9/11, Critique, and Avant-Garde Film

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As I sat at the panelists' table during the final session of the Tulips Conference, trying to listen to the panelist whose presentation immediately preceded mine, I was seized—again, as I had been all week— by misgivings about the relevance of the argument I was about to make, only a few weeks after the catastrophic attack on the World Trade Center and its world-shaking aftermath. Basically, my argument in "Professional Myopia: How Academe Is Failing Cinema"[1] is that the widespread tendency throughout North American academe to give up on 16mm projection and switch to video and digital presentations of film is destructive of film history, since it endangers most forms of alternative cinema. Further, I believe that this de facto decision results from the laziness of academics whose definition of "professional" is the use of critical and theoretical *writing*, ostensibly in the name of cinema, as a means of accruing power and status within the academic social system. But on that October 21st my paper seemed so frivolous that I considered not giving it at all and opening a discussion of how avant-garde media could fit within what seemed a frightening new world.

Of course, even before the Tulips Conference, I had realized—though I was embarrassed to admit it, even to myself—that watching the Twin Towers collapse had changed my own thinking, even about the politics of alternative cinema. The attack had toppled two of what had seemed, for forty years, my most fundamental assumptions: that while I was no communist revolutionary, I was anti-capitalist; and that my job as a teacher and scholar was to critique the problematic dimensions of American military and economic power as this power was encoded within the commercial media. I realized that my thinking had already changed, just a few days after the attack, when I received an email sent by, perhaps originated by, a group of New York City artists. It said, "Islam is not the enemy/War is not the answer/Break the cycle/Pass it on." Instead of speaking for me, as it might have before 9/11, the message annoyed me, and while I didn't have the words to respond at that point, by the time a friend sent me the same message a few weeks later, I was able to send a curt reply: "No, *Islam* is not the enemy, but certain forms of radical, fundamentalist Islam *do* seem to be; and at the moment, I have no faith that *our* peacefulness will do anything but invite further attacks." Much on my mind during those weeks was the image of the group of peaceful souls on the Odessa Steps in *Potemkin* whose appeal to the czar's soldiers is quickly met with further violence.

In the wake of the attack on the Trade Center, the thing that seemed most obvious to me was that the perpetrators, whoever exactly they were, had planned to kill as many people as possible. As the second tower collapsed, I had said to my partner, "There go twenty thousand people." It was Guernica on a massive scale. In the end, the number was, thankfully, nothing like twenty thousand, but the point had been made: those who had planned and carried out the attack were interested in mass destruction, and had they been able to kill a million people, or to level New York City altogether, they would certainly have done so.

As a result, during the following weeks I found myself frustrated at the nature of many of the responses of alternative media people to 9/11 and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. What condemnations of the Trade Center attack I did hear or read seemed, at best, *pro forma*—something said only to demonstrate the speakers' humanity, so that they could make the *real* point, which took a variety of forms. The crudest versions went something like this: "Those capitalist pigs [who worked in the Trade Center] finally got what they deserved: pay-back for all the shit they've been responsible for"; "The towers shouldn't have been built in the first place; they were just two giant capitalist phalluses." More common were statements that, while the terrorist attacks were horrific, we (capitalist Americans) certainly had it coming; an attack on America was long overdue. Indeed, we deserved to be attacked, and *so much* that any military response from us was entirely unjustified—still further evidence of the belligerent capitalist imperialism that had just come home to roost.

I was surprised by my lack of patience with a set of attitudes that, for much of my life, had seemed my own. But the World Trade Center attack had demonstrated the obvious: that there are people in the world, other than Americans, other than capitalists, who are willing to effect horrific atrocities, including the unapologetic mass destruction of men, women, and children, seemingly without misgivings, in the name of God. When much of the artistic community rushed to blame the United States as at least the indirect cause of the attack, this community revealed its own fundamental attachment to a sterile nationalism, even a kind of negative imperialism: "No one else in the world is responsible for *anything*," this community seemed to say, "Only *our* nation can be responsible for a horror of this magnitude, and only the suffering we cause and *our* embarrassment and self-hatred are real."

In mid-October I went to New York to attend the New York Film Festival avant-garde programs organized by Mark McElhatten and Gavin Smith, and, like so many others, made a pilgrimage to Ground Zero. After circling the site of the attack, we walked to Wall Street to see the Stock Exchange with its giant flag—and I was amazed to hear myself

think a silent prayer: "Don't let the nation collapse; hang in there."

