Speech Across the Barricades:
The Democratic Art of Peter Watkins's
La Commune (Paris 1871)

by Gabriel Levine

Televisual publics, contested histories

When Peter Watkins's epic film *La Commune* first aired on French television in 1999, a critic described it as "a UFO in the audiovisual landscape."[1] That initial impression of strangeness has not dimmed in the intervening years. Watkins's film is a five-hour and 45-minute restaging of the insurrectionary Paris Commune of 1871, shot on black-and-white video and featuring a cast of over 200 mostly non-actors who perform "as themselves" and who were largely responsible for researching and creating their own roles. The camera moves in long takes through a maze-like set (built in a warehouse in the Paris suburb of Montreuil) that combines vivid historical detail with the open acknowledgment of artifice. Lovingly-textured walls and period costumes coexist with a theatrical sense of interior space, and the condensed setting allows for the hand-held camera to move from workshop to café, barricade to town hall in the length of a single shot. Watkins uses various distancing effects—titles offering information or commentary, black screens as punctuation, contrapuntal editing—to counterpoise past and present and ask difficult questions of the viewer. And in an anachronistic device, two fictional television networks, the government-run Télévision Nationale Versailles and the upstart independent Télévision Communale, interview participants in the drama, giving them the opportunity to express their thoughts and debate ideas as characters and as performers. This device allows for a critique of the way history continues to be filtered through the institutional and ideological investments of those who report on the present, from journalists of the time of the Commune to the contemporary news media. But perhaps most unusual is the way Watkins's different strategies combine to create a kind of filmic public space, a rare example of messy democracy in the usually streamlined world of audiovisual production.

To attempt to tell the story of an event like the Paris Commune—the autonomous, worker-led Paris government that briefly flowered after France's capitulation to Prussia in 1870, before its bloody suppression by the French army—is to enter the fray of strongly competing historical narratives and to run the risk of misinterpretation. Watkins's choice to make a film about the subject is hardly arbitrary. As history, as memory, and as myth, the Commune has been a uniquely powerful and polarizing force in the Western political imagination.[2] Considering the centrality of the Commune to the French political left in particular, it is not surprising that a critic writing in *Le Monde* would characterize Watkins's film as a tribute to Marxism:

> The film is punctuated by long black screens followed by captions, which... develop the theories close to the Marxist vulgate. This ideological straitjacket imposed by the editing and the post-production brings forth the vanity of the enterprise. To hear them speak, one very quickly has the impression that the volunteers recruited by Peter Watkins are already converted [to Marxism].[3]

A similar confusion, expressed in the form of praise, afflicts one of the only serious journal articles written about Watkins's film, by film scholar Mike Wayne.[4] For Wayne, the events of the Commune represent a kind of "Marxian sublime" (the phrase is Terry Eagleton's) that has found its formal representation in Watkins's film. Wayne assimilates Watkins's iconoclastic work into a ready-made historical narrative that the film clearly does not share. One might say that both Wayne and the *Le Monde* critic have powerful opposing investments in the story of the Commune, investments that prevent each of them from grasping the film's innovative singularity.

If some critics have fallen into this trap in their analysis of *La Commune,* it likely has as much to do with the formal qualities of Watkins's film as with its subject matter. One gets the sense that, for these critics, "long black screens followed by captions" are in themselves indicative of a Marxist aesthetics, never mind the purpose of the screens or the content of the captions. The confusion is understandable: Watkins's titles, black screens, contrapuntal editing (formally similar to Sergei Eisenstein's "dialectical montage"), and use of interviews, are Brecht-like "estrangement effects." They work to keep the viewers thinking, preventing us from becoming swept away in the flow of the action. Watkins also plays on the gap between performer and character by sometimes asking his volunteers to comment in the third person, in Brechtian fashion, on the role they are playing. This much Watkins's techniques have in common with Brecht's, which are designed to break the direct empathic link between actor and spectator. Watkins also shares with Brecht a general concern with issues of form and a broad understanding of "realism," which allows him to create fictional worlds that seem no less "real" for all their improbability.[5]

