voice explaining some of the practical and ideological conditions under which the film was made: "A film's narrative is in large part dependent on where and when the film is made and under what circumstances. This film was shot in a place called Le Milieu du Monde.... This film was shot in 1974, in a time of normalization. Normalization means that between nations, classes, and even between theoretically opposed political systems, everything can be exchanged on the condition that nothing changes the nature of things" (Boujut 46).⁶ This matter of normalization is at the centre of the film overall and will return again and again. But even this sequence is a mixed bag; it opens with shots of the snowy Jura, images that are possessed of a lovely melancholy that is typical of the way that the film moves throughout. The film never fully distances its viewer from its characters, or its landscapes; both are, at least partially, bearers of aesthetic pleasure, spectacles. Writing about the film in the French magazine *Écran*, Noël Simsolo brought in Straub as well: "Getting past the leftist simplicity of Tanner's cinema, isn't it time to look for something more *essential*, that which even Brecht, like Straub, has reclaimed: an articulation between theory and spectacle permitting the viewer to question himself in relation to a representation that deconstructs bourgeois cinema" (47, emphasis his).⁷ Tanner himself voiced that desire to get at something fundamental in this film, something, following the title, at the very centre of film aesthetics, when he tried, in that interview with James Monaco, to distinguish his work from Godard's militantly anti-spectacle work of the early 1970s (both during and after the Dziga Vertov period that I discussed in the introduction). He told Monaco that "I would be completely incapable of doing what Godard does. What he is doing is filming *theory*. What I want to do is to use theory to film *things*" (32, emphases in the original). *Le Milieu du monde* is very much about things, about the material and emotional world of electoral politics, landscapes, migration, sex, economics, and friendship.

But it presents these things in a way that is clearly, unmistakably inflected by theory, by work dealing with ideology, representation, and cinematic classicism.

I want to explain the significance of *Le Milieu du monde* along two lines. The first is largely theoretical: more than any of the films that Berger and Tanner made together, this is the one that tries to both integrate and critique key issues of 1970s French film theory. The second, following from the first, has to do with pleasure and spectacle: the main critique of these theoretical positions that the film offers is, to paraphrase the 1969 text on “Montage” that I have been citing throughout this book, that the inability to escape reason is itself oppressive. *Le Milieu du monde* offers such an escape through moments of rather pure emotional affect; rather than a simple “escapism,” though, these moments are thoroughly linked to the film’s overall critique of “normalization,” for it is moments such as these that cannot be contained by reason, cannot be normalized.

The film’s narrative is very different from that of either *La Salamandre* or *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l’an 2000*, both of which are defined by a veritable rogues’ gallery of appealingly eccentric left-wing goofballs. *Le Milieu du monde* is about an affair between Paul – a successful engineer, married with a small child, who is gearing up for a run at political office – and Adriana – an Italian woman working as a waitress in a café near “Le milieu du monde.” The film details the intensity of the affair, all the while making it clear that neither one can fully commit to the other and thus submit to the instability and unknown possibilities that uncontrolled passion promises. But in addition to being a “love story,” a narrative about erotic love – as was Berger’s novel *G*, completed two years before *Le Milieu du monde* was finished – it is also a narrative about migrant European labour. Berger told Richard Appignanesi “that film began with Alain saying to me, ‘Can we make a film about an Italian waitress’ – there are thousands of them working in Swiss cafés, at least in French-speaking Switzerland – ‘and a Swiss man, who has an affair with her?’ I think he added that the Swiss man should, in some way or another, be involved (in a career sense) with Swiss politics. That was all, at the beginning” (304). The perilous existence of migrant labourers in Europe was also the subject of Berger and Jean Mohr’s photo-book *A Seventh Man*, published the year after *Le Milieu du monde* was completed; his subjects there are mostly emigrating to “rich Europe” (the

UK, France, Germany, Switzerland) from “poor Europe” (Italy, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Turkey). Like *Le Milieu du monde*, *A Seventh Man* engages with “normalization” and the way it undergirds the society of the capitalist west. Berger writes in that photo book that:

It is difficult to grasp a “normal,” familiar situation as a whole: rather, one reacts with a series of habitual responses which, although they are reactions, really belong to that situation. History, political theory, sociology can all help one to understand that ‘the normal’ is only normative. Unfortunately these disciplines are usually used to do the opposite: to serve tradition by asking questions in such a way that the answers sanctify the norms as absolutes. Every tradition forbids the asking of certain questions about what has really happened to you. (100)

The critique of normalization unfolds along different lines in *Le Milieu du monde*, whose stand-in for the ravages of bourgeois tradition is not social science but mainstream, technocratic politics. But the overall thrust of the narrative is similar: what the proliferation of migrant labour shows us is that capitalism requires systems of support that are alienating on many levels. In *A Seventh Man* a lot of this has to do with the toll such working conditions takes on the bodies of migrant labourers; in *Le Milieu du monde* it is more a matter of how the experience of migration leads to emotional and political isolation. In both works, the migrant labourer is the bleeding wound of Europe, the signifier of the failure to create a just, emotionally and politically nourishing social framework.

Theory

What are the theories that Tanner, and Berger along with him, use to film things? By and large they have to do with the desire to expose the hidden ideologies at work in classical form, a desire that is a central part of the post-’68 *Cahiers du cinéma*, of which Tanner was a habitual reader (references to this material do not come up in Berger’s writing and interviews the way they do in Tanner’s). Realist form, sometimes called invisible form or

classical form, was by and large the enemy among these theoreticians. As I mentioned in the introduction, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's seminal 1969 essay "Cinéma/idéologie/critique" contained the statement "the tools and techniques of filmmaking are a part of 'reality' themselves, and furthermore 'reality' is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology. In this sense, the theory of 'transparency' (cinematic classicism) is eminently reactionary" ("Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" [translation modified], 25).⁸ Rigorously anti-spectacle filmmakers like Straub/Huillet and Godard/Miéville⁹ were emerging as the heroes/heroines of this theoretical school. In a similar fashion as these filmmakers' work, *Le Milieu du monde* uses a variety of techniques to disrupt the spectacle that defined classical form, a number of techniques that refuse to present the world created by the film as "reality" and thus refuse to take part in the reactionary project that Comolli and Narboni decry. The most important of these is camera movement and duration, which brings us back to a key component of the theoretical paradox at the core of Berger and Tanner's work: the reconciliation of Bazin and Brecht, of long takes and montage. These techniques also encompass, however, the film's overall narrative structure, along with occasional gestures within the storyline towards filmmaking itself.

