Screening August: Reflections Upon the Events of August 1968
in American and Czechoslovakian Cinema

by

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Abstract

Historically, the events surrounding the National Democratic Convention in Chicago and the acts of political refusal that accompanied the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia occurred simultaneously. This study pursues an investigation of film texts pertaining to the representation of August 1968, and the violent uprisings typified by that month, as filtered through films from each country and in reference to both of these central events. Its methodology is simple: as the cinematographic representation of these events is the focus, the textual analysis of actual films is irreducibly central to the investigation. Nevertheless, it is also pivotal to the argument that there are some key discursive and ideological factors that link the texts under discussion. What makes this connection most evident is the way in which all of the films contextualize the events to suit their own interests, fragment events by reflecting them through various forms of media spectacle (principally televisual), and problematize the separation of various geographical and historical domains. By virtue of these factors, it will be argued, the two events have been denied their local autonomy, becoming fused together in our image culture.

The films have been selected to provide as heterogeneous a textual base as possible. The first two chapters focus on two radically different feature length narrative films from the United States: Steven Kovac's '68 and Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*. The third chapter examines non-narrative American reflections on the Democratic National Convention, looking first at Nicola Lazenburg's documentary *My Name is Abbie* and then, in counterpoint, at two short experimental films, which focus heavily on the

riots, by Chicago filmmaker Tom Palazzolo. The final chapter analyses Jan Nemec's documentary *Oratorio for Prague*, the only film in the study that focuses *exclusively* on the Soviet incursion into Prague, although its contents are filtered by the other films – particularly '68, a film in which Nemec's footage appears on television screens within the diegesis. Though the films manipulate images of insurrection in similar ways, they use these images for purposes all their own. It will be argued that the vast differences inherent in these films – by virtue of their affiliation with divergent film-making practices and the various personalized versions of August '68 that they attempt to reify through their machinations – make all the more impregnable the many similarities which underpin their discursive business, as well as the global context in which they collectively present themselves and the very status of their historical images, which are similarly problematized in each film no matter where its individual prejudices may lie.

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There are a great many people, both directly and indirectly, without whom this project never would have come to fruition, and it is to them that I ostensibly dedicate the finished product.

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Although it may seem disingenuous (which it is certainly not), I would like to finish by proffering jewels of thanks upon not only my parents – for reasons both obvious and not so obvious – but more pressingly upon my ancestors, as in their melange of elements both Irish-Catholic and peasant Prussian, they are mean and vindictive people who would never forgive me if they were to fall by the wayside in any roster of my considerations. I cannot afford to insult them, their blood coursing through me most alarmingly. They are mine. And I, alas, belong to them.

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INTRODUCTION

One or Many Augusts?

The period of radical insurrection that occurred internationally at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s is perhaps best remembered in its Western context for the period of time stretching from May to August of 1968. May '68 in France, particularly, has endured as a signpost for an era of profound strife and generational schism. At the same time, May was an admittedly fleeting phenomenon, as attested to by Sylvia Harvey:

What is most striking about the political upheavals which began with the student unrest and culminated in a wave of massive strikes in the latter half of May is both the unexpected way in which they burst upon the scene, and the extreme rapidity with which they developed, and then apparently dissolved.”¹

This ephemeral nature of the events of May '68 is made all the more evident by the way in which they were depicted in film practices at the time and through to the present. In her analysis of radical film collectives such as SLON, Medvedkine, and Dynadia, Harvey notes that while these groups filmed the events of May in much the same way as standard news crews, they separated themselves with a stance of “minorities...speaking to a minority...interested in the freedom of self-expression.”² Their films were screened by student groups but were not seen outside Paris. The collectives were known for creating ‘works of struggle’ in the place of ‘works of art’ and as such made films that lauded the student agitators merely by depicting them fighting in the streets or orating directly to the camera, assuming that their viewership was of like political persuasion.

The only images captured were brief and violent ones of a movement already in obvious dissolution. When SLON raged against the “entity of ART,”³ they sought clearly to separate their class-conscious work from the image-making practices of artists and craftspeople. Perhaps this is why no comprehensive body of cinematic work emerged from the movement. It happened so fast that all of the violence and “freedom of self expression” dissipated into a blur of newsreel and tear-gas. Julia Kristeva says of May ’68 that it “was about relentlessly questioning all values, powers and identities. Not in order to start a vacuum, but instead to start anew.”⁴ Although Kristeva’s invocation of May ’68 as a moment of the mass transvaluation of values may be to the point, it is not corroborated by the images that have been left behind, which confirm nothing of this impression – at least not on their own.

Although May ’68 is not the focus of this study, it does enter the world of the films that will be discussed as a media-event, and as an event linked to other international occurrences by television as well as by a perceived solidarity on the part of fictional characters and documentary talking-heads alike. The two events that will be discussed in this study occur three months after the demonstrations in France, on opposite ends of the earth. In August 1968, the disastrous Democratic National Convention in Chicago occurred at the same time as the Soviet invasion of Prague, Czechoslovakia. These events were televised simultaneously and have become intertwined through their representation in cinema. Images from each have also been used in similar ways to twist the events that they depict in order to remove them from their proper historical and sociocultural contexts. Though television is not an object of inquiry here – as cinema practices must take precedence – the role of television and the televisual-apparatus in the films I will

examine cannot be oversold. We are dealing with a post-national global environment, nearing the final stretches of the Cold War, where images and cultural signs from all over the world have begun to enter a state of radical exchange. Much as the images that remain of May '68 have lost the grain of their real resistance, as summed up in spirit by Kristeva, so the Czech and American event-moments, which were likewise filtered through the lenses of various media, have been altogether ripped from their ground by popular film practices.

Images of '68, not just in France, have been distilled through many media. If television-events, documentary practices, and incorporation within narrative films take precedence in this study, it is for the benefit of focus. Such representations always seem to do a number of things. Firstly, the films contextualize or de-contextualize the events to suit their own cinematic interests, some of the more radical films foregrounding this very process, others attempting to either repress or naturalize it. Secondly, the films reflect the events through their relationship with media spectacle, no matter how radical the films' aspirations may be. Finally, the films problematize the separation of *here and elsewhere*, domination and resistance, aggressor and victim, further foregrounding their complicity in the effective overcoding and *silencing* of '68 in France, America, Czechoslovakia, and beyond. This also brings to our attention the generally uncomfortable afterlife that these images have taken on within the image culture at large.

In each chapter, one or two films will be treated to a close textual reading in order to unearth exactly how these films use images of '68. All of the films, excluding the final piece by Jan Nemec, are American productions and all focus most of their attention on the Chicago Democratic National Convention. Here, the emphasis is not so much on a

national diversity in the texts so much as a choice of text-types from across as wide a spectrum as possible. The first two chapters focus on two radically different feature length narrative films from the United States: Steven Kovacs' '68 and Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*. The third chapter examines non-narrative American reflections on the Democratic National Convention, looking first at Nicola Lazenburg's documentary *My Name is Abbie* and then, in counterpoint, at two short experimental films, which focus heavily on the riots, by Chicago filmmaker Tom Palazzolo. The final chapter analyses Jan Nemec's documentary *Oratorio for Prague*, the only film in the study that focuses *exclusively* on the Soviet incursion into Prague, although its contents are reciprocally presenced by the other films – particularly '68, a film in which Nemec's footage appears on television screens within the diegesis. It will become clear how media practices with a global context render Chicago and Prague similar because of, and *not* in spite of, the diversity of their settings. These events happen in various settings at one and the same time and are understood to be doing so, often overtly, by all of the films. It will shown that the vast parallels do not end here.

The fragmentary nature of the images of insurrection under discussion naturally causes them to take on similarities without borders. This is clearly compounded by the fact that all of the films depict confrontations with a State apparatus. The similarity of the images is clear despite the fact that there are two very different States being confronted here, The Soviet Union and the United States – not just two organizationally dissimilar imperial superpowers, but two nations locked in bitter conflict with one another during the era in question. This perceived univocity of struggles with different dominant States is aided by nothing more than the images that bring these things together. Somehow these

struggles have a way of being locked together as one through no fault of their own. The films provide the illusion of the coherence between struggles, but do so only by directly undermining the singularity of these events and by situating them as events for media spectacle.

The term spectacle is used throughout this study. It is utilized in very much the same sense as in the writings of Guy Debord and his Situationist contemporaries. Debord sees “spectacle” through a screen of Marxist commodity fetishism. Debord insists that spectacle exists to separate all individuals so that unity may only be retained within the world of spectacle itself, the place where “images detached from every aspect of life (are) merge(d) into a common stream.”⁵ Spectacle is the fundamental way by which workers, activists, and theorists are prevented from taking “direct possession...of every moment of their activity”.⁶ This force of spectacularized commodification is seen as pervasive by the Situationists. In the 1961 papers from the Fifth S.I. (Situationist International) Conference in Sweden, the workings of spectacle are described as follows:

“Private” life is defined...in a formal context. It is, to be sure, born out of the social arrangements created by private appropriation, but its essential form is determined by the expression of those relations. Universal, incontestable yet constantly contested, this form makes appropriation a right belonging to everyone and from which everyone is excluded...as long as it fails to break free from the context imprisoning it...⁷

For the Situationists, spectacle is not just seen in the popular forms that embody it – such as advertising, public events, television, and movies – it is a totalizing public contract that expresses itself in “the negativity that reigns over the expression of social relationships.”⁸ The problem with this Marxist “logic of the value-form,” as argued by Anselm Jappe in his study of Debord, is that social processes are left to take on the appearance of “blind forces.”⁹ The study will use spectacle as a term to designate a specific category of images

and cultural signifiers which become synonymous with the two core event-moments. It will not try to posit one giant force of domination as a “blind” global force. It is the event-moments, the public spectacles of ’68 itself, that are left to the organizing interests of the films under discussion, in their textual and formal business. As such, the events, and the struggles that they represent, are unable to “break free from the context imprisoning them.” The world of spectacle is what makes the positioning of these events outside of their historical contexts intelligible.

The majority of the non-cinematographic texts that will be referenced in this study will be split between film scholarship relevant to the issue of mediatization and postmodern representation and critical theory relevant to the actual events in question, in all their inevitable contingency. Theory will be used to show how the events are both singular *and* multiple in their very nature, and how this is compounded by the role of media practices within the audio-visual landscapes of the films. Although these events are not linked by a single shared cause, images have made it difficult to split them from one another. The discourses employed by the various films continually restate this point in different and interesting ways; the global connection that links disparate fragments of ’68 together as “a worldwide movement that contributed to an unprecedented reordering of private life.”¹⁰

¹ Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 26.

⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 3.

⁶ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 53.

⁷ R. Vaneigem, "Basic Banalities (I)" in *Situationist International Anthology*, Ken Knaab, ed. (Berkeley: The Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 97.

⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁹ Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 10-11.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 18.

CHAPTER 1

Welcome to Czechago: '68, Spectacle, and Hybridity

Chicago sweltered, the Russian tanks clanking through Czechoslovakia clanked through our heat too, and it felt as though the whole world were on a knife-edge. The first news I heard at the *Wall Poster* office was that a Sioux teenager named Dean Johnson had been killed by police in Old Town, the hip neighborhood near Lincoln Park; it was reported that, accosted by police, he had reached into a bag and pulled out a pistol. The second was that forty-three black GIs at Fort Hood, Texas, fearing assignment to ghetto duty, had refused to accompany their units to Chicago, and were being held in the pen. WELCOME TO CZECHAGO. RICHARD J. DALEY, MAYOR.

- Todd Gitlin (Former SDS Organizer)¹

The main trends are familiar: concentration of the national economy on the needs of the big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even controlling force; hitching of this economy to a world-wide system of military alliances, monetary arrangements, technical assistance and development schemes; gradual assimilation of blue-collar and white-collar population, of leadership types in business and labor, of leisure activities and aspirations in various social classes; fostering of a pre-established harmony between scholarship and national purpose; invasion of the private household by the togetherness of public opinion; opening of the bedroom to the media of mass communication.

- Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*²

Steven Kovacs' narrative feature '68 (1987) is a deceptively straightforward film that manages to exhibit an interplay of conflicting styles and approaches that bespeak an

ulterior complexity. Wallpapered in television images and standard rock music of the era, it tells the story of landed Hungarian immigrants running a barely operational restaurant and raising two America-born sons in San Francisco. The boys are followed through multiple historical events, most of which are shown to be foundational to the era as they are textually rooted in the many cataclysmic media-events associated with the film's titular year, while all the while they attempt to endure their proud anti-Communist father's authoritarian order of conduct. The film continually returns to the family, grounding the 'spirit of the sixties' there, via the transformative effect social events and cultural changes have on the sons, who in turn effect transformation within the home (along with various media). The father's attempt to present his family as a constructed American artifice, a proud "nuclear family", no different from the ideal, cannot repress the true status of its role as part of a diaspora. The family is depicted in times of social upheaval that confront it with an overload of cultural images and concepts which seriously problematize and alter its ethnic, diasporic identity, on the one hand, while eroding the father's illusion of patriarchal authority on the other.

The globally connected media, and the way it reflects off the characters' compromised identities, becomes a constant reminder in the film that the sociocultural variables that this family engages with manifest, in one way or another, various "cultural hybrids".³ As with Stuart Hall's modern(ized) nations, identity is polarized in new ways. Identity politics begin to emerge out of a globalized means of production and dissemination, brought together by media-spectacle and the military industrial complex, in a world where people increasingly live in countries in which they were not born. '68 tells a consciousness-raising story of shifting hybrid identities, those of child and parent

alike, in times heavily informed by images of insurrection and violent suppression coming from numerous corners of the televised globe. The story traces the movements of its characters, always lurching forward and being held back at the same instant, never breaking beyond the spectacle that holds them in trance, or the bad faith that keeps them eddying.

Zoltan Szabo is the domineering father. Firm and overbearing in gait and character, with others he is always unshakably bound to moral conviction and is constantly assured of the absolute truth of his beliefs, while privately remaining a sick and overworked adulterer who falters in the face of his own convictions. His sons, Peter, and younger sibling Sandy, bear the brunt of his wrath, while Zsuzsa, his wife, sits nervously at the edge of most frames in the film. She rarely deigns to referee decisively one way or the other, never comments on her husband's mistakes and infidelities, but always moves slowly in his direction, wary of his explosive anger, glancing with trepidation, as though waiting for Zoltan to confess on his own, perhaps finally releasing the built-up tension of their increasingly uncomfortable scenes together. Although she does defend her sons occasionally, she is powerless to effect real change over the family, which remains enslaved by Zoltan's stubbornness and the impassable aporias which alienate two generations of men within this newly re-politicized domestic space.

Oldest son Peter is ostensibly the protagonist of the film. He begins as a naïve college freshman, politically unaware and seemingly guileless, only to be shaken into new ways of thinking by an activist of Chinese parentage named Alana Chan, who gets him expelled for plagiarism after handing in an assignment littered with slogans also found in her Peace and Freedom Party's readily available campus brochure.⁴ The

expulsion causes Peter, now a staunch politico, to enter into more heated conflict with his disappointed father, to take a low paying job at a garage that sells and repairs motorcycles, and to volunteer for Robert Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, further forcing his identity and lifestyle into crisis and reformation. In the end, unable finally to resolve the tides of resentment coursing through the family, and not making any real amends with his father or the troubled times, Peter is left in as ambivalent and problematic a position as he was at the beginning of the film. He only grows superficially. Wiser and more mature, his manner and speech having been neatly altered to betray this to the audience. Peter is no longer unaware of "machine politics," as he has it, and now understands the importance of putting oneself "on the line." His consciousness has been unmistakably raised by the film's climax, as is the tendency in the "coming of age" story, even if only to be let back down again in this case. He may *grow up*; however, the very tentativeness of his position remains unchanged. Our last image of Peter is a freeze-frame of him and Alana Chan poised smiling and uncertain at an anti-war protest, the future indefinite and resolution postponed in mid-action. The effect of this 'snapshot' could even be said to resemble a pair caught in the sights of a rifle.

Peter's younger brother Sandy likewise experiences a turbulent, transformational character arc; his is principally brought about by the simultaneous need to express and repress his sexual identity. Only twenty year's old, and still working for his parents in the restaurant, Sandy is awkward and effeminate, eager to prove himself to his father (who chastises him in the first scene of the film for not being as "responsible" as his older brother). Sandy is unable to come to terms with his sexual attraction to men, which he

forcibly attempts to suppress for the first half of the film by experimenting with heterosexual women. He has two on-screen heterosexual encounters in the film: first with a brazen, older Hungarian woman named Gizi; then, more seriously and emotionally damaging, with Vera Kardos. All three of these characters are first seen together in the film's second media-event, in the form of pure television-event inside the Szabo restaurant, wherein family and friends gather to watch the countdown to the New Year; a traditional cultural context for the collective exultation of televisual spectacle. Vera is a childhood friend of the family whose father, Tibor, plays "gypsy violin" in the restaurant before Zoltan fires him in order to remake the establishment, for the final but not for the first time in the film, more "acceptable" to "American customers".

Sandy's progressive transformation is not the same as his brother's, however, even as it does involve a similar process of awakening and experimentation, as well as the combination and re-combination of a variety of conflicting lifestyle choices and markers of identity. After he briefly marries Vera, which only succeeds in provoking more accusations of irresponsibility from his father, Sandy is unable to maintain a double life and, after Peter discovers his secret, having encountered him alone, intimately, with a man at a bar, Sandy is forced to break free from Vera and come clean with her, postponing the inevitable explanation to his family for as long as possible. It is Sandy's coming out to the whole family, confessing that he beat military service (military service being another conflicting lifestyle choice with which he briefly flirts, along with marriage) by stage-kissing a commanding officer passionately on the lips, that finally causes the chasm between father and sons to widen irreconcilably, although their mother remains sympathetic. Peter implores his father to show mercy, but the scene ends without

resolution after Sandy is sent into familial exile and Zoltan, as is his tendency, is left simply refusing to waver in his steadfastness.

The boys and their mother are reconciled, perhaps prefiguring a matriarchal understanding, paving the way for a generation raised by women, in which father figures have entered a state of anxious foundering. Vera is also sympathetic, even if it takes her a while to nurse her own wounds of rejection. The final scene of the film, following Sandy's coming out, and standing in superficial narrative contrast to it, presents a friendly reunion and coming-to-terms between Sandy and Vera at the honky tonk where she now sings country and western songs. The final shot of the film shows Vera's father Tibor, the *gypsy violinist* with his Eastern European demeanor and thick accent, dressed in cowboy garb, from boots on up to Stetson, playing fiddle with his daughter's backup band. He is another product of hybridity and cultural clash, standing front and center on the stage like an impossible caricature.

Not only are the characters and the socialized/historicized narrative space that they occupy filled with fragmented modalities of identity, lifestyle, and group affiliation; the film takes on these characteristics itself in the way that it tells its story and even, in point of fact, by the specific kind of story that it chooses to tell. In order to understand just why this is, the best question to ask is: exactly what kind of narrative film is '68? As already mentioned, it is a superficially simple film and, no matter how interesting it may reveal itself to be when treated to an appropriately critical gaze, it would be difficult to argue that the film is without its share of cliché and appropriated genre conventions. However, it would be wrongheaded to attempt to categorize the film in terms of its

reliance on a single genre for all of its structural moorings and formal/stylistic excursions. Certainly it is better that we avoid bending the film to suit certain demands. Rather, we should carefully allow for the complex topology that Steven Heath calls the “actuality of the text”.⁵

The cycle of films to which '68 perhaps best exhibits defining similarities is that which Aniko Bodroghkozy refers to as the “youth rebellion films” of the late 60s and early 70s.⁶ '68 clearly diverges from the films Bodroghkozy analyzes in one key sense: it is a historical film reflecting upon an era that all of Bodroghkozy's films treat as the present from the removed perspective of 1987. Such current-event youth pictures as *The Activist* (1970), *Getting Straight* (1970), *Medium Cool* (1969), *The Strawberry Statement* (1970), *RPM* (1970), and *Zabriskie Point* (1970) get the bulk of the treatment. Some films, such as *Drive, He Said* (70) by Jack Nicholson, *Wild in the Street* (1968) by Barry Shear, or Agnes Varda's American made *Lions Love* (1969), which go unmentioned, only serve to suggest that an even larger pool of films could have been drawn from here. It would be unwise to attempt to affix '68 to this roster of films without qualifying its relationship to them as one of thematic and stylistic allusion, and not any form of direct citation, generic fraternity, or analogical parallelism. Still, undeniably, the similarities of '68 to these films (particularly *The Activist*, *The Strawberry Statement*, and *RPM*) are too obvious and numerous to escape some mention.