But Watkins's use of volunteer performers and his desire to involve both performers and spectators emotionally in his story (in contrast to the relaxed and observational attitude promoted by Brecht) should alert us to the possibility that the British filmmaker has different goals than those of the German playwright. Instead, in

the nearly six hours of *La Commune,* something else is happening, something that goes beyond the debates over realism and formalism that have dogged "political" artistic theory and practice since Brecht's time.[6] On one level, *La Commune* does do what Brecht and Walter Benjamin hoped art could accomplish: de-naturalize the present and portray the world as historical and as changeable. But it does this not as critics like Wayne would have it, by exposing the hidden workings of social forces. It does not claim to tear aside any ideological veils. *La Commune* is certainly a "political film" (the title of Wayne's recent book on left-wing cinema), and there are strong similarities between Watkins's process-oriented work and the wave of participatory "Third Cinema" that swept through Latin America and Africa in the 1970s.[7] Yet Watkins is not in the business of imparting privileged knowledge about the dynamics of history. His films do not reveal the "social gest" described by Brecht and Benjamin, the historical content crystallized in human action. Rather, Watkins's aim is to create a fertile situation, a bringing into tension of past and present that gives agency to the film's performers, allowing them to reflect on themselves and their world. In this effort, the use of anachronism is particularly potent. One could say that *La Commune* thumbs its nose at Marx's critique in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of the way in which would-be revolutionaries "anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service," using "names, battle-cries and costumes...this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language."[8] But even deliberate anachronism, though the main stylistic device of the film (and recently examined in depth by Roxanne Panchasi in an insightful article),[9] remains a means rather than an end. *La Commune* is a work that belongs above all to those who participated in it, the two hundred volunteers Watkins assembled to tell the story of the Commune. The film's "popular" or public character is not incidental or trivial—it is its core.

The democratic quality of *La Commune* is what makes it sometimes taxing to watch. Rarely has so much speech been contained within a single film, speech sometimes uttered in anger or frustration, always with deep conviction. Over the course of its nearly six hours, the film comes to resemble what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls a "speech event": the appropriation of political speech by those who have been excluded from the realm of intelligibility.[10] The camera captures multiple performers in each shot, never falling into the conventional close-ups of narrative film, and the performers all have something to say. If we were to describe *La Commune* using Rancière's language—a language well-suited to exploring the interstices between art and politics—we could say that the film documents the experience of a kind of social equality based on democratic speech. For Rancière, the "scandal of democracy" (or, in a striking redefinition, what he calls "politics" itself) is less a matter of electoral institutions and more of a social process, the extension of social relations of equality into the public sphere.[11] Its "principle of equality" stands in opposition to relations of domination or arbitrary rule, what he terms the "police" order of bodies and functions, which are portrayed as natural and inevitable for the smooth functioning of society.[12] Rancière's understanding of democracy, which I take up in this article, is useful for helping us come to a critical appreciation of Watkins's dense and multi-layered epic, moving beyond more obvious parallels to other works of "political" art.

Prior to Rancière's work, the link between speech and political action, essential for an understanding of the public realm, was captured perhaps most forcefully by Hannah Arendt, in what she called "the space of appearance."[13] For Arendt, speech and action are the primary modes by which humans appear to each other as humans, the way we reveal ourselves inter-subjectively in our uniqueness. The intangible "web" of human relationships formed by "the sharing of words and deeds" is, she argues, the core of the political realm. By acting and speaking together, we create a public space— a fragile sphere of visibility, always shifting and always threatened. In an antecedent to Rancière's argument, Arendt writes that the heart of the polis is not to be found in the institutions of the city or the nation-state. Rather, those institutions are set up as a kind of "organized remembrance" of political speech and action to help ensure that the community preserves such ephemeral but crucial moments.[14] For Arendt, power, in contrast to brute force, is what guarantees communal remembrance, ensuring what we might call a collective memory or history of political action. Her concept of "the public" as this collectively remembered "space of appearance" of words and deeds can lead us partway towards under-standing Watkins' film not only as a representation, but as a record of political action. Yet Arendt's conception of the community that engages in this collective remembrance is too unitary, and her divisions between public and private too static. In contrast, for Rancière, "democracy" is concerned above all with the claims to equality made by those excluded from the community, with a seizing of the public "space of appearance" by those shut out from mutual visibility, and with a deep disagreement over the

divisions between public and private. In *La Commune,* Peter Watkins restages and records precisely this kind of democratic experience.

