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Paul Douglas Grant, *Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968*. London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2016. viii + 224 pp. Notes, filmography, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-23-17666-8. \$28.00 U.S. (pb) ISBN 978-0-23-117667-5.

Review by Steven Ungar, University of Iowa.

Cinquante ans, déjà? 2018 will mark a half-century since a wave of student and worker demonstrations swept through greater Paris and parts of France during the months of May and June 1968. Accounts of “May ‘68” abound in words, sound, and image. Some result from serious efforts to chronicle and analyze the period in its complexity. Others locate the period within a longer duration of similar upheavals from 1789 and 1871 through 1936 and 1986. Yet others focus on witnesses for whom the period represents a coming of age experience with which at least some continue to contend. Much like Vichy France and the war with no name in Algeria, May ‘68 and its afterlives retain a distinct presence and contemporaneity. As with the Popular Front movement of the 1930s, many consider May ‘68 a missed opportunity and thus a failure. On par with the events of February 1848 depicted by the narrator of Gustave Flaubert’s 1869 novel, *L’Éducation sentimentale*, the lessons of May ‘68 still preoccupy—or even haunt—many of those who lived them. Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman make the point on the first page of their monumental *Génération 1: Les Années de rêve*, when they describe the crowd of *soixantehuitards* (68ers) attending the 1979 funeral of the assassinated one-time activist Pierre Goldman: “Ils avaient vingt ans et ils allaient à coup sûr changer le monde. La quarantaine est proche, le monde a beaucoup changé/ Eux aussi.” [1]

Paul Douglas Grant’s *Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968* began as a 2014 Ph.D. dissertation at New York University’s Department of Cinema Studies. It is among the serious efforts noted above. Its contributions to reassessments of May ‘68 work outward from accounts of four film collectives toward a broader interrogation of aesthetic similarities, political affinities, and organizational and production strategies that, Grant argues, produced a discrete set of revolutionary practices. *Cinéma Militant* straddles taxonomy and chronicle, with the latter approaching a dialectic of sorts in which the final two groups appear to resume practices during the decade following 1968 and—in one case—through the mid-1980s. Grant peppers his accounts of the Atelier de recherche cinématographique (ARC), Cinélutte, Groupes Medvedkine, and Cinéthique film collectives with references to major thinkers and filmmakers including Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, Chris Marker, René Vautier, and Jean-Luc Godard. He also acknowledges contributions by lesser-known figures including Paul Carpita, Jacques Panijel, Jean-Pierre Thorn, and Bruno Muel. The result locates militant filmmaking within the practices and institutions launched in the broader cause of a revolutionary politics of culture.

Cinéma militant’s opening chapter inscribes approaches to filmmaking during and following May-June 1968 within debates surrounding *cinéma militant* summarized by the hackneyed equation of *cinéma militant* and *cinéma chiant*. Grant translates the latter figuratively as boring or annoying film. In so doing, he avoids the scatological associations related to the verb *chier* (to shit) that convey the transgressive physicality of a youthful counterculture out to rattle sensibilities of its mainstream elders. The substantive issue here

involves determining for whom the equation of *cinéma militant* and *cinéma chiant* is viable. During the mid-1930s Popular Front movement, the notion of *cinéma militant* was associated with the Ciné-Liberté collective and films such as Jean Renoir's *La Vie est à nous* (1936), whose Communist Party backing set it apart from the leftist coalition that would rule France for two rocky years under Socialist Prime Minister Léon Blum. Renoir's feature-length *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (also 1936) recounted how workers turned a Parisian publishing house into a cooperative. And this despite the fact that the film is in large part a romantic comedy with no discernible revolutionary message. The film ends with the male protagonist Amédée Lange (René Lefèvre) and his lover Valentine Cardès (Florelle) crossing the border to Belgium where, presumably, they will observe future changes in workers' conditions from afar. By contrast, the *cinéma militant* Grant analyzes in conjunction with the decade following 1968 is fully committed to a twofold mission to create political films and--in Jean-Luc Godard's oft-cited formulation--create films politically.

