

LIMITS OF POLITICAL MOVIE MAKING:

The Search for Solidarity

30 years of personal quest

by Gideon Bachmann

"A camera is not a Molotov Cocktail"

(Bernardo Bertolucci in the film by the same name, a 1978 documentary by Gideon Bachmann)

When I started making documentary films in 1967, I was very lucky. I was beginning a new career in a historical period of great political importance.

My origins in radio and in written journalism had led me to believe that the next logical professional step was film making, and the natural type of film making for me was documentary. It was a time in history when everybody was beginning to use the medium of the moving image in order to express pressing social concerns.

At the time, despite the fact that many people began working in this way, it was not an easy task. Neither the form nor the content were popular. People did not go in their masses to see films made with small cameras and nonprofessional sound, and they did not, in their masses, demand political content. Therefore one had to teach two things at the same time: a new language and a new content.

In the history of art, that has always been a difficult task, relegated in most cases to non-mainstream operators. Only in the avant-garde could you hope to find understanding for new forms, but even here it was not always easy to find understanding for new content.

(Today, this phenomenon is even more rampant: practically all the new media of the 21st century are devoid of content, or have become their own content. Today the point of departure is HOW, not WHAT.)

But in artistic circles, in 1967, there was great readiness for new ideas. It was the "before the revolution"-days of the 1968 upheavals, and revolt was in the air. America, where I was then living, was swept by a wave of new consciousness, by now history and well-known. It was still possible, in those days, to be part of a small experimental group without the awareness that this group would one day become a major art or social movement. The Beatniks were at their end, cool jazz had been replaced by rock, sculpture and painting were more abstract than ever, music was more than before the expression of the popular thrust. It was an exciting time.

In film, the movement of the day was the experimental cinema, soon to be named "underground cinema", in the hail of censorship and rejection that it faced from the establishment. This was, of course, before the invention of the home video camera, and the fact that so many young people began using film as a form of expressing their discontent depended on the use of 8mm and 16mm film, cameras like the Bolex, the Cine Special, the Beaulieu and the old silent Arri-flex, none of which permitted decent synchronous sound. Much of the cinema of those days was therefore shot mute and had sound added to it later. This created a great field of creativity for the sound makers, who became artists in themselves. It was, in fact, the separation of sound and image which gave the underground films much of their force.

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All the techniques of the classical avant-garde films of the 1920's were re-invented. They were not copied, but creative use of the motion picture image, when in the service of an idea that is pressing for expression, has always led the artist to using similar and unfamiliar applications of existing machinery. What was new in the underground cinema were not the techniques, but the way these were used to provide the language of renewal. The new film makers could concentrate on what they wanted to say, on content.

Since the formula of the day was political engagement, it was clear that the young film makers of the mid-1960's to the early 1970's were all, in one form or another, political film makers. It is true that many of them enjoyed playing with the newly available old techniques and invented many a new, if derivative one, but there was no central, social or political ideology. We all wanted to be political film makers, but many of us succeeded only in being innovators in form, albeit a form adapted from the past. Nevertheless, the general, social need was such, the burning political desires were so evident, that many of these film makers became "political" by abstraction. Many invented political content to describe the films they were making, even if not in all cases these claims could be born out by fact. It was the time of the "muted political meaning", the time of social awareness and urge, but also the time when none of the protests expressed in these works were evident.

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This was the time when I made my first two films, JONAS (1967) and UNDERGROUND NEW YORK (1967), which were born of and describe the New York milieu I have tried to analyse. UNDERGROUND NEW YORK was, in fact, for the version acquired and broadcast by ZDF German Television, called "Protest -- For What?", in order to indicate that it described a political protest movement in art without clear political aims. It was my first political documentary and one I made at a time in my own career when I still firmly believed that a film could not only make a political statement, but that it was its rôle to do so, and by that I meant that films ought to be made in order to influence people in a political way.