Keeping in mind this redefinition of democracy as social process of equality, Watkins's *La Commune* can be seen as more than just a re-enactment of a moment of nineteenth century political struggle. Democracy here moves beyond historical representation. The overflow of collective speech in *La Commune* pushes against the boundaries of the film as an aesthetic object, turning the film itself into a political act. This act is directly oriented towards the audiovisual landscape, the "space of appearance" in which the film was supposed to intervene. As one of Watkins's intertitles from *La Commune* reads, "What the media are particularly afraid of, is to see the man in the little rectangle replaced by a multitude of people—by the public...."Yet if the invasion of the televisual space by the public disturbs (and judging from the often virulent reaction of French critics to the film, it certainly has that power), it also creates the opportunity for a different kind of cinema, a cinema both aesthetically and politically committed to democratic practice. Although critical receptions of *La Commune* have not spent a lot of time on the film's democratic speech, it remains the most striking aspect of the film. To give the speech its due, it is necessary to pay close attention to the revelatory words spoken by the film's volunteer cast, and to recognize their pertinence and power.

Untimely images

Watkins's earlier work prefigures the elements present in *La Commune*. His filmography bursts with historical re-enactments, participatory filmmaking processes, reflexive distancing effects, and critiques of the mass media.[15] But *La Commune* stands as a summation and a condensation of Watkins's other films, combining the diverse techniques he has developed over the years into a new and coherent whole. From the opening minutes of *La Commune,* Watkins establishes the multiple levels on which the film will operate: with a few titles and camera shots he superposes the time of the Commune and the time of the present, opens space for a reflection on the media, presents a didactic "history lesson," and allows for a scene of personal speech. These early images set the tone and set out the elements that will constitute this complex piece of cinema; the film is both a dense and layered work of art and an instance of social equality captured on black-and-white video.

The film begins with a white-on-black title, *La Commune (Paris 1871),* in plain sans-serif capital letters,

followed by more titles setting up the historical context of the Paris Commune. It is a simple way to establish a "discourse of sobriety," as documentary theorist Bill Nichols puts it, suggesting that what we are about to watch is a documentary film, a film that makes an argument about "the real" and the historical past.[16] Yet Watkins's first camera shot breaks from this discourse, immediately putting us in the realm of reflexive interrogation. In a black-and-white video image, we see the entrance to what looks like a small warehouse next to a garage door blocked by a pile of plastic garbage bags. It is a present day urban setting. Accompanied by the sound of footsteps, the camera slowly moves through the warehouse entrance and into a large, open space. As we enter the open interior of the warehouse, we see a film crew. Several people wearing headphones are seated around a video monitor, tracking the progress of the camera, whose image we are also watching. In an eminently reflexive moment, the crew turns to look at the camera as it passes.

The camera then moves to the right and comes to rest on a bearded man and a light-haired woman in nineteenth century proletarian dress, standing in front of an open concrete-floored space. Scaffolding and flourescent lights are visible in the background. The man introduces himself as Gerard Watkins (he is the director's son), and says he will play "the role of a TV journalist in this film, which deals not only with the Paris Commune, but also with the role of the mass media in past and present society." Then the woman speaks:

> My name is Aurélia Petit, and I'll play the role of Blanche Capellier, journalist for the Commune TV. First, what was quite difficult was that she's a credulous person, a naive optimist, and knowing the story (l'histoire), and its ending, and the events of the Commune, it wasn't easy to keep smiling. Secondly, she likes her work in front of the camera so much that she forgets to denounce and question the power of the media, which she represents completely.

