

Writings of Samuel Brody The revolutionary film: problems of form

by Samuel Brody

from *Jump Cut*, no. 14, 1977, pp. 31-32
copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1977, 2004

“The Revolutionary Film” is reprinted from *New Theater*, February 1934. Here Brody encapsulates the original stance of the Workers Film and Photo League and certainly that argument which tended to prevail in practice through the early thirties. From within the context of the documentary film, Brody distinguishes three types: (1) the simple newsreel or “the recording of highlights in the class struggle which are of political value,” (2) following Vertov, the “synthetic documentary” dependent upon the art and craft of the editor for its effect, and (3) the educational short “for purposes of direct political-economic instruction.” Aside from this, Brody finds all other film forms, such as the combination of documentary and recreated material, as reactionary deviations which, by leaving “the sensation of reality irremediably disrupted,” become less of a political weapon.

In the following issue of *New Theater*, there appeared “The Revolutionary Film—Next Step” by Leo T. Hurwitz. In a polite but significant way, Hurwitz challenged Brody’s limiting position and argued instead for “a mixed form of the synthetic document and the dramatic” which would deepen the scope of the revolutionary film by recreating those “events and emotions not revealable to the camera” of the documentary. For Brody, “Workers’ films will be most art when they are most weapon.” Hurwitz subtly reverses this by stressing a greater concern for training, craft, and “how to make the camera eloquent.” This, of course, presupposes a semi-studio arrangement, scenarios, actors, and all the rest generally *not* common to the documentary format and opposed by Brody’s conception of the revolutionary film.

Here in embryo are the beliefs which, a year later, caused the bitter split in the Film and Photo League and the eventual formation of Frontier Films. Hurwitz and Ralph Steiner were soon studying with Lee Strasberg who led them further away from the documentary and towards the totally enacted film, dependent upon the emotional involvement of the audience and depth of argument for its political power. For film theory and practice, this meant a shift away from Vertov (and thus Brody) and towards (the conceptualist) Eisenstein and especially (the humanist) Pudovkin. It is from this perspective that we ought to consider and evaluate Brody’s “The Revolutionary Film.” — Tony Safford

The question: What is the medium of revolutionary film production in capitalist countries such as America? The answer: First and foremost the filmed document. Movie reportage. Reality recorded on film strips and subjected to the painstaking technical operations, montage; whereby these strips are built up into wholes embodying our revolutionary interpretation of events. This is neither a makeshift nor a degradation of the creative potentialities of the cinema. The bourgeois film has vulgarized and perverted the greatest faculty of the movie, never having raised it above the level of the newsreel.

Are we for the documentary simply because the studio-acted film is beyond our material reach? No. Strange as it may seem, our orientation in this question is one of principle based on what we think is the most convincing and effective medium for “the camera in the class struggle.” It is true that the method of the revolutionary filmed document will lead us miles away from the forms and requirements of the enacted studio film. This may cause many to shed a tear. It is, in fact, already causing tears. Our answer? We are forging the film into a working class weapon. And workers’ films will be most art when they are most weapon.

In the film there exists no “happy medium” between the histrionic recreation of reality and directly recorded reality itself. “The illusion of reality in the cinema,” writes Leon Moussinac, “must remain constant, even in the domain of the fantastic. In other words, in the cinema the sensation of reality is indispensable to emotion.” Associate filmed reality and its reconstructed counterpart into a unified structure and you find “the sensation of reality’ irremediably disrupted.

We are practical people. Our theories are acquired at the cost of badly burned fingers. Exhibit A: The Struggle for Bread.

We have, on the other hand, long ago discovered and tested the power and effect of simple and direct visual reporting.

Our records of the Detroit Ford Massacre, the Scottsboro Case, the Bonus March, etc., are ample proof that even when we abstain from “constructively editing” our photographed documents, they nevertheless retain an inestimable importance if for no other reason than that they are irrefutably convincing exposes. The Pathe Newsreel of the Ambridge massacre is a supreme example of the political value to us of motion picture reportage. We must train working class camera-men whose function in the workers’ film movement will correspond to that of worker-correspondents in the field of revolutionary journalism.

We have as yet accomplished little in the sphere of the documentary film in which it is essential for us to intervene; to organize the raw material into a unified revolutionary interpretation. This represents an almost totally unexplored form calling for the highest degree of skill and talent in the realm of cinematic creation. Our best teachers in this respect are the Soviet directors of the documentary school who have tremendously enriched the arsenal of revolutionary film culture with such masterpieces as SHANGHAI DOCUMENT, SPRING, etc. Our own WASHINGTON HUNGER MARCH and the sparkingly brilliant strip on the Washington Farmers Convention represent significant attempts in what must become the broad pattern for the production of films in the American working class film movement.

The resolution of the first conference of the Cinema Bureau of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatre suggests the didactic short film as an important form of our production. Match the moving diagram, chart or graph for workers study groups, if you can. We have completely neglected the educational short. We must build up a 16mm film library which will comprise a complete course in political education for workers. A joint task for the Film and Photo League and the faculty of the Workers School. In this connection we can avail ourselves of the mass of data and research compiled by departments of visual instruction in various institutions of bourgeois learning.

Important scientific discoveries on methods of education through the moving image have been made during the last few years. These we must dig out of the specialized spheres of college laboratories where they are doomed to remain by virtue of their narrow and exclusive application (does Hollywood need them?) and use them for our purpose. Three distinct branches of the documentary method, therefore, comprise the scope of our production. Film reporting, or the recording of highlights in the class struggle which are of political value as events overflowing the frame which merely acts as the carrier, Ambridge, Scottsboro, Detroit Massacre, Tom Mooney Run, etc. The synthetic documentary, the effect and intent of which is one hundred percent dependent on the intervention of the “editor,” The Land of The Free, Imperial Valley, etc.. The frankly educational film for purposes of direct political-economic instruction.

The Film and Photo League is beginning to assume a status more commensurate with its great cultural-political importance in the struggles of the working class.

The Hollywood machine is being geared to the political and economic policies of its Wall Street owners. The production of reactionary, openly pro-war films is no longer the exception but the rule. The League’s program of struggle against Hollywood is clear. We have already tested this program in action. There exist among us no political differences concerning methods of agitation and propaganda to be employed in struggling against the films of the enemies of the working class.