One of Bodroghkozy's main points is that this cycle of rebellion films, focusing on the phenomena of campus activism, “hippie” lifestyles, liberalization of sex and drugs, demonstrations and anti-war protests, was introduced by the studios to appeal to the growing popularity of films directed at youth audiences and away from the over-budgeted

studio mega-productions that nearly crippled the system before *Easy Rider* was released in 1969. The problem for the studios was that they were unsure how “radically” they should let the filmmakers engage with such topical cultural landmines, any controversy threatening to limit the market for these films drastically. As a result, producers “tried to force their films into familiar and, by implication, ‘safe’ narrative forms and categories”⁷. The key means by which this taming of possible subversive cinematographic activities was conducted involved situating the narrative angle around “coming of age” stories about passive protagonists, showing them confused by the chaos around them but never allowing them to demonstrate revolutionary behavior through their actions or to make any revolutionary political discourse explicit through direct address.

These characters, particularly the mild-mannered hero of *The Strawberry Statement*, are the precursors for ‘68’s Peter. His frantic and castrated attempts to assert an order of lifestyle and his constant contextualizing encounters with media-event spectacle render him only more confused, if morally determined all the same. He is placed within a politicized climate too magnificent to grasp or make final sense of. The paradox of the youth rebellion film lies precisely in its studio machinations, this also being true of ‘68. The depiction of Peter and Alana Chan the activist is tempered by an overwhelming denial of investment on any actual struggle’s behalf. The activists of ‘68 retain no more authentic a revolutionary mode than those of the earlier films; they are trapped in a position of “finding one’s political stance of negation and opposition hopelessly enmeshed within a system one wished to dismantle”.⁸

In short, the studios and filmmakers involved in these projects understood the cultural and cinematic appeal of images of resistance, and by incorporating them within

spectacle, by making them “safe”, they effectively neutralized those images, which is precisely what it will be argued '68 is doing through its appropriation and decontextualization of media. What began as “rebellion” ends as lifestyle decision-making in a world of spectacle. Campus upheaval becomes more and more difficult to tell apart from rock concerts and dormitory pot parties, as they all become enmeshed under the same ambiguous banner of spectacular and spectacularized youth.

Since Peter is not the only character in the film, and since the hybrid modulations that occur do so within the family and community at large, it is important to take into account the other genre connections that '68 furnishes itself with. It is an ethnographic family drama about a diasporic America, not unlike blaxplotation films and Italian crime dramas that prefigure it, or the broad range of ethnic family studies that have followed: *The Joy Luck Club* (1994) or *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), for example, as well as multicultural Canadian cousins such as *Double Happiness* (1994) and *Sam and Me* (1991). The American melting pot is rife with drama, and this has certainly been a recurring influence in its national cinema. Also, '68 is a historical picture, or an era film, certainly marketed to baby boomers with its “spirit of '68” and nostalgic music/locale. Ironically it was followed a year later by *1969* (1988), a film with which it understandably has much in common, including sympathetic mother figures and aggressive, controlling fathers (plus sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, protest, and young men soul-searching). It might be argued, then, that '68 belongs to its own cycle, leading from *Between the Lines* (1977) up to and including such recent films as *Steal This Movie* (2000), with widely exhibited mainstream half-cousins such as *The Big Chill* (1982) and *Forrest Gump* (1994).

There are parts of genres plugged into '68 like the parts in one of the motorbikes Peter works on. There are hybrids of all kinds in the film and the film is itself a genre hybrid, working a number of contrapuntal narrative dynamics and operating in a world of multiple and varying forms of spectacle, blurring, the whole while, lines across identity and media with hypnotic disregard for traditional borders. But it is what is within this hybrid that really counts. '68 represents hybridity of spectacle in a relation to the formation and reformation of hybrid identities within its characters' affective passages. The hybrid that the film itself *is* gives way to the hybrids that the film contains.

If the way that genres are reworked and retooled in '68 is reminiscent of the parts that go into motorcycles in the shop where Peter works for mechanic Westy (played by singer/songwriter Neil Young), this metaphor can rightfully be expanded to incorporate the film's endless fetishistic appropriation of archival footage. Such footage is the *spare parts* of the cinema, specifically of '68, whether it is public domain footage purchased from news agencies like Fox (who receive acknowledgment in the final credits), or found footage of any nature whatever. This archival footage is everywhere evident and is certainly a key part, if not *the* key part, of what allows this particular machine to run.

Principally the film utilizes two forms of archival footage: television-events witnessed by the characters within the film's locations, and media-events removed from the context of narrative development – or character interaction – that are there for the viewer exclusively as opposed to the characters, and which function independently of the diegesis. These two ways of using appropriated footage are not always completely separated in the film and enter into a back-and-forth throughout. Many scenes combine

these two methods in ways that create problematic intertextual spaces and dynamics which must be discussed further.

The best example of archival footage being used in the second manner (as newsreel footage divorced from the film's narrative space) occurs at the beginning of the film, before the credit sequence and the opening dialogue between Zoltan and his two sons. The film begins with grainy, black and white footage of Hungary during the Soviet invasion of 1956. A group of workers walks through the handheld frame from screen left to screen right. They wear somber suits and march in cold procession with banners and small flags. The soundtrack is filled with Hungarian folk music, the same piece Tibor will later play in the restaurant, and barely discernable news commentary concerning the invasion. Throughout the Hungarian montage sequence the radio commentary stands in stark disjunction to the fragmented and rapidly cut images. The effect is of a purposeful denial of coherence. Indeed what we are being presented with is more like audio/visual noise, divorced from clear meaning. The first shot, for example, is followed by a jarring cut to a second group of workers moving in the opposite direction, screen left to screen right, while the radio voice on the soundtrack refers to paratroopers landing in the mountains. The sounds and images here are not meant to provide us with a simple overview of the events of the '56 invasion, but rather to create a graphic and aural collage – one that is chaotic, overcoded, and jagged – much like that occurring in the confused interrelations of the characters and media-event spectacle throughout the film. As the montage sequence continues, we see various crowds gather and disperse in the vicinity of a large bonfire in the middle of the road, a Soviet star topples from an unidentifiable building, armed men chant slogans from the back of a moving truck, tanks appear to

move in graphic conflict with one another, random people appear grieving or in shock, their emotional reality completely nullified by the ambiguities of the sequence, and a young woman with a semi-automatic assault rifle stares blankly into the camera, her dark outfit in stark contrast with the light uniforms of the soldiers surrounding her. It is impossible at many times to separate soldiers from dissidents, victim from aggressor, attack from retaliation. The whole while, the newscast on the soundtrack, delivering sketchy details of the invasion, further denies the viewer any ground upon which to grasp the extra-textual topography of these events being presented in such rapid succession. Finally, strangest of all, the scene ends with a final newsreel image of a US Air Force jet launching into the sky followed by a sharp cut to the San Francisco skyline, in standard 35mm color stock, and the opening of the credit sequence.

The Air Force jet clearly stands as a remarkably confusing cap on a confusing sequence. The graphic conflicts at the heart of the sequence, almost Eisensteinian in speed and intensity, open up a locus not of unmeaning but rather of the overabundance of meaning(s) and the consequent impossibility of situating these events in terms of a coherent explanatory methodology or solid historical context. The jet, icon of the US, but also of the military state apparatus otherwise represented throughout the montage, takes the sequence beyond national boundaries and opens it up directly to a global (or at least internationalist) plain of intensities. This sort of connection invokes Marcuse, who saw the world moving away from internationalist Cold War chess in the early 60s, and towards a “world-wide...society without opposition.”⁹ This same thing has more recently been described, in terms of globalization and its basic power arrangements, by Martin Matustik, as “a universally coalitional politics”.¹⁰ The conflation of Soviet tanks and US

air power would seem to suggest this sort of parallel. It also introduces us to the mindset of the diaspora, whereby the Szabo family is almost a surface upon which is recorded images of different places and upon which their fragmented identity must emerge. In '68 the diaspora is in a constant process of negotiating and renegotiating images of *here* and images of *elsewhere* (Zoltan pines in the hospital, "no picture of the blue Danube"; his kitchen is filled with such images while his restaurant's dining area is bedecked with a ram's head and various paintings of cowboys). If America is a melting pot, in '68 it is primarily images that are cooked there.

Another important sequence in the film that sums up the archival dynamic at work involves Peter and Alana Chan watching May 1968 Paris demonstrations on Alana's television.¹¹ This scene, like many in the film, involves both forms of media-event mentioned earlier. Here, as throughout the film, the two bleed together freely, much as do images of *here* and *elsewhere*. The camera begins focusing on the news images displayed on the television screen, which sits in the middle of the frame surrounded by a plant in a vase, a second empty vase, a bowl of snacks, and two Chinese dolls. This image foregrounds the fact that the television is not merely a medium that delivers images and sounds directly to the brainstem but more elementally, as Anna McCarthy writes, the "TV set (is) a material object in social space".¹² This is what essentially makes clear the distinction between the television-events and the media-events disembodied from the material landscape of the film.

On the TV set we see an image of a Parisian police officer darting into the center of the frame and quickly firing off a canister of teargas, his strange riot helmet

notoriously reminiscent of a “Martian”, as Deleuze and Guattari have said in regard to those who wear this particular article.¹³ Ghostly protesters are then seen moving through clouds of gas and/or smoke. The disembodied voice of a newscaster recounts statistics concerning confrontations between riot police and students in the Latin Quarter and on the Boulevard St. Germain; “fifty students injured in clashes,” he says. There are a number of clearer images of students darting into the center of the frame to toss Molotov cocktails and other projectiles in a manner nearly identical to the police officer at the beginning of the sequence. The camera then pans away from the image of the television across a photograph of Ho Chi Minh hung on Alana’s wall. The poster is representative of the various forms of media that encroach upon private and public (social) space within the film, almost serving as a direct double of the JFK campaign posters that bedeck Peter’s bedroom and the RFK poster that causes him to lose his job as a mechanic when he refuses to tear it down at Westy’s request. The camera continues to pan right, past the poster, and completes its visual synthesis by settling on Peter and Alana who carry on an unrelated conversation while watching the images of protest. In the previous scene, Zoltan has engaged Alana and Peter in an anti-Asian racist diatribe which mirrors a similar outburst by Peter after he is attacked by a group of black men during the *live* assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Alana, agent for Peter’s maturation and politicization, tells him that he finally realizes “that politics is not passed on by the genes”.

On cue, the scene cuts to full screen images of the Paris demonstrations, no longer grounded at the material site of the television-event, conjoining them directly to earlier images of RFK, Vietnam, and, of course, the images from Hungary that open the film.

Once again we witness a bevy of fragmented images in graphic conflict: a student is clubbed by a police officer while another officer, looking away, turns to steal a quick glance; police march directly towards the camera; a large group disperses from tear gas; there is a shot over the shoulder of the frontline of riot police as they move slowly forward, swinging mechanically at students with their clubs. As in the Hungarian episode, the disjunction between images and voiceover and the graphic conflict underpinning the representational mode create a destabilizing and delocalizing effect.

The film immediately cuts back to Alana and Peter on the couch, excited by what they are witnessing. When Peter expresses his amazement that they are “*actually*” watching “a real revolution”, Alana contradicts him: “we’re making it happen,” she says. Indeed Alana is right, politics is not passed on by the genes, it is passed on in much more complex and nefarious ways indeed. The media-events, as spectacle, have no real effect beyond the way that they are consumed at the material site. She is not making the riot happen, but is it any wonder that in the mediatized space of the film this is what she *feels*? It is certainly no surprise that these media-events figure in the story at such precise moments, altering the trajectories of the characters, and no surprise, also, that Alana feels the rush of participation. They are participating!...as consumers of spectacle with their own lifestyle agendas. The two characters are energized at the end of this scene and it causes them to embrace in such a way as to suggest the imminent consummation of their relationship. The emotional arc leading into the scene, Zoltan’s verbal abuse of Alana and Peter’s outburst in the black neighborhood, is disguised by a convenient consumption of spectacle – intertextual footage of the May demonstrations – causing the scene to end with the decisive engendering of a new narrative thread. In short, a love story generated

by spectacle, through media-event proxy. It is impossible to divorce this sexual shift in their relationship from the nefarious “opening of the bedroom to the media of mass communication,” mentioned by Marcuse.¹⁴ The film makes numerous such sudden turns, all of which have one thing or another to do with events depicted in the media, even beyond the film’s diegetic interiors.

Guy Debord, who uses the term “spectacle” in a post-Marxist sense and not in the Structuralist sense of Barthes, insists that its key function is to separate all social individuals so that one may rediscover unity only within the spectacle itself. This is exactly what is happening with the layering of these media-events/television-moments. This simulation of unity that Debord is fixated upon finds a clear parallel here in ’68. The spectacle at hand is not just the individual media-event or its sociohistorical context, but rather the world of media-events that the characters inhabit and which keeps them in constant interaction with “images detached from every aspect of life merge(d) into a common stream”.¹⁵ A nexus is formed for the characters to inhabit, whereby their world is made intelligible to them through the bombardment of images in which they perform some willful selection as consumers and virtual receptors. The spectacle never ends for these characters and leaves them subservient to its own industrialized ends. We may not wish to go as far as Debord in insisting that this spectacularized industrial hegemony leads to the “proletarianization of the world,” however, we must at least concede the hopelessness of these sorts of television-induced fantasies as a surrogate for actual political and social action.¹⁶ The ‘spirit of ’68’ can never exist in its fetishization, particularly if part of the purpose of the uprisings in question was to subvert spectacle and the hegemony of any discourse whatsoever. If Michel de Certeau is right and May

'68 "engaged the entire structuring of our culture," then it only managed to do so by being eaten back up by spectacle.¹⁷

All of this is gloriously compounded in the final '68 media-event of greatest import, the concurrent violent images of the Chicago National Democratic convention in August and the Soviet invasion of Prague which occur at the same time and are watched on the television in Zoltan's restaurant by both generations of men and are thus seen through the lens of a deep political chasm. The scene, in its political constitution, clearly stands in direct opposition to the sexual solidarity of Pete and Alana in the previous one. It is here that the images are truly *merged into a common stream*, but in a problematic way that both foregrounds and neutralizes the difference inherent to their contextual transference, politically and graphically.

Zoltan and his friend Bela watch images of the Soviet invasion in disgust. Bella turns away horrified by the specter of tanks rolling into Prague as protesters scurry nervously. The footage on the news is actually taken from Jan Nemec's documentary *Oratorio for Prague* (talked about in a later chapter), as the closing credits confirm, although shots that last as long as two minutes in the original here stretch out for no more than five to ten seconds (granted, even this would constitute a long take by contemporary CNN standards).¹⁸ The appropriation of the Nemec material only serves further to showcase the extent to which '68 decontextualizes its archival materials. Of course, all of this remains unknown to Bella as he turns away from the television set, blurting out that he has not seen anything so egregious "since they raped" his native Hungary (or, as he says, "us") in '56. Turning back to the television set, Bela continues his tirade unaware

that Peter has changed the channel to a news broadcast featuring demonstrations in Chicago. "Look," says Bella, guffawing, "beating up innocent people." When Peter informs him that the images that he is watching are "outside Democratic headquarters," both Bella and Zoltan grow infuriated, referring to the protesters as "that scum." Peter reminds them that only a moment ago they were unable to tell the images apart, pressing his father into further depths of rage by adding that "the party in power always acts the same," unconsciously echoing Marcuse. The associations only become more complex when we consider the swastikas that protesters have affixed to the Soviet tanks. This is clearly the stuff of Marcuse, the point at which:

domination – in the guise of affluence and liberty – extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives....creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe.¹⁹

If the actual movements of 1968, in their various different and differing ways, sought to undermine this system of controls (what Marcuse calls "Technological rationality"), by discovering "authentic opposition" outside of spectacle and the extended machineries of domination, then '68 shows us unable to leave the system of controls behind, hindered by 1) our association with events only in terms of spectacle, and 2) the domestic political space and the law of the father, in this case unwavering Zoltan and his refusal to admit a certain outmodedness in his thinking.

Whether or not the party in power always acts the same, it is clear that the images, and their manner of presentation, make the clearest case for this. As in previous scenes, the disjunction within the set of images creates a decontextualizing confusion for the viewer(s), this time to the extent that a set of images from one location opens up onto a

register which unites it with images from another set within the perceptual domain represented. The screen clearly manifests a hybrid: protesters and state duke it out on the streets of a city between here and elsewhere, a veritable Czechago.²⁰ Whether or not there is a profound difference in the nature of resistance and power in terms of the geopolitical particularities of these separate national contexts, it has ceased to be *perceived* this way. The fundamental political crisis evinced here is that '68 and its various inhabitants, as Alana Chan and Peter have already confirmed, cannot *see* Prague and Chicago as different, they can only *feel* that this difference is the case, as sentient (if sentimental) political animals. But as media spectacle sees to it, the difference is nowhere self-evident and the images become *united in a common stream*.

Tom McDonough says of Hannah Arendt's famous response to the Chicago protests in *The New Yorker* that:

As she was writing, demonstrators battled in the streets with riot police...images of which were televised nightly. It was not, however, merely the instances of collective action and political mobilization that challenged her reassuring view of urban life; rather we need to see her memorialization of the solitary stroller as a reaction to the larger collapse of public order at the end of the 1960s (whether real or perceived matters little here).²¹

The question is begged: what is real, in the film, independent of its being perceived to be so? In the case of Arendt, her perception of a "collapse of public order," is unthinkable without her preceding "memorialization of the public stroller." In a world subsumed by spectacle and media, perception becomes the key, although it is never uniform and remains radically contingent no matter what; it is also clear from this that no matter how these images are perceived, in terms of the actual nature of collective actors and political mobilizers, no understanding can emerge from them that might facilitate political action

within any particular discourse or counter-discourse beyond lifestyle politics. You are left with dystopic ennui, an urge to fight back against a perceived power which dominates you, or a reactionary impulse *not to see*. What is universal about the coalitional politics that enshrouds the globe is to be found at its originary point of emanation; in the heterogeneous machinery of collective perception, the mediatized chaos of postmodern consciousness, invisible to the camera's gaze, but partially constituted by that gaze all the same.

Compounding this spectacularized amalgamation of disparate sociocultural sets and settings is the recurrent device the film continually exploits, whereby these two overlapping media-events both at some point make the jump from television-moment within the setting to media-event-moment rendered for the cinematic spectator outside the diegesis. While the private (but social) space of the family is invaded by these images, so too does '68's audience enter into a relationship of overlap as delocalized and incoherent images render any political, or even geographical, judgment absurd. We too are told to make of these images what we please, to feel them however we feel them, according to our lifestyle politics and our politicized comportment towards the spectacle at hand. Still, the film's machinations run deeper than that in the sense that it has clearly gone out of its way to position these images just so. The problem of calling these events simultaneous becomes wholly evident. The re-presentations of these events occurs *within a common stream* whether or not the actual events occupy the same historical moment. Even if they do occupy the same historical moment, they steadfastly refuse to occupy the same historical space. In '68, it is the television as site of media transmission that distorts this immutable fact. The film imposes itself on its extra-textual materials in such a way as

to further divorce them from their separate contexts, having already fragmented them beyond recognition.

The problem is inherent to the process itself. By taking images from various sources, often sources that are in direct conflict with the contexts that the film seeks to provide for them, the film hints at a lack inherent in its various archival images. All of the media-events stockpiled in '68 are rehashed. They lack Geist or elan vital; the very energy of *coming to pass* or *coming into being*. This is entirely true for the audience of the film but also partially true for the characters within it. They experience the events as history coming to pass, despite the fact that said history is a synthetic simulation, propped up on television screens, posters, songs, etc. The film asserts itself as a problematic fixture in the world of spectacle that it internalizes. At the end of the Chicago sequence, a police officer, live from the streets, tells a radio interviewer on the voice-over: "The policeman is not here to create disorder, the policeman is here to preserve disorder." The same could be said of spectacle in general and, more to the point, '68 in particular.