Here, anachronism is immediately set up as the lever that will operate Watkins's film, and reflexivity as its mode of operation. The subject is made explicit. We are dealing with a contested historical moment, the representation of the past, and the "role of the mass media," including the "mass media" of Commune-era print journalism. Watkins's Brechtian touches are evident: a revealing of the film's "means of production" (camera

equipment and lights), a character referring to herself in the third person, a sense of historical irony, and a strong auto-critique. Yet there is also an opening for a performer in the film to comment on her own experience, the first hint of what will soon burst forth as a torrent of subjective speech.

"Il s'est passé une parole..."

Throughout the film, the performers are always aware of the camera, often addressing it directly. *La Commune's* first half hour is mostly made up of first-person interviews in which characters in static camera shots introduce themselves to an unidentified operator. But soon the camera is in the hands of the Télévision Communale, an independent station set up to provide a popular perspective on the events of the Commune, hoping to counter the "official" version of Télévision Nationale, which is sympathetic to the forces of Versailles. This awkward-sounding device is executed smoothly by Watkins and the film's performers. After the initial humour of the anachronism passes, it becomes strangely easy to accept as natural the idea of rival TV networks filming the events of the Commune. The conceit of having television reporters cover a historical event from the pre-television era (a technique Watkins first used in 1964's *Culloden*), serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it allows for a high level of individual expression on the part of the characters, who can be interrogated directly by the TV journalists. On the other, it allows for a reflexive examination of the way history is reported—and thus created in its narrative form—by the mass media, a subject which is hardly unique to our audiovisual age.

As the film progresses, Watkins's use of anachronism becomes more pointed and complex. The participation of performers of North African origin, including a number of *sans-papiers* (non-status immigrants to France), allows for a meditation on the birth of French colonialism. In the first of the film's "café scenes," a group of North African performers discuss French history, racism, and the endurance of the colonial past. They describe the nineteenth century massacres of Algerian civilians and the repressive policies of the colonial regime. In a refrain that echoes throughout the film, and which Rancière describes as the basic cry by which political subjects constitute themselves, one of the performers exclaims, "Il faut se révolter contre cette injustice" ("We must revolt against this injustice").[17] The young woman who says this is in character, still playing the role of an Algerian-born Communard. Yet the statement, and others like it, begins to echo outside of

the film's temporal frame. Watkins helps the process along, inserting a title about the 1996 occupation of St. Ambroise church by *sans-papiers* demanding legal status, an occupation violently disrupted by the French security forces at the Church's request. With the titles, Watkins begins to draw connective lines between past and present in *La Commune,* not to collapse historical time, but to show how political action, as both Arendt and Rancière argue, tends to refer anachronistically to the past, to the "collective remembrance" of democratic words and deeds that can contrast so jarringly with present injustice.

It is not until Part two of *La Commune*, well into the film's fourth hour, that the tension built by Watkins between past and present finally shatters. As with some of the most powerful moments in this outsized film, it happens quietly and subtly, hinging on the turn of a phrase. The scene is a gathering of the Communard women's union (Union des Femmes) in the town hall of the 11th arrondissement. After enduring condescension and bureaucratic wrangling from the men who work there, the union has finally obtained a small meeting space. The women speak freely to each other, casually yet earnestly, about setting up women's labour co-operatives, articulating the desire to be recognized and to break free from the strictures of the home. But for these nineteenth century seamstresses and washerwomen, the right to work is not enough. They also want to work differently, to have time to think and express themselves outside of work. Above all, they demand that their identity not be defined by their position in the capitalist economy, what Rancière calls the "police order" of bodies and functions. As one woman puts it, "work is the only identity. If you don't work, you don't exist. Even today (*même actuellement*), that's how it is. It's not who you are, it's what you do." The first "even today" of *La Commune*—the first improvised breaking of the film's historical frame by one of the performers—comes with a rejection of the identity of "worker," the identity that declares that your business is to work and nothing else. The speaker goes on to say that in the "real world" she has been unemployed for some time; she describes the pain she feels when forced to define her professional status and the way the question "what do you do?" feels like a negation of her very being. This is the most basic *disidentification* at play in *La Commune*.[18] The performers' rejection of the ready-made identity of the social order, their refusal to limit their personhood to the social roles dictated to them, propels their search for "something else" (*autre chose*), another possible way of life. By acting out the story of the Paris Commune, they discover that the struggles of

the past can help guide them as they grope towards this elusive goal.