Grant begins chapter one by providing working definitions of *cinéma militant* among films that generally present one or more of three characteristics. It is first of all a cinema of social intervention shot in developed (the West) or exploited (Third World) countries and located in the margins of commercial systems of production and distribution. It is also a cinema almost always produced with limited means using 16 mm, Super 8, or video formats. Finally, it is self-styled as a combative cinema that puts itself in the services of working class and other popular classes by providing counter-information, intervention, and/or mobilization. To Grant's credit, he identifies critical sources such as Sylvia Harvey's *May '68 and Film Culture* as well as lesser sources including Christian Zimmer's *Cinéma et politique* and Guy Hennebelle's *Guide des films anti-impérialistes* on the basis of which he constructs his own perspective.[2] These books were important measures of the cinematic moment when they first appeared. They warrant mention all the more today. In addition, Grant locates pre-68 practices among avant-garde/experimental and politically committed filmmakers René Vautier, Guy Debord, and Isidore Isou, going as far back as the Popular Front-era SFIO film service. No less important for Grant's account, he introduces the journal *CinémAction*, founded in 1978 by Guy Hennebelle, whose issue no. 110 (2004) entitled "Le Cinéma militant reprend le travail" demonstrates what is at stake among long-term debates 36 years after May '68. Grant's project thus builds on and adds to Kristin Ross' *May '68 and Its Afterlives* and Julian Jackson et al.'s *May '68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution*. [3] It does this with an attention to detail to which no other study I know of can lay claim.

Chapter two centers on Jean-Pierre Thorn's 1968 feature-length *Oser lutter, oser vaincre* in conjunction with the Maoist Ligne rouge group whose self-styled mission of breaking with the French Communist Party (hereafter PCF) was meant to replace the speech of workers with that of Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Stalin. For Grant, Ligne rouge built, in part, on the aftermath of the États généraux du cinéma launched in May 1968. And while Ligne rouge considered itself a Maoist splinter group, Grant notes that Thorn and the crew of *Oser lutter, oser vaincre* maintained productive alliances with PCF members including Chris Marker, Jean-André Fieschi, and Antoine Bonfanti. Elsewhere in the same chapter, Grant identifies what was at stake in debates surrounding *spontanistes* for whom giving cameras to workers was an end in itself and others, including members of Ligne rouge, for whom the gesture was less productive than providing specialists whose knowledge of Marxist-Leninist theory mobilized the revolutionary potential of workers' activities. Among the latter, Grant explores the Cinéma Libre distribution collective that organized practices of *cinéma militant* around interrelated modes of propaganda, agitation, and the use of cinema as an artistic supplement to political intervention. He also devotes a chapter section to the hundreds of intellectuals--known as *établis*--who took on assembly-line jobs in factories to raise awareness among workers. (See Robert Linhart's *L'Établi* and his daughter Virginie's bittersweet memoir, *Le Jour où mon père s'est tu.*) [4]

A third chapter addresses how the Cinélutte group established in 1973 replaced partisan doctrines of the PCF with others that sought to "burn down *spontaneity*" (Grant's emphasis) through reflection and analysis before, during, and after the shoot. And this in order to transform the struggle by producing and

disseminating counter-information (a.k.a. counter-cinema). Cinélutte's opposition to spontaneity and to providing equipment so that workers could make their own images was grounded in a assertion that filmmakers fulfilled their work on the basis of technical training and experience that most workers lacked. The position, which set them at odds with militants René Vautier and Chris Marker during his Groupes Medvedkine phase, was consistent with the group's twin tasks of filming the revolution and revolutionizing film.

In his fourth chapter devoted to the Groupes Medvedkine (hereafter GM) before and after Chris Marker, Grant readdresses issues of spontaneity vs. ideologically informed and technically competent filmmaking related to the mixing of culture and work. He does this by exploring how Marker's involvement with strikers at the Lip watch factory in Besançon led to a participatory variant of the *établi* phenomenon in which cultural workers participated in factory life and factory workers participated in--and transformed--cultural life. Grant provides a knowledgeable account of how Marker's model of agitprop filmmaking based on the Soviet director Alexandr Medvedkin (1900-1989) extended the efforts among workers to attain self-management in the form of collectives.^[5] Unless I have completely misread Grant, his account of the GM suggests a sympathy with and implicit endorsement of its practices that I did not find in his accounts of the three other groups he studies. See, for example, the following passage: "Les groupes Medvedkine are conceivably one of the most diverse instances of French militant cinema from the period. The filmography of this collective crosses genres and relentlessly challenges and manipulates the traditional boundaries separating documentary, fiction and experimental film. Further, these groups address the myriad issues that informed the work of their contemporaneous film collectives: alternative modes of production; diverse forms of representation with respect to nationality, gender, race, and community; the articulation of revisionist histories that seek to express marginalized voices; an engagement with Third World struggles; and alternative distribution channels and modes of reception. And in escaping traditional genres and formal categories, the groups' body of work manifested the ways in which the cultural and cinematic practices of the era were being absorbed and produced--that is, montage, collective authorship and *détournement*" (pp. 120-121).

Central to understanding the role of the GM is a sense of the role played by the Centre culturel populaire de Palente-les-Orchamps, (hereafter CCPPO) a community center with links to populist education organizations including Travail et culture and Peuple et culture, whose early postwar members included André Bazin and Chris Marker.