In McDonough's reading or Arendt, the world of the late sixties is characterized as a movement away from the world of the solitary stroller to a world of solitary monads prostrate before the same images of *here and elsewhere*. Zoltan and the police, in equal measure, can be seen as leftovers from the nationalist phase that brought the world into two massively destructive wars, desperately trying to reassert ossified discourses in a changing landscape. We must not forget that the role of the television in all of this is a complex one, no less is the site of its impact or consumption. As Anna McCarthy reminds

us, television is a medium that is “particularly malleable”; a “heterogeneous physical form” arriving in all shapes, sizes, and locations:

And such undivergent forms of television coexist unproblematically; one need only take a cab ride through Times Square, populated with more forms of televisual apparatus than one could possibly count, to grasp the inadequacy of theoretical models that attempt to address the medium’s materiality via an abstracted or idealized sense of its technological manifestation on the level of the everyday.²²

’68 may not exactly be the cinematic equivalent of Times Square, but it certainly does manage to come close with its endless interiors with televisions on display. Not just private residences have televisions. Shops, the garage, the campus, campaign headquarters, and the hospital all have them, while the newspaper office has two playing simultaneously. The television is ubiquitous. The ever-present apparatus comes in all shapes, sizes, and contexts, producing the ersatz politicization of the characters and redirecting their emotional and character arcs at every turn. After the RFK assassination montage, both diegetic and non-diegetic, Peter is even depicted like a down-and-out drifter wandering out by the tracks with four-day’s-growth of stubble and a newfound smoking habit. The television guides everything here like a formal air traffic controller.

The lifestyle politics, with their hybrid modulations and volatility of identity, indicate something like a Times Square of choices that the characters view from the window of a cab. The film is filled with disparate assortments of media stimulation and the consequent effect registered in the trajectory of its characters, but, like Times Square, it all occurs in one giant, open space. The characters have genuine relationships with these images, but these are relationships that have already been constituted within the realm of images. I am not intending to contradict the strain of film studies that affirms a relationship between the image and what it indexes – summed up quite nicely by Evan

William Cameron in the very first volume of the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* when he writes that:

one may certainly impose criteria of identity upon objects seen by means of photographs or films, but, when doing so, one must not impose criteria which would render impossible identification of objects as ordinarily seen in the world! Obviously, identity of stimuli is too strong a criterion.²³

This is absolutely true. The problem with '68, however, falls on the particular identity of the stimuli which are problematized in four basic ways: 1) The images return events to a site of spectacle and a site of order, 2) The images deny contextual basis or local specificity, 3) The film uses images to its own narrative ends, 4) events have no context beyond the way they are consumed (by the characters and by extension the viewer). What really happens to the archival images in '68 is that they are disordered back to a state of order – they are *disorder preserved*. When Peter says: "I'm a news junkie, I gotta be plugged in," one wonders what the option to being "plugged in" really is. The film offers no alternative except perhaps for that of the father, symbolically deaf and mute, repressing himself to death, unaware that '68 the movie has already silenced the history around him.

¹ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 367.

² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 19.

³ Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity and its Futures*, Hall, David, Held and McGrew, eds. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 297.

⁴ The name "Peace and Freedom Party" is clearly meant to evoke "Students for a Democratic Society" (SDS), who were associated, by the FBI and campus officials, with multiple campus uprisings in the late 60s and early 70s from NYU to Princeton to the Midwest, and which was in turn associated with even more militant groups like the Weathermen. See Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, "COINTELPRO – New Left," in *The COINTELPRO Papers*, Ward Churchill, ed. (Cambridge MA: South End Press,

2002), pp. 165-230; see also Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

⁵ Steven Heath, "Film, System, Narrative," in *Questions of Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1981) p. 132.

⁶ Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films," in *Cinema Journal*, 41.3 (2002): 38.

⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁸ Ibid., 50.

⁹ Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), xli.

¹⁰ Martin J. Beck Matustik, in *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press), 219.

¹¹ Although it may seem fatuous that Alana, an outspoken activist, would rely on her television for information – after all, she is aware of how those in power "lie about political process" and how people like Peter "believe everything they say" – one must not forget the powerful role of the television for youth organizers of the New Left throughout the sixties and seventies. In a manner similar to Alana's self projected involvement in the events that she watches on TV, Yippie! organizer Jerry Rubin once wrote "You can't be a revolutionary today without a television set – it's as important as a gun," see Jerry Rubin, "Do It!" in *Scenarios of Revolution* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1970), 106-108.

¹² Anna McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture and its Space," in *October* 98 (Fall, 2001): 102.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 31.

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 19.

¹⁵ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 3.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, "A Symbolic Revolution," in *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹⁸ The footage was shot by Jan Nemec himself and is thus used courtesy of him. At other points in the film, particularly a brief Vietnam war montage, similar to the others already

discussed, employs footage used in Peter Davis' *Hearts and Minds* (1974) which was purchased from the same source, as the director confirmed for me by e-mail, since it was already archival footage when Davis used it. Still, as far as the image culture is concerned, all of this footage has been chopped up and recycled adding to its demystification.

¹⁹ Herbert Marcus, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 18.

²⁰ See quote at beginning of chapter; found in Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 326.

²¹ Tom McDonough, "The Crimes of the Flaneur," in *October* 102 (Fall, 2002): 103.

²² Anna McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture and its Space," in *October* 98 (Fall, 2001): 99.

²³ Evan William Cameron, "Kant's Station; Lumieres' Train: Seeing Things by Means of Film", in *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, Vol.1 No.1 (1990): 44.

CHAPTER 2

Windy City Headstompin' Blues:

Fatalism, Hollywood Counter-Cinema, and Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*

Thus, people may not only lose true insight, but ultimately their very capacity for life experience may be dulled by the constant wearing of blue and pink spectacles.

- T.W. Adorno, "How to Look at Television"¹

Phil Ochs
(American)

Born: El Paso, Texas 1940

Died: Chicago, Illinois 1968

- Tombstone's epitaph on the cover of Phil Ochs' 1969 album "Rehearsals for Retirement"

Like Steven Kovacs' '68, *Medium Cool* (1969) by Haskell Wexler is a narrative film that invests itself in assembling a collage of key 1968 events, focusing most particularly on the protests in Chicago during August's convention. Also, like '68, it features a lone male protagonist who begins as a politically unaware, somewhat self-involved everyman, who becomes transformed into a disaffected yet socially aware figure representing cultural change in America. Like Peter, the main character, John, is a political tool as well as an ambiguous human being of unstable ideological constitution. John, no less than Peter, is surrounded by images of his own nation and of other nations within one *common stream*. If popular music iconography and campaign posters are not as central in *Medium Cool*, television screens are (as are Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy respectively).

Along with them are new icons. One such icon is a photo of John as a soldier in Vietnam which seems as though it could be taken as a still from an earlier scene in which the coast guard trains for the imminent Chicago riots. Another icon is a poster of Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless* (1959), which John mimics in pantomime to further the intertextual citation; referring, of course, to Belmondo's similar mimicry of Bogart posters in Godard's film.

Unlike '68, *Medium Cool* maintains an almost exclusively American vantage point in terms of the events it mediatizes, is essentially contemporaneous with its historical events, and goes further in the direction of situating these events within the context of media practices. This happens both on the level of those practices that it depicts and on the level of those that it self-reflexively wants the viewer to know constitute it as a cinematographic text.

The protagonist of the film is a news cameraman who witnesses the events, both inside the convention center as well as out in the streets and in Lincoln Park. It is no surprise that the film thus takes us away from the interconnected network of media consumers prostrate before posters, rock songs, and television screens in '68 and toward a perspective *inside* the construction of media-event spectacle. If '68 is an admittedly awkward film, somewhat weighed down by cliché and stereotyping, the same cannot be said of *Medium Cool* – at least not to the same extent or in the same manner. Like '68 it does combine various different (in this case radically different) types of narrative and stylistic convention. However, its use of fragments, structural dislocation, stylistic experimentation, and its formal modalities weigh more on counter-cinematic practices of the late 1960s. The question that must be asked is whether *Medium Cool*, as a Hollywood

studio picture attempting to be subversive by its very nature and in terms of its message, manages to be radical enough to avoid '68's effective silencing of the events through their mediatization? To what extent does *Medium Cool* return events to a site of order, deny contextual basis, use images of real events for its own ends, open onto a register of interpretive multiplicity, or otherwise find cinematographic means to dilute or even dissolve the events in question?

The title of Wexler's film invariably references the ideas of Marshall McLuhan. Critic Robert Sklar reads the film as a critique of McLuhan's notion that television is a "cool" medium, unlike "hot" media such as print or radio, "that (will) electronically foster a new age of less individualistic, more communal culture and communication." Sklar feels that *Medium Cool* contradicts this notion. He writes:

Not so after all, says Wexler. He shows network TV cameras filming student protesters who chant, "The whole world is watching" – an ambiguous slogan, implying that images disclose truth – and then, as police push the TV cameras away in preparation for an assault, the students plaintively cry, "NBC ...come back...stay with us."²

Sklar sees in *Medium Cool* the antithesis of the "common culture" of the global village, but rather a carefully mediated process of image-making tied to corporate and governmental interests. The status of the images being constructed out of the historical events being depicted in the film is thus thrown into crisis.

The title *Medium Cool* has resonances that reach deeper than this. Both of the two words that it contains have an appropriately split meaning. The word 'Medium' references both media dissemination on the one hand and "averageness" or "middleness" on the other. 'Cool' implies either a condition of laconic social ease with its foundational

cult of 'hip' populism, calmness under pressure, something that is good or exciting, unfeeling or unmovedness, being aware of something shared (information or even just a state of being) of which the majority is unaware, or finally a temperature, notably that of a corpse. The reason that the title is apt is that these various defining extrapolations all mirror forces that are enacted throughout the text itself. The film is of course a 'medium' – one that contains all manner of media within itself. The film puts all of these elements together, suggesting that the bad faith which presides over such a wide expanse of human affairs invariably leads those who cohabit with the status quo to become materially (if coolly) complicit in the functionings of the ruthless, invariably succumbing to a destructive state of affairs as an agent of its execution. As the soundman Gus says to a group of journalists early in the film, comparing himself to a typewriter, "a typewriter doesn't really care what's being typed on it." If, in *Medium Cool*, one does not *play along* or allow oneself to be rendered a tool of exploitation, one will otherwise find oneself being either symbolically or literally destroyed. One must affix upon the page the words typed by another for purposes that are not one's own or else one's very identity within the socius is immediately cast into crisis.

The various contexts of 'cool' are multiple. The theme of "hippie" insurgency brought up by Bodroghkozy in her essay on "youth rebellion films," among which she includes *Medium Cool*, hints at an obvious point of departure.³ The "hippies" in the film are the many young people who protest, for this is one of the many, apparently derogatory, things that the police and media personnel call them. This is what they are called *in* the film if not *by* it. There are many scenes, admittedly dated now, of their 'cool' anti-war, nonviolent dances and gatherings, accompanied, for the first time in an

American studio picture, by the music of Frank Zappa.⁴ In many ways it is the young people that the whole jingoist media fracas has descended upon, including Wexler and his collaborators on the film in question who certainly have a part in both fetishizing and eroticizing their subject.

The Chicago riots, as they do in much documentation, take on a sexual air of their own. SDS and Yippie! organizers present in Chicago often comment on the peculiarly sexual nature of the protests themselves. Abbie Hoffman, in *My Name is Abbie* (81), recalls that over the slogans of the protesters who refused to flee could be heard equally vitriolic slogans from the line of police, most of them “completely sexual in nature.”⁵ If *Medium Cool* remains a film within a certain tradition of counter-cinematic practice anterior to '68s rather faint genre and media simulations, it must be admitted that it also plays a precarious role in filming the protesting bodies that the police have designated, and that the myriad of cameras have confirmed, as a sight of sexual desire and psychosexual crisis.

Taken in consort with one another, the sets of extrapolation sieved from the two words of the title are valuable not just in that they cover some basic themes of the film (namely: the way social forces conspire to incur and document violence and sex, as well as perpetuating static identity-constructs). They also show us, in their various permutational combinations, a number of attitudes toward media. To be ‘cool’ in reference to a ‘medium’ or media can include all of the definitions of ‘cool’: firstly, music and other media inform the ‘hip’ populism (or, to be generous, collectivism) that sexualizes the youth movement, foregrounding the performativity of life-style politics within spectacle; secondly, unfeeling or unmovedness of the media or in relation to it;

thirdly, being aware of the real functionings of the media as the majority remains trapped in its thrall. The film showcases embodiments of all these tendencies and more, reminding us, like '68, that media invariably leaves itself in the hands of a heterogeneous multiplicity of human receivers who may do with it what they please but who may never remain untouched by its reach. *Medium Cool*'s critique is grounded in this ambiguity, forced to catalogue the heterogeneous world in which the media situates itself as a means of epistemological organization, the film lacks the dialectical antithetical postulate of theory (as when Marcuse, for example, pits the technologized world against its entire conceptual negation). *Medium Cool* does not posit a means of resistance towards any particular medium or apparatus of domination and is incapable of doing so for the very reason that the world it depicts, and thus *Medium Cool* itself, cannot have an *outside* independent of the spectacle that contains everything within it.

The 'cool' corpse at the end of the film is that of an Appalachian woman named Eileen (Verna Bloom), and the driver of the vehicle is her not-quite-lover, a news cameraman named John (Robert Forster). Directly before we witness the accident visually, in cost-saving flashes, it is revealed to us on the soundtrack by a simulated radio broadcast that 'coolly' discounts the basic facts of the accident and the names of those involved. The viewer is made to understand, before the accident actually occurs, that John survives as its only material witness, a living man held privy to real devastation and personal tragedy. In this final scene of the film proper, right after the camera has cut to the accident's aftermath with the car now smashed head first into the base of a roadside tree, a pickup truck pulls slowly by the scene, its occupants gazing curiously as they pull

away, not stopping to help. This is the moment that finally brings us full circle to the beginning of the film.

The film begins with John and his soundman Gus arriving with their news van at the scene of an accident. Nobody has arrived to assist the injured passengers, who remain in the vehicle, mirroring the position of John and Eileen in the film's denouement. The car horn blares noisily before being disconnected by the newsmen, as John and Gus casually tinker with their equipment. They take photographs, engage in private conversation, and are quickly off to hand the film over to a go-between on a motorcycle who then rushes it back to the VTR room at the television station in an elaborate series of cross-town tracking shots. John and Gus, and by extension the media organization which employs them, treat the scene of the accident with coldness, unfeeling, and unmovedness. This lack of feeling mirrors both the passerbys in the pickup and the dry radio announcement at that end of the film's narrative proper. If the circle of the film renders Eileen the classic, tragic heroine, then John is the figure of hubris. His complicity and coldness to blood and death, on all fronts, burdens him with the fate of himself bleeding and confronting real death from the other side of the gaze. Effectively, death awakens him and, by extension, the viewer as well.

John starts out as an emblematic product of the world of televisual ritual and its construction, a world that Adorno warned would deprive individuals of "their very capacity for life experience," adding that such faculties have been "dulled by the constant wearing of blue and pink spectacles."⁶ Adorno sees television as the key medium engendering the ongoing disruption of "polymorphic meaning" in a world which is polymorphic: "what it conveys becomes itself organized in order to enthrall the spectators

on various psychological levels.”⁷ Adorno, in short, sees television as a key tool of his ‘closed society’ (similar in nature to his contemporary Marcuse’s concept of technologized universal rationalism). If there is a quasi-dialectical pull that situates John in *Medium Cool* it may be crudely described as one between the ‘closed society’ and a ‘polymorphic reality’. As a cameraman, John personally organizes things “in order to enthrall the spectators on various psychological levels.” Despite his position, however, the lines of information are closed to John and he serves as a mere output machine, used for his labor value – a near vulture (as in the opening scene of the accident) with no real sense of what he produces or for what real purpose he produces it, let alone the real human drama which underpins it. He is not even permitted to follow his own raw footage through the entire production process, as we see when he hands it off to the biker and, much later, learns to what nefarious use it is being put.

This all becomes clear to John when he finds out that the station’s news manager is leasing out his footage to the police and the FBI to peruse at their leisure, much as the Black Panthers and young Robert Kennedy supporters he interviews have been telling him all along. John is furious. He quits his job on the spot and flees. This is John’s second last step towards reconciliation with the real state of affairs governing the social strata that he inhabits and which he realizes – in a series of dogmatic, yet childish and wounded, almost castrated, monologues – that he himself serves as an unwitting pawn. The final such moment of reconciliation is the accident that kills Eileen. If this transition is not one from the middle ground of a ‘closed society’ to a state of ‘polymorphic’ authenticity, then we can at least say that the film creates, and perhaps attempts to bridge, an intermezzo between two variations of the title: the transition John undergoes from

being “medium cool” (a medium of unfeeling or unmovedness) to “medium cool” (aware of the real and secretive machinations at the heart of the media, the state, and the military industrial complex – *cool to the system*). *Medium Cool* is, then, a consciousness-raising picture similar to '68 and the “youth rebellion films” mentioned by Bodroghkozy, but it deviates broadly. John and Eileen are not vindicated simply by political righteousness. It is a death that elevates them. They are freed only when the circle comes to its close and the machinery of desire latent within the film arrives at a site of consummation. They are set free by being destroyed by the system against which they cannot otherwise assert their own autonomy.

The earlier evocation of the temperature of a corpse (‘cool’) is not a flippant one. The film has a circular narrative structure that reaches its climax with a death by impact during an automobile accident. The circularity here leads to an entrenched structural fatalism, not uncommon to reflections on 1968, around the world, which insist on the notion that this is the moment that hope for the local ‘movement’, in accompaniment with like ‘movements’ internationally, was finally proven demonstrably unavailing; not only a death for resistance, but *the* death. This is not a direct narrative focus in *Medium Cool*. It is merely something of which *Medium Cool* is a symptom. To force the notion that the film’s structural fatalism should be understood as part and parcel of its being a text that depicts one of the many international moments of mediatized urban violence involving police and students during 1968 would be to overemphasize that connection somewhat irresponsibly. *Medium Cool* shares its general fatalistic outlook and sudden violent ending in common with a more striking assortment of American films of the era, categorized by Bodroghkozy as “New Hollywood counter-cinema.”⁸ Films like *Easy*

Rider (1969), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), *Taxi Driver* (1971), as well as such Robert Altman films as *Brewster McCloud* (1970), *Thieves like Us* (1970), and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), come to mind as obvious examples of similarly nihilistic studies in apotheosis and the inevitably violent or disruptive nature of all social outcomes in the American mindset of the late 60s and early 70s. More specifically, *Medium Cool* mirrors two sets of films: 1) those that construct fatalistic trajectories around narratives that focus on the construction of media-event spectacle and its contamination by political forces; 2) those that actually focus on the events of the Democratic convention itself. Of the first category *Medium Cool* has much in common with the later films *Gimme Shelter* (1970) and *Nashville* (1975), another Robert Altman film. Of the second it shares sociopolitical similarities with *1968: America is Hard to See* (1968/87), a documentary by Haskell Wexler's on-and-off collaborator Emile de Antonio.⁹

In *1968: America is Hard to See*, Emile de Antonio returns years later to the footage that he made into a documentary about the filling of the Democratic seat in the 1968 presidential race. The film puts de Antonio within his own film, as an organizing agent, cutting up the footage of his aged documentary with new High-8 video inserts that show a much older de Antonio morosely summarizing his bleak memories, mourning "the death of the American spirit", for which he clearly holds the Vietnam War most responsible, but also "that dim actor who has a hydrogen bomb for a curtain call...Colonel North...and even the CIA". De Antonio is clearly one for whom the sixties was *lost*, and much (if not all) was lost with it. He opines, "I wonder what happened to American generosity?" echoing a common sentiment on the left. 1968 as the end of hope. As the final resting place of the American dream. "Power to the people" was finally seen

as the myth it had been all along. But that is too simple. America may have died in 1968 but it went nowhere. Time marches on, even if it must do so cruelly and coldly for some.

Nashville and *Medium Cool* both employ episodic narratives and documentary style to follow a set of characters who engage with one another and are ultimately connected by a politicized media event and a single tragedy. *Gimme Shelter* is a documentary that uses formal and stylistic aspects of narrative cinema to depict the same phenomenon. If there remains any doubt concerning the machinations of the Maysles brothers in terms of their hyper-stylization of the Altamonte outdoor concert, one need only recall the duplicitous nature of one of its key scenes: “Mick Jagger pretending to watch footage of a killing on a movieola near the end of *Gimme Shelter*...a false and contrived scene from the cameraman of that sequence, Alan Raymond.”¹⁰ Clearly cinematic effects take priority over a search for verite authenticity, as this falsified reaction shot attests. Unlike *Nashville* or *Medium Cool*, *Gimme Shelter* depicts only a single media-event, but also ends with a tragic event – the process whereby spectacle enmeshed in social and political tensions gives way to a final act of singular violence. In all three films, as with '68, race plays a major role in the social polarities surrounding the excitation of spectacle. In *Gimme Shelter*, the victim at the end of the film is a black man who is killed by the Hell’s Angels as he pulls a gun. Mick Jagger has a temper tantrum concerning the prospects of being upstaged by a black woman (Tina Turner, the abused spouse of Ike) only to chastise a Hell’s Angel later for focusing his violent attention primarily on colored concert-goers. Race is a heated issue in these films because it becomes a clear barometer for hypocrisy and social inequality while remaining a sign of the radical hybrid nature of the urban microcosms these films involve. Sociality and race

are an area of tension in '68 as well. In that film, Peter would have mourned the death of Martin Luther King Jr. genuinely if he could have learned of the event in private. It is the public nature of the site of transmission that makes Peter's barrage of racist slurs intelligible, after a number of African-American men beat him and steal his motorcycle in response to the breaking news.