This first breach of historical time opens up a flood of reflection and conversation by the performers, a democratic dialogue, or the "speech event" at the heart of Watkins's film. As the members of the Union des Femmes discuss "women's work" and their desire to free themselves from social restrictions, a group of men and women in a munitions workshop discuss the benefits of setting up a workers' co-operative. Again, the conversation turns to the present, with modern-day co-operatives criticized for acting very much like capitalistic organizations. But, as one woman points out, the problem is not purely economic:

> It's not just a question of work equality and profit sharing. It's also equality of speech. Everyone has the right to say what he has to say and then everyone discusses it. That's real citizenship. That's what strikes me. During the Commune, citizenship was all-out, total (à fond, à plein). And people went all-out, because they felt they were their own masters.

Here, equality of speech is more than just the right to free speech, a right that in any case (as one performer points out) takes place within the highly unequal playing field of a media-saturated society. Rather, it is a question of "citizenship," which here means a radical form of democracy: the breaking of the arbitrary link between power and social roles, the opening of the scandal of democratic participation of anyone and everyone in the process of politics. The use of the word "citizenship" is provocative. After all, it now serves to describe the so-called civic obligations of voting and paying taxes, and its legal definition excludes those who have no status in the community. As one of the performers notes, "We have to give citizenship a meaning. Because right now it's a word used…to create consensus." But the term "citizen" can also be re-politicized to create not consensus but dissensus, or political disagreement.[19] The ideal of a citizenship *à fond et à plein*—of the extension of citizenship to the whole of social and economic life—was the dream of many of the Communards, and was certainly the experience of those who participated fully in its short-lived experiment. As the performers realize, this experience of citizenship begins from speech, from the democratic exercise of language that proves, even if only temporarily, that in the public "space of appearance," words can have transformative force.

Of course, the question of speech inevitably raises the question of action, and the problem of the gap between democratic ideals and the reality of concentrated state power. How does one effect social change? What could the Communards have done differently, and what can we do now? How do we connect reflection with action? Again, the historical gap between 1871 and the turn of the millennium functions as a sounding board and the same questions echo through both epochs. In the view of one of the performers, our problem is that we lack of anger. Our capacity for outrage, he says, has been sapped by the comforts of life in the affluent developed world. Another performer points out that in one hundred and thirty years, not much has really changed. As he observes, "Here, we're all in costume, and we've recreated the houses and the street kids," but nowadays there is the same precarity, exclusion, and growing inequality; soup kitchens in France serve 500,000 meals a day. The old debates between revolutionary action and reform make their appearance, without resolution. In a later scene, performers in a "revolutionary debating club" discuss the Commune's failure to organize effectively, the fact that the vast reserves of the Bank of France were left untouched, the problem of centralization of power, and the enduring meaning of the Communards' social project. There are no simple answers here, yet the general sense is one of optimism, even of rejuvenation. One performer sums up the general sentiment: "If we're still here bickering, it proves the Commune wasn't a failure."

Indeed, there is a sense among the performers that the very act of making *La Commune* opened up new political possibilities for them. Some are skeptical on this point. "People are not going to become activists because they participated in a film; it was an interesting experience, but we were already involved," says one performer. It is true that many of the volunteers recruited to play the Communards seem to have come from a more or less activist milieu; others were working-class parents, social workers, or professional actors.[20] But whatever their origin, the film's performers seem to have experienced a new way of relating to each other. Watkins's film functions as an egalitarian space, a horizontal social plane levered open through historical re-enactment. That lived experience of equality, so clearly felt by the volunteer performers, can be difficult to express. As one woman says, " But don't you think, the experience of this film showed us that incredible things have happened between us? Let's not… There was a kind of speech… (*Il s'est passé une parole…*) I don't know.…" A skeptic interjects: "Don't think we've made a revolution." But the woman continues: "But

we came to understand that the relationships between people were...This was the most basic thing for me. Do you realize the relations that we have between us? This is where it starts. Giving and receiving, all the time."

