The Revolution in 35mm
A Voyage Round the World of the Films of ‘68

Cinema and 1968. In comparison to the political and social upheavals taking place across the world at the time one might be tempted to see films as a secondary phenomenon, more a mirror than a protagonist of the revolt. Yet cinema was a part of things right from the beginning.

Today, it is generally forgotten that the demonstrations in Paris began at the Cinémathèque Française. When the Minister of Culture André Malraux cut the cinemathèque’s subsidies on 12th February 1968 the move brought leading artists and intellectuals out onto the streets. For them, the extensive collection of films that Henry Langlois had maintained since 1935 embodied a sort of cultural memory. Some of the leading lights of the ‘Nouvelle Vague’ were among the 5,000 demonstrators – François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Léaud and Claude Jade.

The ‘Nouvelle Vague’, the heart of modern French film, had already announced a new style of cinema a decade earlier; it had opposed the stilted dialogue, leaden camerawork and star cult of the post-war era with a freer, more personal and essayistic style.

The fact that individuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre marched alongside the demonstrators who were beaten up by the police testifies to the solidarity between filmmakers and intellectuals, who no longer regarded cinema as a suggestive and manipulative medium of influencing the masses but also recognised its reflexivity, its suitability as a catalyst, a medium of expression, and accelerator of social processes.

EUROPE

This article will refer to a number of important works that were created in that period of time between 1968 and 1972; however, this cinematic flowering was a continuation of trends that had existed for some time and simply came to a head in the years around 1968.

In France, the people who occupied the Cinémathèque were essentially the core of the new movement. Jean-Pierre Léaud was to become one of the faces of the new cinema; he worked regularly with Godard, and Truffaut wrote an entire cycle of films especially for him. In 1959 he can already be seen in Les Quatre Cent Coups [400 Blows], a post-war tale inspired by Italian neo-realism, playing the young boy Antoine Doinel. The 1968 sequel, Baisers Volés [Stolen Kisses] actually begins with the occupation of the Cinémathèque, and shows Antoine enjoying the new-found freedoms of the times – especially where love is concerned. So much for the face of the age; its driving force, the pivotal film maker who was to capture all its social changes, implement the new ideas and comment upon them, was Godard.
The Left, free love, new forms of behaviour, an entirely new way of playing with the language and traditions of film – all these were already present in Godard's films of the Sixties, and the aftermath is still being felt today. *Masculin féminin* [Masculine, Feminine] (1966) showed ‘the children of Marx and Coca-Cola’ (this was the alternative title) caught up in the conflict between consumerism and idealism. 1967’s *La Chinoise* is set in a commune. *Week-End* came out in 1968. Corinne and Roland, an argumentative couple, decide to go for a spin together. The joyride, during which they are both secretly trying to kill each other, turns into a merciless tour de force through a disintegrating society, and includes the infamous long camera shot that accompanies their car through an impossibly long traffic jam, the cause of which reveals itself as a gory pile-up. This sequence, with its cacophonous soundtrack, hysteria, and the disintegration of all narrative logic, is – like the film as a whole – often interpreted as a metaphor for the Vietnam War. In *Week-End* (and other Godard films), surreal sequences, alienating effects and sudden superimposed pieces of text creep into the traditional narrative style, one that lulls the audience and allows it to get carried away. In the middle of the film, Roland, the main character, cries, ‘Crap film, shitty dialogue!’, and when the bad-tempered couple meet ‘Alice in Wonderland’ in the wood, Roland burns her to death, excusing his actions with the testy comment, ‘But she’s just a literary figure!’

Godard shocks, amuses, irritates, and just when it all seems to be over the bourgeois couple is suddenly kidnapped by Maoists who give free rein to their cannibalistic urges – the ideologised Left comes out of it no better than anybody else. The film ends with the superimposed title ‘Fin du Cinéma’, and initially it was indeed the end of Godard the filmmaker: after giving his producer a public slap in the face he left what he regarded as the imperialistic and commercial world of cinema. From then on, ‘invisible films’, often collective works, appeared without authorial credits and with no official distributor; films such as *Ici et ailleurs* [Here and Elsewhere] in 1976, which dealt with the situation of the Palestinians.