If *Medium Cool* is the most political of these films it is in no small way due to the scope of the media-event that it depicts and to the highly political nature of its particular urban microcosm. The Chicago riots exist on a much larger and more obviously political scale than Altamonte or the fictional campaign concert for Freedom Party candidate Hal Philip Walker in *Nashville*. If socially sanctioned racism and racial hypocrisy are tied to the production of spectacle in *Gimme Shelter* and *Nashville*, then *Medium Cool* addresses them directly, as in a sequence where John goes to visit an African-American samaritan who has been hassled by the police after turning in \$10,000 retrieved from the back of his cab. John and Gus are likewise hassled in the street by a black man who tells them that they have no right to be in his neighborhood just as he is told that he has no right to be in white neighborhoods. The black man in question was a real person unaware he was being filmed.¹¹ When they finally make it up to the cab driver's apartment, they are further accosted by a group of black militants who demand to know what business they are there on, joking that they look like they are collaborating with the FBI (an irony John later notes after discovering that he has, in a manner of speaking, been doing just that – not too far from the truth considering that at the Chicago National Democratic Convention “for every six activists or media personnel...there was one undercover agent”).¹² The militants then berate John and Gus further, demanding that they start covering the real stories out

in the streets and start talking to “real black voices”. It is this retention of *this* voice from the outside, and by extension an outsider identity-construct, that so preoccupies the film and that is further mirrored in the depiction of its Appalachian characters who likewise live in confined neighborhoods in north Chicago that John and Gus designate “Appalachia.” The film appropriates the black militant voice as its own and reveres the Appalachian voice for its rustic authenticity. As critic Pauline Kael says of certain Westerns: “We all know that, in order to survive, many people of oppressed races have developed inner strength, but this strength also shines in many white faces – in the inhabitants of Appalachia, for example – or in almost any group at a time of crisis.”¹³ This is the crux of *Medium Cool*’s fetishization of its marginalized others; they are imbued with the romantic illusion of “inner strength” and “shining faces,” with cultural markings that attempt to liberate them by containing them anew in mythic imposture.

The best way to view *Medium Cool* structurally is to look at it as an elliptical narrative, exhibiting tendencies equally familiar to Hollywood and Western Europe, combined with eruptions of direct cinema or cinema verite. The verite in the film is seldom directly related to the flow of narrative events, being principally expository and best represented by the footage of the riot training and of the riot itself. The narrative part of the film is composed of two stories that interconnect in the second act. On the one hand we follow John as he gallivants with his blonde, bubbly girlfriend, Ruth, between interview jobs around town with Gus, and on the other we follow Eileen, newly emigrated from West Virginia sans husband, as she tends to her young son Harold in the poor Appalachian district in north Chicago while trying to make ends meet working for Motorola. Through an accidental confrontation, whereby John chases Harold through a

parking lot and recovers the dropped satchel which betrays the boy's home address, John and Eileen meet and embark on a tenuous relationship ending in tragedy. It is impossible to understand John's transformation from a self-involved, self-certain hedonist without Eileen and her cultural baggage edging him along. The structural crossover at the midway point is also the point of emergence of a thematic crossover, manifest in John's personal and political awakening which dominates the film's denouement.

If, through John, the film can be broken down to reveal the 'closed society' represented by media, the police, and the military industrial complex in direct collision with the 'polymorphic' flow of life, it is made all the more clear through the presence of Eileen and her son. John's rigidity, urban cynicism/sagacity, and parasitic personification as controlling interlocutor between the mass and itself are in direct conflict with Eileen and Harold's quaint and romanticized otherness, their class position (equaled in *Medium Cool* with authenticity, honor, and a wide-eyed ignorance of the presiding social politics of the time), and cozy cultural peripheralness (the multiple flashbacks to a bucolic and peaceful West Virginia where father and son are united again eternally). Whereas John represents the fate of the unfeeling, corrupted lackey of a bankrupt cultural industry, the film elevates Eileen and Harold (who is played by a real impoverished Appalachian boy recently arrived in Chicago) to the status of martyrs. They are beautiful people, *outsiders* from *inside* America, who are ignorant of the sociopolitical situation around them (of politics, Eileen says uneasily, "it must be a season around here"), and otherwise relatively untainted by a world filtered through 'blue and pink spectacles.'

When the riots happen at the end of the film, shot on location as they actually occurred, John is inside the convention center trying to film the speeches of candidates

and Democratic party elite (like Emile de Antonio in *1968: America Is Hard To See*), while Eileen wanders disoriented through the teeming crowds looking for her son, more interested in the human being close to her than the media-event being staged around her. The direct human connection that makes Eileen's search intelligible is held in direct counterpoint with John's and, more problematically, the film's obsession with the capture of an event divorced from a world of real human beings with real problems. If John and the media stand out in the film as symbols of unreality who translate real life into fiction, Eileen and Harold stand for the opposite. Unfortunately, the film, by its very nature as media text and artifact, is more aligned with John, whose business it mirrors, than with Eileen and Harold, whose privation and state of innocent quasi-socialization it idealizes, in a way that says more about the film itself than about the experiences of poor Appalachian migrants in Chicago during the late 1960s.

If the black gunman and the nomadic Hell's Angels of *Gimme Shelter* – or Norma Jean's "Idaho home", in counterpoint with the creditors of spectacles musical, corporate, and political who parade through *Nashville* – are at the extreme ends of various worlds of otherness within the American cultural landscape, converging through spectacularized hybridization, *Medium Cool* addresses these realities directly. In doing this, the film draws reflexive attention to the way that these founding constructs come to be solidified and the way that otherness becomes neutralized by representation and, more specifically, mediatization. The black militants who demand that their black voices be heard in *Medium Cool* are offered this chance by the film. At the end of the scene, in which John is confronted and nearly attacked for his unintended lack of courtesy to a female apartment dweller, the film switches modes to a series of monologues spoken by various

black militants in the form of direct address to the camera. Although the monologues are partially improvised by the black non-actors in the scene, they are also partially scripted by Wexler.¹⁴ *Medium Cool*, through its more radical approach to the problematic at hand, involves itself in the disruptive intersection with this *voice of the other* by attempting to place it in the same fashion that the various media represented within the film attempt to place historical images. Wexler's film is exposing these supposedly authenticated black voices to the corrective of its own sociopolitical and ideological agenda and in doing so repeatedly draws reflexive attention to the business that it is doing in this regard. The film wants to give voice and stoicism to the others that it designates as *cool to the medium* (in the sense of being either naïve to it, like the pre-urbanized Appalachians, or *hip* to it, like the politically cogent militants in the mouths of whom the film places some of its key aphorisms), but is only able to do so by drawing these peripheral outsiders, from inside America, towards the center and towards a site of symbolization.

It begins to become clear that *Medium Cool*, despite its critical exploration of the mechanisms that construct and distort identity formation, privately and publicly, is only radical insofar as it incorporates itself by proxy in the state of affairs that its critique calls into question. The very fatalism that the film engenders through its tragic circular structure is also present in the very nature of its self-incrimination by association. Like *Nashville*, the bitter end of the film draws our attention to the machinery of production, in its vast material contingency, that brought this tragedy about in all of its apparent randomness, and in the coming to pass of which the film itself is complicit. It is as though both films were aware of the social sickness that they depict because they themselves were infected. It is through this particular process of self-incrimination that we begin to

see how *Medium Cool*, by its very fatalist nature, manages to silence its events and their contexts simply by speaking *for* them and thus, like the police and the cameras in the film, *against* them. The film stands in the way of any grain of the real, and, in the end, Wexler's camera turns away from the struggle, just like the cameramen from NBC.

Whereas '68 is a typical genre hybrid, *Medium Cool* is a politicized statement, combining tactics of agitprop and sociopolitical counter-cinema. Both films expose the re-construction of the "free world" in the late sixties by forces emerging from within that very world, as unable to solidify, as Marcuse states it, anything more liberating than "a free choice between brands and gadgets".¹⁵ It is only *Medium Cool*, however, that by foregrounding core social and political problematics, and maintaining a critical distance from its protagonist, delineates an actual topology of "repressive satisfaction," mirroring Marcuse's anxiety as he sets the bar for any future Marxist theory: "how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions for freedom?"¹⁶ If Marcuse is unable to offer in his book anything other than a set of criteria based upon what these conditions *cannot* be, *Medium Cool* likewise has no answers, using its quasi-experimental critique to simply rail at injustice rather than suggest the grounds for possible social improvements. The fatalism inherent in the film is a clear byproduct of this.

'68 has the benefit, for the interest of this study, of situating its narrative around images of insurrection from across the globe, but *Medium Cool*'s insistence on concentrating the energy of its critique on the local construction of media-events is still far more successful in laying bare the mediatizing practices that occasion "Locally

global movements for social change.”¹⁷ The other “locally global” movements of 1968 (such as Paris and Prague – the two media-events that figure prominently in ’68), hardly earn explicit mention more than twice in the film – in passing and by mere talking heads – but the whole nature of the film’s involvement with media practices draws attention to its pandemic character, as exemplified by an amusing scene in which John’s self-centered and frivolous lover Ruth, after they have been arguing, recounts a story she heard in which thousands of turtles set askew by an environmental disaster, instead of wandering their standard migratory passage to sea, were rerouted inland where Italian journalists filmed them all dying instead of helping them back to water. Ruth is upset by the ‘coolness’ of the journalists, a ‘coolness’ exactly in keeping with that displayed by John in the opening scene of the car accident, who angrily responds to Ruth’s inquiries as to why the journalist would allow this to happen by exclaiming “How should I know? Those cameramen were Italian!” The humor of the scene is apparent, in as much as the nationality of the cameramen is clearly beside the point in view of what the film has already shown us in terms of the journalistic trade’s veritable vampirism in America.

If ’68 and *Medium Cool* are both hybrid forms that manifest this tendency through music, variant film styles, genres, and the hybrid identities of mediatized protagonists, *Medium Cool*, the more radical of the two, intensifies this dynamic in form and function, whether successfully or not hardly matters, through the lens of counter-cinematic practice. Wexler’s film resembles in many ways the counter-cinematic practices occurring throughout Europe (and markedly in Paris), during the period, the particular brand of avant-garde narrative cinema that Annette Michelson calls the cinema of “Dislocation.” Michelson encapsulates the nature of such films:

narrative structure, lighting, cutting produce a visual, temporal, or spiritual transformation, so a continual play with language transforms things known and seen. Thus the low-income housing developments of post-1945 Paris, known as *Habitations à Loyers Modiques* are the clinics and insane asylums of the future: *les Hopitaux des Longues Maladies*. The city's peripheral avenues, *les boulevards extérieurs*, shift and expand into an irrevocably disquieting suggestion of the routes of interplanetary space.¹⁸

This interplanetary space corresponds with Marcuse's technologized "Universe".

Michelson's spaces also resemble the urban Chicago of *Medium Cool*, delocalized and full of minoritarian landscapes, not to mention the formal and stylistic transformations of its narrative focus. Michelson interprets these films as "counter-cinematic."¹⁹

In the late sixties Peter Wollen first cemented the primary criteria that a film had to meet if it was to be defined as counter-cinematic, as in his article on Godard's *Vent d'Est*. He exposes seven fundamental characteristics of the counter-cinema that he notices at work in Godard, outlining how they break from traditional cinema:²⁰

1. "Narrative intransitivity": essentially signifies the lack of structural or narrative causation and the consequent introduction of formal fragmentation. The principal result of this is the replacing of underlying character psychology as causal force with the ideological intent of the filmmaker.
2. "Estrangement": a sense of ironic detachment, which is the result of a reflexive approach to narrative, that tends to isolate the characters before the filmmaker's, and consequently the audience's, critically distanced gazes.
3. "Foregrounding": whereas filmmakers like Hawks or Hitchcock go out of their way to produce a structural transparency through regimented continuity editing and psychological characterization, a filmmaker like Godard in his most

radical incarnations brings issues of language, both traditional and cinematic, to the very surface of the film.

4. "Multiple diegesis": the film does not exist in one contrived and sustained aesthetic/logical system. Divergent structural possibilities are consistently employed, sometimes, for example, fluctuating between fictive and documentary approaches to their content.

5. "Aperture": extends from multiple diegesis. The formation of these diegeses effectively eliminates the formal borders of the text. The film maintains a certain 'openness' in view of this; a singular story or plot does not contain it. Aperture can also be seen in the manner with which the text opens itself to external influences, eg. intertextuality:

6. "Unpleasure": seems to be a result of the other devices more so than being its own self-sufficient mechanism. The removal of traditional pleasure in cinema can only be accomplished through the manipulation and alteration of more specific components within the style and structure of the film that exist to surfeit the presumed appetites of filmgoers.

7. "Reality": as opposed to fiction. Reality, in counter-cinema, consists of location shooting, construction of a natural setting, and a drawing of attention to the camera's presence in conjunction with the organizing element of the filmmakers themselves. Reality equates with honesty as to the state of affairs governing human interactions in a particular place and time .

Whether or not one finds viewing *Medium Cool* to be an unpleasurable experience, it is clear that all of Wollen's categories apply in one way or another to Wexler's film. The

narrative is fragmented and not generally driven by explicitly psychological motivations. Wexler combines different styles and genres throughout, merging the Western, the procedural, agitprop, and documentary (focusing on 'real' events). Characters and actual persons within the film acknowledge the camera throughout, as when one of the production coordinators famously warns Wexler, who is filming a canister of freshly deployed tear-gas, "Look out Haskell it's real!". Later, when John complains to his boss that he doesn't have any film, the boss turns to the camera, destroying the chimera of spectacle, and asks what the problem is since "they've got film," meaning, one supposes, both the director of photography of *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler himself) and the whole entire world outside of the movie, since he is effectively addressing the audience as well.

It is clear that the connection to Godard, unavoidable in lieu of the invocation of Wollen, is also worthy of note, considering the variety of Godardian devices that *Medium Cool* employs in league with its many citations of the French filmmaker's work. Even the fatalistic ending of the film is unavoidably a reference to *Le Mépris* (1963), with its unseen conflagration of the female lead in a car accident and concurrent tableau vivant of the gruesome yet peaceful aftermath. In the one case the driver is a big-shot movie producer and in the other he is an unemployed news cameraman. If this still seems like a mere coincidence, Wexler cuts from the accident to shots of news crews lined up along the boulevard and, finally, a shot of Wexler himself turning a 35mm camera on the audience, mirroring the gaze of the news boss, while protesters scream out, "the whole world is watching," in a nearly fascist trance of violent solidarity. Wexler turning the camera on the audience once again directly references *Le Mépris*, this time the beginning

of the film, when Raoul Coutard is seen doing the same very thing. *Medium Cool* references the work of Godard and Coutard, just as John mimics Belmondo, and as such is employing *aperture* throughout, appropriating references to counter-cinematic practice and individual works of counter-cinema at the same time. In doing so, *Medium Cool* is appropriating fragments of other texts for its own contextual effects, mirroring the very news agencies it decries for their distortions and “nation sucking,” as John says.

Wexler employs another Godardian trope in his tendency to reference American cinema through citation of its genres and auteurs. The music track in *Medium Cool* is a mishmash of Frank Zappa (“hippie” music), hill music/gospel (“Appalachian” music), and the Harlem Globetrotters theme music (accompanying a particularly violent roller derby attended by John and Ruth, after which the event yields to coitus – violent spectacle and sex never being far apart here). The main score of the film, however, is pure Morriconi/Leone, and the film itself is like a bleak urban Western with political scope. John, in many ways, plays both sides of a John Ford hero: both the stoic, masculine John Wayne with a primitive code of ethics and a rustic mistrust for the fancy talk of city folk, and James Stewart, the very beacon of *fancy talk*, but also the compassionate outsider who means well in his engagement with assimilation. If *Easy Rider*, also released in 1969, but made a few months later, was imagined as the “proto-apocalyptic Western with bikes,”²¹ then *Medium Cool* is certainly *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* made urban, with John as both protagonists and told from the perspective of a system which no longer knows how to do anything other than ‘print the legend’. The old and new, the city and the country, although they are neighbors, are no closer to reconciling than in 1831. The connection to John Ford takes on an even more whimsical

connection when one takes account of the Hollywood director's wartime experiences working with Navy Patrol Wing Ten and other military branches documenting the fighting overseas. As Lindsay Anderson wrote in *Cinema*:

From 1941 to 1944 Ford served with the Navy, finishing with the rank of Captain (later to finish with Admiral). Since for much of the time he was engaged on secret work, it is impossible to chronicle his adventures with accuracy....He was in the battle of Midway, filming the action; he shot the Navy's part in the raid on Tokyo by the Doolittle Squadron; he took part in the raids on Marcus Island and Wotje, led elements of his command in the invasion of North Africa, flew the "Hump" several times, and filmed the Normandy landing at Omaha beach on D-day.²²

Although this does not signify some close connection between Wexler and Ford, it does suggest that both filmmakers existed in a place between fiction and reality. The Chicago riots, as well as the riot training, that receive the (estranged and foregrounded) self-reflexive documentary treatment throughout *Medium Cool*'s Western-like narrative, serve as a parallel to John Ford's image-collecting collaboration with the US military in conjunction with his presence as a defining influence on the film's narrative and stylistic business. The zone of interaction between cinematic spectacle and the military industrial complex is breached, devalued, and otherwise thrown into radical compromise, each medium opening onto the other (*aperture*).

Ultimately, film culture, like the news media, exists in interaction with the "war culture of the state", as attested to by Etienne Balibar; it is thus not the case in a text like *Medium Cool* that some form of truth can be exposed that will exist independently of the film's agenda and the myriad ways in which it is perceived: it is spectacularized interventions like *Medium Cool* that betray one simple contextualizing agenda – Balibar: "in the history of every modern nation, wherever the argument can apply, there is never more than one single founding revolutionary event (which explains...the permanent

temptation to repeat its form, to imitate its episodes and character's forms).²³ Wexler's film, like De Antonio's *1968: America is Hard to See*, places the 1968 protest outside the Democratic National Convention as the quintessential American resistance of the late twentieth century despite grounding its critique in a fatalistic declaration of failure. How does one conquer the rule of capitulation to discourses of Marcusean *technological rationalism* around the world, indeed *universally*? *Medium Cool* fails the test when reflected through Matustik's ethico-revolutionary aphorism:

In this in-betweenness, I am still learning of the need to go as far and wide within and without beyond my local borders to meet myself and others as ever new. I must learn of 'hybrid' life in solidarity with struggles I do not directly know or wage, lest my procedures are blind to suffering bordering on my own; lest I ignore, compare, fragment pain.²⁴

Medium Cool's narrative appropriation of events undermines its *aperture* within a world of "Locally global movements for social change." As open as the structure of the film may be, it closes off and forces events to comply with its specific sociopolitical agenda, all the while intuiting within these events a fatalistic connotation. *Medium Cool* goes further than '68 in attempting to allow for an investigation of the causes and influential forces underpinning the insurrections being recontextualized. However, as a narrative film, it carefully organizes and ennoble these reasons through its own fictions, even as these fictions engender interactions with the (now fictionalized) real.

Medium Cool is unavoidably guilty of silencing the events through their placement within its fatuously "real" world. It employs the devices of counter-cinema but remains entrenched in "a trend toward consummation of technological rationality, and intensive efforts to contain these trends within the established institutions."²⁵ It does so by reappropriating, through its pseudo counter-cinema of "Dis-location," the

deterritorializing devices of the *established* media institutions that it criticizes, while narrativizing the events to its own politically charged and fatal ends. The very “blue and pink spectacles” decried by Adorno are worn by all viewers of *Medium Cool*, no matter how the film may sit with any individual audience member. It shows you what it shows you, which is, finally, only itself. The whole world may be watching but could that ever be enough? The whole world watches – who is deciding what it sees?