This is, in Rancière's language, a moment when political subjects are formed, in the coming together of what he calls a "communauté de partage," a community that constitutes itself in conflict.[21] The "disidentification" of the performers, their rejection of their twentieth century social roles, is brought about literally through acting, through re-staging a long-passed conflict in what Marx calls "time-honoured disguise" and "borrowed language." The experience is artificial, the result of a controlled process of making a collective work of art. But the artifice involved in making a film is perhaps no more artificial than what is required to stage "real" political claims. Both are products of human invention, and both intervene into the realm of appearance, the sensible world of political visibility. It is true that the performers of *La Commune* did not make a revolution. But through their participation in the film and above all through their speech—a speech between equals—they do something more than just give a history lesson. Like workers occupying a factory, they enact what Rancière calls "a demonstration of *capacity* which is also a demonstration of *community*."[22] This powerful and transgressive staging of equality is what makes the film so difficult and compelling. It becomes the aesthetic document of a moment of politics.

That famous barricade

For all the liberating speech and social equality experienced by the cast of *La Commune*, it remains a film, an aesthetic object for which one person assumes ultimate responsibility. Watkins is responsible for both the camera and the montage, a position of authority that has the potential to clash with the newfound freedom experienced by his performers. The director is aware of this tension:

> It has to be said, however, that working in this [collective] way—as well as being very exhilarating—is also very difficult. The more conscious I was of the liberating forces I was unleashing, the more conscious I was of the hierarchical practices—and personal control—I was maintaining. ...I deliberately wanted to retain certain hierarchical practices (including being a director with overall control) in order to see whether a "mix" of these, and more liberating processes could result in something

> satisfying both forms of creativity—a lone and ego-bound form, and an open and pluralistic form.[23]

Watkins ultimately defends the process of *La Commune*, with its long takes and space for debate, as being much more open and participatory than conventional modes of filmmaking. He undoubtedly gives his cast a rare opportunity to contribute to the development of the film, which they gladly take, in the process turning a planned two-hour feature into a six-hour epic. Yet *La Commune* is very much Watkins's film, the product of a singular creative vision. It is this tension that makes the film sit uneasily somewhere between art and politics; a "mix" of individual and collective creation, of speech between equals and storytelling in a solo voice. This uneasiness does not make the film a failure. Rather, its tension produces some moments of startling cinema that capture the energy and contradictions of political struggle.

Watkins notes that some cast members objected to the Commune TV reporters' invasive interview process, which forced the performers to express themselves on the spot in a few short phrases. This invasiveness becomes more pronounced as the film progresses. As *La Commune* moves towards the story's tragic end and the Communards go to the barricades to defend their revolution against the Versailles army, we see TV journalist Gérard Bourlet practically haranguing the performers, urging them on to new heights of passion and intensity. The reporter is Watkins's surrogate, whipping up the kind of desperate energy the director expects from his cast. Yet even here, the mode is reflexive and multi-layered. Bourlet thrusts his microphone at the performers, actors deep in their roles, and asks what they would do in such a situation, whether they would fight on the barricades. As the cast grapples with this anachronism raised to a height of tension and passion, we see the play of thought across their faces. It is perhaps the most moving moment of the film. The range of responses, from wholehearted enthusiasm to rejection to thoughtful reflection, works with the tragedy of the historical scene and Watkins's virtuosic camera work to create a sequence of tremendous power. As the performers imagine themselves faced with death, they overcome their fears and lassitude and easily translate their combat into metaphor. When Bourlet asks a woman what she would do in this situation, she replies, "The same thing. I'd take up arms. But today it's up to each person to be his own barricade." Others agree, observing that the nature of the struggle has changed: "Today, the power is global, it's in the economy...." It is

no longer a question of building barricades in the street, but of finding other ways to pursue the Commune's legacy. Giving up is not an option. As one man says, "Not to fight means dying inside."

