

THE GEOPOLITICAL AESTHETIC

Cinema and Space in the World System

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis



BFI PUBLISHING
London

The films discussed here have been selected with a view towards an unsystematic mapping or scanning of the world system itself: from what used to be called the superpowers, across that most industrialized zone of a former Third World now called the Pacific Rim, only to conclude with a confrontation between First World or European technology at its most self-conscious (in Godard) and a Third World meditation on that technology at *its* most self-consciously and reflexively *naïf* (in the work of the Philippine film-maker Kidlat Tahimik).¹

But technology is little more than the outer emblem or symptom by which a systemic variety of concrete situations expresses itself in a specific variety of forms and form-problems. It is not a random variety, and sometimes seems best described in developmental – or better still, in uneven-developmental – language: as when, for example, Edward Yang's film *Terrorizer* seems to raise the question of the belated emergence of a kind of modernism in the modernizing Third World, at a moment when the so-called advanced countries are themselves sinking into full postmodernity. The residues of the modern will then offer one clue or thread for these explorations.

Yet other kinds of relationships also propose convenient figures: the US and Soviet narratives discussed here, as different from each other as the *série noire* from Grimms' fairy tales, both seem to raise the problem of the view from above, and of the invention of new forms of representation for what it is properly impossible to think or represent, and both finally coincide in the logic of conspiracy. But in the North American movies, it is a conspiracy of the espionage-thriller or even paranoid type, while in Alexander Sokurov's stunning *Days of Eclipse* (based on a novel and script by the Strugatsky Brothers) such inverted providentiality becomes on the contrary science-fictional in its resonance.

In fact the theoretical focus of this investigation is modified after the American materials, as the section break indicates. The earlier section sought to document the figuration of conspiracy as an attempt – 'unconscious,' if you follow my loose, figural use of that otherwise

individual term – to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves. Space and demography offer the quickest short-cuts to this perceptual difficulty, provided each is used like a ladder to be kicked away after it has done its work. As far as space is concerned, Bergson's warning about the temptations of spatializing thought remain current in the age of the intercontinental ballistic missile and the new infra-red and laser systems of which we are so proud; it is even more timely in an era of urban dissolution and re-ghettoization, in which we might be tempted to think that the social can be mapped that way, by following across a map insurance red lines and the electrified borders of private police and surveillance forces. Both images are, however, only caricatures of the mode of production itself (most often called late capitalism), whose mechanisms and dynamics are not visible in that sense, cannot be detected on the surfaces scanned by satellites, and therefore stand as a fundamental representational problem – indeed, a problem of a historically new and original type.

All of the terms that lie to hand, indeed, are already figural, already soaked and saturated in ideology: this is why demography won't work either, although it is certain, not merely that the sheer numbers of new people on the globe, but even more surely their unprecedented self-consciousness, play their part in the new representational situation. But for most people, demography projects an immediate and subliminal image of the starving masses abroad and the homeless at home, of birth control and abortion. It thereby fixes the theme permanently at the political level and in a form which – all the more so because of its intrinsic urgency – does not move the viewer or the listener, the reader or 'public opinion' itself on to the underlying systemic reality, the root cause of missiles and permanent underemployment, or birth-rates abroad fully as much as break-ins at home. To make your way from those vivid miseries, which offer no problems of figuration since they can all at once be witnessed on your television set – and indeed somehow offer the example of an idea that includes an image, or an image that comes pre-packaged and already labelled with its ideational slogan – to be able to make your way through that level so as to think it together with its deeper, but non-visual systemic cause – this, if it is possible, is what used to be called self-consciousness about the social totality.

My thesis, however, is not merely that we ought to strive for it, but that we do so all the time anyway without being aware of the process. Critics and theorists have shown enthusiasm for the proposition that figures and narratives can bear many different meanings at the same time, and know distinct, sometimes even contradictory functions. They have been less eager to make an inventory of some of the specific meanings in question, something I try to do here for what

may be called the 'conspiratorial text,' which, whatever other messages it emits or implies, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality. Conspiracy film takes a wild stab at the heart of all that, in a situation in which it is the intent and the gesture that counts. Nothing is gained by having been persuaded of the definitive verisimilitude of this or that conspiratorial hypothesis: but in the intent to hypothesize, in the desire called cognitive mapping – therein lies the beginning of wisdom.

In Part Two, this orientation is reversed; and a series of 'filmic texts' is scanned for a kind of allegorical thinking which is less ultimate than the cartography of the absolute invoked in the preceding paragraphs, although of a piece with it and sharing common mental operations. At a more local level, indeed, what I have called cognitive mapping – and what Althusser described in his classic model of the three fundamental terms of ideology (the individual subject, the real, and the Imaginary projection by the subject of the former's relationship to the latter)² – was simplified by a Cold War division for which henceforth traditional class categories could largely serve (business classes and managers, factory workers, fieldworkers, and lumpens or unemployed). Now however we revert to a multiplicity of nation states (and fantasmatic nationalisms), not yet culturally and ideologically organized around the categories of the new triumvirate of super-states (the US, Europe and Japan). In the absence of general categories under which to subsume such particulars, the lapse back into features of the pre-World War I international system is inevitable and convenient (it includes all the national stereotypes which, inevitably racist whether positive or negative, organize our possibility of viewing and confronting the collective Other).³

