
H-France Review Vol. 14 (November 2014), No. 174

Mario Marret and Chris Marker, directors. *À Bientôt, j'espère* (*Be Seeing You*) 39 min. DVD. (SLON 1968/Icarus Films 2003). \$298.00 U.S.

Class of Struggle: A Film by the Medvedkin Group 37 min. DVD. (SLON 1969/Icarus Films 2013). \$298.00 U.S.

Review by Julian Bourg, Boston College.

There seems to be something of a temporary lull in reflection and debate on “the ’68 years.” We are in an interlude, closer to the fiftieth anniversary of the events than the fortieth. Although the interpretive flood of 2008 has not been fully absorbed, the likely ramping up toward 1968’s golden jubilee has yet to begin. The map of the sixties’ parts and wholes has become very complex, ranging from discreet events to extended temporalities and from local situations to global connections. The *who*--youth or intergenerational alliance, margins or masses, liberal professionals or workers--is as unfixed as the *why*--demography, economic boom, Cold War decolonization, and so forth. Culture, politics, or socio-economic forces? Revolution, revolt, or reform? Identity assertion, interpersonal emancipation, participatory citizenship, human rights, environmentalism? There is no shortage of available positions. To the busyness of the terrain, however, is joined an apparent and perhaps passing lack of urgency in developing orienting map keys. One consequence of the publishing torrent of 2008, especially in France, has been a conspicuous 1968 fatigue. Just “forget” it, Daniel Cohn-Bendit said.[1] Presentist polemic has served in recent years to stimulate but also to freeze in place the stand-off between memory studies and historicization, and French scholarship remains in large part stubbornly focused on domestic circumstances, out of step with globalizing trends in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The landscape of 1968 currently risks both becoming an unmappably vast topography and, in the French case, glaciating into predictable politics and staid scholarship.[2]

Into this situation, the films *À Bientôt, j'espère* (1967–68) and *Classe de lutte* (1968) are like hot celluloid drops, restoring something of the burning urgency--the courage, stakes, and consequences--some people experienced during the ’68 years. They display dynamic dilemmas of labor, social mobilization, and gender in black and white. For all that might be said about the mediating effects of cinema, these two films offer a remarkably immediate portrait of the personal-political mobilization of workers in Besançon in 1967–68. There is not much nostalgia here. Created at the time as militant *ciné-tracts* by the collectives Société pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles (SLON) and Le Groupe Medvedkine, viewed today they highlight both the differences between the sixties and our own time and the fact that, in terms of the existential audacity required to pursue dignity in our work lives, maybe not so much has changed after all.

Paul Douglas Grant has already hit upon the essential connection and development across these two films: the move from auteur representation of a failed strike in *À Bientôt, j'espère* to collective presentation of the transformation of one Suzanne Zedet in *Classe de lutte*.[3] While there is much to be said about both the broader context of collective, militant filmmaking and the formal-diegetic qualities of these films, I will focus on their didactic-mimetic aspects because their political salience emerges there. In early 1967 Chris Marker was invited to Besançon by the Centre culturel populaire de Palente

les Orchamps to film a strike at the Rhodiacéta textile factory.[4] The resulting collaboration with Mario Marret, the elegiac documentary *À Bientôt, j'espère*, broadcast on French television in March 1968, centered on the efforts of Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT) activist, Georges Maurivard (aka Yoyo).

The film opens in a cold and dreary December 1967, nine months after the Rhodia strike has ended. Yoyo vainly tries to mobilize workers outside the factory gates. In an interview he recalls his emerging role as a leader (his nerves before speaking, the need to be brief), the aims of the February–March 1967 strike (beyond pay increases, a humanizing redress of the fact that “instability due to work translates into instability in all of life”), and the real gains of the walkout (breaking down rigid lines between the CFDT and the Confédération générale du travail [CGT], “the education of workers,” a newfound experience of community). “Bread” and “culture” were put forward as equal aspirations. Yoyo’s voice, however, is only one of a chorus. A group of workers recall how the strike, which had built on other stoppages since the 1950s, raised their awareness of their own situations and more importantly of their capacity for action. One person speaks of his fresh desire “to know as many things as possible.” Another recounts his pleasure in seeing a film every night in the occupied factory. Indeed, each in his own way, several interviewees emphasize the shared experience of having broken through a threshold of possibility, of passing from *these are the way things are* to *we are showing by our actions that other ways are practicable*.

