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Peter Watkins, Director. *La Commune (Paris 1871)*. 1999/France/Black and white. Studio: 13 Production, La Sept ARTE, Musée d'Orsay. Running Time: 5 hours 45 minutes. Distributor: First Run/Icarus Films.

Review by Victoria E. Thompson, Arizona State University.

Peter Watkins' *La Commune (Paris 1871)* is a thought-provoking and moving tribute to the desire for a better world. It is unconventional, both in its method of filming and in its approach to history. While this unconventionality makes it a challenge to think about how to make use of this film effectively and practically in the history classroom, it also provides a unique and rewarding glimpse into a process of great interest to historians, that of collective, revolutionary action.

Some viewers will not like this film. In the beginning, I reacted negatively to the length of the film, the emphasis on discussion over action, the anachronistic presence of television reporters, the repetitious discussions, and the references to current issues in debates among participants. These elements have led some to conclude that the film is "not finished" or "amateurish." Yet as I continued to watch the film, I found myself increasingly drawn into the process that Watkins was trying to set in motion.

La Commune (Paris 1871) is five hours and forty-five minutes long in French (available with English subtitles). The film was conceived and directed by Peter Watkins, known for films such as *The War Game* (1965) and *The Freethinker* (1992-4). It was filmed in black and white by cinematographer Odd Geir Saether and included a cast of over 220 individuals, 60 percent of whom had no prior acting experience. It is a joint production of 13 Production, La Sept ARTE and the Musée d'Orsay.

The film traces the events of the 1871 Paris Commune in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris. More accurately, it traces reactions of both participants and bystanders to the events of the Paris Commune and gives us a sense of daily life under the Commune. None of the "big" events of the Commune—such as the assassination of Archbishop Darboy or the burning of the Hôtel de Ville—are recreated on camera. However, we do see a glimpse into some of the "small" events: a civil marriage, a classroom previously taught by nuns now taught by lay schoolteachers, a meeting of the Union des Femmes (a group formed during the Commune to advance the cause of women's rights), a group of Communards defending a barricade.

The film intersperses text that recounts the major events of the Commune: scenes of an actor representing Adolph Thiers speaking to the Assembly at Versailles; news reporting on the Commune broadcast by an invented television network "TV Nationale Versailles"; scenes in the apartment of Madame Talbot, whose letters to her daughter relate a bourgeois woman's experience of the Commune, and the actions and opinions of a group of inhabitants of the eleventh arrondissement. The eleventh arrondissement is recreated on a set that retains its artificiality. Indeed, the first scene of the film takes us on a tour of the set where most of the filming will take place. The goal, according to Watkins, was to "hover" between reality and theatricality."^[1]

Before filming began, the cast was instructed to read up on the Commune and on the individuals who participated. This individual research was in addition to the research carried out by Watkins' team, who looked into the history of the Commune and into daily life in the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Watkins' website, they were aided in their work by historians such as Alain Dalotel, Michel Cordillot, Marcel Cerf, Robert Tombs, and Jacques Rougerie. Throughout the film, participants read stories from period newspapers and quote theorists and actual members of the Commune. However, while the film is historically accurate in its recounting of the events and in such details as costume and songs, it can by no means be considered a reconstruction of the Paris Commune. Rather, the film uses the Paris Commune as a means to question both past and present.

Most of the film is devoted to discussion. In the first tape, inhabitants of the eleventh arrondissement articulate their grievances with the government and the Catholic church: poverty, poor housing conditions, a growing gap between rich and poor, and religious control of schooling. In small and large groups, individuals discuss the harsh conditions under which they work and live. As the film progresses, discussion focuses on the events of the Commune, and on the way TV Versailles portrays these events. Commune TV is created to counter inaccurate representations, and its two reporters move throughout the crowds of Communards, eliciting and recording reactions to events. Discussion moves, over the course of the film, from the causes of the rebellion to its internal workings. Participants discuss the best means to create a new society, the principles upon which that society should be based, and the problems that face revolutionary movements that try to walk a line between democracy and order. At one point in tape four, for example, members of the National Guard discuss power sharing. One participant says, "It's something of a contradiction. This hierarchy with people who manipulate and centralize power and give orders that sometimes get us, our friends, and brothers killed on the field because of tactical errors. Who's really calling the tune here? Us, the Committee of Public Safety the Sub-Committees, who?" (Tape 4, 00:02).

According to Watkins' website, the film was largely unscripted. Participants read about the Commune, and then further developed their understanding and opinion of the event in discussion with others while making the film. This gives the film a remarkable sense of immediacy. When participants are debating whether or not business owners should distribute profits to their workers or the validity of establishing a Committee of Public Safety, they are really debating the question rather than reciting a script they have been given. Their spontaneously invented dialogue gives the viewer a sense of what participants might have said; the interpretation of the Commune that emerges as a result is the work of a group rather than one individual author. Due to this process, the emotion and spontaneity that is part of impassioned public debate comes through strongly in this film, and gives the viewer an amazing sense of what it might have been like to be in Paris in the spring of 1871.