The tension between montage and long takes emerges very early in the film. The first sequence to establish the connection between the film's two main characters, Paul and Adriana, is a good example. This is a montage sequence that alternates between shots of a boisterous meeting of a party executive whose members are debating whether to put Paul forward as a candidate and shots of Adriana walking through a small town with her suitcase, having just gotten off the train from Italy. Both sequences use different setups, but throughout both there is a marked use of both camera movement and stillness. These are, basically, two complete spaces, two tableaux – both assembled along the lines of a slow-paced *découpage* – that are being juxtaposed by way of creating a connection, and meaning, not present in either one alone. It is a merger of the sensibilities of Brecht and Eisenstein, along just the lines that Roland Barthes lays out in his essay "Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein," published in 1973, the year before the release of *Le Milieu du monde*. Barthes writes there that "Brecht indicated that in epic theatre (which proceeds by successive tableaux) all the burden of meaning and pleasure bears on each scene, not on the whole.... The same is

true in Eisenstein: the film is a contiguity of episodes, each one absolutely meaningful, aesthetically perfect, and the result is a cinema by vocation anthropological, itself holding out to the fetishist, with dotted lines, the piece for him to cut out and take away to enjoy" (*Image-Music-Text*, 72).¹⁰ I wouldn't go so far as to say this sequence (or others like it) is holding anything out to the fetishist, but otherwise it is operating in precisely this Brecht-Eisensteinian manner. These tableaux are very precisely conceived from an aesthetic standpoint, and as such are fully autonomous objects capable of bearing considerable burdens of meaning and pleasure. The harshly lit, smoke-filled room is a striking icon of the banality of mainstream politics, even more so because of the way in which everyone talks over each other, creating plenty of sound and fury that, in terms of fully-thought-out political positions, signifies little. Furthermore, the camera movement in that room is mostly circular and (like most of the movements in the films Tanner and Berger made together) not simply a matter of tracking in on whomever is speaking; this has the effect of pulling the viewer out of the spectacle slightly rather than simply making him or her feel like s/he is in the room with the bosses. This tableau also makes sharp use of montage within the scene. Early on there is a montage of the faces of the bosses: the camera is still, the editing is rhythmic, and there is a sense of relentless constancy here, a sense that this is a regularized ceremony whose outcome is fixed. The tableau of Adriana in the city is just as precisely conceived, and uses camera movements whose motion is independent of that of the characters in the frame. The first shot of this entire montage sequence is of Adriana in extreme long shot and in the centre of the frame walking up stairs and towards the camera; as she gets closer and closer, the camera tracks right to left, and this means that she moves out of the centre of the image towards its edges, slowly transforming a very classically composed image into something more awkward and striking. The next time we see Adriana (which follows a slow track circling around the table where the bosses are sitting), she is just as far from the camera as before but is now walking down the stairs, with the camera moving in the opposite direction, again moving her slowly to the edge of the frame. These sequences both draw upon a self-consciously visual strategy to show us something about their own words: the circular, sterile sameness of the party meeting, the slow onset of feelings of alienation and marginalization as someone moves through a strange city for

the first time. Their form is self-conscious, and as tableau they are relatively self-contained. But in good Eisensteinian fashion, there is a new meaning when they are put together; the film argues, in short, that the marginalized loneliness of the migrant worker is part and parcel of mainstream politics in a capitalist system. They are woven into the same ideological fabric, and this becomes clear through the act of weaving these two (fully-realized, aesthetically-autonomous) tableaux together into a single piece of cinematic fabric, a fabric whose edges (as both Brecht and Eisenstein would demand) are always showing, whose borders are never smoothed out.

Another key theoretical concept that *Le Milieu du monde* is wrestling with is that of “Suture.” This is the title of Jean-Pierre Oudart’s two-part, 1969 article in *Cahiers du cinéma*, which explained the illusion of all holes in a narrative, diegetic world being sutured closed by the workings of classical film language; shot/reverse-shot editing, as the veritable backbone of that language system, is particularly responsible for this effect (the verbosity of his explanation precludes a quote; see “Cinema and Suture,” 37 / “La Suture” part 1, 37–38). One way that *Le Milieu du monde* is engaging this concept is through its renunciation or radical changing of that editing pattern. This was also true of *La Salamandre*, which sometimes used variations of the form, such as volleys of opposing medium shots rather than close-ups during a few dialogue sequences. One sequence about twenty-five minutes into *Le Milieu du monde*, where Paul comes to Adriana’s apartment for the first time, is illustrative of the way that this later film tweaks this most important visual convention of narrative cinema. This begins in Paul’s car, in a medium shot of the back of his head, taken from the back seat. The film then cuts to a close-up of a door, which opens to reveal Adriana’s face in a medium close-up. Within this single shot there is a fair bit of dialogue between Paul and Adriana – “what do you want?”; “to talk”; “now?” – and the shot lasts about twenty seconds. There is then a cut to a reverse-shot of Paul, where again *both* of them are talking; this shot lasts almost thirty seconds. Then it’s back to original medium close-up of Adriana, and the conversation concludes with her closing the door after, once again, *both* of them have exchanged several lines within a single shot; that shot lasts about twenty seconds. This is shot/reverse-shot, strictly speaking; it is an editing pattern that moves between two close-ups of people talking. But what is missing is the rather crucial element of an editing rhythm that is linked to the

exchange of dialogue, a rhythm that demands a cut to whoever is speaking. I don't want to get into whether *Le Milieu du monde's* rhythmic alteration of the schema does or doesn't invoke the "absent one," the abstracted subjective agent who Oudart feels reigns over a shot/reverse-shot sequence, controlling the spectator's ideologically inflected perceptions, while remaining hidden behind an invisible form, all as part of what Oudart calls "the suture (the abolition of the Absent One and its resurrection in someone)" (37).¹¹ Suffice it to say that shot/reverse-shot is a fundamental element of classical form, a form whose rhythmic smoothness helps to naturalize, or normalize, a film's artificiality, and its ideological assumptions along with it.

Tanner was explicit in his writing on *Le Milieu du monde* about his desire to move beyond this conventional editing pattern. Describing the editing pattern of the film, and the compromises that a real spirit of montage demanded he make with the radical form he was seeking, he wrote that:

In the whole film, there are not more than ten "correct" match cuts – that is to say match cuts within a single scene and maintaining a temporal continuity – whereas a "normal" film would no doubt have quite a few. It is a matter of deconstruction to work on this traditional language, but obviously it's not enough to simply obliterate everything. Montage, if it seeks oppositions and ruptures, only makes sense if between the fractures, there exists some connections. ("Le pourquoi dire," 17)¹²

This is quite consistent with the workings of all of the films that he made with Berger, and for that matter it is consistent with the work the two have done on their own. Furthermore, it is fully consistent with Robin Wood's analysis of Brecht's aesthetic practice which I discussed in the introduction. Indeed, Wood describes Brecht's insistence on leaving some elements of realist form in place using language very close to Tanner's in the passage I just quoted. Where Tanner writes that "il ne suffit évidemment pas de simplement tout *bouleverser*," Wood recalls how Brecht's sense of critique of identification uses "operates to counter this without *obliterating* it" (13, italics mine). This is, of course, very typical of modernism generally, which is marked by a self-conscious manipulation of formal conventions rather than an all-out rejection of them. *Le Milieu du monde*, like *La Salamandre*

and *Jonas*, but I would say more so than those two, illustrates the basic definition of modernism offered by Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch, that “the syntactic code of Modernism is no more than a one-sided emphasis on particular syntagmatic options – a particular selection from among the many syntagmatic possibilities, which in general are provided by the linguistic system and only rarely are newly invented” (34). Neither the sequence shots upon which the film’s aesthetic is based nor the slowed-down shot/reverse-shot upon which it occasionally draws are newly invented; both forms basically exist within the realm of narrative cinema. The change is in emphasis; the regularized, rhythmic aspect of *découpage*, so important to classical cinematic form, is almost completely absent here. *Le Milieu du monde* tweaks these conventions rather than rejecting them, thus putting them into expressive opposition.