In Germany too there was a pre-history to ‘revolutionary cinema’. As early as 1962, the ‘Oberhausen Group’ around Alexander Kluge had called for a new method of creating films; with the slogan ‘Daddy’s cinema is dead’ they had proclaimed their abandonment of post-war cinema and its amnesiac approach to history – a new beginning, both politically and aesthetically.

To many ‘68-ers, this ‘Young German Cinema’ already seemed out-dated and too intellectual. The new generation wanted close contact with the street and the zeitgeist, and this was the impulse behind the ‘Munich Group’. May Spils’ *Zur Sache, Schätzchen* [Go For It, Baby] (1968) is – on account of the title, and the casting of Uschi Glas, whose performance was deemed mediocre – an often-underestimated work of genius. Spils, who prior to this had worked as a journalist, a photographic model and a documentary filmmaker, captures the love and lightness of that summer, and brings to the screen a completely new type of character – the so-called ‘sponti’, or member of the undogmatic leftist scene.

Martin (Werner Enke), the non-conformist, is hilarious in his situationism. One night he observes a break-in from his window, but instead of calling the police, like any other respectable citizen, his first reaction is to go back to bed. Another morning, when awoken by his friend, he states dryly, ‘I hate it when the sun’s already shining in your face so early in the morning.’ Martin and his friend roam about, alarm upstanding citizens, and meet Barbara at the local open-air swimming pool, a saucy girl who’s happy to join them in their pranks.
Martin’s character and attitude are the alternative response to the prevailing stuffiness, the petty bourgeois attitude, the work ethic of the years of the economic miracle. Majority society would call him a ‘layabout’, but Martin is a charming, intelligent good-for-nothing. Even when he is eventually arrested by the police in connection with the break-in he still has a clever bon mot on his lips, like Jean-Paul Belmondo at the end of Godard’s À bout de souffle [Breathless] (1960).

The other discovery of that year, Rudolf Thome, also orientated himself according to Godard’s approach by using the classic American genre guidelines only in order to play around with them. The plot and story are simply a backdrop against which previously unknown character types romp about. Thome’s Detektive [Detectives] (1969) is one long paean to the American cinema of the Thirties and Forties, to an America in which one could still have unconditional admiration for its lifestyles – before the moral bankruptcy of the Vietnam War. The two ‘detectives’, played by Ulli Lommel and Marquard Bohm, invoke their great role models through their poses: the handsome Lommel, delicate and pale, is like a German Alain Delon – who was in his day the European James Dean – while Bohm models his part on Belmondo, who was already playing a version of the Hollywood gangster à la Bogart for Godard. What this concept conveyed was above all ‘a great enthusiasm for America – in the poses, the staging, the star cult. We wanted to play at making films’, said Lommel, its lead actor, of Detektive.

**Cutting up men**

But it was Thome’s second film, Rote Sonne [Red Sun] (1970) which was to become the cult film of the German ’68-ers, and which still has an international following today. A group of women sharing an apartment decide to take revenge on the lousy male species and bump off all their lovers after a few days. These new women’s libbers – authorial fantasies of fear and desire – are both attractive and hard-boiled. Problems only start to arise when Peggy falls in love with Thomas. Portrayed, once again, by Marquard Bohm, Thomas is another drop-out with a loose mouth: ‘I’m not talking to you, you’ve got a negative personality. But perhaps you could give me a light…’

His brash language has a style of its own; when he and Peggy are right up to their necks in it he comments laconically, ‘You know me; tactics were never my strong point. But I do have a certain wastrel charm, that’s what makes me irresistible.’ Lines like that are what gave Thome’s film cult status: back then, everyone would have liked to have expressed themselves this way. Belmondo would have been able to; Bogart did. Thome’s murderous women are not so very different from the men. Scarcely had the ’68 movement come to life than it was already in crisis – the Paris revolt failed, and the hippie movement ended in the overdoses and murders of its leading lights.

The character of Thomas, too, is world-weary: ‘This planet gets on my nerves’, he says, and thinks up romantic escape fantasies with Peggy: ‘We’ll go to Morocco. The sun shines there; it’ll make us beautiful and happy and better people.’
In the US something had occurred that is nowadays inconceivable: a progressive youth and pop culture was calling the imperialistic behaviour of its government to account. Even Hollywood was forced to grapple with the hegemony of its images, which had dominated the world for decades. In Europe Godard had deconstructed the classic Hollywood film; fans like Thome imitated him and applied his techniques in a German way, and this laboratory was having an effect.