By the third tape, discussions based on past events begin transitioning into discussions based on the present. Characters in costume begin reflecting on their own experiences as actors in this film and compare past and present, focusing on the continuities between the two. One participant, for example, remarks, "More than a century later, we've sent people to the moon, etc. But it's exactly the same thing. Homelessness, precariousness, destitution. Growing inequalities . . ." (Tape 3, 00:48). This sense that the problems faced by the Communards are still problems today is voiced by many of the participants in the film, and is emphasized by the interspersed text, which begins to tie past issues into the present. For example, in the third tape, a discussion on problems facing women in 1871 France among members of the Union des Femmes is interspersed with text that provides statistics on the situation of women in France in 1999. One such statistic notes, for example, that while more women than men obtain university degrees, women dominate in the secretarial field.

While highlighting similarities between past and present, participants also indicate areas of difference. Globalization and the mass media take a big hit in this film, as agents that, respectively, contribute to the gap between rich and poor and that lull individuals into a sense of false comfort. The "sans-papiers"

(undocumented immigrants) are identified in the second half of the film as present-day counterparts to the Communards; in both cases the film presents these groups as marginalized and oppressed by forces outside of their control. The role of the media is also a major component of the film. Indeed, in the opening scenes, the viewer is told that this is a film about both the Commune and the role of the mass media. The anachronism of the rival television stations--TV Versailles and Commune TV--is meant to demonstrate both how the media distorts events and how it encourages passivity. So, for example, we see a report on the women of the Commune broadcast by TV Versailles that would have (if it were historically accurate) laid the basis for the myth of the "Pétroleuses." We also see scenes of Communards sitting silently in a café watching television broadcasts. By the end of the film, however, the Communards reject the distortion and passivity of the media. One woman, getting ready to defend the barricade she and others have built, declares, "The biggest pain in the ass is that you're still here recording, watching everything [...] You have to join us. Drop your microphone." (Tape 4, 00:53)

Peter Watkins has long been a critic of conventional methods of filmmaking and of the dominance of films produced in Hollywood. On his website, he argues that both the form and process of mass media productions create passivity in viewers and encourage their acceptance of globalization. He writes, "This 'vision' of the way in which our planet 'has to develop' (a keynote for globalization is the idea that it is inevitable) is not only enforced by most governments around the world, it is promulgated daily by global TV and by the cinema of Hollywood (and its European and Asian clones)."[2] It does this, he contends, by presenting both current events and history in a certain way, leaving out alternative viewpoints and outcomes, and employing a fast pace, frequent cuts, and a short time span, to stifle any possibility of critical reflection: "This fragmented, extremely rapid, densely packed and constantly moving narrative structure is the antithesis of any reflective, questioning, complex, participatory process possible within TV and the cinema." [3]

In *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, Watkins sought to produce a film based on alternative forms and processes, one that would encourage critical reflection in the viewer and participation by the actors in the process of telling the story. He has succeeded on both counts. The length of the film, the time given to discussion of issues--both past and present--and the insight the film provides into the process of social change invites reflection both on the state of the world today and on the process of historical change on the part of the viewer. One cannot help, for example, reflecting upon the difficulties faced by revolutionaries as they strive to create something new, and yet are inevitably limited by their need to make use of existing institutions and practices. The participants in the film were also clearly drawn to reflect upon the historical moment they were recreating. "What impressed me," one of the actors says, "is that the Commune opens up many paths and reflections on its failures" (Tape 3, 01:27). Indeed, the participants become increasingly articulate on the challenges inherent in the process of revolutionary change, debating the wisdom of moves such as establishing a Committee of Public Safety, or maintaining certain pre-existing taxes. The most poignant moment of reflection comes near the end of the film, during the final "Bloody Week" of the Commune when the participants are getting ready to meet the forces of Versailles on the barricades. The reporters of Commune TV move through the crowd, asking participants if they would take to the barricades today. The responses reveal a sense of frustration and a desire for change that must have prompted the real Communards to risk their lives, while at the same time giving us a sense of their courage and their fear. At the end, when the participants are lined up against the wall, awaiting execution, we see on their faces expressions of anger, horror, fear and sorrow. We have spent long hours watching them try, and fail, to bring about revolutionary change and, like them, we have been changed in the process.

La Commune is a film worth seeing, and a film worth showing to students. While the anachronistic presence of TV reporters in 1871 risks confusing some students, the film's ability to depict the process of revolution makes it a valuable teaching tool. The film could be of use in a course on the Commune, on comparative revolutions, or on modern France. It raises interesting questions on the use and representation of history, and could be profitably compared to a historical monograph on the Commune

or to a primary source recounting the events. But how to use it? At five hours and forty-five minutes, several weeks of the semester, or two long evenings outside of class would need to be devoted simply to viewing the film. One of the drawbacks, from a pedagogical point, of view is that showing a short segment of the film would not be worthwhile, because this would not allow students to experience fully the process of change the film captures. While the logistics of figuring out how to show the film in its entirety present a challenge, many instructors would no doubt find the effort worthwhile.

NOTES

[1] Watkins, Peter. "Production Background; La Commune de Paris." <http://www.peterwatkins.lt/varyk.htm> (6 June 2003).

[2] Watkins, Peter. "The global crisis, the MAVM, and media education; Summary of the web-site." <http://www.peterwatkins.lt/varyk.htm> (6 June 2003).

[3] Ibid.

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