REVOLUTIONS WITHIN REVOLUTIONS

BY

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Mr Verloc, getting off the sofa with ponderous reluctance, opened the door leading into the kitchen to get more air, and thus disclosed the innocent Stevie, seated very good and quiet at a deal table, drawing circles, circles; innumerable circles, concentric, eccentric, a coruscating whirl of circles that by their tangled multitude of repeated curves, uniformity of form, and confusion of intersecting lines suggested a rendering of cosmic chaos, the symbolism of a mad art attempting the inconceivable.1

—Ioseph Conrad, The Secret Agent

I. “It was unusually early for him ...”

One of three opposing pairs of screens (north and south)2 light up in the darkened gallery. The time is early morning. It’s summer and except for the sound of chirping birds all is quiet. The sun has barely risen over the horizon and out of the darkness the stately contours of a white, three-story villa emerge. Despite its imposing character, the building seems a bit forlorn, out of place, unable to impress itself on its indeterminate surroundings. An unpaved road curves around the far corner of the villa and the neo-Renaissance facade abuts a triangular, unkempt area while the top floors of a high-rise building loom in the near distance. A number of more squat dwellings are located closer by. All in all, the environment of the villa lacks clear articulation; the boundaries that subdivide this space are ill-defined. Hence, it is impossible to determine whether, perhaps, the villa is located next to a verdant, urban park or, rather, at the very edge of the city where the dense urban fabric begins to unravel into the open countryside. We are equally hard pressed to identify the current economic status of this location: is it an affluent neighbourhood or possibly a less well-heeled area of town? Are we to understand that this building stands at the edge of an empty, disused lot, as the camera frame suggests, or does it perhaps face other buildings of a similar dignified nature? The angle of the camera, perched high above the scene, provides no definite clues.3

What we do know for sure, if we look closely enough, is that two sentinels stand guard at the top of a flight of stairs leading up to the front entrance and above them an American flag slowly flutters in the breeze. We have been facing one array of screens to this moment, but suddenly, on the opposite side of the gallery, another set of screens is activated. First, the phrase “Two Weeks Prior” flashes onto their surface, which identifies the current shot as a flashback, but only deepens the enigmatic quality of the image, as no calendar date is given. Then, on the south-west screen, we catch sight of two men, one leading the other, as they climb a monumental staircase which, we are given to presume, is located within the villa shown on the facing screens. As they hit the landing of the first floor, the two characters make a U-turn and proceed to pass through several ornate chambers.

We are watching the opening sequence of Stan Douglas’s The Secret Agent (2015), which is based on the novel of the same name by Joseph Conrad. Clearly, however, the historical context of Conrad’s story has been transformed. The original story was situated in London during the early 1890s against the background of the anarchist movement and its doctrine of “propaganda by the deed”. In Douglas’s The Secret Agent the main characters remain the same but the action has been transplanted to another time and place. The narrative is located in Lisbon during the period of the

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Carnation Revolution, which was initiated by a military mutiny on 25 April, 1974. The coup was conducted, early in the morning of that day, by a group of disgruntled, leftist officers, organised in the Movimento dos Forças Armadas (MFA: Armed Forces Movement). The MFA was motivated, in part, by the escalation of the colonial wars being fought in the colonies of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, seeking to bring the devastating conflicts to an end. The army rebels were able to remove the authoritarian regime of the Estado Novo with a minimal loss of life, but they did not anticipate that their actions would trigger a popular uprising that would last for two years. The events of 25 April inaugurated a period of intense, revolutionary fervour called the Processo Revolucionário Em Curso (PREC: Ongoing Revolutionary Process), which only came to an end with the legislative elections of April 1976.