UNDERGROUND NEW YORK is therefore a kind of bastard: while trying to make an "objective" report on American Underground Cinema for European TV audiences, I was trying, at the same time, ^{to} press into the film my own political message, namely that film that had no political message was a useless form of cinema. X

But since I was myself an alumnus of the New York School of Experimental Cinema, I was, at the same time, making a documentary which was in itself an underground movie. It was therefore very hard

to combine my three pursuits: to show that American film makers had no clear political line; to express my own political views; and to do it all in a form of which I was simultaneously saying that it was not capable of expressing political views!

In the end this was done by the application of three basic techniques:

First of all, my film concentrates on those film makers who had more of a political or social message than others, or at least expressed, in words, their wish to express such a message through their work. Secondly, I myself appear in the film and offer the viewer a chance to see who the film maker is, in order for him to be able to "deduct" the personality of the maker and see, behind him, what may be a truer reality than the maker may have been able to report. And, thirdly, the entire film was made with irony and humor, which have always, in history, been the metaphors of doubt.

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UNDERGROUND NEW YORK went on, after 1968 (the year it won the Silver Lion in Venice) to become a classic of the documentary cinema and of the political documentary, despite its essentially negative message. It may have, soon after the 1968 upheavals ended in conformity, contributed to this demise, by providing, despite its intent, an object for critics to cite when deriding the use of politics in film. So, in a sense, it failed. On the other hand, the political message of the film was not imposed, and in the sense that it was unable to fulfil my own political wish, it became an objective work. What may have seemed like a failure to me, personally, only made it more attractive to audiences. It was my first direct experience with the fact that one cannot impose a political message on a documentary film.

In the end, I made a film which better expressed its time than I had intended it to do. It anticipated the decline of politics as a dimension of youth by almost two decades.

That may be the reason why it has remained a classic.

Ten years later, in 1978, I made my second major political documentary film. In the meantime I had moved to Italy and become involved with Pa⁶olini, Rosi, Damiani, Giuseppe de Santis, Germi, and many other Italian "political" film makers. I had continued making documentary films on film makers, among these CIAO, FEDERICO! about Federico Fellini, in which, despite the humor and the love with which the personality is seen, there is also a measure of concern and questioning: repeatedly, in the film, I ask Fellini about his social involvement and the film concludes on the notion that there is no such thing in his work. Again, the imposition of a personal view which does not hold up to history's measure. The failure of which, in large extent, helped the success of my film. Very simply: nobody except Fellini himself noticed that the film was critical. In fact, I had enveloped the character in so much charm that my piddling critique, expressed primarily in the end song, got lost in the admiration. Today I think that this is what saved the film and made it a world success. But CIAO, FEDERICO! was not a political film.

What I call my second political film was a documentary on street film making in Italy, called, on the basis of one of the things that Bertolucci says in the film, "A CAMERA IS NOT A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL" It was a film made, still, with the hope that politics could motivate young people and that films could be made to be a vehicle of such motivation. I was then, like many post-sixtyeighters, convinced that education and consciousness were the future roads to social improvement, and that "taking the means of production into their own hands" the workers, students and intellectuals could to some extent contribute to the changing of the times. I still believed that films were an instrument of revolution.

But of course not only the films of the well-known feature film makers. The names mentioned above had made films with political messages all their lives, without causing much change in society. What I wanted to research with this documentary was whether a change could be made, through film, by a different form of it, by the non-professional, by the man in the street himself.

In its form, this was a much more simple documentary. I no longer attempted to create, foremost, a work of cinema myself, since at that time the notion had grown that form could hide content. In fact, with the ever-increasing quality of cinema technique, with the perfection of image and sound quality, with the availability of a method to actually create reality rather than reproduce it from what surrounds us, the temptation of film makers has become to use more and more technology and less and less content. We now have the means to say almost anything, but have very few things to say.

This trap, which became engulfing with the invention of home video cameras and recorders, was looming at the horizon like a giant, malevolent bat, and I wasn't going to fall victim to it. In A CAMERA IS NOT A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL I wanted to ferret out those examples of street movie making (and of commercial moviemaking, where applicable) which started with something to say and then looked for a means to express it, instead of having a means of expression and then looking for something to say.