But *Le Milieu du monde* also addresses the concept by occasional calls back to a formal pattern that more fully eschews classical film language, and suture along with it, by adopting a kind of pre-Griffith, and I daresay a pre-Porter grammar. Oudart writes about “a stage, which can be ignored now, in which the image was not perceived as a filmic field, but more like an animated photograph.” He describes this kind of film language as being “a hypothetical and purely mythic period, when the cinema alone reigned, enjoyed by the spectator in a dyadic relationship.” During this period, he writes, “space was still a pure expanse of *jouissance*, and the spectator was offered objects literally without anything coming between them as a screen and thus prohibiting the capture of the objects” (41–42).¹³ Is this not what is happening in a sequence (about halfway through the film) in Adriana’s one-room apartment, when she sits at a table by the window, at first naked and then wrapped in her overcoat, drinking coffee? This is a single shot, without any camera movement at all, lasting just over a minute.¹⁴ It could be a Lumière *actualité*. Of course, it is not: it is a part of a narrative film. But it is a part of a narrative film where dominant narrative film language can find no purchase whatsoever. It is strongly reminiscent of the scene in *La Salamandre* of Rosemonde sitting on the bed describing herself, which I discussed in the last chapter. But despite that sequence’s iconicity, even there we had a reverse-shot to reveal the entry of Rosemonde’s roommate, with whom she has a brief exchange. But in this *Milieu du monde* shot, there is no *découpage*, no dialogue, no advancement of a plot. There is only a body,

in a space, in motion. Despite this fully pared-down grammar, though, this is a fully legible part of the narrative; it does not stand outside the diegesis in the way that the opening shots of the camera crew working do. Suture as a formal pattern is fully absent; what remains is the basics of narrative cinema: representation.

There is a better analogy for the use of film language in this sequence than Edwin S. Porter or the Lumière brothers: Straub and Huillet. “He may construct his films from the most realistic materials,” Richard Roud writes of Straub (seeming to mean Straub-Huillet), “and yet the result is a musical structure which transcends realism – but without rejecting it” (*Straub*, 11). What is going on in *Le Milieu du monde* is the similar emergence of a structure that rejects the limitations that realist form places on form itself, places on matters such as duration, stillness, and expressive *mise-en-scène*. This is not a moment of full-on artifice along the lines of what defines most of Straub-Huillet; where they usually have their actors delivering lines in completely flat tones, and oftentimes directly facing the camera, *Le Milieu du monde* maintains throughout (and this is very true of this scene as well) a toned-down realism that nevertheless maintains the integrity of the diegetic world. In his article “L’effet d’étrangeté,” published in *Cahiers du cinéma* a few months after *Le Milieu du monde* was released, Pascal Kané uses Rossellini and Pasolini to distinguish between two kinds of self-aware gestures:

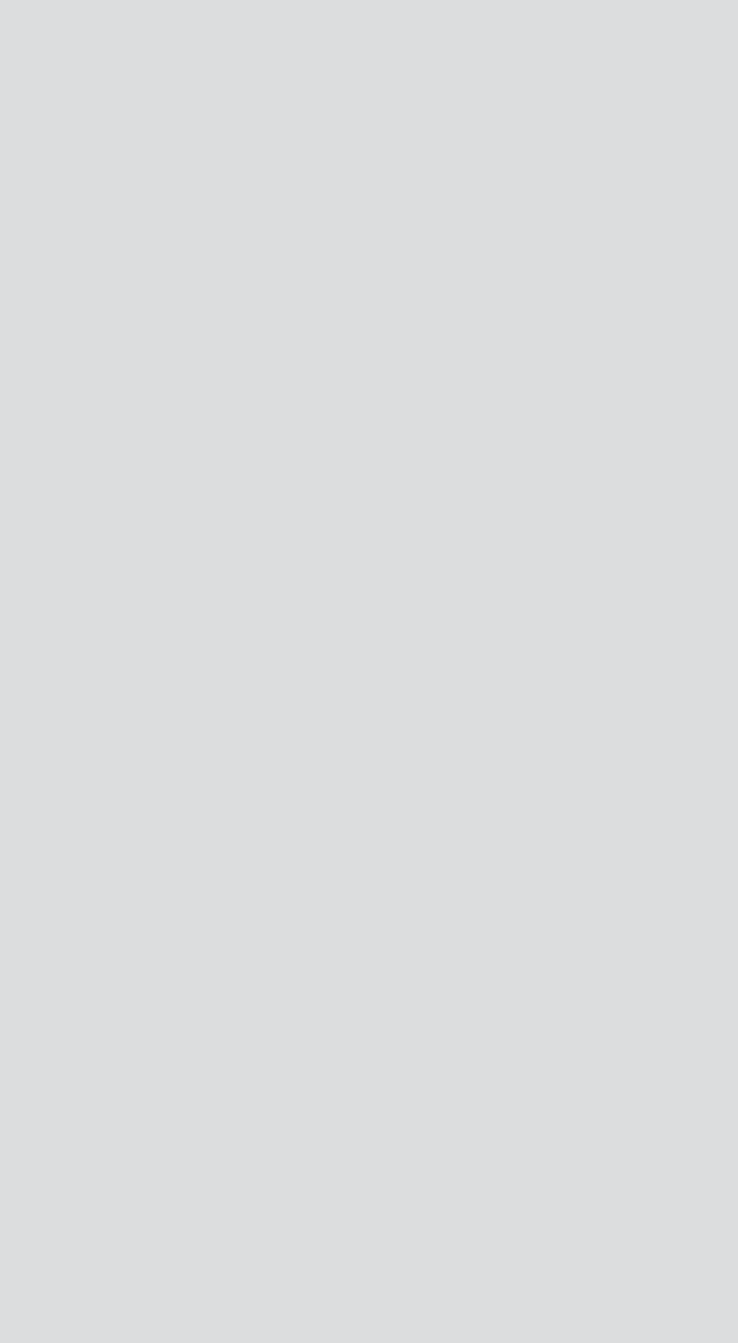
With Rossellini, the signified identifies itself exactly with the referent of the (supposedly complete) fiction, without even constituting an autonomous production. With Pasolini, all discourse is only a discourse on the narrative itself, only a tangible referent (the historical referent is emptied of any role). (81)¹⁵

Much the same could be said of Tanner-Berger and Straub-Huillet. In films such as *Le Milieu du monde*, the self-conscious gestures always refer back to the fiction itself. This is true even of the opening image of the camera crew working; this is a sort of autonomous production, in that it is about stepping back from the diegetic world, but Tanner and Berger only do this through an image of that world being produced. That’s not true of filmmakers like Straub-Huillet, where all of their discourse – the acting

styles, the way voice-over narration is used, the highly structured and often repetitious camera movement – is a discourse *on* their narrative (which is always adopted from some other source – literature, drama, opera) rather than something that creates that narrative. Tanner and Berger cannot do away with realist form altogether, nor are they satisfied by the limits that it imposes on the expression of complexity (be that complexity ideological, emotional, or some combination of the two). This is a moment in a cinematic, and in some ways realist-illusionist narrative; this is the *character* of Adriana, not the actress Olimpia Carlisi, that the viewer is being asked to see. But the shot nevertheless demands an engagement on the part of the viewer, and it presents itself as an undisguised example of representation; it becomes “more than real” precisely because of the access to reality that very long and thus eccentric-and-artificial-feeling take promises to provide, a paradox that was dear to Tanner’s heart. What we see in this image is an emergence of a structure that transcends realism – but without rejecting it.

