

Supervisor's Report on M.A. thesis

Dunja Ilić

“Between Mainstream and Avant-Garde Filmmaking: The French New Wave and the Illusion of Realism”

Ms. Dunja Ilić illuminates the transnational phenomenon of mainstream and avant-garde filmmaking in her thesis; in so doing, the text covers such key figures as Orson Welles and movements as the French New wave and the later more overtly political films that emerged from the French New wave's coattails. The thesis contains 73 pp. whose contents include the following: “1. The French New Wave and What Came Before It, 1.1. Daddy's Cinema and the Father(s) of the French New Wave, 1.2 The Technique and the Metaphysics, 2. The Wave's Tour de Force and Its Avant-Garde: Realism and Beyond, 3. The New Wave and the New Real, 3.1 An Ideology Without Ideas, 3.2 Two or Three Things France Has Learned About Ideology, 3.3 Realism and Ideology, Bibliography, Abstract, and Abstrakt” (4).

In general the thesis is very well written. There are, however, a few errors such as the following: “the French New Way proper” (7) should be “the French New Wave proper” (7), “what the *concessions*” (9) should be “what are the *concessions*” (9), “the guise warn” (17) should be “the guise worn” (17), “winner” (18) should be “winners” (18), “portray” (22) should be “portrays” (22), “Naramore” (26) should be “Naremore” (26), “Jean Moreau” (27) should be “Jeanne Moreau” (27), “worlds” (34) should be “world” (34), “fist-time” (65) should be “first-time” (65).

As for the substantive part of the thesis, illuminating linkages are made between films such as Truffaut's *400 Blows* and Welles's *Citizen Kane*. There are also some perceptive observations about the ideological complicity of the French New Wave with the ruling class ideological world, which may be what one would expect from what the candidate terms the “Tradition of Quality”, but which in this thesis also maps onto the cultural objects from the aesthetically revolutionary French New Wave. For example, we read that, “From their early attack on the Tradition of Quality's *industrial* production values, and their insistence on the individual agency and genius of the auteur, and to their narcissistic protagonists who like to pronounce “truths” about the nature of woman, “the New Wave illustrated the behavior of privileged beings in privileged situations and privileged places”¹ (49). The candidate continues: “The privilege may not have always been economic, but it was regularly *intellectual*. This is likely the ultimate art house quality which immediately disqualifies the New Wave from ever being considered politically avant-garde, despite its innovativeness and its historical importance, which are hard to deny. The French New Wave directors made clear that, like Godard's Bruno, they *fight alone* and for themselves” (49). This valorization of a certain conquering individuality proves thus for the candidate to undergird a vital aspect of the French New Wave. A little later we read that, “[Jean-Luc] Godard did not sign the petition for the desertion of soldiers in Algiers, but he soon became the most political French New Wave director – a *former* French New Wave director, that is.”² What came after the

¹ Clouzot, *Le cinéma français*, 56.

² Godard's attitude to his New Wave period is well-known and is made clear in Colin MacCabe's *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980).

Wave was a period of politicized filmmaking, brought about by an increased awareness of the social and cultural powers influencing society, reflected in post-structuralism which replaced the structuralism that operated on linguistic binary oppositions disconnected from the immediate social context” (49). The thesis writer continues, “All tenets of the French New Wave were challenged. Instead of a genius auteur able to oversee and control every aspect of his/her work in which s/he invested his/her personality and worldview, the “death of the author” was [50] announced, most famously by Roland Barthes in 1967, but the works of Jacques Derrida, who did away with the so-called ‘transcendental signified’ [. . .] were equally important. [. . .]. The enthusiasm for American cinema and culture subsided: (49–50). Furthermore, as for the ideological and intellectual climate: “the set of relevant figures from the history of film changed: the foundations of the new cinema were provided by “the combined influence of Russian formalism, Soviet montage, Brechtian aesthetics and French post-structuralism” (50).³ The foregoing are all productive ways of contextualizing the topic area of the thesis.

We also read that, “As for film theory, which lived through a kind of renaissance which determined today’s film studies, it was based on the post-structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser and the influences present in Althusser’s thought” (50). Moreover, in a key argument, “In *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, his openly Brechtian film, Godard was “avant-garde” in the most positive way possible – de-naturalizing our consumerist tendencies, he understood them as caused by the society which posits products as a comfort and a reason for enduring reified labor, while drawing attention to the role of the ruling class who has a financial interest in keeping the status quo” (58).

Some compelling juxtapositions between general, albeit not unrelated, comments from Adorno and Horkheimer’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in relation to the French New Wave, also prove fertile of insight; or, as we read, “What Adorno and Horkheimer say about the film industry and the most run-of-the mill film ironically bears on the New Wave too: “Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies, [which leave] no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience. [...] They are so designed that [...] sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts”” (60).⁴ Crucially, we too discover that, “What Louis Althusser says of Brecht describes the post-New Wave attitude: ideology can be effectively criticized only if “the ideology’s aesthetic” is abandoned.⁵ The ideology’s aesthetic is realism, problematic, in the final instance, most of all because of its understanding of filmed reality as something given, objective” (63). Not only this: “If, in the politicized period which followed, the French New Wave started to be perceived as a smug and hopelessly realist school of filmmaking, the truth was that the period of political modernism couldn’t have happened – at least not the way it happened – without the stylistic advancements of the New Wave” (66).

In the light of the above-indicated mentions, I would ask the candidate if there are, in spite of the reservations indicated by the thesis, some politically avant-gardist or progressive currents (or seeds in gestation or in incubation) in some productions of the French New Wave? Accordingly, how would the candidate define “avant-garde”? Also, how does the thesis writer imagine the connection between aesthetics and politics to inform this issue of


³ Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema*, 132.

⁴ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, chap. “The Culture Industry,” Kindle.

⁵ Althusser, *For Marx*, 144.

the aesthetically versus the politically avant-gardist aspects of a moving picture? My fourth and last question is: How would a film such as Godard's *Weekend* (1967) fit in with the concerns and arguments in the present thesis?

In light of the foregoing mentions, I hereby recommend the pre thesis defense mark a 1 (výborně) for the thesis work. The *viva voce* will determine the final outcome.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Erik S. Roraback". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

doc. Erik S. Roraback, D.Phil. (Oxon.)
25 August 2022