This was the time of the comitati di quartiere and of the cento-cinquanta ore, movements at a grassroots level that were calculated to arouse the simple city inhabitant to the fact that he or she, too, could be educated and could take an active part in the shaping of the media. Having seen that MAMMA ROMA, ACCATTONE, LE MANI SULLA CITTÀ, and a hundred other movies that dealt with corruption, mafia, crime, social disintegration, drugs, street violence and family violence made no apparent difference to the people who saw them, I thought, with many at that time, that if we made those movies ourselves, if we didn't see them up there, far away, remote on the silver screen, but had to work hard and research and shoot and edit and distribute them ourselves, they would touch people in their hearts, and through their hearts, in their minds. That's why I wanted to try again, after ten years, to make a political documentary. Were people's ideas more concrete now? X

With "all arms to the people", what would the people say?

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Making A CAMERA IS NOT A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL was a hybrid experience. In juxtaposition to all my previous films, I did not have an entirely free hand in the making of this documentary. It was being made for German Television, and I had had to sell them on the idea of making a film about the cinema of the people by claiming that it would include material about "official" political films, made by "official" Italian film directors. The TV station wanted a documentary that showed how the directors, whose films were being broadcast in Germany at that time, worked, lived and thought. My film about the "cinema di quartiere" turned into the life story of Damiano Damiani.

Nevertheless, while making the film on Damiani, we found that he, himself, was very much more interested in working with us on a film on the cinema of the streets than to be the subject of a standard biographical work. So what we did was making the film ostensibly about him, but making him -- inside the film about him -- do the things which we had wanted to do in the documentary. The result is that it is now Damiano Damiani who is making the documentary about the Italian "cinema di quartiere", and we are simply following him while he is doing it, in the meantime sharing his views and seeing his life, and of course watching him make his own films: political action movies, the ones German TV had bought.

In this post-1968 time, the political climate was changing. The total disillusionment with the European left had not begun to be felt; Pasolini had only stopped writing (and living) ^{in 1975} ~~three years~~ ~~earlier~~ and many of the great theoreticians of the left were still alive and working. The program of the "150 ore" was very active in the land: workers were given 150 hours a year off their work in order to attend classes to improve their position and knowledge. Everybody suddenly had small cameras, although still home video was rare. Political parties supported para-political units which were effectively film production centers, there were film societies and political groups where these films were shown and discussed. Experimental film making had also come to Italy and Italian film makers had been to the US. There was much, and fruitful, cross-fertilisation. It was an active time. XX

My central question was: can a film be politically useful? Can a film cause social upheaval? Can a film cause people to act? Is cinema really such a force for change as has always been assumed, or can it only introduce new habits, new fashions, new obsessions?

The documentary therefore contains a few conversations with film makers who had, until that time, held the view that film was in fact an important political tool. But we soon found that they could not define the ways in which a film could be a tool, they had no concrete answer to this question, any more than the American directors of the Underground Cinema had had an answer. SO I felt that, perhaps, my question was, after all, naive.

At least, even if I did not want to accept that I had asked a naive question, I realised that matters were more complex. Of course films could be politically useful tools, but they could not cause immediate political action. What, then, was their purpose? We do not need to make them in order to convince people of ideas they already hold, and we may not be able to convince people to change ideas which oppose ours. What then can we do, why then continue making films with a political viewpoint?

In the beginning of the documentary Bertolucci gives the first answer to this dilemma, by making his definitive statement. He made the statement in reply to a question where I quoted to him something he had said many years before, namely that in the end-effect every fiction film was at the same time a documentary, because from every work of fiction set in a specific time we learn something about that time. But by the end of our conversation, and after making the declaration which now gives my film its title, he finally agreed to the opposite: in reality, every documentary is also in part a fiction.

That is how it becomes part of the fantasy world of the cinema, part of the human tradition of invention, part of the creativeness which makes us human. I learned that the effect of a film, even of one we call "objective" is always emotional, and is thus always part of fantasy, dream, art. In fact, I learned that film becomes art by admitting its inability to be a piece of reality. And because it is not a piece of reality, it cannot create a new reality.

This is an extremely controversial statement, because it contradicts so much that has been said and written about the cinema. Therefore I must explain the statement in greater detail, relating it also to the conclusion which my film's title implies.