¹ T.W. Adorno, “How to Look at Television,” in *Hollywood Quarterly: Film Culture in Postwar America: 1945-1957*, Eric Smoodin & Ann Martin, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 231.

² Robert Sklar, “‘Look out Haskell, it’s real’: American Cinema 1965-1975,” in *Culturefront*, Vol. 8 issue 3 (1999): 61.

³ Aniko Bodroghkozy, “Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood’s Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films,” in *Cinema Journal*, 41.3 (2002): 38.

⁴ Robert Sklar, “‘Look out Haskell, it’s real’: American Cinema 1965-1975 ” in *Culturefront*, Vol. 8 issue 3 (1999): 60.

⁵ See also Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 305-361.

⁶ T.W. Adorno, “How to Look at Television,” in *Hollywood Quarterly: Film Culture in Postwar America: 1945-1957*, Eric Smoodin & Ann Martin, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 236.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁸ Aniko Bodroghkozy, “Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood’s Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films,” in *Cinema Journal*, 41.3 (2002): 40.

⁹ The two men collaborated on a number of films including, most famously, *Underground* (1976), a documentary about the radical Weather Underground movement. To read about their collaborations during the mid-sixties see Penelope Walker, “The American Film Industry in Vietnam,” in *History Today*, Vol.8 issue ¾ (1999): 23.

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- ¹⁰ Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 171.
- ¹¹ This fact is confirmed in the Haskell Wexler's commentary track for the DVD edition of the film, Paramount, 2001.
- ¹² Terry Anderson, *The Sixties* (New York: Longman Inc., 1999), 120.
- ¹³ Pauline Kael, "The Last Wave," in *For Keeps: 30 Years at the Movies* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 812.
- ¹⁴ This fact is confirmed in Haskell Wexler's commentary track for the DVD edition of the film, Paramount, 2001.
- ¹⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 7.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹⁷ Martin J. Beck Matustik, *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press), p. 167.
- ¹⁸ Annette Michelson, "Film and Radical Aspiration," in *The New American Cinema*, Gregory Battcock, ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1967), 90-91.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 92
- ²⁰ Peter Wollen, "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'est*," in *Movies and Methods Volume II* (London and New York: Routledge, 1974), 500-509.
- ²¹ Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films," in *Cinema Journal*, 41.3 (2002): 43.
- ²² Lindsay Anderson, "John Ford," in *Cinema*, Vol.6 No. 3 (Spring, 1971): 29.
- ²³ Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds. (New York: Verso, 1991), 86.
- ²⁴ Martin J. Beck Matustik, *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press), 167.
- ²⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 17.

CHAPTER 3

‘The Whole World Is Watching’:

August 1968 As Reflected Through Nicola Lazenburg’s *My Name Is Abbie* and
Two Experimental Films By Tom Palazzolo

Once in power the French Revolution ceased to call into question its own values. The Russian Revolution stopped questioning its own ideals and degenerated into totalitarianism. In the light of the betrayal of revolt in Revolution, I want to rehabilitate the microscopic sense of the word, its etymological and literary sense in which the root ‘vel’ means unveiling, returning, discovering, starting over. This is the permanent questioning that characterizes psychic life and, at least in the best cases, art.

-Julia Kristeva, ‘Can There Be Revolt Without Representation’¹

Our school motto was ‘make your desires reality’. I myself preferred the song ‘Don’t Dream It, Be It’. In those days desires weren’t allowed to become reality, so fantasy was substituted for them: films, books, pictures, they called it art. But when your desires become reality you don’t need the fantasy any more. Or art.

-Amyl Nitrate, from Derek Jarman’s *Jubilee*, 1977

The final sequence of Michelangelo Antonioni’s American film *Zabriskie Point* (1970) – along with *Medium Cool* a movie that stands as one of Aniko Bodroghkozy’s “youth rebellion films”² – exhibits perfectly the entrenched problematic of cinematographic representations of societal insurrection. The female lead, played by Daria Halprin, experiences an apocalyptic hallucination in which her wealthy industrialist boss’s hillside estate is immolated in a series of explosions shown from various angles. The character’s sublimated rage at civilization and its cruel tendencies yields an appropriately explosive

release in a film directed at politically astute youth whose deepest desires it attempts to embody (and whom it sexualizes in its narrative, combining its attractive leads and its mid-section desert orgy of minors) in this moment of American luxury's violent devaluation. Antonioni cuts from the exploding house to various other slow motion images of objects in a state of mid-combustion, including, in a number of shots, televisions, radios, and other media devices. Clearly, part of the American social reality that the film attacks is inherent in the television – a device that fosters ideological dissemination while at the same time being an object in a particular kind of social space, typified by the innocuous, catalogue-like interiors of the industrialist's home. As a film made under the auspices of MGM, *Zabriskie Point* bares along with *Medium Cool* the awkward fact of its indulging in critiques that naturally turn on itself. The television screens that the film destroys are mere surfaces for the consumption of spectacle, the very same world of spectacle that Hollywood movies figure in so prominently. Another fatalistic narrative film from the period, Monte Hellman's *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), does *Zabriskie Point* one better by burning up the very film stock at its finish so that the film itself becomes the equivalent of Antonioni's burning mansion.

As narrative films, *Medium Cool*, *Zabriskie Point*, and *Two-Lane Blacktop* are all models of spectacularized reality and, as such, invariably indulge in what Stuart Hall calls the "narrative construction of reality."³ Each film is thus complicit in the functioning regime of the dominant cultural landscape from which it originates. *Medium Cool*, however, has the added burden of incorporating into its construction real historical events which it cannot help but twist to fulfill its own specific narrativizing interests. As it invests itself in the critique of media practices that television journalism embodies at its

very core, *Medium Cool* invariably incriminates itself in what Jean Baudrillard calls “the dissolution of life into TV.”⁴ It has become obvious that narrative films are incapable of depicting real historical events without narrativizing and, thus, *constructing* them. What must now be questioned is whether or not non-narrative films might be capable of more authenticated and objective depictions of, or reflections upon, the highly politicized events at the core of Chicago during the violent spectacles of 1968.

Nicola Lazenburg’s film *My Name Is Abbie* (1981) is a short documentary on the famous Yipie! organizer Abbie Hoffman, who serves as the film’s talking head, ruminating on his personal recollections of his life as a “cultural revolutionary” in the 1960s and 1970s. Tom Palazzolo’s films *Campaign* (1968) and *Love It, Leave It* (1970), on the other hand, are short experimental films made by Palazzolo out of rapidly intercut footage, almost all of it documentary in nature and much of it directly depicting the violence at the Democratic National Convention. Lazenburg’s film and the two Palazzolo pieces are films whose form and content depart from ’68 and *Medium Cool* in that they quite obviously veer from the mold of the feature length narrative film. All three films, by virtue of their divergent formal and structural natures, do engage with the viewer in ways that will seem unique based on the films discussed up to this point. While it is clear that some valuable new problematics have been raised through their business, it is not necessarily the case that they escape altogether from devices and characteristics that silence the events, muting them, returning them to a site of order. This point is key: these films cannot escape placing events within specific ideological contexts, constructing them according to the divining whim of the social beings who have culled them into existence. Both Lazenburg and Palazzolo engage and represent media practices with

regard to the events to which they refer, as well as contextualizing them around “the emergent placelessness”⁵ of the world reflected through the television’s sly window.

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Of the four typologies of documentary modes outlined by Bill Nichols in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, *My Name is Abbie* is most clearly an example of the “interactive” mode, if it also, through natural inevitability, embodies as well the “expository” documentary’s tendency to put the images “at the service” of a controlling element behind the specific documentary text in question.⁶ It is, of course, not a problem that the film seems to straddle different types of documentary, inasmuch as all of the other films discussed so far embody hybrid forms of their own and that documentaries, as confirmed by Matthew Bernstein, tend to mix modes anyway, often, for example, switching between omniscient “expository” narration and “interactive” interviews where information is gleaned from a third party and not simply rendered by the film as truth-claim.⁷ This is precisely the purpose that Abbie Hoffman serves in *My Name is Abbie*, filling the film with his remarks, recollections, and political views. It is always he who speaks out in the film if not *for* it. The presence of Lazenburg is felt only twice. Near the beginning we see two placards on which she has written questions that Hoffman is then heard answering. Later, towards the end of the film, we actually here her ask Hoffman one question in a thickly accented whisper. If this is enough to corroborate Lazenburg as a structuring element in *My Name is Abbie*, this must not be taken too far, as she certainly continues to take second place to Hoffman himself, who molds and models the film’s sustaining oratory. *My Name is Abbie* is the least hybridized of the films that have been analyzed. What makes it especially suited to this

study is not its structural or formal aperture but rather its being a film that *comments* on the actual events in Chicago, instead of just organizing mere images that might hope, dimly and under the operation of a narrativizing regime, to *stand* for these events. *My Name is Abbie* finds a new manner by which to get *close* to the events but it cannot touch them without their being altered irrevocably.

If Emile de Antonio, who in *1968: America is Hard to See* decries the death of an American dream that he is unsuccessful even in articulating clearly, mirrors Haskell Wexler's fatalism, then he stands in stark contrast with pithy, cynical Abbie Hoffman, who declares himself a Marxist since the age of four when he first saw the Marx brothers cartoons on TV. He is a "cultural revolutionary" he insists; "I'm against all isms. There are only two kinds of people, reactionaries and revolutionaries. Those who want to uphold the status quo and those who want to bring it down." Hoffman wants it known that he is, and shall ever be, in the latter category. This ignores, however, the one ism of which he is undeniably guilty: televisionism.

Even as he now lives alone on the lam, and must tell his story from an apartment emptied of all contents in an undisclosed urban location. Street "guerrilla theater" is Hoffman's principal tool of insurrection and may not be too far away from a Marxism of the Groucho/Harpo/Chico variety – the counterculture's theater of the absurd at the feet of the military industrial complex. When delivering "revolutionary" pamphlets to the press, the Yippies! made absurd rhetorical threats, like LSD in the drinking water and the force-feeding of hash-brownies to Lyndon Johnson. These were taken quite seriously by the authorities and the local press.⁸ Likewise, Hoffman recalls other "guerrilla theater" attacks – a tactic of expressing cultural solidarity that he professes to believe came

“before language” – such as that in which a group of young people entrenched themselves outside the offices of Secretary of State Dean Rusk dressed as soldiers and threw around bags of real blood while playing war sounds on audiotapes, thus bringing the *there* of Vietnam to the *here* of Washington DC. The ultimate catalyst of these staged guerrilla theatrics, and the “be-ins and sit-ins,” is the television media, and this is not something that Hoffman shies away from. Hoffman notes that it was the television that first showed young Americans “the Generals fighting the war in Vietnam.”

Hoffman declares television an indispensable revolutionary tool, his equivalent of Mao’s gun barrel. “The young people are watching what is going on,” he enthuses. “And so we’ll give them something to watch...rock music, marijuana, freaky clothes, long hair...a whole culture that was resistant.” Hoffman points to Underground news services, be-ins, and all form of performative freakery in defiance of the “macho mystique” of the police. He brags of a veritable underground media network, yet generally sees it embodied in institutions like popular music, television, movies, and newsprint which he somehow refuses to acknowledge for their dominant position in the perpetuation of spectacle. The youth movement did not need to run candidates for political office; he avers, “we ran rock groups.” One would be hard pressed to gauge this as a political improvement since, in the end, it is corporate institutions that disseminate this material. Exactly what is so “resistant” about this culture anyway? The defense of “a hedonistic lifestyle that attacked the underpinnings of the Protestant ethic” is no more politically sound a solution than Peter’s wounded disavowal of his father’s values in ’68.

Hoffman reaches a truly vitriolic crescendo when he comes around to discussing the events in Chicago and Paris during 1968. Chicago takes on something of the ether of

the religious for him, as he sees it as an event somehow prophetically foreseen in the very programming of the sixties and which, like many of the people wandering through cinematic representations of 1968, he is unable to talk about without situating the events in terms of their mediatization. He sees 1968 as being the high water mark of a two year cultural crest, with the presence of 100,000 organized protesters at the Pentagon, "the mighty Citadel of American defense," 75,000 at the UN demanding an end to the war, and 40,000 in Central Park every weekend demanding the same: "and we saw that the next logical step was for us to protest outside the doors of the warmakers of Chicago in August of '68. And so we started our activities, we started planning, we started making buttons and posters, and we started negotiating with the city." This conclusion is spawned from his insistence in the (un)real rush of participation; that something was being accomplished, something was being won; a "partial revolution." But here again Hoffman is misspoken, insofar as a "partial revolution" is not possible whatsoever in that revolution must be able, as Marcuse says, to escape the paradox: "how can the people who have been the object of effective and productive domination by themselves create the conditions for freedom?" The escalating, ineluctable sense of a national scene in revolutionary transition is built right out of perceptions fostered by various media as addressed by Hoffman and embodied in the film by still photographs and newsreel/documentary footage spliced in by Lazenburg. The events being captured by these media have a very real feel for Hoffman, which is presumably why he seems so utterly blind to the fact that these are not the real events at all, mere simulated *versions*. He blames mayor Daley for the violent outcome of Chicago, but yields no real clues, beyond rhetorical aggression, that even hint at what was going on in the mayor's head,

what precise errors the mayor is responsible for having made, or under what exact terms he may have done so. But if Chicago failed as a peaceful show of the collective singularity of a peaceful vision for social performance and political interaction, for Hoffman it was a media smash success: "So when the cameras came to see Hubert Humphry collecting the prize that Johnson had abandoned, there would be a lot of focus on the 200,000 people that were against it." Although only about 5,000 showed up in the beginning, Hoffman insists, in the film, that when television footage of bleeding students and reporters being attacked and their press badges removed by force is aired across the nation and around the world, "young kids throw down their dinners and get on a plane." By Wednesday, he asserts, their numbers had doubled. "Chicago from that day until this is not so much a city as something that happened. Some apocalyptic moment that jolted history in the same way that May is not a month, but May '68 in the French consciousness is an event that gripped a whole nation."

By investing in May and August the mythic status of defining social and cultural event-moments, as reflected through their mediatization, Hoffman personalizes and twists these public events based on their private mode of emanation, or at very least encourages us to do this, like '68's Peter and Alana Chan in their reverie of participation in May – a distant event to which they have no connection independently of fantasy and spectacle. Hoffman is unable to imagine a response to these televised events that in any way varies from his own confabulations. He thus misses the whole nature of televisual indulgence, as David Morley sums up:

Silverstone and I have argued elsewhere that we need to develop a 'double focus' on television viewing, so that, for instance, we understand viewing as, *simultaneously*, a ritual whose function is to structure domestic life and provide a symbolic mode of participation in national community; as an active

mode of consumption; and as a process operating within the realm of ideology.⁹

The multifaceted characteristics at the heart of television's private and public business are not to be confined within rosy summations like Abbie Hoffman's. He avoids the plural elements at the site of consumption, within the variations of lifestyle-politics through which individuals *use* visual and aural information, and the aspect of television's role in solidifying the hegemonic machinations of dominant media institutions in consort with political and corporate institutions. He forgets also how radically these images split people, like Zotan and Peter in '68. Hoffman ignores Sean Cubitt's point that, the world of "appearances...the odds and ends of reality that strive to appear on the screen" stand in contrast with a reality not inherent in the media-event but within "the machinery and the televisual apparatus."¹⁰ If the "hippie" spirit of the American '68 movement and May in France is removed from its plural contexts and returned to a site of order, Hoffman further problematizes the issue by forging connections between the two events on several peripheral levels. The Paris slogans of May with their emphasis on the liberation of desire in the face of repression – such as the famous "take your desires as reality" or "It's forbidden to forbid"¹¹ – share much in common with the performative nature of Yippie! guerrilla theater. The iconography of the two events is difficult to tell apart, as the Chicago police shown in stills throughout the film exhibit the same masked, Martian-like visages as their French counterparts.

The most ridiculous interchange comes from the Supreme Court trial of the Chicago seven when the eighth, Bobby Seal, the only black defendant, is muzzled and, finally, when the muzzle fails to silence him, excommunicated to a holding cell. Bobby Seal embodies a particular conceptual element at the heart of May '68's revolt as seen by

Michel de Certeau as a movement of young people demanding from their elders a right to “public speech.”¹²

My Name is Abbie, once again, like '68, places international events at the site of the television set and contorts them until they begin to blur together in a mediatized hybrid. It likewise merges images from a vast and international array of conflicting visual fragments together in *one common stream* – still images of wounded protesters in the same context as images of the Rolling Stones, John Lennon, and others of rock renown – most particularly in the images summoned by Hoffman’s monologue. But this collision of images from across such a wide spectrum introduces problems also at work in *Medium Cool*. Like that movie, *My Name is Abbie* evinces a crisis at its heart in terms of the placement of otherness within its cultural landscape. Its other cities around the world are no more *other* than the various American cities it exposes in its media barrage (Hoffman’s youthful slogan: “We are all niggers! We are all Viet Cong!”). The solidarity Hoffman shows with his hippie brethren is mirrored in his adoption of minoritarian rights from within the American landscape itself. The Appalachians and black militants of *Medium Cool* and the Hell’s Angels of *Gimme Shelter* find their spectacularized equivalents in the black militants, Vietnamese (as with Alana Chan’s Ho Chi Minh poster in '68), Sioux Indians, a poster of Che, and the nomadic hippies of *My Name is Abbie*. The film shares in '68’s dislocation of *here* and *elsewhere*, with respect to otherness and marginalization, without acknowledging the specific topographies of the sociopolitical and geographic terrain its various minor figures inhabit. The hippies are Hoffman’s Appalachians now mediatized, but they are also “always there as an alien culture, like the Indian walking amongst the white man.” In short, outsiders from inside America.

When a judge from the Supreme Court trial of the Chicago seven persistently asks Hoffman where he currently resides, only to be met with the same string of responses, the problematic becomes intensified. In the film, Hoffman reads both voices of the court record; both voice of nomad and of State:

Judge: Just tell us where it is, please, that you currently...that you currently reside...where is this Woodstock nation? In what state is it located?

Hoffman: It is in a state of mind, sir. It is in my mind, it is in the minds of my brothers and sisters who carry it with them like the Sioux Indians carry around the Sioux nation...

The judges grow more irate, one even telling him to answer without being philosophical and without talking about *India*. Just as the party members in *America is Hard to See* listen to hours of speeches about nothing (which the candidates admit!), aware of the violence in the streets, Governor Dempsy stooped with his head in his hands, bored out of his mind and stupefied by the violence in the streets which he cannot see, so the State does nothing but redistribute and reaffirm the dissolution of here and elsewhere into one *common stream*. The Sioux teenager named Dean Johnson killed by police, referred to in an earlier quote from Todd Gitlin, is outside the state's construction of reality, properly narrativized or not. The state's power is beyond it, out of its reach, but everywhere evident. The state doesn't know that a Sioux is not an inhabitant of Bombay, and it no longer needs to. The Supreme Court is involved in the same world of spectacle as the televised hippies. All its work is done by proxy. The police shoot the Sioux and the courts mail the dead body back to India, repressing reality through political and social rituals no longer attuned to a world seen without *blue and pink spectacles*. Here and elsewhere, where are you?

But Abbie Hoffman persists. Attack and retreat. He lives amidst the discourses he devalues, and uses their dismantled parts as weapons of war against the State and self. He has committed a tactical microsuicide, between '68 and the making of the film, by having reconstructive facial surgery and taking karate to change his gait, reminding us that suicide is not about removing oneself from the world but removing the world from one's previous self. He is still active with community groups, living up by the Canadian/American border, right on the St. Lawrence; "Bridgette Bardot saving seals on one side and the love canal on the other side full of poison...we were in the middle". This in-betweeness, if nothing else, is what saves him from the same bad faith as Emile de Antonio and, through his fatalist narrativizing indulgences, Haskell Wexler as well. However, *My Name is Abbie* does not avert the traps that consume those films and, in the end, does no better by its events in and of themselves.