What we can also see in this pared-down vision of Adriana alone in her room are the traces of sexual love, and that is what connects this sequence, and the film overall, not only to suture and Tanner’s interest in allied theoretical work, but also to Berger’s work of this period. This sequence with Adriana drinking coffee naked, although it eschews all of the elements of dominant film language that Oudart indicts, leaves one aspect of cinematic representation solidly intact: eroticism. As I mentioned in the introduction, Oudart argued that there was a profoundly erotic quality to suture, writing, in an afterword he says was meant to “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”).¹⁶ What he had in mind here, I think, is that the experience of two bodies coming into contact – the body of the spectator and the bodies of the on-screen representations – created not only meaning but also emotional and visceral sensation through that sense of bodily contact, an experience whose connections to eroticism are not so hard to understand. This kind of pure, bodily experience is surely at the heart of this scene in *Le Milieu du monde*; it is a moment of cinematic purity, and also a moment of bodily purity, being made up entirely of a naked woman moving through space.

image not available



Le Milieu du monde
(Alain Tanner, 1974).
Citel / Action Films.
Pictured: Phillippe
Léotard and Olympia
Carlisi. Photo from The
Kobal Collection/Art
Resource, NY.

Reading such bodily representation in visual art (mostly in painting, but in photography and cinema as well) has long been a central part of Berger's work as a critic, and this interest reached a kind of apex at just the moment *Le Milieu du monde* was coming out. This is most visible in the two works that I discussed in the last chapter, two works that came out in 1972, just a year after *La Salamandre* was released and two years before *Le Milieu du monde* was: the novel *G* and the critical work *Ways of Seeing*. It is in *Ways of Seeing* where Berger holds forth at length on the legacy of naked women in painting and photography, and there that we find a description of the "exceptional nude" that fits this image of Adriana, distinguishing it in many ways from the comparable scene in *La Salamandre*. Writing about post-Renaissance oil painting's tendency to use nudity as a means to signify a basically economic power that belonged entirely to men, Berger states:

There are a few exceptional nudes on the European tradition of oil painting to which very little of what has been said above applies. Indeed they are no longer nudes – they break with the norm of the art-form; they are paintings of loved women, more or less naked. Among the hundreds of thousands of nudes which make up the tradition there are perhaps a hundred of these exceptions. In each case the painter's personal vision of the particular women he is painting is so strong that it makes no allowance for the spectator. The painter's vision binds the woman to him so that they become as inseparable as couples in stone. The spectator can witness their relationship, but he can do no more: he is forced to recognise himself as the outsider he is. He cannot deceive himself into believing that she is naked for him. He cannot turn her into a nude. The way the painter has painted her includes her will and her intentions in the very structure of the image, in the very expression of her body and face. (57–58)

I would not argue that Adriana is being bound to Berger and Tanner in the fashion of a model sitting for the sort of painting that Berger is evoking here. But describing the image of Adriana as that of a loved woman, more or less naked, seems quite correct, given that this image comes at a point in the narrative shortly after she and Paul have made love for the first time and

where Paul's obsessive love is becoming fully central to the film's narrative (as their affair progresses the story of his running for political office seems to fall away, only to return again after his relationship with Adriana has fractured). Furthermore, it is clear that, in this tableau of Adriana in her room, the viewer is, in Berger's formulation, "forced to recognise himself as the outsider he is. He cannot deceive himself into believing that she is naked for him. He cannot turn her into a nude." This is due, really, to the radical rupture with dominant film grammar. At this point the film makes no allowance at all for the spectator; far from being sutured via shot/reverse-shot, or *découpage* of any kind, into a perfectly fully conceived duplication of reality, the viewer is held at a distance via the use of a still camera, a complete lack of editing, and a dense and evocative *mise-en-scène*. The spectator can witness this image of Adriana alone in her room, but s/he can do no more. S/he is not invited in.

This refusal of dominant film language also emerges at the level of the storyline as well. As the film moves forward and their affair starts to disintegrate, Paul gives Adriana a home movie camera. She is as annoyed with this gift as she is with his earlier suggestion that she go with him on a trip to New York, an exchange where she tells Paul that "tu ne me vois pas; tu vois une autre": you don't see me, you see someone else (Boujut 92).

Adriana. – What am I going to film?

Paul. – Beats me; whatever you want.

Adriana. – But what?

Paul. – I don't know. There's lots of stuff to film.

Adriana (almost angry). – What stuff? The customers at the café? Or the widow Schmidt washing the glasses? Or dogs peeing in the street? Or maybe me, like this (*She stretches out her arm and points the lens at her face*), in my room, that'd make a nice film. A nice shitty film! I'd show you the film, and you'd never even see me. (Boujut 94)¹⁷

Here, then, is a sort of rejection of the analysis of the non-dominant film language that I was celebrating earlier. Just a shot of a woman in a room? Some shitty film that would be! Most importantly, though what is being rejected here is that a simple, utterly non-institutional cinematic image (like

that of a home movie) would somehow bind Adriana and Paul together through the purity of the vision that it enabled. For Adriana, the opposite is true; Paul is incapable of seeing her no matter what, even if he watches a film made up entirely of her face. Small wonder, then, that Paul is *absent* from the tableau of Adriana in her room. This is an image of self-discovery, of the projection of *Adriana's* self, not a projection of Adriana and Paul as a couple. It is clear by this point in the narrative that a home movie camera wouldn't make Paul see Adriana any more clearly. The idealism of that image of her in her room is, in this exchange between Paul and Adriana about the possibilities of non-dominant film language, melancholically clarified. Adriana may have been, in that tableau, a loved woman, more or less naked. But Paul, like the spectator, can no longer deceive himself into believing that she is naked for him. He cannot turn her into a nude. Like the spectator, he is forced to recognize himself as the outsider he is, love her though he may.