For another woman, pursuing the same metaphor, the barricade is within. You have to fight, she says "with your own self on that famous barricade…." This individual struggle is what Watkins's work has the power to articulate, even to actualize. The intensity of *La Commune*'s performances—present in all Watkins's films, to the point where they have been called "hysterical"—is a kind of reality effect, helping to convince us of the life-and-death stakes of a historical moment. But it is also a way for Watkins to push the conflict over that internal barricade to its limits, a way for him to achieve a kind of crystallization of the subjectivity of each performer. If we all struggle over questions of commitment, of right and wrong, and our willingness to struggle against injustice, *La Commune* throws that struggle into sharp relief. Through its anachronistic re-staging of historical struggle, its reflexivity, and its "artificial" creation of a space of democratic appearance, the film allows its performers and those viewers who identify with them to live the conflict of "becoming political." As the cast of the film struggles collectively and individually on "that famous barricade," the gap between action and reflection becomes acute, almost painful. The intensity called forth by Watkins—the near-hysteria, the noisy outpouring of speech, song, and shouting—is an effort to shake the film's audience, another public, awake. The film-going public's divided reactions to this assault, from wholehearted embrace to wholehearted rejection, is a mirror of the conflict in the hearts of the performers, another struggle over the barricade within.

Le Rebond: the film outside the frame

Watkins's authority as director, his commitment to the film as an aesthetic object as well as a space of political speech and action, is especially strong in *La Commune*'s closing scenes. Watkins has always excelled at depictions of war in an artificial documentary style, and his roving camera stalks the barricades, rocking with every booming shell launched by the Versaillais. His economy of means—we never see the enemy, and there are no special effects or fake explosions—in no way detracts from the "reality" of the scene. The contrapuntal montage shifts between a mobile camera behind the barricades, interviews with soldiers and bourgeois witnesses to the massacres of the *semaine sanglante*, discussions by Versailles television journalists over the propriety of showing

images of Communard corpses, and titles describing the extent of the slaughter by the French army. As the sound of the firing squads—a slow succession of drum rolls, shouts and gunshots—fills the warehouse, the camera moves over a heap of bodies covered in dust and debris. Against the walls of the large open room are the performers we have followed for the last six hours; the camera inches across their faces, pausing for a moment on each one. Some stare in silence, others sing workers' songs or say "Vive la Commune." The sound of singing and gunshots continues over the last titles, which describe the execution and deportation of thousands of Communards. Watkins is calling forth a very un-Brechtian identification with both the characters and the performers who play them. If we followed the film with sympathy thus far, the scene is intensely moving. But characteristically, Watkins's final titles describe not the tragedy of the history he portrays, but the process of making the film we have just watched:

> This film was made with the participation of more than 200 citizens from Paris and its suburbs, from Picardy, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, Limousin, Burgundy, and a group of "sans-papiers" from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The working process of this film included group discussions and personal research, with the cast able to develop their characters according to their own experience and motivations. What they say is largely based on their personal beliefs and feelings.

It is a measure of Watkins's commitment to and respect for his performers that he gives them the last word.

The participatory process of Watkins's film is at the heart of its existence as a document of politics. For many volunteers, the experience was transformative, a moment of "real" political subject-formation. The organization Le Rebond pour la Commune was formed through the democratic working process of the film. A group of performers decided that the political moment created and captured by Watkins deserved to have a longer life, to grow and develop in new ways. Le Rebond has successfully countered the lack of attention given to *La Commune* in the mainstream television and film world by organizing screenings, lectures and discussions across France, in universities, union halls, cinemas, and community centres. Watkins has always imagined himself as a television artist, creating works to be seen by a mass public. But Le Rebond's grassroots style and horizontal mode of distribution is in fact more in keeping with the

democratic nature of Watkins's work. Upset by the institutional reaction to *La Commune*, in particular Franco-German network ARTE's marginalization of the project, Watkins has declared that it will be his last film.[24] But the work of Le Rebond has shown how new paths of production and distribution must be developed if works as iconoclastic and demanding as *La Commune* are to be seen and appreciated. It is a testament to the strength of the change wrought by political awakening, even through a process as ephemeral as participation in a film. The members of Le Rebond may have been activists to varying degrees before they signed on to Watkins's grand project. But, as they describe it, the experience was nonetheless transformative. The artistic re-staging of a revolution, the crystallization of struggle over a barricade within, can have effects as durable as any moment of struggle in the world outside the frame.