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Tom Palazzolo's twin '68 experimental films clearly outdo *My Name is Abbie* in terms of sublimating a nearly schizophrenic multiplicity of possible interpretations of the cinematic representation of their converging spectacles great and small. In the older film, *Campaign*, a much higher percentage of screen time is dedicated to the riots during the August Democratic convention. They also serve to ground *Love It, Leave It's* spectacularized labyrinths as well, with its rapidly deployed image-signs and acoustical-signs in radical collision. Palazzolo is a significantly underanalyzed experimental documentarian from Chicago who dedicated the 60s and 70s to making films concerning his hometown. The documentarian element of his films stems from their appropriation of real documentary footage which is retooled and deconstructed to conceptual and aesthetic

ends, removing it from its contexts without entering into a reactionary organizing process implicitly occasioning interpretive gridlock. Palazzolo's films do the opposite of Nicola Lazenburg's documentary in that they slash these events open in all of their vast contextual busyness, never shutting off interpretive possibilities or positing any coherent vantage point beyond the writhing visual and audio tracks themselves.

Palazzolo's films, it could be said, embody Jonas Mekas' mantra of the experimental cinema:

this search is manifested through the abandoning of all the existing professional, commercial values, rules, subjects, techniques, pretensions. We said: we don't know what man is; we don't know what cinema is. Let us, therefore, be completely open. Let us go in any direction. Let us be completely open and listening, ready to move to any direction at any call, almost like one who is too tired and too weary, whose senses are like a musical string, almost with no senses of their own, blown and played by the mystical winds of the incoming Age, waiting for a slightest motion, or call, or sign – let's go in any direction to break out of the net that is dragging us down.¹³

As Palazzolo's films utilize real filmed materials, they share more in common with the experimental films of Mekas than with, say, the hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage or Norman McLaren. In doing so, the films also appropriate documentary techniques at least at a basic level, this time using Bill Nichols' "observational mode," with an emphasis on tactics of direct cinema and *vérité*.¹⁴ Palazzolo, however, subsumes these documentary images in a radical montage approach which leaves the viewer reeling in overstimulation. In many ways his films organize their images crudely, employing something like the most primitive form of montage outlined by Eisenstein, "rhythmic montage": wherein "nothing more than perplexity is excited in the specialist, and nothing more than a confused impression is aroused in the lay spectator."¹⁵ Palazzolo's films, then, are hybrid

works of exemplary status, retooling, as they do, a number of cinematographic conventions in a heterogeneous collage.

Campaign begins by foregrounding the dual nature of its title by cutting from footage of aerial bombing over Indochina to images of young protesters gathered to watch the radical, "White Panther" rock group, The MC5, who played outdoors in Chicago at the time of the convention. Immediately, three things become interconnected here: the military *campaign* in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; the Democratic National Convention, leading to the election *campaign*, with its spectacularized violence; and, finally, the rock band who provide the spectacle as well. There is also a revolutionary *campaign* inherent in The MC5's sloganeering. "I wanna hear a little revolution out there...I wanna see you see your hands up...I want to hear you testify, brother's and sisters...are you ready to testify?...it's time to decide whether you are gonna be part of the problem or whether you are gonna be part of the solution." The band's revolutionary rhetoric is tied doubly to its position within spectacle, its subordination to the military industrial complex and the late-market system of capitalist expansionism. It is tied as equally to the military campaign as it is to the violent youth for whose resistance it seeks to posit a voice and whose zeal in that regard it seeks to inflame. As with all spectacle with which the socius is forced into ever-renewed interaction, the band and the milling revolutionaries held in their thrall are sucked into the very mediatized system of social organization that they decry, whose presence and complicity it requires in order to make itself heard. To further emphasize this fact, the song, "Ramblin' Rose," that the band is playing, is the version from their live major label release "Kick out the Jams" (1969). It is not the music they played in Chicago, it is rather a surrogate portion of their music in its

final, commodified form, overdubbed to provide the spectacularized illusion of the live event in its visual and sonic dimensions entire.

As though it were reflexively foregrounding its false appropriation of the music, the film further draws attention to its confabulations by manipulating the music, looping the sound of the electrical frequency drone of the band's instruments emitting feedback, and combining this with displaced sounds of creepy, disembodied screams. The visual track likewise leaps from the concert to images of protest late at night with little detail standing out. Palazzolo ends the sequence of shots by returning to an image of bombing over Indochina, bringing the film's opening full circle. The connections that it has already synthesized are innumerable, but remarkably humble in view of what is to come. The film is already beginning to show a more radical and consistently fractured embodiment of its historical events than the likewise disjointed, but ultimately becalmed '68, with its Budapest, Chicago, Paris, and Prague conjoined in a common stream of upended, violent, interconnectivity. If those newsreel collages were fractured and delocalized, then Palazzolo's are positively rhizomatic in their implementation of plural connective routes. Interpretive possibilities arise at every moment, never solidified or granted any logistical coherence. Images are overlapped and superimposed until it is difficult to tell what is what. The film further decontextualizes its documentary contents through its *musique concrète* soundtrack by Ray Whilding White, which combines documentary sound fragments with a myriad of other found sources.

Palazzolo cuts from the exploding missile in an unknown Vietnamese rice patch to shots of protesters sleeping on the grass in Lincoln park, a favorite location of Wexler and Lazenburg. The young people must be asleep, but their lifeless bodies seem touched

by an ineluctable air of death and depopulation, only confirmed by the soundtrack which overlaps a test of the emergency broadcast system. It is as though the *campaign* were coming home, as when the Yippies! ransacked the offices of the Secretary of State with fatigues and bags of blood. Soon the protesters that we see sleeping turn to homeless people sleeping under newspapers on benches and in the street as the soundtrack suddenly shifts to a news bulletin concerning “the market composite index” and the relative state of health of Wall Street. This too soon yields to a broadcast from the National Weather Service warning of tornadoes in an unspecified region (certainly not Chicago where there were none), in conjunction with a row of American flags on a small hill being flanked by a U.S. airforce jet like that at the beginning of '68. The title card of the film then fades in over another image of a jet as it travels over an unidentified rural landscape laid to waste.

After the title card, the film's cutting becomes substantially more rapid and apparently illogical. We are shown police setting up barricades, ticket holders beneath a theater marquee, a monologue that situates the events unfurling on screen as “a show” (“better than the New York, Detroit, and LA shows” at that). From here we return to ambient urban chatter and a relatively lengthy pan down a line of civilians behind a police barricade; they are of numerous ethnicities and walks of life. The faster the film cuts, the more it leaves images in a state of inert positionlessness. Protesters are seen climbing the hill to the memorial in Lincoln Park over which a Coast Guard helicopter circles ominously. The documentary collage on the soundtrack cuts out, leaving a solitary electrical tone in its place, until the cutting once again increases in pace. Palazzolo cuts rapidly between frolicking protesters, injured persons in various states of trauma, police

standing around or moving in formation, and, in one brief shot, what appears to be a group of industrialists standing around in suits and bright blue hard hats. The pulsing live sound returns over an image of a police officer working a 16mm film camera, various American flags, some worn by protesters as clothing and some on masts, and various fragments of altercations – some seeming to line up with the soundtrack, most not. A group of police carry an injured young man to a police van while protesters on the soundtrack chant, numbly, “the whole world is watching.” As with *Medium Cool*, it is difficult to articulate what in fact the whole world is watching and whether or not it is seeing the same thing. The police are filming, newsmedia are filming, protesters are filming, Palazollo is filming. This is brought back to the televisual apparatus when the removal of the young man amidst the chanting youth, of whom we only receive aural corroboration, is intercut with images of random television sets at various sites, private and public, including a large downtown monitor mounted on a large Coca-Cola billboard and a rolling computerized news text that mentions an unspecified “infiltration.” The image on the monitor is of a woman and a young boy holding hands. The violent collision between the images in *Campaign* and of the images within images, the very flickering Times Square of the film, is involved in the presentation of mediatization’s limits; its *common stream* a raging river. Television, above all, is tied with the *campaign*. When it returns to the industrialists in the blue hard hats mentioned earlier, match-cutting invokes the illusion that they are gazing up at ancient Roman Pillars. Moments later we see a shot of an angry crowd chanting in Lincoln Park intercut with a Muslim man, apparently somewhere in the Middle East, tending to his sheep. The soundtrack cuts to a

traffic report detailing the level of congestion on various Chicago expressways named after American presidents.

Once again, the radical interaction, or aperture, played out between the *here* and *elsewhere* is thrown into radical compromise in images that exist outside a univocal material realm. As such, the film approaches the “complete openness” espoused by Jonas Mekas (similar to Wollen’s counter-cinematic “aperture”). As television itself intertextually draws from other forms – “literary, journalistic, filmic, sporting”¹⁶ – *Campaign* recombines within itself a hyperfluid world of filmic spectacle surrounding Chicago 1968’s entrenched mediatization, spinning off in all directions. *Campaign* combines images of Allen Ginsberg on a loud speaker with Lyndon Johnson exiting Air Force One; it takes images from a vast array of contexts and explodes them violently. Finally, it is the first film on August ’68 that superimposes images of the police and the newsmedia, blurring them into a single hybrid. It places spectacle within the ultimate confluence of all social mechanisms of control.

The focus on spectacle in its various coexisting forms becomes even more accentuated in *Love It, Leave It*. Palazzolo’s second film takes off where *Campaign* leaves off. It interconnects various forms of spectacle with brief fragments of the riots and a longer section in which riot police train in a park. It is edited in such a way as to infer that they are encroaching upon a group of black boys who are playing exuberantly together on the grass; each of the forward movements of the riot police is accentuated by a vain thrust of their batons into empty air. The other forms of spectacle, often violent, incorporated within *Love It, Leave It*, are multiple and varied. It begins with, and depicts throughout, in different settings, a bizarre nudist pageant in which large groups of naked

people, some children and seniors, parade about having their photographs taken. Soon the gallivanting nudists are accompanied by a soundtrack that pontificates suggestively on new model European sports cars. "The excitement and performance demanded by a sports car fan...take a look at the sporting nature of its proportion with its body designed by Vertone in the purest Italian tradition." The narrator adds, more suggestively since his voice materializes in conjunction with the frolicking nudes, the "easy access interior." Taking it further even, Palazzolo's film cuts to an image of a young man at a car show, surrounded by a fancy car and his three friends, who produces a giant green phallus which he proceeds to wave lazily and which appears to emanate from the general region of his crotch. Worse even, a reference to an engine with "twin overhead cam shafts" accompanies an image of a naked man squatting directly over his camera and then wielding it like yet another ancillary phallus. The camera itself is phallic in Palazzolo's film, as spectacle itself falls within a regime of phallic determination and phallic devices of reproduction, from the baton, to the camera, to the state legislature. In the world of spectacle, the revolution, the European car, and the naked human body (not to mention the campaign of war), exist within spectacle's lavish interventions.

After the sequence of riot police in training appearing to confront young black men at play, *Love It, Leave It* changes course to depict city life and random urban images, particularly of clowns (unavoidably participants in spectacle – the circus being a primitive archetype of postmodern spectacle) and homeless people. The soundtrack incorporates a monologue by an unknown man who extols the graces of General Westmorland and "the fine and outstanding example of the military of our great nation." Those who don't like it, he opines, "can get out." The soundtrack then cuts to loops of

various synthetic voices repeating the words “love it.” This is soon followed by interruptions of “hate it” and “leave it.” The montage continues, intercutting dour urban spaces with various forms of spectacle. There is a stadium celebration in which well-dressed Caucasians shake their American flags in unison, while the film cuts in shots of wrestling, drag racing, motorcycle stunt riding, a cowboy wearing chaps, which expose his posterior as he walks down a runway, singers, musicians, strippers, cheerleaders, basketball players, baseball players, mascots, and ballerinas. All of these figures are incorporated within the same strata of spectacle as the nudist pageant, the violent spectacles of protest/war, and the urban decay of Chicago’s inner city. The web of vast social and cultural contingencies radically combined in the films of Tom Palazzolo contrasts sharply with the comparatively closed circuits of *My Name is Abbie*, *Medium Cool*, and *'68*, and showcases an interconnectivity bordering on mania. If Palazzolo basks in the heterogeneous openness that contains the other film’s in rigidified narrativizing stances, he is no more able to avoid fixing his events outside of themselves, effectively organizing them in all of their apparent disorganization.

Palazzolo’s style of radical montage is as different from Nicola Lazenburg’s “interactive” encounter with Abbie Hoffman as *'68*’s nostalgic revelry is from the more malignant *Medium Cool*, in all its fatalistic prescience. Their real value for this study lies in these films’ use of non-narrative cinematographic practices in order to stage encounters with the same media-events that were subsumed in the “narrative construction of reality” inherent to the previous films. It is apparent that the three non-narrative films under discussion engage directly with some of the same themes of the previous narrative films. They are all equally interested in media, spectacle, and the military industrial

complex and the manner by which they come together in more and more nefarious ways. *My Name is Abbie* also shares with those films a very clear tendency to manipulate its information for its own purposes. It is not interested in the facts, but rather in the cult of personality of its “cultural revolutionary” star. It refuses to reference the Chicago National Democratic convention independently of its short life on the screen, and stretches this to the point that the television becomes ennobled as a revolutionary tool. For Hoffman, television really is the *cool* medium, opening up onto the global village of an imagined army that only needs a few images to get it going. If Hoffman, in all of his hopeful endurance, avoids the bad faith of Emile de Antonio and others who see in '68 the epochal revolution that never was and thus shall never be, he nevertheless invokes Balibar in his sentimental recollection: “in the history of the modern nation...there is never more than one single founding revolutionary event.”¹⁷ *My Name is Abbie* closes history off and falsifies it, submitting it before the altar of a single man who bases his whole political existence on performance. In *My Name is Abbie* the history is all performed and the images are no more than props.

With Palazzolo's two films, it is not quite as simple. The very nature of his approach presents us with a far more radical re-imaging of '68 than any of the films previously discussed. His films are spliced with such unrelenting violence that at a certain point interpretation becomes a matter of disparate, rapidly passing impressions. Upon close review, however, it becomes clear that his films are intent on positioning their own gaze within the maundering parade of spectacle they present. Although they focus on spectacle, televisual sprawl, and the mediatization of the Chicago riots, their form is so radically new as to introduce a new probelmatization. In some ways it must be

acknowledged that Palazzolo's films embody a formal approach that coincides with the political forces of the New Left and post-structural theory. The films expose the viewer to a montage of images and sounds that must take on multiple meanings, breaking these meanings down as it goes along, only to mobilize them within new strata of conceptual business. At the very core of their business, Palazzolo's experimental montages mirror Kristeva's deconstruction of the word 'revolution' "in which the root 'vel' means unveiling, returning, discovering, starting over". She adds, "this is the permanent questioning that characterizes psychic life and, at least in the best cases, art."¹⁸ While it is true that in its radical formal approach, Palazzolo's work does meet Kristeva's demands for a suitably revolutionary art form, this says nothing of the status of the real-world images of Chicago within the film, or its real-world revolutionary applications. As in the other films, they remain enveloped by an "emergent placelessness," situated beyond time and place, a void of either unmeaning or the overabundance of meanings. The images of Chicago and elsewhere are used as tools of assault in *Campaign* and *Love it, Leave it*, sterilized and denied of context to be recycled as cinematic artillery. If the television replaces Mao's rifle barrel for Abbie Hoffman, for Palazzo, seniority is clearly given to the editing table. All the same, no questions are answered and Chicago disappears beneath his knife.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 23.

² Aniko Bodroghkozy, "Reel Revolutionaries: An Examination of Hollywood's Cycle of 1960s Youth Rebellion Films," in *Cinema Journal*, 41.3 (2002): 38.

³ Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity and its Futures*, Hall, David, Held and McGrew, eds. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 297.

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- ⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 55.
- ⁵ Jody Berland, "Placing Television," *New Formations*, no.4 (1988): 147.
- ⁶ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press), 34.
- ⁷ Matthew Bernstein, "Documentaphobia and Mixed Modes: Michael Moore's *Roger and Me*," in *Documenting the Documentary*, Barry K. Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski, eds. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998), 397.
- ⁸ Terry Andersen, *The Sixties* (New York: Longman, Inc., 1999), 121.
- ⁹ David Morley, "Where the Global Meets the Local," in *Screen*, vol. 32 no. 1 (1991): 5.
- ¹⁰ Sean Cubitt, "Time Shift," in *Screen*, vol.29 no.2 (Spring, 1998): 76.
- ¹¹ Julia Kristeva, "What's Left of 1968?" in *Revolt, She Said*, (Lose Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 23.
- ¹² Michel de Certeau, "A Symbolic Revolution," in *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.
- ¹³ Jonas Mekas, "Where Are We – The Underground," in *The New American Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock, ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1967), 17-18.
- ¹⁴ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press), 42.
- ¹⁵ Sergei Eisenstein, "Methods of Montage," in *Film Form* (San Diego: HBJ Publishers, 1977), 75.
- ¹⁶ Sean Cubitt, "Time Shift," in *Screen*, vol.29 no.2 (Spring, 1998): 75.
- ¹⁷ Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds. (New York: Verso, 1991), 86.
- ¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said* (Lose Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 23.

CHAPTER 4

Strange Ceremonies of '68/89': The Czechoslovakia Connection and Jan Nemec's *Oratorio for Prague*

How many have there been between Chicago and the Potemkin?

- Jean Luc Godard in *France tour detour deux enfants*, Episode 11

I used to say to myself that I feel to be a socialist. I did not identify by that with some concrete economic theory...or an idea that all should be state-run and planned; I wanted to say by that only that my heart is so to speak on the left... Yesterday's feared Communist is today's quite unscrupulous capitalist.

- Vaclav Havel, *Letni premitani*¹

The Czechoslovakia of the magical realist numerology of '68/89' is not the Germany of the 1930s....The Spring of '68' hoped for democracy with a human face just as much as did the Velvet Fall of '89'. Both revolutions aimed at the self-limiting yet radically democratic transformations of equal rights, liberty, and political coalition, even solidarity, of 1789. Yes, these revolutions aimed to do a bit more than move from a real existing dogmatic socialism into a dogmatic market neo/liberalism....The 'third' invests and introduces here the refusals of the neo/liberal tolerance for the material seeds of fascism, and the refusals of revolutionary terror and totalitarianism in its mixed secular-religious forms.

- Martin J. Beck Matustik, *Specters of Liberation*²

Jan Nemec, by far the most prolific filmmaker in this study, is well known for his significant role in the Czech New Wave. Also a musician, Nemec was a member of the large movement of socialist artists in pre-1968 Prague. Among his friends in the Czech New Wave were the renowned radicals Vaclav Havel and Josef Topol who, according to Nemec himself, were part of "the same generation of people who got together in cafes

and wine bars, and went to parties.”³ Nemec is best known for Buñuel, Bresson and Bergman inspired narrative feature films such as his breakout success *The Diamonds of the Night* (1964), with its visual style grounded in the “somber and controlled” and for its “sad lyricism.”⁴ As a sign of Jan Nemec’s productivity, he made four films in 1968 alone: a television documentary named *Cas slunce a ruzi*, a fictional television short named *Necklace of Melancholy*, the feature fiction *Navrat*, and finally the documentary *Oratorio for Prague*. Nemec, who is still an active filmmaker today, has spent his career moving between documentaries and the fiction films for which he has been better recognized in his native Eastern Europe. Often, the styles of the two kinds of film become crossed or confused in his work, the one feeding off the other.

Jan Nemec’s documentary *Oratorio for Prague* (1968) is his eighth film. It provides the reflexive balance to this study, because it is the first film to focus exclusively on the Soviet invasion of Prague during the same month as the clashes in Chicago. It is not only because of this shift in historic and national contexts that we must acknowledge the singularity of this film amongst the others discussed, but also by nature of its other singularities on various fronts. *Oratorio for Prague*, first and foremost, is not a film about a young, frustrated citizenry conglomerating in a large city to rise up against its own nationalized institutions of repressive authority. It is rather the stark portrait of life poisoned by invasion from outside. As such, it does hold one thing in common with the American films besides the invocation of the presence of an *outside* now *inside*. By the nature of its focus on the resistance to the invasion, and by directly advocating this resistance along with any future resistance that might mirror it, Nemec’s invaluable film once again presents a local movement of solidarity, in a global context, which stands in

defiance of a widely dominant, aggressively expansive, State apparatus. Spectacle intervenes in military campaigns and their popular rejection. Here, however, the approach avoids the involvement of a distinct formal hybridity, at least in any manner immediately discernible upon a first viewing. What hovers over the film, however, is a historical process involving the formation of a new hybrid culture through the invasion, a new sociocultural synthesis at its point of spectacularized origination, a becoming-Soviet of the Czech scene, with its retention of the old in direct intercommunication with the incoming new.