Another way that the film distances the viewer is through its self-consciously linear narrative structure. The film takes place over 112 days, which the viewer knows because it opens with a title card that says "6 décembre" (this is the first image after the scenes of the film crew and landscape shots that follow them, and thus marks the opening of the film's narrative) and episodes are broken up with other title cards that give the date; the last one says "28 mars." Jim Leach has written of this device that:

The titles giving the date before each sequence (as well as the apparently arbitrary omission of certain dates) and the difficulty of accounting for the order of the seasons changes work against any sense of natural continuity and make us aware that our experience of time in watching the film is part of a cinematic process. A tension is set up between a detached "structuralist" perspective and the sensuous immediacy of the "realist" treatment of nature and sexual passion. (119)

This tension between sensuality and detachment strongly recalls the tension created by these films' use of long takes. As I mentioned in the last chapter, Tanner told Lenny Rubenstein of the paradox he saw in using long takes, that "if you don't cut, instead of it being more real which it should be, in

fact you are getting unreal because of the traditions in the eye of the spectator” (79). These title cards giving the dates, and the complete and explicit linearity that this creates, give *Le Milieu du monde* a similar kind of “unreal” quality. As Leach notes, we are aware that watching the film is a cinematic process, an awareness that is equally central in sequences like the ostensible “zero-degree” tableau of Adriana in her room, an image that, like the device of title cards, calls attention to itself because of the way that it refuses to consolidate either space or time into a more easily consumable form. This refusal is the defining formal element of *Le Milieu du monde*, and this is a project that clearly engaged with (although never pedantically imitative of) the theoretical debates of the era in which it was made.

Pleasure and Spectacle

That is not to say that all of *Le Milieu du monde* is self-consciously theoretical or distancing. I very much disagree with Todd Gitlin’s assessment of the film as a failure because it is too engaged along these lines: he writes of *Le Milieu du monde* that “When a film of theirs [Berger and Tanner’s] fails it is because the characters have gone abstract and joyless, and so has the style” (37). In actual fact, these characters are richly fleshed out (the result of a long process on the part of Berger himself, who wrote long letters to both of the lead actors), and the spectator is often invited into the spectacle of the narrative. It would be all too easy to make a political film that holds the viewer at a distance, insisting on a cold didacticism that makes the filmmakers’ ideological assumptions completely explicit (and which, echoing Pauline Kael, would be a didactic pain). I mentioned in the introduction how Brecht had rejected the idea that his epic theatre “proclaims the slogan: ‘Reason this side, Emotion (feeling) that’” (227). To organize aesthetics in such a neat way would, after all, be the essence of normalization, a strategy that seeks to maintain received notions such as the incompatibility of reason and emotion. Berger was quite explicit about his desire to resist normalization on a cultural/aesthetic level as well as on an economic one; in a 1976 interview accompanying the release of *A Seventh Man*, he told Pierre Henri Zoller, of the leftist Swiss newspaper *Construire*, that “I believe that the division of culture into categories is one of the means that underpins

current culture, that is to say our current society, where everyone keeps to themselves, sticks to their domain, their speciality, their category” (7).¹⁸ *Le Milieu du monde* contains a great deal that evokes very raw emotions, emotions that spill outside of categories like “melodrama” or “political art,” and this is part and parcel of its overall critique of normalization. Its argument, which Berger and Tanner are making in equal part on the levels of storyline, visual form, and narrative structure, is that a world defined by the cold technocracy of capitalism is, at its core, anti-human.

One way into the charged emotional content of the film is via a para-text that is attached to *Le Milieu du monde* without really being part of it: the letters that John Berger wrote to the two lead actors. These were written before work on the script had even begun; Berger recalled to Richard Appignanesi that “The first thing I wrote was not a scenario at all, but two letters” (304). They were written in English¹⁹ about a year before the shooting of the film commenced; the letter to Olimpia Carlisi (who played Adriana, although the letter refers to her character as “M.”) is dated 27 February 1973, and the letter to Philippe Léotard (who played Paul, although the letter refers to him as “François”) is simply dated “Geneva, 1973” (the diary that accompanies the published screenplay states that shooting began on 16 January 1974; Boujut, 103). Berger ends his letter to Carlisi by saying “Dear Olympia – there’s almost nothing of the story in this” (26), and that’s true of the letter to Léotard as well. But there are nevertheless moments where important parts of the film are contextualized, and then re-appear in the film itself quite closely to the way they are evoked in the letter. This is most true of the scene where Adriana tells Paul about how she was burned in a house fire and feared she would be disfigured as a result. Strongly echoing what he has to say about women’s self-surveillance in *G* and *Ways of Seeing*, Berger’s letter talks about how, following this accident, “She [M./Adriana] then had to come to terms with the space between how she would always appear to most people and how she *was* for herself. Or, to put this another way, her responsibility for her own life became *interiorised*; it no longer depended on visible roles” (25). Fairly early in *Le Milieu du monde*, there is a sequence (a single medium shot that pans between Paul and Adriana as they talk to each other) where she explains this experience:

You see this? (*she shows him her scar*) There was a fire in our house. I was burned. It's still there. But I stayed in the hospital for two months. I couldn't see anything for a month, because my eyes were always bandaged. All alone at night.... So I changed. Other people changed too, because I thought that all that would happen afterwards would be different. I saw myself one way, and other people saw me differently. You're always performing for other people, you're putting on a mask for them. But I couldn't do that anymore, with a disfigured face.... (*She makes a gesture that imitates going into herself*) E verso di se stesso.... towards yourself. Responsibility for yourself. Finally it wasn't so bad; I still had a face. But that changed me. (Boujut, 63–64)²⁰

This kind of close correspondence to the film itself is the exception for these letters, though. For the most part they are about fleshing out details and interior states of the characters. He tells Carlisi that “In some respects she belongs to the 19th century rather than to the 20th American century. She is still, to a degree, outside the controls of the managerial consumer society” (23). He tells Léotard that “When he is entirely concentrating upon and astounded by, her physical existence, he loses himself completely in the immediate, and the delight he finds in it. This delight – and his ways of expressing it – are childlike (That is not to say innocent: but spontaneous and single-minded)” (20).

Berger also writes at some length about the relationship between passion and the social world; this is actually most of the substance of the letter to Léotard. The letter to Carlisi connects her character's traits to political concerns, such as the matter of being beyond the control of a managerial society, or how “She is *not* a political being, but she has a consciousness of class and a familiarity with certain Marxist categories” (23). But for the most part anything political is contained within a description of the character's “deep background.” The letter to Léotard, on the other hand, holds forth at some length on the ways in which worldly, materialist concerns interact with love. “Lovers love one another *with* the world,” he writes to him. “(As one might say *with* their hearts or *with* caresses)” (19). He also asserts that “Passion aspires to include the world in the act of love. To want to make love in the sea, flying through the sky, in this city, in that field, on

sand, with leaves, with salt, with oil, with fruit, in the snow, etc., is not to seek new stimuli, but to express a truth which is inseparable from passion” (18).

