

Megaphone, Molotov, Moviola: 1968 and Global Cinema / Celluloid Revolt

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‘There have never been any good films on that period’, quips Jean-Luc Godard in his salty assessment of 1968, a thunderous era of insurrection, invention, and promise.[1] No artists, no aesthetics, were able to competently capture those outbursts, monumental as they were; elusive and at least a tad unrepresentable, the Parisian barricades (an event that synchronised with factory and university occupations, street-level protests, as well as the general strike) evaded filmic inscription, being too large, too iconographically overwhelming, for any filmmaker’s humble gaze. ‘By their very nature’, as Serge Daney once remembered, les événements ‘forced us to abandon cinema, or rather turn our backs on it.’[2] Then, the dilemma between observation and physical presence, between quiet recording and intervention, was non-existent. Only bodies behind banners counted as transformative practice, or as the auteur famously put it, ‘there is only one way to become a revolutionary intellectual: by ceasing to be an intellectual’ (p. 271, *Celluloid Revolt*). Not far from the erupting French turmoil, post-holocaust Germany was facing its own representational conundrum. How, after Hitler and Auschwitz, was one to continue creating cinema, to resume with the production and consumption of art? Here too, Godard weighed in with a provocation:

Is it possible to make films in Germany today? Are Germans capable of producing viable images?[3]

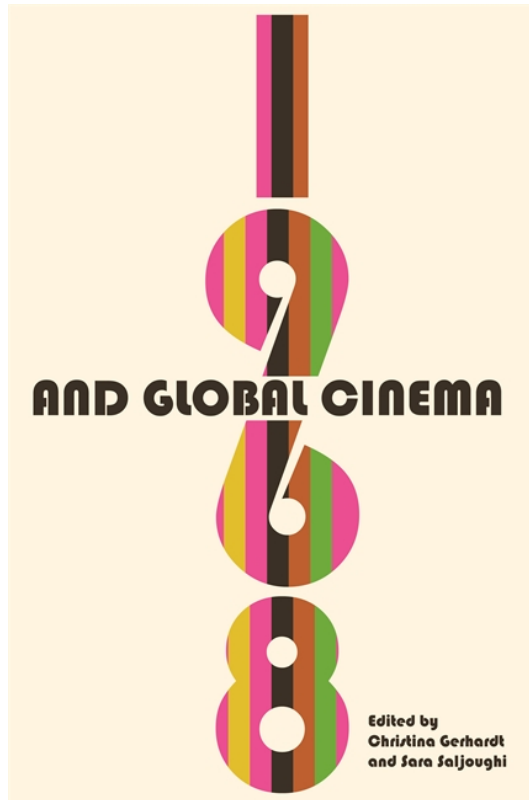
Make no mistake, history demonstrates that they were. Against Godard and Daney’s reservations, two fresh volumes testify to the fact that ‘68 militant mediamaking, rather than an epiphenomenon, is a scholarly terrain saturated with radical, rebellious, and still uncharted curiosities. Occasioned, no doubt, by the year’s semicentennial, *1968 and Global Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne

State University Press, 2018) and *Celluloid Revolt: German Screen Cultures and the Long 1968* (Rochester: Camden House, 2019) add munition to something of a boom in contemporary countercinema scholarship, blasting its narrow geographic borders.[4] Where most English-language studies of the period take '68 to be an urban, metropolitan, Euroamerican affair, neglecting any and all non-Western contributions, these sizeable collections aim to remedy the territorial gap. Understood in this light, *1968 and Global Cinema* and *Celluloid Revolt* share more than a common author (Christina Gerhardt co-edited and contributed to both books, joining forces with Sara Saljoughi for the first, and with Marco Abel for the second), as it is the spirit of transnational, inter-continental solidarity that animates and organises both. Illuminating the flows of a worldwide movement, Gerhardt and Saljoughi's compendium thus tries to interrogate 'lesser known film cultures ... and to provide new readings of canonical texts', including works traditionally treated as escapist, insignificant, or apolitical (p. 1). In its turn, the German-centred *Celluloid Revolt* takes up this inclusive internationalist method, seeking to 'allow the conversations, formerly occluded from view by boundaries established by film genres or national cinemas (Austria, East Germany, and West Germany), to appear and come to the fore' (p. 3).