Of course, *Oratorio for Prague* does enter into relations with the other films that are more specific. As already mentioned, fragments from the film appear as news footage on the Szabo family television in Steven Kovacs' '68.⁵ The invasion that it depicts is also mentioned twice by radio and/or unseen television announcers in *Medium Cool* who compare it with the protests occurring in Chicago. The events of *Oratorio for Prague*'s final half have served repeatedly as part of the *elsewhere* presenced in the *here* of the American films' mediatized/hybridized spaces. Even Nemec himself has recycled fragments of the footage in his later works, including his most recent documentary, a cinematic lyric poem to his dead mother – and the times through which she lived – entitled *Late Night Talks with Mother* (2001). With all of this taken into consideration, *Oratorio for Prague* is clearly a film that must be placed in terms of its having been intertextually filtered through an international matrix of images that each of these films deals with through its own business. Still, Nemec has made a film radically outside the terrain inhabited by the preceding texts. His film is more thoroughly investigative in terms of the social/local contexts of the events that he documents. As such, *Oratorio for*

Prague draws more attention to specific geographic and sociopolitical actualities than the other films gloss over. If it is less of a postmodern or globalized film, it nonetheless remains a work that deeply invokes other forms and embodiments of resistance, through both its preestablished interconnection with international mediatized events *within a common stream* and its direct citation of past events. It goes even further, stating an investment in possible events yet to come, especially those suggesting a return to liberal-socialist utopianism in Czechoslovakia itself.

The documentary form employed by *Oratorio for Prague* is markedly different than that of *My Name is Abbie* or Palazzolo's films (although the latter filmmaker's works are not properly documentaries they do employ several documentary conventions). In *Oratorio for Prague*, the soundtrack is dominated almost entirely by the narrator's voice-over. It relates to us endless statements of apparent fact, sometimes directly pertaining to the images on the screen and sometimes – surprising due to the relative lucidity of the film – appearing confusingly out of joint in connection with the occasionally spastic visual track. Still, no matter what we are seeing, it is the voice-over that prevails above all else. Clearly the film perfectly embodies Bill Nichols' "expository mode" of documentary, with its images existing to "serve as illustrations or counterpoint to the verbal argument" and with its "epistemological assumption that knowledge about the world is readily accessible to the director."⁶ Although the film consequently bends its trajectory in order to control its contents, being predicated on the assumption of the authenticity of the information that it presents, it retains a radically specific approach to its details, grounding them in a succinct and unwavering discursive construct reflected off the real events themselves. This discursive construct is precisely what is made manifest

through the ongoing voice-over's insistence on a single reading. As in all documentaries, it is also apparent through how the film is edited. *Oratorio for Prague*'s journalistic approach becomes wedded to its unquestioned authorial voice, closing the circuits like Lazenberg does in *My Name is Abbie*, and placing its scattered images at its own ongoing service. As such, Nemec's film never opens up to multiple interpretive angles.

Oratorio for Prague may cast its peaceful and violent social events within its own prefixed set of ideas and convictions, yet these ideas and convictions are still somewhat unlike any that we have yet witnessed: firstly, the national context cannot be ignored, as this is often at the root of its deviation; secondly, the occasionally scrupulous attention to detail, embodied repeatedly by visuals and voice-over in regard to the clear representation of various people, places, and actual occurrences; thirdly, its political sentiments, if not absolutely immutable, are spelled out more coherently and at greater length than in any film discussed up until this point. While the film certainly stands apart on its own unique terms, it cannot be entirely written off as an autonomous phenomenon in the depiction of locally global insurrection in 1968. *Oratorio for Prague* may not be involved as entirely in the hyper-mediatized dislocation of its events, but mediatization is certainly present within it and there is also an ongoing delocalization and dislocationing of its images through the way in which they are edited together. It engages in something of a structural engineering of its contents, which is not surprising when we consider that it is an expository documentary. Nemec himself is explicit about the *engineered* nature of his style of "pure film" in regard to both fiction and documentary, practices that he sees as fused: "it is apparent that any superficial resemblance to reality is not important at all, the audience will give up their favorite comparisons and concentrate on what the director

really tries to convey.”⁷ Labeling this approach “pure film” seems strange, as clearly the film becomes somewhat impurified by the hands of its director. Nemec claims, paradoxically, to be exerting the kind of “control” that he rails against throughout his documentary. This makes a line of the narrator’s later in the film, when the invasion finally occurs, all the more conspicuous: “we had the unexpected luck of being able to make a real war film.”

Oratorio for Prague opens itself onto new local/historical differences that detail a univocal singularity of its phenomenon, putting it in a position of ideological counterpoint to the other films. It provides us with a new national context and cinematographic voice. Unlike the other films, it demands attention be paid to sociocultural contexts and the requirements of a very particular struggle for a very particular cause. Consequently, even if *Oratorio for Prague* were to be reimagined in an alternate dimension as *Oratorio for Chicago*, utilizing the same approach to document the Chicago National Democratic Convention, it would remain a film quite separate from the others. Although it shares *Medium Cool*’s occasional sense of liveness, *My Name is Abbie*’s authoritative documentary opinionatedness, and occasionally *Campaign*’s barrage of visual stimuli, it certainly does not employ nearly as wide a spectrum of images from across the globe as these films. Neither does it create the kind of pure “theatricality for the benefit of the media,” espoused by Abbie Hoffman and decried by Felix Guattari.⁸ It is fixated on its live images of *here*. Of course the images are live and the voice-over is not, a fact of which it constantly reminds us by speaking in the past tense about the purportedly ‘real’ things that we are supposedly seeing on the screen. This temporal inconsistency between image and commentary draws attention again to the

constructed nature of the film, the manner by which it puts together various parts which perhaps do not quite fit or which, at any rate, it *forces* to fit. The film also remains open to its interaction with, and involvement in, media and spectacle. Despite being exclusively set in Prague, it is also constantly drawing in signs and symbols from outside its national context, presencing them within itself.

Oratorio for Prague, through its contextualizing encounters with films already discussed and with its own historical events, is deeply involved in a problematic interaction between different nations, insurrections, and other historical phases of transition: not just *here* and *elsewhere*, but *now*, *then*, and, most obliquely, *when*. As the earlier Soviet invasion of Hungary became intertwined with Chicago, Paris, and Prague in Kovacs' '68, events from outside the sphere of August are evoked throughout and inform *Oratorio for Prague*'s constructs. This suggests that the events of 1968 are not just interlocked with one another, but also with a greater history of insurrections and invasions occasioning dissent. Most of these events, however, were not covered by newsmen or documentary filmmakers, and certainly not at one and the same time.

...

Oratorio for Prague is a film split into two distinct halves. The surprise Soviet invaders drive a divisive stake through its middle in the form of seemingly endless lines of hulking tanks that leave the filmmakers visibly shocked. In this sense the film's structure is like that of *Medium Cool*, with its equally disruptive second half built on a backdrop of the cataclysmic violence in Chicago. What Robert Sklar says of *Medium Cool* is equally true of *Oratorio for Prague*: it is "a work that strove to shed its skin of fiction in response to the political realities that overtook its production."⁹

Although *Oratorio for Prague* is not a film that switches from a fictional mode to documentary, it does radically switch its documentary approaches halfway through. Indeed, it may be an even more exemplary model for Sklar's appraisal than Wexler's film. *Medium Cool*, famously, was made with the protests already in mind and the script built to incorporate them. The fact that Wexler cleared the script with Paramount a full year before shooting began caused the FBI to take an active interest in whether or not he was responsible for "inciting the Chicago riots."¹⁰ Wexler built his film around the protests instead of having it built by them, not entirely unlike how Robert Altman built the previously discussed *Nashville* around a number of free concerts and fictional political rallies with the actors performing on public stages, attracting legions of extras by placing advertisements in Nashville newspapers promising free food and refreshments.¹¹ *Medium Cool* it is not an innocent bystander as far as films go, even if it does not go to the extremes of manipulation and falsification that *Nashville* does. *Medium Cool* does not stage the riots, but it does consciously use them as the backdrop for a narrative fiction. It is *Oratorio for Prague* that was truly forced to face "the political realities which overtook its production."

The film begins as what might best be described as the Czech New Wave, post-war update of the city film, a genre forever immortalized by Dziga Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1928). The first half of Nemec's film uses an equally exuberant approach to extol the wonders of his idyllic hometown during a Springtime of socialist utopia, in which a liberated Prague, striving to reinvent itself, has become unburdened by the oppressive weight of the past.

Oratorio for Prague's first image is that of a small boat on a Prague canal about to go under a stone bridge, apparently dating from centuries past. The image is the sort typified by postcards and tourist guides, giving us a hint about the film's stance concerning the city of its title. Mellow rhythm and blues music accompanies the voice-over, which introduces us to our location and the very topic of the film itself: "the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, Prague, 1968." The film then proceeds to explain its origins on August 8th, at the beginning of "a month in the renaissance of socialism." The film lays out its very intentions in the most explicit terms possible: "we thought we were going to make a film about a happy and free country," the voice-over tells us in juxtaposition with various images of crowds milling in unidentified urban areas full of architecture both modern and pre-modern. It adds ominously that the project was a failure: "different than intended...but it's not our fault." The voice-over finishes the train of thought by adding that, in lieu of this failure, "we are now beginning at the end."

What this means exactly is unclear. As the invasion occurs after the early events depicted in the film, it clearly comes at the chronological endpoint. The voice-over's odd inversion does not take on its full meaning until we have arrived, appropriately enough, at the film's conclusion. Its final call to action and conditional demand for a future return to local liberal-socialist solidarity is a message which, by default, becomes as ubiquitously global as the audience that hears it, while desperately attempting to reassert its idyllic past as a future to struggle for. *Oratorio for Prague* is a part of a mediatized landscape, and as such it exists in a particular kind of world. Peter Wollen sums up this newly mediatized world:

Globalization seems to have moved us away from a time-based towards a space-based culture, in which we can constantly be kept in touch with

simultaneous events and sights from across the globe, while our sense of history and meaningful succession is correspondingly eroded. This cultural change seems also to involve a movement away from a tactile to an optical apprehension of the world, to a fascination with seeing at a distance, with access to an elsewhere, rather than learning to inhabit a space, physically integrating oneself into it, as Benjamin required of us.¹²

The feeling and political will that the film hopes to instill in its audience can only emerge from an interspatial, optical conflation of here and elsewhere. The whole intensive drive of the film is based on a making synthetic of the real, much as in the other films. The voice-over's call for the continued pursuit of its revolutionary dream is a call to no one in particular. It is directed out of time, into a chasm of elsewheres.

The organ-driven rhythm and blues that accompanies the opening scene is one of many forms of music in the film. This particular music returns at the end when Nemec presents us with an impassioned monologue – if one that is also equally saccharine in tone and rhetorical flourish – that is meant to be buoyed by the music's swaying romanticism and concomitant gloominess. Different forms of music emerge throughout the film. Urban locations with their bustling traffics, human and otherwise, are accompanied by breezy jazz music. The politically engaged youth, actually called “hippies” by the film, spend their nights and weekends making folk music in the park and dancing to the latest rock and roll while, “unlike their Western counterparts,” they study or tend to crops and worksites during the day. The various historical sites, statues, churches, graveyards, and memorials that the film introduces into its Tourist Bureau aesthetic are generally accompanied by classical music. When not yielding to the ever-present voice-over, the riots themselves are subsumed in a reverent silence with brief explosions of live-on-location sound early on.

Like *Medium Cool* and '68, *Oratorio for Prague* employs music from across the spectrum, suggesting already that whether or not the film is a self-conscious hybrid in any clear sense independent of its conflicting halves, the world within it is undeniably one of proliferating hybrids. The Soviet invasion is just another event, coming from outside, that catalyzes Prague's emergent identity as a hybrid site. The idealized Spring of socialism is itself an event with roots outside. Importantly, the socialist phases in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet invasion both have deep-seated roots in the history of their respective nations, and the film is clear that they do not occur in a vacuum. Architecture, churches, monuments to history, and all manner of object awash in historical context are introduced by the film as a way of foregrounding the presence of history in the formation of the new. The socialist utopia, after all, must build a solid base amidst buildings older than the collective memory of its citizens, based on an endless onslaught of struggles and insurrections tapering off into the darkest recesses of the past.

The voice-over compares the struggle of the young socialists to the generation who battled against the Nazis in 1945 at the same location where the film shows the blocking of Soviet tanks. A few moments later we see the famous image of a swastika emblazoned by resisters upon the side of such a tank. Hybridity in *Oratorio for Prague* is certainly created by a lateral interaction between images and associations of here and elsewhere. However, it is more centrally evident in the transtemporal fusion of images and associations from across history that are finally used by the film in order to suggest the ongoing necessity and inevitability of future resistance. Both the historic and lateral motors of hybridization influence the shape of the music track – Americanized popular forms mixed with local folk idioms, music of the late 19th century – even if otherwise

remaining nearly dormant in view of the film's single-minded discursive pursuits and its coolly consistent approach to style.

The influences of America and elsewhere, in conjunction with the forceful presencing of history in the disruptive, and very real, *now* of Prague, filter through the film's first and second halves. In the first half of the film they serve to underpin what is essentially an idealistic and poetic apology on behalf of the social revolution engendered by the citizens of Czechoslovakia, and particularly by the inhabitants of its titular city. The voice-over delivers endless lists of political and social improvements witnessed since the birth of the Socialist Republic. If these monologues are not questionable for their dogmatism then they certainly are for their unblinking partisan affiliation. External influences aside, the first half of the film exists to celebrate three elements of this new socialist paradise: the place, the Party, and the people. Even its priests espouse the "humanist values of socialism" to their congregations.

Oratorio for Prague doesn't waste any time getting around to this. It goes to great lengths from the outset to detail the glories of its "happy and free country." Following the opening monologue, the voice-over goes on to list some of the commendable accomplishments of this revolution based on the "spontaneous interest of the citizens in the destiny of their country": no more repression of freedom of speech, no more fear of the police as an "instrument of political power," the right to freely gather. Later we learn also of newly humane prisons. So humane, in fact, that during the Soviet invasion prisoners who were freed by the Russians chose to remain of their own accord. The accompanying montage is completely fragmented and in no way capable of confirming the narrator's claims. We see prisoners in mid-transit, men standing around smoking,

soldiers overseeing agricultural labor which may or may not have anything to do with prisoners, shots of gates and empty cells, indolent guards, and, finally, somebody tying his boot.

The images that accompany all of the congratulatory adulation at the beginning of the film first consist of people moving through streets and grouping together in clusters. Slowly the clusters grow larger and the visual track reveals that we are now in a park where an immense group conglomerates at the foot of a massive statue. Some appear to be conducting a Trotskyist open forum, an animated discussion appearing to shoot back and forth between them. The large group hoists up monochromatic flags and camera crews can be seen milling in the foreground. The progression of images from peripheral packs to the amassed, unified group, is just like the buildup of chaotic images of Hungary at the very beginning of '68. As the voice-over becomes more controlled by its presumptuous listing of facts, the images take on less and less meaning of a consistent or coherent nature. The voice-over's analysis of the new police force may involve a corresponding shot of a police cruiser, but this is clearly not in any way evidence of a newly docile police force. So far the visual world inside of Nemec's film is not terribly unlike the televisual landscapes of Kovacs' film, for which it was partially pilfered.

Here the film introduces us to the party by way of Dubcek, the First Secretary of the Central Committee for the Communist Party. Later President Svoboda will garner like praise. Dubcek, the voice-over informs us, is the most critical engineer of the socialist paradise. To confirm this we are shown pro-Dubcek graffiti along with the joyous outcries of his supporters. The voice-over praises the "honesty of (his) thinking and feeling." A group of longhaired musicians plays in a large square, a young woman in the

center of the group singing a pro-Dubcek folk song that can be heard on the soundtrack. The song combines English and Czech lyrics. The singer, the voice-over tells us, is a “young American woman who has been walking across Europe for eight years.” Here we already begin to see the presence of the American outside on the inside of Prague. This would be nothing in and of itself if it were not for what is to follow.

It is in the next scene that *Oratorio for Prague* introduces us to “the first national gathering” of its “Czech hippies”. The voice-over foreshadows what is to come when it suggests that these young people, seen cavorting in a lengthy montage, are the very same people “who would devote all of their energy, and even risk their lives, for their nation’s freedom.” The hippies take on a split character in *Oratorio for Prague*. Their unkempt presentation and strange clothing, right down to the telltale flowers in the hair of the young women, evoke, along with the rock music that they consume, their oft-photographed American contemporaries. The film’s images make this abundantly clear, although the voice-over only mentions the American hippies as a direct counterpoint to these politically responsible young people who were, we are led to believe, foundational in the coming to pass of political change and democratization. The narrator does not point out that this movement of young people, no matter how politically involved, has borrowed its manner of signifying, its very props, from American images, right down to the name of the movement itself, in all of its unavoidable referentiality. They have banners reading “Love not War.” They are adorned with peace symbols. They gather in the local movie theaters to sing songs and explain their movement to the locals. They preach “not war, but love and friendship,” the voice-over tells us, “and the local grannies agreed with them.” The elsewhere of now, cemented in the hippies’ appropriated

strategies of performance and self-representation, is merged with the here of the past, the older generations for whom there is also a spot in this particular revolution. Sure enough, the sequence ends with a group of attentive old ladies seated in a row at the back of the theater, united in cozy solidarity with the singing youngsters.

Having shown us the politically active youth in full Spring blossom, the film goes on to shed further light on the unwavering altruism of the Czechoslovak people. We are shown the country's oldest synagogue, where prayers are delivered for those Jews who perished in the Holocaust, and upon which are engraved 75,000 of their names. In the adjacent cemetery lies the Oppenheimer family, "relatives of the father of the atom bomb," the narrator unflinchingly informs us, "now the abode of peace and quiet." Again the elsewhere of America takes on a material form in the city of Prague's architectural here and now. The following sequence creates a further expansion of associative reference. As already mentioned, the hybrid landscape of the film's Prague is informed by the presence of America and elsewhere, in conjunction with the forceful presencing of history in the very real now of the film's August. It is thus fitting that the film cuts from the graves of the progenitors of America's ultimate symbol of phallic, State supremacy to a parade of men, marching bands and news crews amongst them, dressed in the same uniforms, the narrator explains, as the soldiers who defended Czechoslovakia against the Austro-Hungarian empire. The celebration is intended to represent solidarity with the current national regime, a process through which history is spectacularized to reflect and enshrine the present.

The presence of American symbols is never far away from view leading up to the invasion. It is only a few scenes later that this is confirmed to us upon the introduction of

a second memorial, similar to the one on the side of the synagogue; this one is a slab of stone commemorating the American soldiers who fell during the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the Nazis. The voice-over once again uses this monument, and the recent respect that has been paid to the American liberators under Dubcek and Svoboda, to showcase the vast improvements in the sociopolitical constitution of the country, no longer held at the whim of Kremlin censors and historical revisionists. We then cut to another byproduct of America's wartime intervention. We return to the youngsters, the staunchest representatives of the film's liberated Valhalla, who dance at a high school rock and roll café to the songs of performer Sally Selling. Sally, the film tells us, is the daughter of an "American Negro" who arrived in 1945 under the guidance of General Patton. *Oratorio for Prague* repeatedly engages in cross-association with a phantom America, far more than with any other nation including Russia, thus completing the double-movement that binds it to the American films. What is exceedingly strange, however, is that this lateral association does not involve the August events of Chicago anywhere in *Oratorio for Prague*, further suggesting that the connections to be drawn between mediatized events and contexts outside of them border on the infinite. There are as many connections to be made as there are lines to be drawn between them.

Following Sally Selling's spirited performance and the narrator's further idealization of the youthful objects of the cinematographic gaze, the voice-over begins to impart unrelated political information about the failing summit in Bratislava, slowly bringing the film around to the events leading up to the imminent invasion – the unpleasant surprise that was not the filmmakers' fault, and which drastically reshaped the entire outlook of the film, as well as the nation. The voice-over relates hopeful stories of

false promises and agreements from the East Germans, and talk of hope amongst Dubcek and the Czechoslovak representatives. However, anybody familiar with the history knows very well what is to come. It is a “sunny August Sunday” when the delegates return. They are greeted by Nemec’s camera crew and many others, a reflexively embarrassing mass spectacle of successful diplomatic homecoming, like Neville Chamberlain’s boastful return from what would prove to be disastrous negotiations with Hitler. Such filmed events expose a simple fact: there are always things going on behind spectacle that spectacle does not tell you about.