During the PREC the political and social future of Portugal remained highly uncertain. Not only were the conventional parties, such as the communists, social democrats, and conservatives (most of which had been banned during the Estado Novo) struggling to gain the upper hand, but the traditional forms of politics were severely put to the test. As could be expected, a conflict took place between the goals of the Stalinist Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), namely to establish a "dictatorship of the proletariat", and those of the Socialist Party (PS), which wanted to construct a parliamentary democracy on the model of other Western European nations. The Socialists would eventually, in 1976, emerge as the victors in this battle with some assistance from outside the country. In particular, the American ambassador played an important role in an attempt to cut off the path of the PCP, which in the early stages of the revolution seemed to be in control of the state apparatus even though their hold on power was highly fragile. However, there was also another popular struggle taking place outside the system of representational politics.\(^5\) During the PREC, Portugal witnessed a strong movement of autonomous workers' committees in the wake of a series of occupations of houses, factories, and agricultural estates. It was this development that, ultimately, proved the most unpredictable and the PCP would attempt, frantically, to co-opt this anti-authoritarian movement, but to no avail. By the summer of 1975, the precarious situation brought the country to the brink of civil war and there was much talk within the radical factions of the army about providing the workers and the peasants with weapons. At this point, all bets on the future of the country seemed to be off. Douglas's The Secret Agent is placed upon this precarious ledge of time and therefore it is apparent that the calmness of that early summer morning cannot last.

The camera continues to track the movement of the two men as they proceed along the corridor. We gather from their conversation that one of the men is a functionary working for the American Embassy, whereas the other, Alexander Verloc, is employed by the embassy as an informant. As will later be revealed, Verloc has infiltrated a small cell of would-be revolutionaries consisting of Thomas Ossipon, Michaelis, Karl Yundt and, somewhat on its fringes, a character called "The Professor", who is a bomb-maker.\(^5\) Verloc reports on their activities to Mr Vladimir, an embassy official, as well as to Inspector Heat of the Lisbon police. So far, however, the activity of this group of agitators has amounted to no more than the production of a steady stream of propaganda pamphlets. Indeed, they seem to be more concerned with maintaining the current state of détente with the police. The snide comments of the embassy functionary make it known to Verloc that his reports have proven unsatisfactory and the latter begins to suspect that trouble awaits him. They pause at a set of tall, panelled doors with gold trimming. The functionary knocks and the two men enter the room. The camera, however, pauses on the threshold and does not follow them into the next room.
Thus far, on the actual clock, a minute has elapsed of a film that in its totality has a duration of fifty-four minutes. That is, if we count one cycle of a film that loops endlessly with only one, computer-generated difference: the synchronisation of the music and the images. From one cycle to the next, namely, the relation between the two is altered. But, at this point, I would like to emphasize a different aspect of the movie. We might note how, during the extension of one minute, the spectator has progressed, step by step, ever further into the diegetic space of the movie, travelling from a position on the very edge of the off-screen space – the elevated shot of the villa – to a viewpoint that is embedded within the mise-en-scène – the tracking shot of the two men – which situates the spectator, on a virtual plane, within the same phenomenological space as the two characters.

One could propose that the tracking shot mimics the appearance of a “documentary” image; that is to say, it imitates the style of so-called direct cinema in which the camera is physically present to the filmed subjects even if they do not always respond to its presence. The purpose of direct cinema is to give spectators the impression that they are “really there” and have unmediated access to the event as it occurs, rather than looking at a fictionalized or re-enacted version of the event. Yet, this tracking shot almost imperceptibly mutates into something different which retroactively imposes a fictional value on the preceding tracking shot. The conversation between Verloc and the functionary, namely, is edited by means of a conventional shot/counter-shot sequence that places the spectators on a transcendental, rather than an immanent, level in relation to the filmed characters. The viewers, in the parlance of classical film theory, have been provided a position of sovereignty and their previous awareness of the contingency of their own viewpoint has become suppressed.

All that has transpired during the first minute of the film – literal and fictional time, so far, coinciding with each other – seems to be no different from what normally happens during the first moments of a classical narrative movie. In phenomenological terms, the viewer has been transported from his own embodied, yet immobile position within the darkened cinema to an imaginary viewpoint that coincides with the “pure mobility” of an omnidirectional camera gaze. And like this camera gaze, which constitutes the virtual sum of all possible camera positions that can be established on an actual set, or series of sets, the subject has become unmoored from the “laws of matter and time”. In a paradoxical fashion, the difference between inside and outside, on-screen and off-screen space, seems to have fallen away since the camera appears to be both external to the movie scene – it frames the set from all possible angles without being implicated in the action – and internal to the diegetic universe of the movie as it connects all sets into one seemingly interconnected whole or closed system.