It is also important to stress the fact that these archaic categories will not work for the new world system: it is enough, for example, to reflect on the disappearance of specifically national cultures and their replacement, either by a centralized commercial production for world export or by their own mass-produced neotraditional images, for the lack of fit between the categories of the nineteenth century and the realities of the twenty-first to become apparent. Under these circumstances, the operations of some banal political unconscious clearly continue – we map our fellows in class terms day by day and fantasize our current events in terms of larger mythic narratives, we allegorize our consumption and construction of the object-world in terms of Utopian wishes and commercially programmed habits – but to that must be added what I will now call a geopolitical unconscious. This it is which now attempts to refashion national allegory into a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being-in-the-world. It may

henceforth be thought to be at least one of the fundamental allegorical referents or levels of all seemingly abstract philosophical thought: so that a fundamental hypothesis would pose the principle that all thinking today is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such. All the more true will this be for narrative figurations, whose very structure encourages a soaking up of whatever ideas in the air are left and a fantasy-solution to all the anxieties that rush to fill our current vacuum. The films analyzed in the second part of this present book may all of them be taken as exhibits in that process, and as examples of the way in which narrative today (or at least narrative outside the superstate, which need not worry about these problems in the same way, as Part One will show) conflates ontology with geography and endlessly processes images of the unmappable system.

The issue is thereby joined of representation itself, or rather (since that word has been associated with polemics it may be distracting to recall in the present context) of representability: a term that raises in its turn the fundamental historical question of the conditions of possibility of such representation in the first place. It is a question which necessarily opens out onto the nature of the social raw material on the one hand (a raw material which necessarily includes the psychic and the subjective within itself) and the state of the form on the other, the aesthetic technologies available for the crystallization of a particular spatial or narrative model of the social totality.

For it is ultimately always of the social totality itself that it is a question in representation, and never more so than in the present age of a multinational global corporate network. It is, indeed, as if the imagination included a sound barrier, undetectable save in those moments in which a representational task or program suddenly collapses. Such a sound barrier (if not the speed of light itself) could be thought of in terms of demography, of the sheer quantities of other people, whose figural categories cease to multiply beyond a certain point. But what is that point, in our time: the mob; the masses in the plaza, seen from above in a literal bird's-eye view; the silent wheeling of great armies on foot, face to face (as in *Spartacus* [Kubrick, 1960] or Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* [1968])? Most wondrous of all, the first appearance, on the strand, in carts and on foot, on horse- or donkey-back, in rags and tattered uniforms, accompanied by family and concubines, of the rag-tag and bobtail army of the people itself in Pontecorvo's *Burn!* (1969)? Under what circumstances can a necessarily individual story with individual characters function to represent collective processes?

Allegory thereby fatally stages its historic reappearance in the post-modern era (after the long domination of the symbol from romanticism to late modernism), and seems to offer the most satisfactory (if varied and heterogeneous) solutions to these form-problems.

On the global scale, allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall, with a fluidity that has no equivalent in those older national allegories of which I have spoken elsewhere.⁴ On the actantial level, a host of partial subjects, fragmentary or schizoid constellations, can often now stand in allegorically for trends and forces in the world system, in a transitional situation in which genuinely transnational classes, such as a new international proletariat and a new density of global management, have not yet anywhere clearly emerged. These constellated and allegorical subject-positions are, however, as likely to be collective as they are individual-schizophrenic, something which itself poses new form-problems for an individualistic storytelling tradition.

As for commodification, its relationship to allegory can be expected to be polyvalent; but the fact of the commodification of the cultural product itself can illustrate some of the complications, since, in the postmodern, autoreferentiality can be initially detected in the way in which culture acts out its own commodification. From the generic standpoint, what interests us here is the way in which the former genres (thrillers, spy films, social exposés, science fiction, and so on) now conflate in a movement that re-enacts the dedifferentiation of the social levels, and by way of their own allegorization: so that the new post-generic genre films are allegories of each other, and of the impossible representation of the social totality itself.

Space, representability, allegory: such are then the theoretical and analytic instruments that will be mobilized to examine a variety of filmic narratives from that new world-systemic moment which, gradually laid in place since the end of World War II, has been unveiled in discontinuous convulsions – the end of the 60s, the rise of the Third World debt, the emergence first of Japan and then of a soon-to-be-united new Europe as competing superstates, the collapse of the party state in the East, and finally the reassumption by the United States of a refurbished vocation as global policeman – and which can indifferently be called postmodernity or the third (or ‘late’) stage of capitalism.

But by the same token, it is to be expected that the remarkable films which constitute the present set of exhibits will have their own commentary to make on those new conceptual and analytic instruments and will modify them appropriately, as have a number of gratifying readers and listeners, among whom are to be mentioned Colin MacCabe, Esther Johnson, Ian Christie, and my audiences at the National Film Theater in London, in the spring of 1990. The final product owes an incalculable debt to Roma Gibson, Candice Ward, Tom Whiteside, and Kevin Heller.

Durham, North Carolina – March, 1991

Notes

1. If I have not included discussions of films from other national cinemas or non-Western traditions, the reader will I hope not too quickly conclude that this accident reflects lack of interest. I have in fact written on Latin-American films in my chapter on 'Magic Realism' in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and touched too briefly on African film (Ousmane Sembène) in my essay 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,' *Social Text* 15, Fall 1986), pp. 65–88.
2. The reference is to the well-known essay on 'Ideological State Apparatuses,' in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971).
3. I discuss the pre-World War I system of national allegory in chapter 5 of *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
4. In the essay referred to in note 1.