This connection between the forces of passion and the material of the everyday – salt, oil, fields, cities, and, this being Switzerland, endless acres of snow – is at the core of *Le Milieu du monde*'s critique of normalization. The problems for Paul's political career begin, not when he starts to have an affair with Adriana, but when he cannot keep the affair a discrete part of his life, safely bracketed off from the rest of his existence. He can't do this, of course, because he is genuinely passionate about her; passion isn't amenable to being managed, to being neatly shunted to one side in a way that prevents its mixing with other parts of life. Thus it is not sex or even infidelity that is the threat to a bourgeois, managerial, normalized existence; it is *passion*. It is not the sensual, but the uncontrollable that is the real threat. The last third of the film has a number of party members talking about the affair, either between themselves or with Paul, and this culminates with a meeting that is shot using a constantly moving camera, which circles around the table, framing various party members in close-up as they complain about the trouble this affair is causing them. One member says hey, he loves her, let him be. This annoys the chairman of the meeting, who says “Everyone's talking about this. You create the image of a serious family man, a town councillor, technical director, worker, honest guy, and you find that you've got a dumb-shit who chases Italian waitresses! [The subtitles translate this as 'a dopey skirt-chaser'] Everywhere where I could get a little feedback, I got the same reaction. You'll see when this wipes out our ticket. It's not going to work if this continues” (Boujut, 87).²¹ This tendency to see the world in neat, bifurcated segments – one is either an essentially ersatz version of a respectable burger or “un connard qui court des serveuses de café italiennes” – is a desperately impoverished view of human nature, but it does allow for a more efficient management of political campaigns, being so reliant on sudden shifts in public opinion (which functionaries such as these insist are knowable by “sonder l'opinion des gens,” however that's supposed to be accomplished). This is obviously not an ethical problem for these politicians, or even a real political problem. The problems created by obsessive sexual passion are entirely managerial.

Denis de Rougemont has argued that Switzerland's politics are unusually managerial in nature, something whose broader implications are visualized throughout *Le Milieu du monde*. To a certain extent, this is a matter of the sort of leadership that it takes to hold together a particularly complex country, one made up not only of four language groups (German, French, Italian, and Romansh), but more importantly of twenty-six cantons, each having a great deal of sovereignty over matters of everyday governance, some of which overlaps with the jurisdiction of communes. But de Rougemont focuses specially on Switzerland's Conseil fédéral, which is the body that wields executive power at the national level; it is made up of only seven members, even though it is always composed of members from each of the four parties that form the government, and as a result it is an ongoing exercise in compromise. De Rougemont writes how attempts to enlarge the council to nine members have been repeatedly defeated by popular referenda, stating that proponents of such proposals "are basically trying to politicize the executive, and the great majority of Swiss people refuse to do this. The Conseil fédéral must remain above partisan disputes, inasmuch as it constitutes the chief of state; it must remain a team of 'sages' as well as of 'managers' inasmuch as it administers federal affairs" (129–30).²² This illusion of a "non-political," technocratic politics is a recurring image in *Le Milieu du monde*. At Paul's first campaign rally, his introducer says this: "As you can see today more than ever, the time of ideologies, of extreme positions, and of pretty speeches, has passed, and so what we need are competent people, organizers and technicians capable of mastering the complex problems of industrial society, and not just loudmouths hawking the latest hot idea at the top of their lungs" (Boujut, 58).²³ Paul is running for the Action Démocratique pour le Progrès, a fictional party whose main rival seems to be the Parti démocrate-chrétien (PDC), a Christian-Democratic party which is traditionally centrist to progressive on economic issues and relatively conservative socially. (The PDC is never mentioned by name in the film, but there are frequent jokes about how if Paul loses it means that the church will win.) This vision of Swiss politics basically matches that of de Rougemont; the difference is that for Berger and Tanner, this is symptomatic of a society whose need for "techniciens capables de maîtriser les problèmes complexes de la société industrielle" has conscribed passion, and all comparable forms of human messiness (such as ideology) to the dustbin

of the inefficient. Just as if someone is not a manufactured family man he must be a dopey skirt-chaser, if something is not managerial and efficient, then it can only be some form of extremism.

Clear examples of *Le Milieu du monde*'s rejection of this kind of simple-minded managerialism can be found in the film's sex scenes. A sequence where Paul and Adriana have sex in a tub is particularly instructive; it's two shots, both a few seconds long, with their intertwined bodies first in a medium-long shot and then in a medium close-up. There is nothing on the soundtrack except for the dripping of a faucet into the tub. There is a kind of rawness to the scene, which its brevity only enhances. Furthermore, it is brightly lit and the only colours are flesh tones (the actual flesh of the actors against a tannish-orange wall), in contrast to the shot immediately preceding it, where Paul kisses Adriana in their warmly lit hotel room. The scene is almost edgy, although there is also a pronounced sensuality at work here. This play between tension and intimacy is disquieting rather than voyeuristically appealing, and the combination is one way that the film evokes the truly overwhelming, uncertain quality of the feelings that Paul and Adriana are experiencing. This overwhelming quality may be part of the reason that it so often comes up in criticism of the film as exemplary of some sort of larger aesthetic failure. Panning the film for *Journal de Genève*, Christian Zeender writes that "As series of one little deception after another, *Le Milieu du monde* seems most of all to break certain promises.... Further to this, let's quickly forget the 'erotic' scene in the film: it is so ungainly as to become almost shocking."²⁴ Even Swiss cinema's *éminence gris*, Freddy Buache (at this time a bit less *gris*) had a problem with this scene, writing in his review of the published screenplay that "The stylistic coherence in maintained from one end of the extreme to the other, except during sequences of intimate eroticism, which the filmmaker hasn't mastered and which disrupt the tension of the work because of their naturalist character" ("*Le Milieu du monde*," 14).²⁵ This sequence, though, uses this sort of naturalist harshness to disrupt the spectacle in a way that is different from but still consistent with the film's overall tendency to distanciation. Nobody should be shocked (shocked!) to see this kind of sharp austerity in a film like this.

There is a similar duality to the scene that directly follows the one where Paul gives Adriana the home movie camera. This is almost a jump cut; Paul is in more or less the same place as he was in the previous shot, but a change

in lighting seems to signify that time has passed. Furthermore, Adriana has taken her skirt off; the camera pans and tracks from its medium shot of Paul to a medium shot of her on the bed, smoking and naked from the waist down. They argue harshly about whether to make love; Paul asks her to undress, she insists she's cold and they can do it like this, Paul responds that this is how whores do it. But the next shot is of a close-up of their entangled bodies making love. This is also a single shot lasting about twenty seconds and ends with Paul playfully pretending he is dead; again, there is nothing on the soundtrack except for ambient sounds, this time of their breathing and rolling around. Tension and intimacy were packed into the same shot in the first sex scene I mentioned (harsh lighting and complete silence, save for dripping combined with intense bodily passion): montage within a shot. This time it is a matter of montage between shots: a raw, hurtful argument about sex in a gradually moving medium shot first, followed by a completely still shot of two bodies intertwined in gestures of profound intimacy. This is all slightly difficult to watch, but also intensely expressive. None of it is clean or neat or easily managed.