**Sex in the desert**

The most direct response to the changing times was Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* in 1970. Right at the start the hero, Mark (Mark Frechette), is portrayed as a rebel and a loner. He leaves a neverending discussion among revolutionary students about the Black Panther movement with the comment: 'I too am prepared to die, but not of boredom.' When a policeman is shot during a brutal raid, Mark falls under suspicion. He steals a single-engine plane and flies into the desert. There he encounters Daria (Daria Halprin), a part-time secretary, who wants to go to a conference in Phoenix. Together they explore first the desert landscape with its bizarre, surreal-looking rock formations, then each other's bodies; they make love, and go on their way. When Mark tries to bring the plane back, he is shot and killed. In the famous closing sequence, Daria blows up her bigoted boss's bungalow. The realistic sections of *Zabriskie Point* are often a closely-observed contemporary document of the American hippie movement – and its opponents. Antonioni's true achievement in this film lies in the gradual dissolution of classical dramaturgy. In the psychedelic realm of experience that is Death Valley, all the rules of civilisation evaporate; there is almost no separation between reality and hallucination. Inner fantasies are projected externally; external impressions are reflected back at several times their size. People duplicate themselves, and anything is possible.

The final explosion, filmed in slow motion and accompanied by the music of Pink Floyd, is horribly beautiful to watch. It testifies to the fantasies of the time regarding the dissolution of boundaries; it symbolises the revolt against the old, and expresses an appropriate end for a society in the process of being destroyed by its own technocratic obsession with growth.

*Zabriskie Point* is sometimes viewed as a cinematic manifesto of its time, a work that encapsulates the zeitgeist of the hippie era. However, in America too there was a prehistory to the epoch-making cinema of 1968: as early as 1960 Hollywood had realised that its old stories were in need of renewal, and Europe played no small part in this. The flagging energy of the dream factory was confronted with the innovation of the Nouvelle Vague, above all Godard's *Breathless* or the completely new narrative style of Antonioni's *Blow Up*.

In the US, the legendary road movie *Easy Rider* (1969), by and with Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda and nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, was a breakthrough for the so-called New Hollywood. From then on the studio bosses gave talented new directors an artistic and financial freedom unheard-of either before or since. It was the start of one of the most creative epochs in American cinema. The classic genres - Western, crime thriller, romantic melodrama, adventure movie, comedy - and their attitudes to morality were in part re-evaluated, and in part entirely dissolved.

This period also brought about a revision of the official writing of history, a reckoning with America's heroic image of itself. The brutality of the colonisation of the West was now shown in all its brutality and was more
or less subliminally compared with the contemporary bloodbath in Vietnam. The noble heroes of the Western were knocked off their pedestals, and in their place wholly new anti-heroes were created who depicted historical events from unfamiliar perspectives: outsiders, bounty hunters, half-Indians.

Another patriotic genre, the American war film, degenerated into farce. The action might be taking place in the Second World War, or in Korea, but it was always Vietnam that was meant. The heroes had lost all faith in their mission, and sought refuge in cynicism, drugs, anarchic humour, or insanity.

BEYOND THE HORIZON

The movement had effects around the world; it encompassed Italy, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Japan, Australia, Mexico, Hungary, and had a corresponding influence on their respective cinematic cultures. To name some names here means, as always, that others are done a disservice, but let us try to give a sense of the abundance of those years:

Pasolini broke open the nuclear family in Teorema; British director Lindsay Anderson's boarding school drama If... beat Dennis Hopper's Easy Rider to the Palme d'Or; in England, Stephen Frears was filming Kes; in France, Eric Rohmer was making Ma nuit chez Maud [My Night at Maud's]. Andrzej Wajda, Milos Forman, Istvan Szabo, Piwowski, Makavejew were working in Eastern Europe. In Sweden, Olle Hellbom gave a literary figure her big break: a little girl who lives on her own, is stronger than any man, and has a treasure chest in her house - a girl, that is, who is independent of any provider and creates her own world for herself: Pippi Longstocking. Luis Buñuel, who as a surrealist had a not inconsiderable influence on Godard, Woody Allen and Monty Python, continued to disturb, and took aim, in Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie [The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie] at the smug middle-classes. The Franco-Greek director Konstantin Costa-Gavras filmed État de siège [State of Siege] about the uprising of the Tupamaros in Uruguay. Gillo Pontecorvo denounced colonialism in Queimada; two years earlier he had filmed the definitive movie about the Algerian liberation movement in La Battaglia di Algeri [The Battle of Algiers]. Apropos: what was happening in the Islamic world?