During the month between 9/11 and my visit, I had been haunted by two images of Lower Manhattan. One was that ubiquitous view from Brooklyn across the Brooklyn Bridge toward the financial district that for a generation or two had been the most iconic image of New York. The other was more "private," a view down East Broadway in Chinatown toward the Woolworth building and the Trade Center, an image I had come to associate with a transformation in my life during my early thirties that had brought me storybook romantic love and a new professional passion: exploring and serving the wide world of avant-garde cinema. Those views had become my quintessential images of the city around which my life had always circled and *in* which, during the late 1970s, I was discovering a world of new possibilities.

Or to put it in a truer—if more melodramatic—way, 9/11 had revealed to me that I had—not exactly *sub*-consciously, but not exactly consciously, either—come to see New York City as a "sacred space" and to feel that the City's energy and beauty, its ethnic and historical multiplicity, its artistic pre-eminence were encoded in those two images. By the time of my visit to Ground Zero the connection of the attacks to a certain strain of fundamentalist Islam had come to seem quite clear, and I remember thinking that, whatever else one might say about the United States, we had *not* nuked Mecca and were not (I hoped, assumed) even considering such an action, despite the terrorist attack on my "Mecca" and its obvious implications. It had come to seem quite evident that the target of the attacks was the most visible symbol, not just of capitalism, but of modern life in an industrialized society and the many good things this life has made possible—including a living discourse of all kinds of cinema.

By the time I drove to the Tulips Conference a week after my visit to New York and Ground Zero, I was increasingly troubled by the fact that, over a period of three decades, the primary justification for independent cinema had become its ongoing critique of American capitalism and bourgeois life. Of course, *I* had used this justification endlessly: my ongoing series of filmmaker interview books is called A *Critical* Cinema. In avant-garde film, at least American avant-garde film, a critique of capitalism— as exemplified and propagandized by Hollywood filmmaking in particular—has been a badge of honour for decades. And in American academe much of what is considered sophisticated writing is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, anti-capitalist and anti-American.

It is true that in recent years I've been growing more conscious of the ironies of this situation, which seem particularly evident in academe, where new spins on Marxism, new forms of anti-Americanism and anti-

Westernism, are of particular use in moving up the ladder of academic power and prestige. Granted, I don't read as much academic writing as many of my colleagues, but I've never read an academic book or essay that, in its critique of capitalist patterns in commercial cinema and modern industrial society, *also* critiques what its own real purpose within a capitalist economy is. It may be argued that many of these essays and books are meant to be calls to action, but, in most instances, the action that seems most called for is a further immersion in the increasingly complex—and for most readers opaque—language of academic discourse.

In avant-garde filmmaking, the same paradox is evident, particularly in the most pervasive avant-garde approach of recent decades, "found-footage" or "recycled" cinema, where many filmmakers feel free, even obliged, to steal whatever imagery and sound they want from whomever they want (other than Disney!) as a means of mounting a critique of commercial media by turning its own absurdities and excesses against it. I have always been in sympathy with this Trojan-Horse strategy, but I am also aware that for many of these anti-capitalist warriors "success" is measured, at least in part, by the acceptance of their work at festivals and in museums that are usually underwritten by (who else?) "The Enemy." And when it seemed that in *American Beauty* Sam Mendes had stolen the image of the plastic bag from avant-garde filmmaker Nick Dorsky, few in the enraged avant-garde community seemed to see the irony of the situation (Dorsky later explained that he wasn't sure *he* should use the image since it was so common in poetry).

At some point during the Tulips Conference, in response (as I remember) to several *pro forma* attacks on capitalism as *the* problem in world affairs, Peter Harcourt stood up and announced that he was not an anticapitalist and that his hope was not for an end to capitalism, but for an "enlightened capitalism," a more humane and decent capitalism. It was precisely what I had been wanting to say, and Harcourt's statement brought to mind some lines from Emerson's "Self-Reliance":

> Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility than most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.[2]

Continuing to argue for a global revolution—either in the name of communism or of fundamentalist Islam—seems to me as fully a form of political suicide as was the World Trade Center attack. As a result, I must, and

do, hope for changes in the nature of capitalism, which I believe *can* be effected (and in some past instances *have been* affected) by creative human beings of courage and good will.