Certainly film can create a new reality, and actually that is its main effect on viewers, but the reality it creates is not part of our concrete world. Although it is reported that after seeing POTESKIN viewers assembled to express their feelings publicly as a direct result of their exposure to the film, and although we know now that children watching television are influenced to the point of trying out violence in their real lives, the film is always only an indirect cause. It creates an emotion and it is this emotion, in turn, which in some cases activates viewers. But the film itself, I repeat, is not, on its own, a molotov cocktail.

In fact, as far as we know, there has never been a film in history that has, in itself, caused a major social upheaval, and certainly none that has created a revolution.

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What, then, can film do?

Although with the passing of the years my own, personal, political quest subsided, inasmuch as I stopped believing, like all of mine and the following generations, in revolution as an evolutionary instrument, I continue to be intrigued by Pasolini's paradoxical statement: "I do not believe in the future, but in order to live I must pretend that I do, and I act accordingly". Although I may not be quoting the exact words, the idea is clear: life requires continuation and continuation requires belief. What, then, can I continue to believe in? And how, in my work, can I express this belief?

Another ten years passed before I made another political documentary, or at least one that had politics as a subject (there is a difference).

In 1988 I made THE CINEMA OF THE MEN WHO SAY NO, a film with and about opposition film makers in Israel. The film was shot just before the fall of the Berlin wall, and the political climate world-wide had been shaken and provided with new hope by prestroika and glasnost. After dealing, in 1967, with things in my own country, the USA, and then, ten years later, with things in the country I had later chosen to inhabit -- Italy -- I now went back to even earlier memories: I had lived, during world war II, in what was then British Palestine, the country which in 1948 had become Israel. Here, like in the other two countries where I had tried to make political films, I had no language barrier, I was well aware of the history, I knew many people, especially film makers, and I was not considered an outsider.

But the political moment was transitory. The first steps towards a form of cohabitation with the Arab population had vaguely been made, but there were no concrete achievements to report by then. The Israeli establishment was as nationalistic as ever and the peace movement was still a movement of largely ineffectual romantics. Nevertheless in the arts, in literature, in music, in drama, in all forms of public life, a certain pragmatic form of collaboration had come into existence. Arab actors acted in Israeli plays, newspapers in Arabic were being published in Israeli cities like Haifa and Nazareth, Arab authors wrote in Hebrew, and in cinema, more and more directors took, in their work, a public stand for collaboration. It was the work of these directors that I documented.

Although this time I had, again, full freedom in structuring my documentary (German TV did not, this time, interfere, although they produced the film) I did not, this time, try to make a cinematographic, stylistic work. I simply wanted to tell a story, and thus this film has no effects, no music, no lovely landscape shots, no clever juxtapositions of images or sounds. And it has very long, into-camera statements by the directors. It is, actually, a document rather than a documentary.

I simply wanted to report what was going on.

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What about the basic quest, then, what about the real reason why we make political documentaries? What have I finally learned from these three expeditions over a period of thirty years (because since 1988 and THE CINEMA OF THE MEN WHO SAY NO another ten years have practically passed)?

In these thirty years I have not only made three political documentaries. I have also spoken, in the form of long interviews, with a few hundred film makers, who all, in one form or another, had been making or are making, documentary films. The list would be too long to report or for me to remember. But there isn't one to whom I have not posed this questions: why do you make political films? What effect can you expect from this endeavor? What satisfaction do you derive, personally, from dealing, in your work, with social and political problems?

And I have found an answer.

It is the distillation of many replies, many attempts, many failures, some successes, some historical disasters. It is simply the formula which for me contains the resolution of my dilemma. It contains that spark which helps make the whole effort worthwhile.

I no longer think film can have a political effect, it cannot be a molotov cocktail. It cannot convince the unconvinced. But it can do one thing: it can make those who are already on our side feel less lonely.

The human being, by nature, is not a lonely fighter. We are not heroes on fast horses, not Great Alexanders who alone conquer, we are not really solitary prophets on mountain tops. We need each other. And in order to hold a belief, we need to know that this belief is not ours alone. And that is what political films can do for us: give us the feeling that we are not alone out there in the storm. That somebody shares our views.

X Film can provide solidarity.