Arranged chronologically, starting with texts that tackle '68 filmmaking proper, the books take a peculiar perspective on time and its progression. Not a discrete, particular year so much as an era, a period, or a protracted historical sequence, '1968' is understood here as an emancipatory happening with causes and consequences that stretch further than a single season. Adopting the term from Fredric Jameson, the authors thus talk of a long 1968, considered as lasting between two and twenty years.[5] While Gerhardt and Abel interpret its duration liberally ('68 for them encompasses two decades, beginning with the Oberhausen Manifesto of 1962), writers across the two publications remain more cautious. Robert Stam, whose survey of subversive Brazilian and United States cineastes opens *1968 and Global Cinema*, operates with works from 1966 to 1972, mirroring Paula Rabinowitz's emphasis, some two hundred pages later, on the quadrennium of 1967 to 1970. 'In many ways', as Graeme Stout notes in his deconstructive rereading of *If...* (Lindsay Anderson, 1968) and *Teorema* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1968), '68 as '68 simply 'did not produce a politically committed cinematic output' (p. 183, *1968 and Global Cinema*), an observation elaborated elsewhere by Jurij Meden. 'That legendary year', as Meden concludes in a 2018 article, 'did not witness any exceptionally enticing culmination of political filmic images. Films with a similar

pedigree – that is, films that do not so much chronicle political movements, but rather join them – can be detected in similar numbers traversing the years before and after '68.'[6] It is in this elongated timeframe that committed, activist, and progressive cinemas were to flower most fiercely. Idiosyncratically, most of 1968's seminal moving images, as these writers are very well aware, precede or postdate the twelve-month interval itself.

Just as Gerhardt, Saljoughi, and Abel reconfigure chronology, so too do they enlarge geographic scope. Invalidating Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's assertion that, unsurprisingly, 'Europe really was the centre of most of what went on during the decade', *1968 and Global Cinema* interrogates a refreshingly wide variety of practices and practitioners from all sectors of the globe, sidelining the usual Anglophone classics.[7] Argentinian, Chinese, Czechoslovak, Indian, Iranian, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Hong Kong productions all receive their awaited share of attention, drafting a picture of '68 as a network of intense, intersecting alliances. As Stam very rightly remarks, 'there was no single, unified 1968', a fact that both books routinely recognise (p. 24). What Andrew Stefan Weiner, in his incisive and diligently sourced entry in *Celluloid Revolt*, points out about the Austrian Filmmakers Cooperative, we could just as easily say of East Germany, Yugoslavia, and their multiple neighbouring countries: '1968 in Austria took a very different shape than it did in other parts of Western Europe' (p. 158). Viral and relentless, the insurrections of spring and summer '68 encircled the entire earth, yet not in every environment did they unfold the same. It is the two collections' great achievement to illuminate such local specificities, all the while remaining conscious of the transcontinental and anticapitalist solidarities that united them. Aided by an astute choice of format (the selected texts are plentiful but comparatively brief, taking up no more than ten pages each), both editions confront their reader with unseen breadth, gathering almost two dozen academic perspectives. Put together, the contributions constitute a lucid, systematic, at moments even comprehensive scrutiny of the 'somewhat eventful year' that we remember as '68.[8]