The process of making *La Commune* was one of creating democratic openings, of heightening anachronism to a pitch, of sending the past crashing into the present and the present crashing back to the past. It is a difficult, messy film, both exhausting and exhilarating to watch. In its awkward untimeliness, it is an affirmation of the power of history. It lets old disguises seem contemporary and borrowed words ring clearly in the present. It shows, in the play of emotion across a face, in the struggle to find words adequate to the moment, the coming into being of new political subjects. It is perhaps the final work of a master filmmaker who has engaged, shaken, and frustrated audiences for over forty years. Most of all, *La Commune* presents a democratic path, a movement towards a kind of equality that cinema might take. By collectively restaging a moment of political struggle that moves so freely between past and present, and by opening a filmic space of speech to allow its performers to become political actors themselves, *La Commune* clearly moves beyond Brechtian aesthetic strategies and leaves in the dust certain well-worn debates over "political" representational art. This should not be seen as a prescription, but rather an invitation, a possibility offered to filmmakers to take up democratic and public modes of creation that have faded over the past thirty years. Watkins's way of reconciling art and democracy is not universalizable, nor should it be taken as an absolute model. But it is marvellously suggestive. Watching *La Commune* is watching cinema step outside of both commercial and auteur-driven models; it is both unnerving and promising. It exists as a reconfiguration of the aesthetic sphere, and (in Rancière's words) as a "demonstration of capacity which is also a demonstration of community," both high art and politics at its purest. Yet its singular vision is hardly imitable. It remains to be seen if others will take Watkins's path, and if they do, what new forms, languages, and images they will discover.

NOTES

1 Review in *Les Inrockuptibles*, quoted on Peter Watkins's website, "La Commune (de Paris, 1871),"
<http://www.mnsi.net/~pwatkins/commune.htm>
[accessed 13 May, 2008].

2 For a classic eyewitness history of the Paris Commune, see Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871* (1876; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967). Recent significant studies include Jacque Rougerie, *La Commune, 1871* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988) and Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871.* (New York: Longman, 1999).

3 "*La Commune* (de Paris, 1871),"
<http://www.mnsi.net/~pwatkins/commune.htm>
[accessed 13 May, 2008].

4 Mike Wayne, "The Tragedy of History: Peter Watkins's La Commune," *Third Text* 16, no 1 (2002): 57-69.

5 See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964) and Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (New York: Verso, 2000).

6 For the *locus classicus* of the debate, see Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1980).

7 Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001).

8 Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Essential Marx: The Non-Economic Writings* (1852; New York: New American Library, 1979).

9 Roxanne Panchasi, "If the Revolution Had Been Televised: The Productive Anachronisms of Peter Watkins' *La Commune (Paris 1871),*" *Rethinking History*, 10 no. 4 (2006): 553–571.

10 Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics* (London: Verso, 1995).

11 Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: Verso, 1997).

12 Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory and Event*, 5 no. 3 (2001).

13 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

14 Arendt, 198-204.

15 The only book-length study of the filmmaker is Joseph Gomez *Peter Watkins* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979), but a new volume by Patrick Murphy and John Cook, *Freethinker: The Life and Work of Peter Watkins* (Manchester University Press) is forthcoming.

16 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

17 Rancière, *On The Shores of Politics* and "Politics, Identification, Subjectivization," *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rajchman (London: Routledge, 1995), 63-72.

18 Rancière, "Politics, Identification, Subjectivization."

19 Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

20 This is a sampling of those interviewed in Geoff Bowie's making-of documentary *The Universal Clock*, 2001.

21 Rancière, *On The Shores of Politics*, 49.

22 Ibid., 49.

23 "La Commune (de Paris, 1871),"
<http://www.mnsi.net/~pwatkins/commune.htm>
[accessed 13 May, 2008].

24 ARTE apparently declared the project an "artistic failure," and screened it only once in a late-night slot, beginning at 10:00 p.m. and ending at nearly 4:00 a.m.