Yet, appearances can be deceptive. Not all that has transpired during the first minute of The Secret Agent is what one may have expected. The film installation remains true to its title on more than just its thematic level: the spectator is transported to a sovereign subject-position only to be subverted from within. The installation has been organised in such a manner that the spectator has to step between the images. This results in all kinds of fragmentations, splits and doublings on the level of the image – one character will appear, for instance, from different angles on two facing screens – and on the level of the cinematic apparatus as such. The relationship between the two facing screens, namely, is constantly altered from one episode to another and even, as we have seen, within one episode. Either, for instance, the spectator seems to be located in the centre of a room with each camera mirroring another half of the space (rendering the cameras invisible) or the cameras are placed perpendicular to each other as in the L-shaped space of a cinema lobby were many scenes take place. A character walking into the lobby from the street will then have to turn the corner in order to be shown
by the other camera, at which point the character disappears on the first screen. The Secret Agent establishes many such permutational relationships between the set, the screen and the spectator, but what they have in common is a kind of game of hide-and-seek. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the music on the soundtrack is derived from Captain Beefheart's "Clear Spot"; the cameras appear locked in a battle to provide the best view of the narrative, while forced each to remain out of the frame of the other. Sometimes the viewer will have to piece together the fragments in order to make sense of the scene in its totality. But it also becomes obvious at certain moments that what looked, at first, like one continuous take of a scene with two cameras could not possibly be true because, for instance, as one camera widens its angle to include the position of the other camera within its field of vision, there is nothing there. The camera is absent from the place where we expected it to be.  

Yet, there is more. Not only do the spectators remain aware of their physical relation to the screen, but also occasionally they become implanted within the violent exchanges taking place on-screen. At such moments, the spectators are literally placed in the crossfire between two subjective camera shots. Take, for instance, the scene that occurs after Verloc and the functionary proceed into the interior of the embassy office. Once they disappear through the door, the exterior view of the embassy vanishes and is replaced by a shot of the interior of the inner office. Thus the spectator is not only situated between two screen surfaces, but is also placed, in a virtual sense, between two connecting halves of the same movie set. The distinction between off-screen and on-screen space has become disturbed. On the north-west screen, the spectator follows the two men into the room, whereas on the south-west screen only the surface of the door is visible. The door is kept slightly ajar, but not enough to peer into the office beyond. Inside the office, another embassy official, Mr Vladimir, is seated behind a U-shaped desk. He proceeds to grill Verloc in a rather brusque fashion about his reports. Previously our field of vision had become split apart, Janus-faced, in a flagrant violation of the rules of narrative cinema. In the final seconds of the embassy episode, however, our perceptual field closes down upon us with a sudden ferocity. Vladimir has just made a shocking proposal to Verloc, demanding that he orchestrate a "display of imbecile ferocity" if he wants to save his financial arrangement with the embassy. Seeking a way out, Verloc counters that he has insufficient funds to execute Vladimir's atrocious plan. At this point, the spectator is placed between a close-up of Verloc's face and the angry countenance of Vladimir, who shouts to Verloc (and thus to us):

"FUCK YOU, VERLOC. THAT WON'T FLY.
YOU'LL GET YOUR ALLOWANCE AND NOT A PENNY MORE UNTIL SOMETHING HAPPENS. AND IF NOTHING HAPPENS YOU WON'T GET EVEN THAT." — MR VLADIMIR

After this verbal assault by Vladimir, who stares directly into our eyes, the screens go black, establishing a transition to the next episode.
All along a noose has been tightening, not only around Verloc's neck but around the spectator's as well. The spectator has been placed in the central axis of a circle around which the characters have been revolving. On the one screen, the set is bracketed by the odd, U-shaped desk of Mr Vladimir, which determines the blocking of the scene, and on the other screen, it is the U-shaped staircase leading to the ground floor that delimits the set. While Mr Vladimir and Verloc engage in their tense exchange, the young functionary quietly withdraws from the room. As he retreats down the corridor, the camera halts at the top of the stairs and looks down into the lobby where an immobile sentinel stands guard upon a chequerboard floor. We can look no further. The bodies of the fictional characters as well as our own bodies are locked into the same circumscribed space and one question The Secret Agent begins to pose to us at this moment is to what extent anyone might escape from this loop that is as much spatial as temporal in nature.