And yet, the Rhodia workers also spell out in poignant detail the technological reification of labor: “automation” amounts to “acceleration”; workers are allowed to eat when the machines need a break, not the people; bodies take home the unappeasable exhaustion of rote movement; the men look older than they claim to be. They dissect the divide-and-conquer strategies of management (“the bosses are smart”) and draw the balance sheet of the recent experience (a battle in a larger campaign, keep learning, “unity is the main thing”). Regardless of narrow material outcomes, the strike’s value had been found in the very process of collaborative action. Yoyo concludes cheerily that the strike had not actually failed. “I want to tell the bosses,” he says, “that we’ll get you, it’s sure, because there is this solidarity that they know nothing about. We’ll get you. We’re not mad at those who wrongly think that they are the bosses. But those who own capital, we’ll get you. It has to be. That’s nature. Hope to see you again soon. [*C’est la force des choses, c’est la nature et à bientôt j’espère*].”

A particular, telling interview in the middle of *À Bientôt, j’espère* will subsequently take on greater significance. Claude and Suzanne Zedet both work in alternating day and night shifts seven days a week; he at Rhodia, she at the Yema watch factory. Claude worries about relationships breaking up around him (“We have no family life”); he is fed up with the dispiriting job, even with talking about it. But—here is the pivotal point—he does all the talking. Grant describes the scene this way:

“The interview takes place in the Zedet home, with Suzanne and Claude sitting together at the kitchen table smoking. Claude Zedet describes his work schedule and as he speaks, there is a close-up of his wife Suzanne, who timidly avoids the camera through a downcast look, as Claude describes how they barely see each other and remarks that when he comes home at eight, he wants to eat but Suzanne is ready to go to sleep. The interview continues this way: Claude speaks, Suzanne listens and is looked at. At one point Suzanne speaks, saying that working just to bring home money is useless and that she hates working for someone else, but Claude more or less interrupts her.”[5]

What Claude says is politically perspicacious, but especially for the viewer today his speaking for her is conspicuous. The way that the camera lingers on Suzanne’s downcast eyes reveals that the filmmakers, too, noticed something, although the moment is quickly subsumed by the speech of Yoyo, Claude, and the other men. For Grant, Claude’s re-presentation of Suzanne mirrors the auteurs’ relationship to the Rhodia workers, exemplified by montage and voice over: with the best of intentions, cutting and framing from the outside.[6] Marret and Marker’s tragic emplotment of the defeated strike captures

and contains Yoyo's roguish see-you-again-soon, an operation to which Suzanne is subjected twice over by Claude and then by the camera. To ruin the effect of seeing both films back-to-back for the first time: this minor corner of *À Bientôt, j'espère* becomes the grounds for *Classe de lutte*.

"Right from the opening," Grant observes, "*Classe de lutte* sets itself against the deflationary opening of *À bientôt*. Sylvio Rodriguez's ode to Che Guevara *La Era está Pariendo un Corazón* accompanies a soft-focus, black-and-white close-up of Suzanne Zedet, taken from Marker's film, followed by a full shot of Suzanne crossing a room strewn with political banners, eventually arriving at a flatbed editing table where another woman watches a demonstration on the monitor." [7] The camera pulls back to reveal graffiti on the wall: "Cinema is not magic, it is a technique and a science, a technique born from a science and placed in the service of a will: the workers' will to liberate themselves." We are in the middle of May 1968. Shots of mimeographed tracts and posters declaring solidarity with the Spanish people and "Help Vietnam" shift to the Zedet home, Claude and the children. Suzanne is typing. An off-screen voice asks, "What are you doing?" She turns, shrugs, and smiles, "Well, I'm fighting [*Ben, je milite*]." The opening credits list forty names as collaborators in the SLON/Groupe Medvedkine production, and the film returns to the Claude and Suzanne *À Bientôt, j'espère* interview. "I would like to join the struggle and all that," she says softly in a previously unseen segment, "but I realize that I don't have the time and that I would run the risk of doing a bad job." Claude offers a well-meaning but condescending observation. The contrast between this Suzanne and the buoyant woman at the typewriter in 1968 is already unavoidable.