I've come to believe that what I long understood as a progressive critique of capitalism, by media scholars and media makers, is often implicitly reactionary—and disingenuously reactionary at that. It assumes that the best that media scholars and makers can do is *react to* the status quo: model a hatred of capitalism and whatever it supports (except perhaps those systems that benefit makers and scholars). As a result, activities that might develop or maintain spaces within capitalist societies for more progressive alternatives are increasingly ignored. It's simply easier—and often more profitable—to produce "radical" written critique of what one doesn't like than to create and support vital alternatives within capitalist economies. How else are we to account for the paradox of academe's production of a huge anti-capitalist (institutionally supported) *literature* critiquing mainstream film, *and* of fewer and fewer opportunities for students and the public at large to experience truly progressive moving-image media on a regular basis in a public forum? I've become convinced that so long as film critique is grounded in a knee-jerk anti-capitalism, and in a hatred of the United States as the most visible representative of capitalism, it can never play a progressive role in an improvement of media or society. At most, it can lead only to endless complaint and self-righteous frustration—and to an expanding literature that may serve the careers of academics, but does not serve film history or expanded media awareness in any practical way.

On the other hand, if we could accept that alternative media could play a role in the development of a more humane form of capitalism, and, by doing so, help enable an ever-expanding world to deal with its many problems more effectively, we would have a less frustrating and more useful rationale for presenting a broader range of media art. We could express our revulsion with the more decadent tendencies of commercial cinema without damning commerce itself, which makes all media possible; and we could be clearer about how avant-garde film/video provides evocations of a more gentle, generous world, and more energetic in our efforts to be sure that these evocations reach those for whom they can be transformative. What we need now is a new commitment to making what we consider the best and most progressive films/videos/digital works available and attractive to a growing audience, and a new generation of scholars who can see, and tease out, and *communicate* the visions of progressive media makers so that a new generation of viewers can find their way into this work.

My deepest respect as a film historian and programmer has always gone to those films/videos that demonstrate most dramatically the quin-

tessential lesson of avant-garde media: that magnificent works can be made from minimal financial resources. Indeed, many of what seem to me the most intelligent and memorable films and videos reveal the decadence of most Hollywood filmmaking, and so much of modern life, in both their production process and in the experiences they create for audiences. Of course, avant-garde film- and video-makers have developed myriad ways of transcending limitation. If I am most deeply attracted to films/videos that model a retraining of perception—so that I can live more fully in the limited time I have, with the limited resources at my disposal —I remain in sympathy with *all* those makers who use the often limited resources available to them within capitalist economies to produce something substantial—and who, by implication, suggest we can do the same in our lives as teachers and as citizens.

There is, of course, a considerable history of organizational models for expanding academic and public awareness of alternative media, many of which were developed by individuals or small groups with very little to work with. The most obvious of these models are the major North American film societies of the 1930s-1950s—Cinema 16 in New York, Art in Cinema in San Francisco, and probably the Vancouver Film Society (I've not yet seen any detailed records of this venerable organization's work)— which created large and vital communities around the presentation of alternative media during an era as politically and economically conservative as our own. These organizations didn't rely on government funding or even on angel financing; they modelled community organization and action on the basis of a commitment to the use of media as a means of expanded awareness and more informed citizenship. The results of their efforts included new audiences for a wide range of cinema, a network of smaller film societies each of which developed its own audience, and the widespread distribution of forms of film that might never have been seen otherwise. That so much of this history has been ignored by so many in academe—even in an era when Masters and Doctoral theses about cultural history abound—is both typical and frustrating.

Ultimately, what a good many alternative films/videos demonstrate to those of us who find our way to them is that our quality of life—once our basic needs are met—is not a function of accumulation or extravagance, but of a deeper, more complex attention and awareness. This is, above all, the lesson that capitalism, in its more corrupt manifestations, doesn't want us to learn, and it is this lesson, above all others, that so many of us within modern industrialized societies have the opportunity to teach ourselves, our students, and the larger society. Generations of inventive, courageous filmmakers have produced a body of work we have only begun to deploy in this quest. It remains for us to become a true avant-

garde again, and show how cinema can model movement toward a world order that neither embarrasses nor frightens us. But we can only do this if we're willing to move beyond the cul-de-sac of endless written critique of and complaint about what we *don't* respect, and serve the field of creative media by working to develop vigorous communities, inside and outside academe, around the informed, inventive, regular exhibition of what we *do* admire.

Notes

1 Scott MacDonald, "Professional Myopia: How Academe is Failing Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 19, No. 3 (Summer 2002), 201-207.

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," *The Complete Essays and Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1940), 145-146.