A final chapter offers Grant an opportunity to set the practice-oriented GM alongside Cinéthique, which he characterizes among the most theoretically rigorous film collectives that emerged from the May '68 movement and, provocatively, as a "quasi-Althusserian case of cinema in the last instance" (p. 151). Cinéthique began as a journal, with initial leadership roles played by Jean-Paul Fargier and Gérard Leblanc that forged a self-styled perspective allied with a cultural branch of a projected Marxist-Leninist communist party. Cinéthique extended its practices toward those of a video journal by interviewing Jean Rouch and Glauber Rocha using a Portapak. The group's 1975 montage film, *Quand on aime la vie, on va au cinéma* took its title from a 1972 promotional campaign for the UGC Gaumont Pathe Parafrance movie theater chain. The citation was intended as ironic, since the film hovered between critique and tract of mainstream film as an expression of capitalist ideologies. Organised in chapters, *Quand on aime la vie* sought to undermine the assumptions and values associated with mainstream popular cinema, including repression in the form of censorship. As Grant notes, the film's tone and strategic use of montage recalled the Situationist Guy Debord's 1967 *La Société du spectacle*, but its rejection of direct cinema and spontaneous "wildcat" shooting owed as much to Louis Althusser as to the Situationist International. By the time its last issue appeared in 1985, Cinéthique exuded what amounted to an elegy of *cinéma militant* that had more or less disappeared.

Grant's discussion of Cinéthique is also notable because it links the group to efforts of a militant networking group known as the Front Paysan active in support of dairy farmers in Brittany as well as protesters of a planned military base on the Larzac plateau in southwestern France. The same holds for a

closing mention—all too brief in my opinion—of Hervé LeRoux’s 1995 documentary, *Reprise*, whose point of departure was June 1968 documentary footage shot by two film school students at the entrance to the Wonder battery factory in St. Ouen. The original nine-minute long footage—known as *La Reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*—showed a young woman employee who refused to go back to “that prison” even after the official strike had ended. Kristin Ross notes that Le Roux’s film recasts the discontinuities between past and present as a palimpsest in which neither moment is given priority.[6] For Nathalie Rachlin, Le Roux’s film, which she characterizes in conjunction with a crepuscular cinema, centers less on the young woman as a May `68 *passionaria* than on the living memories of the Wonder workers to whom he showed the 1968 footage. Rachlin also catches the double meaning of the term *reprise* as a return to work and—in terms of filmmaking—as a second take. Despite Grant’s attention to detail, he fails to grasp the extent to which this dual temporality helps to explain the tensions surrounding ongoing considerations of May `68 and its aftermaths.

With its abundance of information, Grant’s *Cinéma Militant* fills a need in ongoing scholarship on and surrounding May `68. At his best, Grant provides a fact-laden account of self-styled militant filmmaking during and in the immediate aftermath of the events. Even more, its final chapters on les Groupes Medvedkine and Cinéthique answer a question raised by Kristin Ross when she asked: “What becomes of the militant after militancy has waned and the militant must become once again a journalist, a filmmaker, a theorist, or a labor organizer?”[7] *Cinéma Militant* depicts individuals and collectives engaged with questions of representation in which *la prise de parole* (taking charge of the word) extended to a *prise d’image* (taking charge of the image) if not also a *prise de plan* (taking charge of the film shot).

NOTES

[1] Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération 1: Les Années de rêve* (Paris: Seuil “Points,” 1997), 9.

[2] Sylvia Harvey, *May `68 and Film Culture* (London: BFI, 1978), Christian Zimmer, *Cinéma et politique* (Paris: Seghers, 1974), and Guy Hennebelle, *Guide des films anti-impérialistes* (Paris: Centenaire, 1975).

[3] Kristin Ross, *May `68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Julian Jackson et al., eds., *May 68: Rethinking France’s Last Revolution* (London and New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011). See also “Mai 1968: Tactiques politiques et esthétiques du documentaire,” *La Revue documentaire* 22-23 (2010).

[4] Robert Linhart, *L’Établi* (Paris: Minuit, 1978) and Virginie Linhart, *Le Jour où mon père s’est tu* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

[5] See Chris Marker, *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), distributed in the U.S. by Icarus Films.

[6] Ross, 143. Nathalie Rachlin, “Falling on Deaf Ears Again: Hervé Le Roux’s *Reprise* (1997)” in Julian Jackson et al., eds., 342. Rachlin draws on Y. Delsaut, “Ephémère 68: A propos de *Reprise* de Hervé Le Roux,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 158 (2005), pp. 62-95 and Martin O’Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film Since 1995* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2008).

[7] Ross, 113.

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