We return to May 1968. A quick image of a laughing Suzanne egged on by her coworkers at the Yema watch factory to take the platform at a demonstration passes to a clip of her speaking before the crowd. "We cannot accept being divided," she says loudly. "We must continue our struggle together." She repeats the last word—*ensemble*—as a refrain. The brief scene teases the overall arc of Suzanne's transformation from timidity to confidence. *Classe de lutte* then widens, showing worker unrest at other factories as well as life in Besançon—"a city like any other: you get bored on Sundays; during the week, you work." Watchmaking, in which the workforce is one-third female, is a key industry. At Yema there are more women than men. Suzanne recounts how before May 1968 there had been no union at the factory and that in the wake of the events the task is to organize and prepare for further actions, although many workers think they do not need collective representation. "The boss" is trying to win some people over through promotions and discourage others through demotions; the union organizer is swimming against the current. "Buying a newspaper is an act of consciousness," she says, "small, you see, but it is already something"—a prelude to collective action, so the theory goes. As she speaks, we see her doing housework and out grocery shopping. The layers thicken.

From the broader circumstances of May 1968 and labor in Besançon, *Classe de lutte* pulls back to Suzanne. Retrospective reflections on her first speech are punctuated with scenes from that day. Neither too little nor too much should be made of the contrast between her feminine self-presentation in the later interview (makeup and white sweater) and her appearance the day she passed from observer to participant-leader (tussled hair and black leather jacket). Her narrative is affecting. Having decided that others' speeches were not good, she had gone home and written notes on the versos of a stack of tracts. The next day she showed her ideas to CGT militants who encouraged her to share them with the crowd. Before she took the rostrum, a long-winded professor droned on pretentiously about worker dignity. The "beautiful words" of someone who "has" culture can be intimidating, even if a discourse is about "nothing." Where Yoyo had noted his nervousness about public speaking, here we see Suzanne act out her trepidation: pacing, biting her nails, sighing, and smoking. After her speech she joins a small group that confronts the factory managers.

As in *À Bientôt, j'espère*, the Yema strike in *Classe de lutte* is also a "failure." But the *mise en scène* differs markedly. Suzanne personifies how the real, damaging consequences of challenging unfair arrangements in the name of greater equality can be offset by the personal and social returns obtained through the

very process of confrontation. Almost a year later in March 1969, she relates the union-busting retribution that has taken hold since the unsuccessful May '68 campaign. There have been repercussions. She has been demoted and had her pay cut (from 800FF per month plus bonuses to 549FF per month). A "final warning" letter has informed her that "political discussions" at the factory are forbidden, that magazines and documents not related to her work are banned, that collecting union dues during work hours is prohibited, and so forth. Still, when asked about her relationship with the factory boss, Suzanne describes her own growing self-confidence ("j'ai pris une assurance") and how he lowers his eyes when they pass in the hallway. Glowing camera shots dramatize the transformation from meek wife to union leader.

Work may be, as Suzanne had said in *À Bientôt, j'espère*, a "vacuum," but labor organizing is not empty because "we have the impression that we are bringing something to people; we help them understand things." Since May '68, the relationships she has established with others have been valuable in ways different than her lost wages. The notion of leaving the factory to find work elsewhere fills her with a sense of betraying her colleagues, of not finishing what she had started, of acting out of fear when she has told others not to be afraid. She sees through her boss's paternalistic efforts to act friendly because "conflict exists." This upward crescendo of Suzanne's experiences—from employer punishment to growing self-confidence to community fidelity to depersonalization of socio-economic struggle—culminates in a final reflection promoted by the off-camera interviewer. "Tell me about Picasso," a voice says. "Picasso," she replies, pausing to think, "is, you see, he's a bit like [Jacques] Prévert." The camera pulls back to reveal her seated next to a poster of a Picasso painting. She goes on to discuss Prévert's poem "Picasso's Magic Lantern" (1940). Culture is the prize, the apotheosis of self-confidence and political consciousness.

"Artists, poets, they also have something to say and things to express," Zedet remarks. "In the society in which we live today, you see, I don't know, there are conditions such that workers believe that poetry and painting or things like that are not for them, you see; they think that it's reserved for the bourgeoisie or a certain kind of people. ... I thought like that. At the same time, you see, that I discovered the workers' struggle, I realized that culture is something that gives us things, and in the end I don't see why we don't go to exhibitions and why we don't read poems and things like that. ... It's very important, as important as the rise of wages."