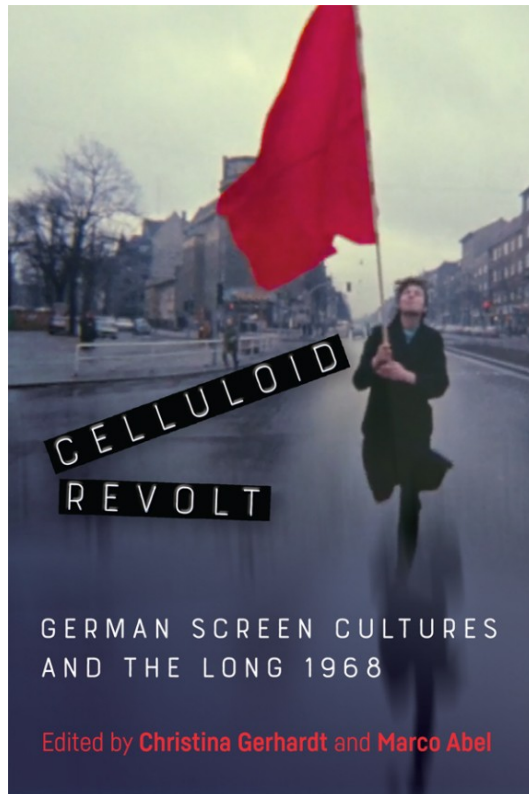
‘We prepared ourselves for students who wanted to make films’, reminisced Edwin Leiser, once director of the deutsche film- und fernsehakademie berlin (dffb), in his 1993 memoir. ‘We were surprised when we realised what many of them actually wanted: revolution’ (p. 55, *Celluloid Revolt*). Not unlike in Cuba, Argentina, and subsequently Prague, where the founding of film academies mobilised rioters in antiauthoritarian struggle, it was precisely higher education that catalysed and propelled the German student campaign in May. Most interestingly, a recurrent thread in *Celluloid Revolt* is the twelve-day occupation of the German Film and Television Academy Berlin, garrisoned and renamed the ‘Dziga Vertov School’ by its inaugural cohort on 30 May 1968. For all the administration’s astonishment and awe, the undergraduates’ requisitioning of their dffb can be deciphered, in retrospect, as symptomatic of the post-war settlement’s derailed social politics and policies, as Morgan Adamson (by way of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten) argues in her offering to *1968 and Global Cinema*. The brisk expansion of college access and

affordability in the 1950s and early 1960s, as Adamson shrewdly observes, incorporated ‘a vastly augmented section of the population into the university system, resulting in the unintended consequence of a new social force with the capacity to analyze and to resist the increasing role of the university industrial complex in imperialist ventures, the production of specialized labor for capital, and the university’s role in the reproduction of manifold forms of inequality’ (p. 146).[9] Berlin’s insurgents understood this, and so too did their comrades across the Global South, from whose example Western militants and moviemakers learned.

‘Knowledge comes from struggle’, Italian operaismo thinker Mario Tronti once observed (p. 147, *1968 and Global Cinema*). Closely researched and committed, *Celluloid Revolt* takes this proposition seriously, managing, at one and the same time, to position German-language cinemas as both a node in a multinational constellation and a historically unique milieu in their own right. Joined in their fierce, righteous opposition to the barbarities of American-led imperialism (a practice epitomised but by no means exhausted in the then-unfurling Vietnam), German protesters and their cognates across the East and West were ideologically united, yet in important contextual ways distinct. As a number of authors articulate, German filmmaker-combatants drew ideas and inspiration from countercolonial struggles, those of Tricontinental liberation and the Black Panther Party in particular, even as their enemy at home was a subtly different, sneakier one. Both Timothy Scott Brown’s and Madeleine Bernstorff’s pieces thus talk, through two separate lenses, of German political cinema’s engagement in a long, concerted critique that took national corporate media as its target.

Hateful and hegemonic, the antagonist bore a company name: Springer. As owners and operators of the FRG’s most popularly circulated daily press – papers and magazines whose coverage of 1960s student radicalism was sensationalist at best and manhunting at worst – the Springer conglomerate had blood on its hands, and these documentarians strove to prove it. As with the countercinematic projects of the LA Rebellion, to whose aesthetic Allyson Nadia Field’s inquiry in *1968 and Global Cinema* is an invaluable introduction, their battle was waged on the terrain of knowledge, news, and facticity. Just as in the African-American example, the declared adversary was mass media representation (seen as twisted, deceitful, distorted), even as the true arch nemesis was bigger. ‘The anti-Springer campaign’, as Brown soberly deduces, was ‘nothing less than an assault on the very foundations of capitalism: “Our

struggle against Springer is ... a struggle against the late-capitalist system of rule itself.” (p. 44, *Celluloid Revolt*)



