

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Topp, Dominic (2019) Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968 by Paul Douglas Grant. Review of: Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968 by Grant, Paul Douglas. Studies in European Cinema, 16 (2). pp. 169-170. ISSN 1741-1548.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17411548.2017.1363499>

Link to record in KAR

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/76471/>

Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968, by Paul Douglas Grant, London & New York, Wallflower Press, 2016, 224pp., £24.00 (pbk), ISBN 9780231851015

The task that Paul Douglas Grant sets himself in this book is to fill a gap in film history. As he points out in his Introduction, previous English-language accounts of the French film world's response to the 'events' of May 1968 have tended to privilege the involvement of established directors, particularly those associated with the New Wave (most notably Jean-Luc Godard and his flirtation with radical left-wing politics and collective filmmaking under the banner of the Dziga Vertov Group). What historians have largely ignored is the abundance of cinema produced in France in this period by militants operating outside the institutions of the commercial industry (including its auteur-focused art-house wing). It is this body of work, an assortment of mostly low-budget documentary films shot on 16mm between 1968 and 1981 (the year of the Socialist Party's electoral victory under François Mitterand) that is Grant's focus.

Drawing on interviews conducted with many of the relevant parties, he offers an account of several groups that were inspired to pick up cameras in the service of the class struggle: Atelier de recherche cinématographique (ARC), which shot a number of films documenting the May events, but dissolved soon afterwards; Cinélutte, founded in 1973 by students and teachers at IDHEC, the French national film school; Les groupes Medvedkine, two collectives formed by militant factory workers and given technical support by Chris Marker; and Cinétique, a group associated with the film journal of the same name. He also devotes a chapter to Jean-Pierre Thorn, a Maoist activist who spent much of the 1970s working and organising at a factory in the Paris suburbs. Despite their broadly similar ideological sympathies (mostly to the left of the French Communist Party), these filmmakers

took a variety of approaches to making political cinema, both in terms of subject matter and at the level of working methods.

For the films made closest to 1968, the main topic was the revolt of students and workers and the wave of protests, strikes and occupations that swept through France in the summer of that year. But Grant shows that, as hopes for a revolution dispersed in the ‘return to order’ that followed the May events, militant filmmakers expanded their scope beyond the traditional subject of the white male factory worker to focus on previously marginalised sectors of society. Thorn’s *La grève des ouvriers de Margoline* (1973) and Cinélutte’s *Jusqu’au bout* (1973) both chronicle the struggles of undocumented immigrant workers. Several Cinélutte films highlight the experiences of women: *Petites têtes, grandes surfaces – anatomie d’un supermarché* (1974) reveals the exploitation of female cashiers at the Carrefour supermarket chain, while *À pas lentes* (1977-1979) focuses on women workers at the self-managed Lip watch factory. Cinéthique made films on the independence movements in Mozambique and Cape Verde, collaborated on a number of films about French agricultural workers, and teamed up with a group of special needs activists to produce *Bon pied bon oeil et toute sa tête* (1978), which analyses the representation of the handicapped body in capitalist society.

Grant also explores on-going debates about what militant film practice should entail, often arising from filmmakers’ critical analysis of their own efforts. Most of the groups rejected (in theory, if not always in practice) the ‘spontaneity’ of direct cinema, in which the camera acts as the neutral recorder of a pre-existing reality. Filmmakers, they believed, should play an active role in the struggle, not just observe it. In some cases, as with Thorn’s *Oser lutter, oser vaincre* (1968), this meant imposing the ‘correct’ political line on the events filmed by way of voiceover and title cards. For Cinélutte, it meant a collaborative approach involving discussions between the filmmakers and their subjects before, during and after the

shoot. The results range, Grant suggests, from propaganda ('the film that speaks') to pedagogy ('the film that listens'). A different approach is found in the case of Les groupes Medvedkine. When workers at the Rhodiaceta textile factory were dissatisfied with the way they had been portrayed in Marker's documentary *À bientôt, j'espère* (1968), he encouraged them to make their own films, and arranged for equipment and technical training to be provided. While other groups argued that 'putting the camera in the hands of the workers' would lead to films that merely mimicked conventional cinema, Grant shows that the Medvedkine project grew out of a long tradition of working-class cultural activities, and that the workers involved were quite capable of expressing themselves when given the opportunity.

Grant's book is to be welcomed for the light it sheds on a neglected chapter of French film history, but it is open to criticism on several counts. While Grant notes that the theoretical debates which appeared in *Cahiers du cinéma* and elsewhere in this period have tended to eclipse the films produced, he devotes a lot of space to rehashing these same debates, without ever committing to a position himself. On the one hand, he appears to take seriously the critique of direct cinema's 'empiricism' and its claims to provide an unmediated window onto the world (I say 'appears' because it is not always clear when he is giving his own opinions and when he is paraphrasing those of the filmmakers and theorists under discussion). On the other hand, he is happy to assert the films' value as documentary evidence of working-class participation in May 1968 and beyond: 'these films provide images of the concrete role that the working class [...] played during the events and the extent to which it was involved in the radical politics of the post-'68 political sphere' (10). Only occasionally does he admit the possibility that the filmmakers were imposing their own interpretation on events rather than transmitting the workers' speech on their behalf. And although he makes several references to militant cinema's reputation for being dull and of

limited artistic quality, he never provides an effective counterargument to this view. This begs the question: just what is it about these films that deserves our attention almost fifty years after they were made? There is no suggestion that they had any political influence at the time, and since Grant does not make any particular claims for them on aesthetic grounds, it is ultimately unclear why he feels they are worth valuing.

Dominic Topp

Department of Film Studies, University of Kent