The transplantation of a political critique into the realm of sexuality should in no way be seen as a retreat from the political. Tanner has repeatedly expressed misgivings about how easy it was for him to make a film with explicitly political characters and situations like *La Salamandre*, and how uncomfortable he was with the kind of easy pleasure that seemed to bring audiences. In his text accompanying the published screenplay of *Le Milieu du monde*, he recalls that "After *La Salamandre*, I became a bit dubious with regard to humour, which invited agreement a bit too easily and especially contained a sort of admission of weakness" ("Le pourquoi dire," 22).²⁶ He recalled something similar to Lenny Rubenstein in an interview that accompanied the release of *Le Milieu du monde*, saying that "I was very much surprised when I saw audiences in Paris and Geneva watching *La Salamandre*. They were laughing in the right places, but far too much, far too much. I realized the oral satisfaction they had when they picked up on those lines, and I didn't like it. I realized this facility had to be wiped out from this film, which is more austere and colder" (101). Now, I'm not sure I entirely accept this definition of *Le Milieu du monde*, which seems to play into the hands of critics like Todd Gitlin, who, lacking the (oral? I'm not so sure about that either) pleasure of a film like *La Salamandre* (or *Jonas*, which

is what he was actually reviewing when he wrote his dismissal of the film), would unsurprisingly classify it as “abstract and joyless.” What I’ve tried to show here is that the film is anything but cold, anything but joyless. It overflows with emotion in places, even if in other places it is possessed of a harsher aesthetic. I am thus echoing assessments like Guy Braucourt’s, who (himself echoing Brecht) wrote in *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* that “By this ideological reading of a love story, Tanner succeeds in reconciling two fundamental notions of auteur cinema: on the one hand an element of reflection of society and the connections with which we live every day, and on the other a sense of spectacle, of telling a story which connects the audience to characters, to a narrative. The first quality does nothing without the support of the second” (8).²⁷

The film’s real contribution is to show just this point: not only can these elements co-exist, but they are always connected, and this sort of elemental reality is a big part of what makes technocratic, managerial capitalism such an inhuman system. Thus *Le Milieu du monde* is quite a bit more political than *La Salamandre*, and I dare say it’s also more political than *Jonas*, which, for all its accomplishment, definitely uses humour as an admission of weakness. There really is a different kind of filmmaking at work here, one that radically transforms the language system of narrative cinema without abandoning it altogether, one that puts a story about the dialectic between passion and control into a secondary dialectic of illusionist and didactic modes of address. Furthermore, it does this mostly on the level of *form*. While I wouldn’t say that the film’s storyline is banal, certain fairly conventional elements of the love story are clearly present. Suffice it to say that, simply as narrative, it is only political in passing; its ideological and political interventions are occurring at the level of cinema, not story. “El contenido de la obra de arte está en su forma,” Tanner said to *El País*’s Fernando Trueba and Carlos S. Boyero in 1978. As I hope is emerging throughout this book, this is one of his maxims, and it is an ideal that defines John Berger’s work across fiction and criticism as well. No film demonstrates it more clearly than *Le Milieu du monde*. It is totally amazing to me that this is the least-discussed of the three features that Berger and Tanner made together, and the one most frequently dismissed as dull or somehow lacking. Even Berger himself admitted to Richard Appignanesi that he was unhappy with the film, telling him of “my initial disappointment in that film,” although he also recalls

that after speaking to people who had seen it, he came to see his disappointment as unfounded (305). He also recalled to Appiganesi that “the one film which differs from how I had visualized it is *The Middle of the World*.” But however Berger may have initially visualized it, *Le Milieu du monde* is, in its actual realization, an unprecedented combination of theoretical sophistication, political insight, and emotional power. I know of no European film of its era quite like it.

Notes

- 1 “L’âme du Milieu du Monde, elle est dans ce reflet de l’eau qui court; dans la chambre aux pommes – violets tirés – d’une ancienne demeure. Elle est dans le geste du paysan et dans le ronronnement du moulin ; dans le sourire des grands’mères et des bonnes tantes, celles d’hier et celles d’aujourd’hui, qui maintiennent la maison, et grâce auxquelles on fait de nouveau du pain dans notre four. Elle est dans la moindre fleur et dans chaque graine ; dans la cloche de l’école et sur la pente du cimetière. C’est l’âme d’un pays vivant, riche de signes et riche de beauté.”
- 2 I am working hard here to resist the temptation to correct every instance of “Straub” with “Straub and Huillet”; it is only French’s brutalizing rules around the inflection for the plural that are holding me back. Although Richard Roud’s path-breaking book on their films is just called *Straub*, it was, until Danièle Huillet’s death in 2008, more typical to refer to the films they made together as being “Straub-Huillet” films (or, less frequently, films made by “the Straubs”). The fact that “Straub-Huillet” was also the name of their production company made this even more natural. Jonathan Rosenbaum has explored these issues in his article “The Place(s) of Danièle.” Detailing the ambiguity around Straub and Huillet’s co-authorship, he writes that “Danièle only began to be credited as coauteur belatedly, after their first few films. But was this because she gradually became more active as a filmmaker or because the two of them began to place a higher value on her participation? Again, I have no idea.” This October 2009 screening at the Cinémathèque Suisse made her importance very clear; the film they made together, *Itinéraire de Jean Bricard*, was a lush and fully realized study in landscape, whereas the two films Straub had made by himself and finished after Huillet’s death, *Il Ginocchio di Artemide* (2007) and *Le Streghe* (2009), struck me as more airless and academic.
- 3 “Il n’est pas étonnant que Jean-Marie Straub ait exercé une influence particulièrement profonde sur le cinéma suisse. Straub a dépouillé ses films (*Non réconcilié*, *Chronique d’Anna Magdalena Bach*, *Leçon d’histoire*, *Moïse et Aaron*, etc.) de tous les clichés et de tous les mythes du cinéma de consommation, pour retrouver un langage limpide, parfaitement intelligible.”
- 4 “Après « Charles », l’expérience la plus enrichissante, ce fut « Othon » de Straub, auquel j’ai participais comme assistant-caméraman.”
- 5 “Ce lieu marque l’endroit de la séparation des eaux entre le sud et le nord d’un continent.”
- 6 “Le récit et la forme d’un film dépendent dans une large mesure d’où et quand ce film est fait, et dans quelles circonstances. Ce film a été tourné en un lieu appelé Le Milieu du Monde.... Ce film a été tourné en 1974, en un temps de normalisation. La normalisation signifie qu’entre les nations, les classes et même entre des systèmes politiques théoriquement opposés, tout peut être échangé à

condition que rien ne change la nature des choses.”

- 7 “Sous la simplicité gauchisante du cinéma de Tanner, ne serait-il pas temps de chercher quelque chose de plus **essentiel**, cela même dont Brecht comme Straub se réclament : une articulation entre théorie et spectacle permettant au spectateur de s’interroger sur lui-même par rapport à une représentation déconstruisant le cinéma bourgeois.”
- 8 “Mais cette « réalité » susceptible d’être reproduite fidèlement, reflétée par des instruments et techniques qui, 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,” p.1, 12). As I also mentioned in the introduction (note 21), Susan Bennett’s very strange translation of this passage renders that second sentence as “Seen in 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.” I have modified that here.
- 9 Godard started making films with his partner Anne-Marie Miéville in the early 1970s; the first work in which she has a credit is *Numéro Deux* (1975). The following year, the two made the twelve-part series *Six fois deux : sur et sous la communication* for French television; the *Cahiers* had Gilles Deleuze write on the series for issue number 271 (1976). While both Godard and Miéville also made films

separately, they continued making work together until 2002.