Another attack – this one, too, strongly if not singularly German – was unsettling national cinematic culture. ‘The old film is dead. We believe in the new film’, clamoured the twenty-six (all-male) signatories of the Oberhausen Manifesto, a blunt and combustive text that rattled the Federal film industry in February 1962 (p. 5, *Celluloid Revolt*). It was a loud and piercing dispatch, a virulent polemic that took the conservative movie establishment as its foe (assailing its rigid conventions, opaque and inoperative funding schemes, as well as its total serfdom to the dictates of shareholders and commercial capital). Although state-of-the-art at the time, these Young German polemicists quickly came to stand for the decadent, inscrutable, and unbearably elitist type of filmmaking that the children of ’68 resisted and renounced. For all their modernist subversiveness, the once-defiant Alexander Kluge, Edgar Reitz, and Rainer Werner Fassbinder were, in the newly electrified climate

of '68, deemed 'just not sufficiently political' (p. 54, *Celluloid Revolt*). As Priscilla Layne surmises in her stellar close reading of Hans-Rüdiger Minow's *Berlin, 2. Juni* (Berlin, 2 June, 1967), a brief but pivotal film from the period, the influential Oberhausenerers 'may have strived for social changes that reflected more liberal art and lifestyles, but they were not as committed to effecting concrete political change' (Ibid.).

With the regressive 'Papa's cinema' dead and buried, its residues exterminated by the likes of Wenders and Herzog, the dffb's militant first cohort – to which soon-to-be-icons Harun Farocki, Helke Sander, and the Rote Armee martyr Holger Meins all belonged – took the Oberhausen group as its rival. To an intensity unwitnessed in other countries, the German late-sixties wave of militant film was also a charge against artistic tradition, against a lineage embodied not so much by popular entertainment (as was the case in the Argentinian repudiation of First and Second Cinemas), but by leftist, Marxist-informed predecessors. It is this hard-line oppositional posture that intrigues Gerhardt, Abel, and others in the German cinematic '68, and that three interviews at the end of *Celluloid Revolt* – with Farocki, with experimentalist Birgit Hein, and with the auteur-provocateur Klaus Lemke – vividly illustrate. 'Everyone acted as if they were in the gym of a military barrack', the latter says of his experiences in Germany after the War (p. 300). Farocki, paraphrasing his classmate and comrade Meins, responded with an alternative take on collectivity: 'A union of filmmakers is utterly wrong. Filmmakers need to associate with other fields of experience.' (p. 278)

And associate they did, inside European capitals and out. Invaluably, both books dedicate close attention to the DIY, sometimes semi-professional collectives that burgeoned on the battlefields of '68: those small or large, formal or lax assemblies based on egalitarian ethics of cooperation, camaraderie, and trust, not of industrial exploitation. What Pablo La Parra-Pérez, writing in *1968 and Global Cinema*, terms 'a logic of equal aesthetic rights' was fruitfully in operation here, as these chapters do well to emphasise (p. 372). Never capitulating to dominant dogma, the volumes are especially valuable as testaments to the work of women and feminist practitioners, both as makers and as theorists. *1968 and Global Cinema*, in contradistinction to the many macho accounts of the era, looks closely at female-spearheaded cinemas (most memorably at the Spanish-Italian factory films of Helena Lumberras), just as *Celluloid Revolt* tells us that the German late sixties, for all their masculinist bravado, were more than an exclusive boys' club. Aesthetically, the difficulties of women's creativity were, at that time, cogently clarified by Frieda

Grafe: 'How do you express yourself in a world in which the possibility of expressing yourself is marred by an ideology that you would like to contradict? How can women explain how they want their world to be, if their existence is defined by a basic speechlessness, because there was always someone there before the women and nothing remains for the women, except to always have to react? In the name of the father', Grafe coldly concludes (pp. 98-99). Throughout the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, politicised filmmaking was more than a boring, bro-ey enterprise; alongside Sander, directors Claudia von Alemann, Cristina Perincioli, and Elsa Rassbach were irreplaceable figures.