In the Maghreb it was the liberation movement, of all things, that was stonewalling free cinematic development: revolutionary cinema was supposed to celebrate the liberated Arab collective above all else. This enforced ideological conformity encouraged studies in social realism, but only allowed individual artistic impulses in a few isolated cases.

Turkey, on the other hand, adopted an exceptional approach for the time. Whereas other countries in the region were experiencing something more like a decisive renunciation of ‘cultural imperialism’, in Istanbul American cinema was the starting point for a particular film culture of its own. From the late 1960s onwards films were shamelessly copied: from Jaws, Star Wars and E.T. to Tarzan and Rambo, anything you could imagine had its Turkish equivalent. In a time of economic hardship and political repression these trash films were churned out on minimal budgets but with boundless enthusiasm. The fact that in the heat of the moment whole sequences were copied directly from the original films, or the film music pilfered, only helped things along. In Kunt Tulgar's Süpermen dönüyor [The Return of Superman], our hero is raised by his headscarf-wearing mother before embarking on the long road to the city. One of the acting superstars of that
period, who made up to twenty of these conveyor-belt films a year, was Yilmaz Güney, whose screen career consisted primarily of hopeless battles with Anatolian feudal lords. 1968 saw the release of his first significant work as a director, Seyyit Han [Bride of the Earth]. From this point on Güney regarded himself as a maker of auteurfilms, was regularly imprisoned on account of his Marxist convictions, and died in exile in 1984. One who shared his political views was Deniz Gezmis, the leader of the left-wing Turkish ’68-ers; a figure somewhere between Rudi Dutschke and Che Guevara, he was executed in 1972 after the military coup. It was only in 1998 that he was paid a belated tribute, in Reis Celiks Hocşakal yarin [Goodbye Tomorrow]. Turkish cinema is only now beginning to come to terms with this period of its history.

In Iran the death of Benno Ohnesorg and the deployment of the ‘Persian thugs’ during the Shah’s visit to Germany in 1967 acted as a catalyst, establishing a dissident path that was to lead indirectly to the fall of the Shah. The French Nouvelle Vague had its Iranian counterpart in the Mouje Nou (New Wave). The protagonists of its thrillers and action movies picked up on American narrative traditions and tailored them to genuine Iranian stories. Masud Kimiai’s Gheisar (1969) portrays a campaign of revenge by a suburban thug who sets out to restore his sister’s honour. The central sequence, a masterfully edited, wordless murder in a hammam lasting several minutes, clearly shows the influence of Hitchcock. The films of another exceptional director, the Baha’i Bahram Beizai, bring together references from neo-realism to Kurosawa to Hitchcock, yet still retain an unmistakable style of their own: he continually refers to ancient Iranian archetypes and pictograms.

However, the definitive film of that period is Dariush Mehrjui’s Gaav [The Cow] (1969), a strangely puzzling masterpiece about a farmer who falls in love with his cow. Mehrjui, who is to this day one of Iran’s most productive directors, depicts the hardship of the farmers in provocatively realistic scenes, and combines them with a language of symbols that was to determine Iranian cinema in the years that followed. A whole generation of new filmmakers attempted, each in their own way, to express critical content through new visual and narrative means.

In Egypt, on the other hand, the technical innovation that had already been developed decades earlier by Youssef Chahine or Salah Abu Seif was not developed further. The only filmmaker who was truly interested in the image was Chadi Abdel Salam, who innovation consisted in, of all things, looking to the past: to the country’s Pharaonic inheritance. Al-Mummia [The Night of Counting the Years] (1969), his only full-length feature, delights with a hitherto unseen visual brilliance coupled with explosive content. Wannis, a young, upper-class Egyptian, discovers that his tribe, the Hurrabat, have for decades been living off the proceeds of selling ancient Egyptian treasures pilfered from tombs. After much hesitation he stands up to the tribal collective, opposes the sell-off, and finally reveals the location of the treasure to archaeologists, who are at least in a position to decipher the ancient inscriptions. This grave robber tale is a fascinating parable of the relationship with the West, with Islam, with Egypt’s own past. The long camera shots, the gliding camera movement, the dialogue spoken in High Arabic all help to create an atmosphere of hypnotic intensity.