She concludes by evoking Roger Vailland's *Beau masque* (1954) ("it could provide workers with self-confidence") and Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* (1906) ("the first book I read that I liked"). This climactic focus on cultural capital is of a piece with 1968-era mutations in the "symbolic order" as workers and cultural elites moved toward one another.[8] There remains a tension between, on one hand, the appropriation of cultural capital, learning the "beautiful words" of someone who "has" culture, and on the other hand, a more generalized historical process of embourgeoisement. The screen cuts to black before Colette Magny's song "We are the Power Together" plays to a montage of Suzanne Zedet in front of the factory gates the day she gave her first speech. The song lyrics are based on her words:

So far we have decided to strike
 Together
 We have presented our demands
 Together
 We have gone to discuss with management
 Together
 We must continue our struggle
 Together

The final intertitle declares, "To be continued." *À suivre*. [9]

There are obvious discontinuities between the 1968 era and our own. Grainy monochrome suits the bygone workerism of late 1960s Besançon: syndicalist actors guided by a still-compelling revolutionary philosophy of history and who engaged decision-makers at local factories. In the day of solitary retinal-display laptop viewing, things are seldom so black and white. Be that as it may, *À Bientôt, j'espère* and *Classe de lutte* successfully collapse the distance between the 1960s and the 2010s not by establishing unbroken continuities but by suggesting analogous circumstances and possibilities for social action. In spite of obvious differences, they drop us in on a scene that maintains a relevance and immediacy sometimes minimized in depictions of 1968 *generalis*.

Writing the globally complex or endlessly archival sixties runs the risk of sidelining vital and inspiring concreteness. Even if it gestures toward universality, historical experience always remains particular.[10] Here, it is a matter not of Yoyo and Suzanne's indexical relationship to "1968," but rather of what they communicate across the past fifty years with striking actuality.[11] They speak in their voices, of course, but *to us* of timely and altogether familiar realities: the difficulty of organizing people in their workplaces, the fear of standing up and speaking out, the fortitude required to face the inevitable consequences of pursuing fairness, social justice, and economic equality. Against the background of a complexity with diminishing returns, if one avoids the temptation of consigning them to the archive of lost causes, *À Bientôt, j'espère* and *Classe de lutte* offer a glimmer of the existential requirements, advantages, and costs of hopeful acts. Much has changed since the 1960s, yet some things have not changed very much at all. Now as then, it still takes courage to speak up at work for what's right.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Cohn-Bendit, *Forget 68: entretiens avec Stéphane Paoli and Jean Viard* (Paris: L'Aube, 2009).

[2] In spite of the noble efforts of the terrific organizers, most of the interventions at a recent conference, *Le genre de l'engagement dans les années 1968* (Université de Rouen, 5–6 June 2014), were classic three-point recitations of archival minutiae with minimal historiographical or other substantive big-ticket analysis. The endless mining of French local and departmental archives on 1968 is fully underway.

[3] Paul Douglas Grant, "Just Some of the Ways to Shoot a Strike: Militant Filmmaking in France from Arc to the Groupe Medvedkine," *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination* 4/1(2011): 121–28, <http://ojs.gc.cuny.edu/index.php/situations/article/download/744/1192> (accessed 4 August 2014). *Les Groupes Medvedkine* [14 films on two DVDs plus booklet] (Paris: Éditions Montparnasse/Iskra, 2006). See also Trevor Stark, "'Cinema in the Hands of the People': Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film," *October* 139 (Winter 2012): 117–50.

[4] Chris Marker, "Les Révoltés de la Rhodia," *Le Nouvel Observateur* 123(March 1967).

[5] Grant, "Just Some of the Ways to Shoot a Strike," p. 123.

[6] The judgment of auteur misappropriation was shared at the time by Rhodia workers who, after a screening of *À Bientôt, j'espère*, launched a barrage of tough questions and criticisms at the filmmakers. This recorded exchange, entitled, *La Charnière*, was treated as a revelatory audio-tract in its own right.

[7] Grant, "Just Some of the Ways to Shoot a Strike," 125.

[8] Boris Gobille, *Mai 68* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), pp. 6, 60–61.

[9] Ludivine Bantigny's brief radio reflection on Suzanne Zedet (28 May 2012) is available at <http://www.lfm-radio.com/Chronique-Hommage-Suzanne-Zedet.html> (accessed 4 August 2014).

[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Kierkegaard: The Singular Universal," in Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, tr. John Matthews (New York: Pantheon, 1974). Paul Crittenden, "The Singular Universal in Jean-Paul Sartre," *Literature and Aesthetics* 8(1998), <http://ojs-prod.library.usyd.edu.au/index.php/LA/article/view/5230/5938> (accessed 4 August 2014).

[11] For a parallel mobilization of past images for use in a given present, see *Reprise*, directed by Hervé Le Roux, 98 mins. (Les films d'ici, 1996), which built on *La reprise du travail aux usines Wonder*, directed by Jacques Willemont, 10 mins. (IDHEC, 1968).

Julian Bourg
Boston College
bourgj@bc.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172