Directly before the invasion, the documentary takes a brief detour from its set structural path, interviewing six bystanders whose responses are summed up by the narrator and whose voices are never heard. They are each asked a single question: “what do you wish?” The question reflects the May ’68 slogan, “take your desires for reality,” and serves as the crest of the film’s hubristic ode to Prague, as though imagining that it has found a city in which it might very well be possible to have your desires become reality amidst love, peace, freedom, and passive law enforcement. And the desires of the interviewees seem fairly attainable too, as broad and realistic as they are: one young woman wishes this wonderful Spring would never end so that her children might grow up in its spirit, an old woman wishes she had her apartment back, a hippie girl wishes simply for love, a teenage girl wishes to travel the world while her boyfriend wishes he could finish school and get a good job. Even Dubcek appears, speaking hurriedly through an open car window, and says simply, “let’s hope that all of us will be successful in our work.” Fine socialist wishes, all. Sadly, as it would turn out, they were not to be. Nemec

would have been hard pressed to find anybody who would have wished for what was to come.

...

Oratorio for Prague, because of the way that it sets up the invasion through its idealized portrait of a celluloid city, causes the Soviet occupation to appear like a form of psychic intervention, breaking the world of the film violently in half. On the other end of the spectrum, the Czech campaign for democratization was the excuse that the public-relations-troubled Russians needed in order to invade: "When the Czechoslovakian uprising came in 1968, it was a godsend. Russian leaders sent in the tanks, and the Soviet populace cheered wildly."¹³ This is why the film seems hubristic, in a manner completely different than *Medium Cool*; instead of like a historical event rooted in material causes, it makes the invasion appear like a fascist fist coming down on socially conscious hippies, kindly grandmothers, nationalist parades, humanist priests, elated prisoners, and the film itself. It decontextualizes its contents in order to render the invaders nameless conquerors on giant machines, human monsters to be branded with swastikas. The cheering of the Soviet populace can likewise be attributed to the spectacle represented by the tanks, which Marcuse suggests are fetish objects of Industrial States, and as such exist to present the spectacle of power and wealth as well as alignment with a Universal agreement on the primary importance of munitions in the industrial basis of a superpower.¹⁴ Also, as Matustik reminds us: "Nationalism presupposes some economic surplus of inferior groups within its borders. One can never be sufficiently patriotic to overcome tensions between the needs for immediate community and the need for a fresh supply of unpatriotic scapegoats."¹⁵ The invasion, which *Oratorio for Prague* calls a

crime against “the basic rights of man” and a slight against the Czech people, is seen by Russians as a show of their own national fortitude and the obvious omnipotence of the great Soviet system. Russian eminence is affirmed. Again, competing viewpoints emerge at every turn, even as the film suppresses them.

We first see the tanks shortly after the filmmakers do. As the crew leaves town to capture some final footage for their film on the outskirts of Prague, a shot over the shoulder of the two crew members in the front seats of their vehicle first captures the column of tanks entering the town from the opposite direction. The driver turns and glares at the cameraman stunned. At this point the film completely alters in form and focus. The style becomes more journalistic, with emphasis on capturing valuable images and information instead of pontificating at length on the spirit of the Czech people. The soundtrack, as mentioned, oscillates between silence and a voice-over now more geared towards the direct analysis of the images on screen in an evidentiary capacity.

When the camera surrounds the building where Dubcek is barricaded, the voice-over explains where we are and who is inside, while also telling us, as the visual track confirms, that the building is guarded from all sides. The film painstakingly shows us the blood of the first Czech citizen killed by the soldiers, and moments later two young men holding up a flag soaked with the blood of another victim. Again the voice-over explains this all to us. The camera briefly zooms in on the back of a tank, showing its license plate. The narrator announces that the soldiers on this tank are responsible for a death, proceeding to read back its license number, a marking that we are told not all of the tanks possess. The filmmakers attempt to expose the identity of a Russian soldier who is trying to hide his face in his jacket. Moments later the film details a similar unmasking. “We

often ask ourselves who is responsible,” the narrator muses meditatively, only to assert that the officer in the leather coat who is now up on the screen is responsible for a shooting in front of the radio building: “he is responsible for the people killed whose blood is on the pavement.” The camera holds on him for an inordinately long period of time.

These investigative images, no doubt meant for reasons as much to do with future legal action and sentimentalist rabble rousing as with art practices, are mixed with more patriotic images, meant to evoke the very spirit of the people celebrated in the first half of the film. One of the grannies from earlier in the film bravely approaches a tank, like the protagonist of Maxim Gorky’s *Mother*, holding up a picture of the president in defiance. Rebellious youth risk life and limb to hang flags on tank turrets, and otherwise put their lives in jeopardy for the greater good. “For Czechs it was necessary to defend,” says the narrator. We are told how the youth fought and struggled, at times to the death, while making posters and underground papers, printing and publishing, organizing an unarmed resistance, their only weapons, the narrator tells us, being “reason and humor.” These may not seem like adequate weapons with which to take on a superpower, but that is just the method that the film proposes to both defend and depict. All that its inhabitants can do is bury their dead and stand up in continued refusal, maintaining their vision for an emancipated socialist republic in good humor and collective alliance.

It is all of this suppressed hope that comes seething to the fore in the film’s closing monologue. It is here that the formidable resilience of the young socialists of Prague, risking their lives defending an ideal with reason and humor alone, gives way to a declaration much along the same lines as the young female hippie’s one wish: that there

be love. The narrator's final wish is simple: "a hope that one day we will meet in the free streets of Prague" and "make love not war." The film then ends with images of a cathedral, statues, and various Prague locations already detailed in the film. Here, the film comes full circle like *Medium Cool*, returning to the beginning it earlier professed to be its ending. The city of Prague, in a spectacularized zone of intermediation, looks back upon a future for which it strives. The unconscious proclamation of the American hippie mantra ("make love not war") is part and parcel of how the film demarcates its terrain of resistance in an optical, non-tactile realm between here and elsewhere. *Oratorio for Prague*'s mediatizing elements cut even deeper than that. Not only is it a film that is contextualized in extra-filmic and televisual terms, it represents a media spectacle under the guidance of its own organizing ideological concerns. The voice-over sums it up best when it describes the events surrounding the invasion as a "strange ceremony."

It is impossible to divorce the mediatized events of *Oratorio for Prague* from the victorious response of the general Russian populace or, by extension, the feelings of connectedness aroused in the conflicting responses of the characters in '68. The invasion is indeed a strange and fragmented "ceremony" as rendered on the screen, with an inborn interpretive variability. The film attempts to place itself at the real site of action, but only manages to use this action as a series of parts in a narrative machinery under its own control. Its "strange ceremony" is not unlike those of Chicago in terms of its integration of the fragments and ambiguities of its particular spectacle into a deceptively unified whole. Nor is this "ceremony" entirely unlike the parades, stadium events, nudist fashion shows, and campaigns of Palazzolo, or the violent rollerderby of *Medium Cool* for that matter. Its relative fidelity to events notwithstanding, *Oratorio for Prague* cannot escape

the world of spectacle in which it becomes neutralized. It remains trapped in a problematic outlined by Marcuse:

As the great words of freedom and fulfillment are pronounced by campaign leaders and politicians, on the screens and radios and stages, they turn into meaningless sounds which obtain meaning only in the context of propaganda, business, discipline, and relaxation. This assimilation of the ideal with reality testifies to the extent to which the ideal has been surpassed. It is brought down from the sublimated realm of the soul or the spirit of the inner man, and translated into operational terms and problems.¹⁶

These operational terms and problems are precisely what *Oratorio for Prague* is bogged down in, its socialist aphorisms part and parcel of an ideological myopia. Its spectacle is released for reappraisal on “the screens and radios and stages” of the world, without its political intentions necessarily filtering through to those for whom the images serve the purpose of evidence for any ideological prejudice whatsoever, within the context of a globalized set of controls. The film must be read in terms of all of the practices outlined in relation to the American films: it capitulates to the double-movement between here and elsewhere, it indulges in the structural dislocation and periodic delocalization of its events, and it contextualizes these events around spectacle and its intrinsic bond with industrial society.

That this is the case with *Oratorio for Prague* is all the more significant in that it depicts a manifestation of resistance absolutely distinct from those showcased in Chicago and, peripherally, Paris. Although it indulges in these practices, it forces a whole new strata of problems and questions to light. The great refusal demonstrated by the dissenters of Nemec’s Prague is constructed around discourses within a standard liberal-democratic symbolic regime, in tight contrast with the comparatively anarchic performance of ‘guerrilla theater’ or the ethical precept of taking one’s every desire for reality. The

politics of *Oratorio for Prague* are particularly unlike the politics of French post-structuralists associated with the sociopolitical discourse surrounding the events of May as it engages in the “polemics” and “infantile leftism” decried by Foucault and others.¹⁷ It works also against the Marcusean outlook, which would territorialize its politics in a world of fixed choices within a social system based on organizationally convenient options. Its politics are still a politics from within the flux of the endless pursuit of domination, power, and autonomy on an international scale. As an explicitly socialist dissertation, it is guilty of trading in the “isms” profaned by Abbie Hoffman. Its polemic never even strives to break from the shackles of “Universal rationalism”, even though it is this exact force that brings in the Soviet tanks to clamp down on Spring. While the students and protesters of Paris and Chicago fight to solidify a zone of nomadic microdemocracy within a greater democratic whole which is despotic and with which they are displeased, the refusal of the Czechs strives for a liberal democracy of its own, the only stipulation that it be a real one and not a mere ‘wish’.

Medium Cool and Emile de Antonio’s *1968: America is Hard to See* stand out as films which leave Chicago in a historical vacuum because they view it as a failed experiment on behalf of the New Left and an unmitigated victory for the police state with its proxy presidents and pervasive surveillance. *My Name is Abbie* embraces a stance of political/anti-political performance in the guise of no cause save righteous insubordination, suggesting that Hoffman himself, as a bastion of the counterculture, will continue to destabilize the status quo wherever he sees the means. Palazzolo subjects his images to a barrage of cuts and jabs reminiscent of the police and armed forces depicted on screen. In the case of *Oratorio for Prague* we are presented with a film that refuses to

cut itself off from a future. Nemec's film does not close its events off as singular spectacles, but rather opens them up onto a horizon of immanence, a plain in which the lost utopia reemerges as an ideal – in which the end is only the beginning and specific revolutionary causes are left in limbo.

It is thus of no small import that Czechoslovakia, in contrast to the insurgents of America and Paris whose movements were progressively vanquished throughout the 1970s, came to find itself, once again, under a state of self-governance in 1989. As the Soviet invasion appears like a psychic intervention in the socialist dalliances of *Oratorio for Prague*'s Czech nationals and American expatriates, the film's sentimental call for a return to the free streets of Prague, where the making of love shall replace the making of war, is telepathically mutated in the '89 liberation. "Are 1968/89 the same story?" asks Matustik. He decides later that they are not, the principal distinction being one between "socialism with a human face," and "capital markets with a human face."¹⁸ Matustik describes this inverted '89 of '68:

Behold the visual landscapes – massive billboards and enterprise logos loom in place of pro-Soviet slogans, which have been transfigured into slogans for Volkswagen or IBM or the new lingerie! A popular buffet near Prague's Charles University is replaced by the unhealthy and overpriced fast food Kentucky Fried Chicken.. The Prague Radio, Kiss 98.7, sponsors the opening night full of lights, speeches, and status sharing. Elsewhere, the golden Communist Creed printed on red and surrounded by red stars melts into the Big Mac ad printed under MacDonald's golden arches against a red background.¹⁹

The process of corporate cultural conquest, much more nefarious and underhanded than the Soviet's phallic display, serves as the return of *Oratorio for Prague*'s repressed. Havel, to become president of Czechoslovakia is a veritable McDubcek, in a world now thumb-printed with the icons of a new global regime. Self-governance becomes, in this newly globalized world, an issue of freedom of choice between an amalgam of set

options, a world of choices with no outside. The American presence underneath *Oratorio for Prague*'s urban shrine is reinscribed in the transition to Havel's Czech Republic, with its corporate bonds and spectacle of spectacular commodification.

Jan Nemec's 'wish', in as much as the concluding monologue of *Oratorio for Prague* could be said to articulate this director-reifying filmmaker's dreams as opposed to its own, takes on a poignant adjunct considering the effect of the invasion on his life and work. After the invasion Nemec stayed in Prague until 1974 when he was finally able to leave, having secured a long-sought visa after much conflict with authorities. This incredibly prolific filmmaker was finally able to make his first film in seven years. Beginning in France, Nemec worked all over Western Europe until finally landing in the United States. When the shift of power occurred in 1989, another "strange ceremony", Nemec wanted to return to Prague and continue his work there. Unfortunately he was stuck "working in Chicago," unable to secure the proper papers to leave America.²⁰

Although this biographical information has no ostensible connection to *Oratorio for Prague*, it is interesting that Nemec found himself trapped in Chicago in '89 for the same reasons he was trapped in Prague in '68. Again, the then and now of Matustik's '68/89' involves a crossover or double-movement between the here of Prague and the there of Chicago. This double-movement is inherent in *Oratorio for Prague* as well, as it is the film that provides the reciprocation for the American films already discussed. The images from Nemec's film, and the struggles that it depicts, have been thoroughly absorbed by the American films. Nemec's film capitulates, opening up the relationship with the American films to one of mutual exchange. Although it is different from the others, as is the insurrection that provides it focus, it equally engages images of

elsewhere, and not just contemporaneous ones. The velvet revolution of '89 is not entirely divorced from the content of *Oratorio for Prague* as it is just such a revolution that the film ends by conceiving as the future of its liberal-democratic paradigm. However, the reality of '89 is obviously something more than the fulfillment of a dream dreamt by a film. Behind it lies the ongoing oscillation of economic and political power, manifest in Matustik's hybridized Prague, where the golden arches melt into the hammer and sickle. Here again, freedom is inseparable from images and signs, in radical collision, over which one has no control. Matustik's Prague of '89 sounds like Times Square, with its spectacularized overstimulation of the senses. Unfortunately, it also sounds like the *real* future of *Oratorio for Prague*'s idealistic dream. The anecdote about Nemec's extended sojourn in Chicago is more than just curious. Between his own '68 and '89, in Prague and Chicago respectively, and the materialization of his dream in cold reality, it is as though Jan Nemec has entered his own personal Czechago.

¹ Cited in Martin J. Beck Matustik, *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press), 199.

² Ibid., 193.

³ Ivana Kosulicova, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About My Heart," *Central Europe Review*, No. 17, 14 May 2001. http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/interview17_kosulicova.html.

⁴ Peter Hames, "Enfant Terrible of the Czech New Wave: Jan Nemec's 1960s Films," *Central Europe Review*, No. 17, 14 May 2001. http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/kinoeye17_hames.html.

⁵ Footage from *Oratorio for Prague* was also used for similar purpose, although as archival footage unlinked to the television, in Philip Kaufman's Milan Kundera adaptation *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988).

⁶ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 34.

⁷ Peter Hames, "Enfant Terrible of the Czech New Wave: Jan Nemec's 1960s Films," *Central Europe Review*, No. 17, 14 May 2001. http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/kinoeye17_hames.html.

⁸ Felix Guattari, "Genet Regained," *The Guattari Reader*, Gary Genosko, ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996), 221.

⁹ Robert Sklar, "'Look out Haskell, it's real': American Cinema 1965-1975," *Culturefront*, Vol. 8 issue 3 (1999): 60.

¹⁰ Paul Taylor, "Medium Cool," *Time Out Film Guide: Eleventh Edition*, John Pym, ed. (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2003), 768.

¹¹ Anthony F. Macklin, "The Artists and the Multitudes are Natural Enemies," in *Robert Altman: Interviews*, David Sterritt, ed. (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press), 74.

¹² Peter Wollen, *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London, New York: Verso, 2002), 214.

¹³ Howard Bloom, *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition into the Forces of History* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997), 288.

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 7.

¹⁵ Martin J. Beck Matustik, *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press), 242.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 57.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problemizations," *Foucault Reader*, P. Rabinow, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 381.

¹⁸ Martin J. Beck Matustik, *Specters of Liberation: Great Refusals in the New World Order* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press), 206.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁰ Ivana Kosulicova, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About My Heart," *Central Europe Review*, No. 17, 14 May 2001. http://www.ce-review.org/01/17/interview17_kosulicova.html.

CONCLUSION

One *And* Many '68s

There is a comic scene late in Jean-Luc Godard's bleak 1963 anti-war film, *Les Carabiniers*. This playful, if darkly understated encounter, shares much of the frenzied exchange of images between cultures that the films analyzed in the preceding chapters depict and inform. Two young men, returning from a fictional war on behalf of an unspecified "King", which has taken them pillaging across the entire known world, finally return to the rustic farmhouse that they share with two women. The men, improbably named Michelangelo and Ulysses, burst into the kitchen, exclaiming loudly, "We're rich!" The consequent jubilation of the women continues until it becomes apparent that suitcase full of "spoils" provided by the boys, instead of being filled with the loot of foreign lands, contains only hundreds of photographs. The boys contest that the photographs *are* the spoils of foreign nations: "the world's riches...nature's marvels...the five continents, the planet." The young women soon grow passive, yet noticeably inquisitive, as Michelangelo and Ulysses sort through the postcard-sized pictures. The images go all the way back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, from the Coliseum to Versailles. The frame jump-cuts from image to image as they shout out the name of each location on the soundtrack. Along with the women, the spectator is shown images from everywhere, even the Chicago Aquarium and the Chicago-Milwaukee train-car. "Oil," the boys shout directly afterward, "Hollywood's Technicolor

plant!” The scene ends with the foursome throwing up pictures from all over time and space and dancing jubilantly as though the useless postcards were in fact banknotes, title to some form of newfound prosperity.

It is just this very taking of images from all over a vast cultural spectrum and throwing them up in the air that these films from and about August 1968 emulate in their very operational business, their conjoining of *here and elsewhere*.¹ By whatever means they manage to navigate ideological landscapes, they are all compelled to put images and associations from outside of their diegesis, or outside of their narratives proper, to work in similarly calculated ways. As Godard’s film combines images of “Hollywood’s Technicolor Plant!” and “Oil,” the films detailed in this study are unable convincingly to separate their image-making practices entirely from the dominant strata of social control, most typically referred to as the military industrial complex. Though each of the separate moments of insurrection occurs in vastly different international contexts, and is politicized in different ways by each film, the question of the connection between such events in terms of their mediatization, or textualization, is potentially a much broader one worthy of substantially more inquiry. The principal reason that these images from vastly different social arenas take on shared markers of cultural identity and imagined solidarity is based on the way that images become used with stunning interchangeability to foster these optical and aural illusions. These illusions are at once social in nature, as the cinematographic practices that incorporate these images of insurrection are themselves deeply social due to their placement in terms of spectacle. The frames of archival footage, or the segments of film actually shot amidst the violent chaos by the filmmakers in question, have become fetish objects for the business of intertextual appropriation.

Although August '68 is a valuable signpost, due to its chronological fusing of two events which have otherwise become textually fused, it is not the be all and end all of the phenomenon in question. It is the entry point to an entire global hybrid-landscape in which such diverse fragments, united *in a common stream*, have become the standard currency of our image culture.

If the preceding analyses have provided us with evidence of anything, it is that no matter what sort of crisis our post-industrial world might face, we will see the events relived in our image culture. Although this will not change the events in and of themselves, it will continue to change them *for us*, while also popularizing our familiarity with certain *radical* or *approved* metanarratives concerning them. We can no longer manage to have just one or even two narratives, smoothing over events that can be spliced and repeated indefinitely in less and less recognizable recombinations. Rather, it has not yet begun to be clear to what extent, or within what other formal or national contexts, such historical rearrangements occur through the appropriation of images in cinematographic practices. This is particularly true of images of insurrection, which are crucially vulnerable to manipulation for the purposes of misinformation or, worse, propaganda. We are not, finally, left with anything so clean as a Marcusean dialectic between a Universal domination at the hands of technology in conflict with a proletarian refusal of the system of controls.² What we have are a great number of moving images which depict an overcoded zone between these two poles, a place of heated conflict with no clear meaning or context. The job of the archivist is to sift through them very carefully. Although we may not wish to become overloaded with these images, it hardly seems fortuitous to let them do their work unchecked. It would seem unwise to merely

throw images up in the air and let them land where they may. The risk could be permanent myopia.

¹ Godard collaborated on a film entitled *Here and Elsewhere (Ici et Ailleurs)* from 1971-1976, first with Jean-Pierre Gorin and then later with Anne-Marie Miéville.

² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987), 7.

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