The quality of most Egyptian films, however, generally depends on the narrative. Like so many films from that period, Thartharah fawq al-Nil [Adrift on the Nile] (1971) by Hussein Kamal is an adaptation of a story by Naguib Mahfouz, and like the story itself it combines precise observation of Egyptian society with a conservative undertone. Representatives of the Egyptian middle classes – a lawyer, a newspaper editor, a writer and an actor – have created a paradise for themselves aboard the titular houseboat: a second Swinging
London. Pot-smoking galore, wild dancing, changing relationships – this microcosm appears to be an escape from the grey meaninglessness of everyday life.

The only colour sequence in the film, which is otherwise shot in black and white, is, of all things, a song and dance number from the musical the actor Ragab is currently working on: 'Let Me Into Your Bathtub', an amusingly apt criticism of the vacuous films churned out by the film industry conveyor belt. The director, Kamal, depicts the depravity of the party-goers on the Nile sensuously, even voyeuristically. However, these debauched characters are denounced as traitors to the collective, and are rudely awakened from their hedonism: on one of their outings Ragab runs over a poor fellah woman and leaves the scene of the accident. The woman’s death is hushed up, but it eventually leads to the break-up of the escapists’ commune.

This counter-culture is also contrasted with the contemporaneous war against Israel. A soldier returning from the front describes the moral deterioration in Cairo: ‘Guys in tight jeans, long hair and gold chains. The women’s dresses have got ten centimetres shorter. Some people are having fun, dancing and wearing their hair long – and others are dying.’ In Western cinema, the freedom to live out one’s desires – sexuality, drugs, music, anarchic humour – had been laboriously fought for, and went hand in hand with an emphatic pacifism. For Kamal, liberality is exposed as, ultimately, decadence and desertion. The moral, according to him: no pleasure without repentance!

It would be some time before Chahine introduced a new, individualistic, autobiographically-coloured perspective. He took the decisive step in 1978 with Iskanderija... Ilh? [Alexandria... Why?]. In his Alexandria trilogy, Chahine takes Godard’s anti-illusionist approach further; he tears apart old forms of narrative, takes a look behind the scenes of the dream factory that is cinema, and portrays himself as a chain-smoking, stressed-out filmmaker. Here, the process of making a film is revealed to the audience as something both sensual and spontaneous; the film comes together as a ‘work in progress’, closely connected to topical and private events. Up until then, the radically subjective auteur film, established by the ’68 movement, had been regarded in the Islamic world as unseemly, even subversive: to consider one’s own person a worthy subject for a film was supposedly dangerous for the collective. Chahine, however, never became a blind copyist of Western methods, never denied his roots. On the contrary: he reconciled the new with the old when he worked elements of the traditional Egyptian musical into the heart of his story. Contemporary Egyptian film still has not yet properly come to terms with this innovation.

The Orient as a whole seemed to react rather late to the innovations of the ’68 movement. It was not until 1976 that Merzak Allouache’s study of suburban life Omar Gatlato introduced a new flavour to Algerian cinema; another decade later the gay characters on the margins of the films of the Tunisian Nouri Bouzid, or Nacer Khemir’s technical experiments, appear as belated responses to the cinema of the ’68-ers. Nowadays it is above all Iranian cinema that is continuing the achievements of that time. Not for nothing is the biggest fanclub of multiple-award-winning Abbas Kiarostami and his countless imitators to be found among French cinephiles. Their stories, filmed using amateur actors and in rural settings, have a naïve simplicity and yet are open to interpretation in a post-modern way. Questioning the one true narrative, playing with identities and differences, truth and lies; the relationship between film and reality – all this is strongly reminiscent of Godard. Kiarostami himself cites other influences, such as Shiite taaziyeh theatre, Iranian poetry, Sufi mysticism. But the hippies would have liked all of those too.
Amin Farzaneher is one of Germany's best-known film critics. He lives in Cologne. His most recent publication is his book, sponsored by the Goethe Institute, *Kino des Orients. Stimmen aus einer Region* [Oriental Cinema: Voices from a Region], Schüren Verlag, Marburg 2005.

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