'We don't make cinema history; we make history with cinema', said Lumbreras with her partner Mariano Lisa (p. 368, *1968 and Global Cinema*). Her diagnosis is, by now, a familiar one, and it encapsulates the mission of '68 imagemaking as a whole. Unsatisfied with mere reflection, with interpreting while never transforming the world, these dedicated producers strove to act and intervene in real injustices, using full visibility as a weapon. To reveal, as was then so ferociously thought, was always also necessarily to change. At least in the eyes of its creators, filmic representation equalled loud and legitimate political action, on par with rallies or proletarian strikes. The camera, never a neutral or nonpartisan observer, became no less than a 'beautiful weapon that shoots carefully selected targets', as one manifesto argued, or simply 'a machine that kills bad people', as Roberto Rossellini's *La macchina ammazzacattivi* of 1952 phrased it more mercilessly. *1968 and Global Cinema* and *Celluloid Revolt* attest to this fiery conviction that images, in the charged long sixties, held transformative capacity as writers, movers, or, at the very least, muckrakers of history. Thrilling in intellectual rigor and scope, the books' accomplishment is an inestimable one for future studies of committed film and media, particularly those interested in Tricontinental theory, post-socialist Europe, and the worldwide South. As, however, with any endeavour so scopic and ambitious, some promises remain unfulfilled.

Is cinema a mere mouthpiece to ideology and counterideology, or is it an autonomous agent in social struggle? What are the vanguard aesthetic manoeuvres that bring emancipation and progress? How, to put it crudely, can film change the world? 'Many of these questions', as Robert Stam discovers in his article, 'have to be modified in the light of changes in the medium and historical shifts of power – for example, the digital revolution, the decline of movie theatres, postcelluloid film, globalization, financialization, and so on – but with some reformatting they remain highly relevant to twenty-first-

century concerns' (p. 40, *1968 and Global Cinema*). While failing to offer solutions to his question, Stam is nevertheless right and well justified in raising it; opening up a different discourse, his query points to something of a lack. Why write on '68 in a time of new media, new nationalisms, ecological collapse, and computational surveillance? What is at stake historically, politically, and aesthetically in doing so?

Some contributors, to be sure, probe in the right direction, yet lacking is a serious, sustained discussion on how far we have found ourselves from the world of '68. Blissfully or not, the conditions for political practice have changed, a fact that these texts intuitively fathom yet never explicate. Thanks to them, a significant new piece to the sixties puzzle has been added, but exciting work is still, as always, to be done. Street demonstrations, occupations, loud expressions of demands and desire: 'All of these tactics', writes Alexander Galloway, 'are tremendously useful. Yet the world is different today, and thus we need to invent different tactics. We shouldn't expect that the tools from the 1960s will still work.' [10] As opaque as it is inexhaustible, '68 is a global treasure trove of material. Which of its treasures are salvageable, and which worthy only of the dustbin, is, however, not at all apparent.

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Notes

- [1] Quoted in Witt 2013, p. 129.
- [2] Daney 2007, p. 80.
- [3] Quoted in Rentschler 2015, p. 348.
- [4] For an important (yet heavily French-focused) work in this subfield, see Grant 2016.
- [5] While Jameson influentially periodised this era as the *long sixties*, Gerhardt and Abel refer to it instead as the *long 1968*, a 'conceptual tweaking' that they consider small but meaningful. See Jameson 1984.
- [6] Meden 2018, p. 4 (my translation).
- [7] Nowell-Smith 2008, p. 13.
- [8] 'A somewhat eventful year' is filmmaker Danièle Huillet's euphemism for 1968. Cited in Rubinoff 2011, p. 22.
- [9] For a longer discussion of New Left movements and the academy, see Adamson 2018.
- [10] Berry & Galloway 2015, p. 171.