- 10 “Brecht a bien indiqué que, dans le théâtre épique (qui procède par tableaux successifs) toute la charge, signifiante et plaisante, porte sur chaque scène, non sur l’ensemble.... Même chose chez Eisenstein : le film est une contiguïté d’épisodes, dont chacun est absolument signifiant, esthétiquement parfait : c’est un cinéma à vocation anthologique, il tend lui-même, en pointillés, au fétichiste, le morceau que celui-ci doit découper et emporter pour en jouir” (187).
- 11 “... la suture (l’abolition de l’Absent et sa résurrection en quelqu’un)” (“La Suture,” 38).
- 12 “Il n’y a, dans tout le film, pas plus d’une dizaine de raccords « justes » – c’est-à-dire de raccords à l’intérieur d’une même scène et en continuité temporelle – alors qu’un film « normal » en compte au minimum plusieurs centaines. Il y a un travail de déconstruction à opérer sur le langage traditionnel, mais il ne suffit évidemment pas de simplement tout bouleverser. Le montage, s’il veut oppositions et ruptures n’a de sens que si entre les fractions existe un rapport.”
- 13 “... une étape que nous négligerons désormais : celle où l’image n’était pas appréhendée comme un champ filmique, mais, disons, comme une photographie animée.... Posons un temps, purement mythique, où règne le cinéma seul, où le spectateur en jouit dans une relation dyadique. L’espace n’y est encore qu’une pure étendue de jouissance, les objets s’offrent à lui sans qu’à la lettre aucune

présence fasse écran entre eux et lui et interdise leur capture” (“La Suture, Deuxième partie,” 50).

- 14 There is a very similar sequence towards the end of the film, where Adriana is in her room, drinking coffee and getting dressed. This, however, is comprised of two shots, the first of which (just over a minute in length) also includes a track to the right and slightly in as she goes to her mirror to brush her hair, and then a cut to a close-up of her as she brushes her hair (which lasts about five seconds). There is thus a flash of découpage editing here (via both editing and camera movement), which is completely absent in the earlier sequence.

- 15 “Chez Rossellini, le signifié s’identifie- ra exactement au référent de la fiction (réputé plein) sans jamais constituer une production autonome. Chez Pasolini, tout discours n’est qu’un discours sur la narration elle-même, seul référent tangible, seule butée du sens (le référent historique est vidé de tout rôle).”

- 16 “... 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 rapprochée du procès même de l’érotisme” (“La Suture, Deuxième partie,” 55).

- 17 “Adriana. – Mais je vais filmer quoi ?

Paul. – Eh bien, je sais pas... Tout ce que tu veux.

Adriana. – Mais quoi ?

Paul. – Je sais pas. Il y a des tas de choses à filmer.

Adriana (*Presque fâchée*). – Quoi des tas de choses? Les clients du bistrot? Ou la veuve Schmidt qui lave les verres ? Ou les chiens dans la rue, qui font pipi ? Ou alors moi, comme ça (*Elle tend le bras et braque l’objectif contres on visage*) dans ma chambre, ça fera un beau film. Un bel film di merda ! Je te montrerai le film, tu ne me vois jamais.”

- 18 “Je crois que la division de la culture en catégories est un des moyens qui soutiennent la culture actuelle, c’est-à-dire la société actuelle, où chacun se replie sur soi, s’enferme dans son domaine, sa spécialité, sa catégorie.”

- 19 These were also translated into French and published in the 1974 edition of the Zurich film magazine *Cinema*. The English-language versions were published in the first issue of the Montreal film journal *Ciné-Tracts* (which was an English-language review), which came out in 1977.

- 20 “Vous voyez ça ? (elle montre sa cicatrice). Il y a eu le feu dans notre maison. J’ai été brûlée. Il me reste ça. Mais je suis restée deux mois à l’hôpital. Pendant un mois je voyais plus, j’avais toujours un bandage sur les yeux. La nuit, toute seule.... Les autres aussi ils ont changé, parce que j’ai pensé que tout ce qui se passerait après serait différent. Moi je me voyais comme ça, et les autres me verraient autrement. On joue toujours la comédie pour les autres, on se fait une tête affreuse, C’est tout pour eux. Et moi je pourrai plus le faire, avec une tête affreuse.... (*Elle fait un geste qui mime l’interiorisation*) E verso di se stesso ... vers soi-même.

- La responsabilité vers soi-même. Et finalement c'était pas si grave. J'ai encore une tête. Mais j'ai changé à cause de ça."
- 21 "Tout le monde parle de ça. Vous fabriquez l'image d'un personnage père de famille, sérieux, conseiller municipal, directeur technique, travailleur, honnête, et vous vous retrouvez avec un connard qui court des serveuses de café italiennes ! Partout j'ai pu un peu sonder l'opinion des gens, c'est la même réaction. Vous verrez qu'on le biffera des listes. Il ne passera pas si ça continue."
- 22 "Elles visaient en effet à *politiser* l'exécutif, et la très grande majorité des Suisses s'y refuse. Le Conseil fédéral doit rester au-dessus des luttes partisans, en tant qu'il constitue le chef de l'État; il doit rester une équipe de « sages » autant que de « managers » en tant qu'il administre les affaires fédérales."
- 23 "Car qui ne voit pas non plus qu'aujourd'hui le temps des idéologies, des extrémismes et des beaux discours est passé et que ce dont nous avons besoin c'est de gens compétents, d'organiseurs et de techniciens capables de maîtriser les problèmes complexes de la société industrielle, et non pas d'hurluberlus qui colportent aux quatre vents les idées les plus fumeuses..."
- 24 "Succession de multiples petites déceptions, **Le milieu du monde** nous semble surtout ne pas tenir certaines promesses.... A ce propos, oublions vite la scène « érotique » du film : maladroite, elle en devient presque choquante."
- 25 "La cohérence du style est maintenue d'un bout à l'autre, sauf au cours des passages d'érotisme intimiste que le cinéaste n'a pas su maîtriser et qui rompent la tension de l'ouvrage par leur caractère naturaliste."
- 26 "Après « La Salamandre », je suis devenu un peu méfiant à l'égard de l'humour, qui sollicite un peu facilement l'adhésion et qui surtout contient un sorte d'aveu de faiblesse."
- 27 "Par cette lecture idéologique d'une histoire d'amour, Tanner réussit à concilier ces deux notions fondamentales pour un cinéma d'auteur : une dimension de réflexion sur la société et les rapports que nous vivons quotidiennement, et le sens du spectacle, de l'histoire à raconter qui attache le public à des personnages, à un récit. La première qualité ne servant à rien si elle n'est pas soutenue par la seconde."