A circle, as said, is closed. Yet, of course, a closed system, as Gilles Deleuze reminds us, can never be absolutely closed. Set theory has demonstrated that the very notion of a "set of sets" contains a fatal flaw in logic so that "whole" needs to be thought not as a closed system but as "that which prevents each set, however big it is from closing in on itself, and that which forces it to extend itself into a larger set. The whole is therefore like thread which traverses sets and gives each one the possibility, which is necessarily realized, of communicating with another, to infinity." And, furthermore, the out-of-field (hors champs) to which the whole relates has two aspects that differ in quality: a relative aspect by which a closed system refers from one spatial set to another set, a movement that could, in principle, extend on to infinity; and an absolute aspect "by which a closed system opens onto a duration which is immanent to the whole universe ... and does not belong to the order of the visible".

This more radical, temporal sense of the "out-of-field" testifies, as Deleuze writes, to a more "disturbing presence" that resides outside homogeneous space and time; that is to say, to a dimension of sheer potentiality which is not a mere set of possibilities that can be realized in actual time and space. This absolute aspect of the cinematic out-of-field is nothing different from what Deleuze, elsewhere, referred to as that strange, topological fold where the whole of the inside - the historical strata of knowledge and cultural practices - finds itself actively present on the outside. What happens on the inside, within the "closed system" of a socio-historical formation, is a condensation of the past. But this archival order - "the thread that traverses the sets" - is constantly exposed to a future that comes from outside and re-creates the past. "Thought", Deleuze writes, "thinks its own history (the past), but in order to free itself from what it thinks (the present) and be able finally to 'think otherwise' (the future)." Therefore, the out-of-field, in its most radical sense, is the very limit where the closed system of the sets, and their individuated parts, go in and out of focus; where figures become entangled in an abstract ground and the spectator is immersed in darkness, or, vice versa, new configurations appear to float to the surface of an otherwise impenetrable and formless outside.

At this limit of the out-of-field where an "inside" folds into an "outside", the progression of chronological time might appear to have been momentarily arrested. Yet, this does not entail that all is calm. Instead, at this limit a struggle rages; it demarcates "a turbulent, stormy zone where particular points and the relations of forces between these points are tossed about". In short, the radical out-of-field opens onto the singularity of an unexpected, unforeseeable future and it is no different from that irrational cut within historical continuity that the past two centuries have attempted to think in terms of the revolutionary event. This irrationality of the revolutionary event does not concern the violence that occurs on its surface, but its structural logic that causes an arrest of time and the creation of a singularity, a radical point of bifurcation, on the continuous curve of history. There are filmmakers who try to capture this fugitive moment at its point of irrup-
tion, which requires much luck, speed and improvisation. Such filmmakers can be called exponents of the militant film. And then there are filmmakers who attempt, retroactively, to close out this singular moment and respectfully entomb it within the calm strata of history. Such filmmakers can be reckoned to belong to the genre of political cinema.

Militant film and political cinema work at cross-purposes: a fact that became the centre of a vehement debate in, among other places, Cahiers du cinéma during the 1970s. Certain militant films about the Carnation Revolution by, among others, Robert Kramer and Thomas Harlan, would figure in this debate. Perhaps one might expect that the direct cinema style of the militant film be praised over the suspenseful série-Z movies (named after the popular movie of Costa-Gavras), which “psychologised” rather than “analysed” history. Nevertheless, it was definitely not the case that the militant film was spared in relation to the political cinema. In retrospect, we might observe that the militant and political cinema of the 1970s not only formed each other's opposite, but they were also each other's complementary. Where the one failed, the other succeeded. But the reverse is also true. The militant film can never represent an event which, by its very nature, exceeds representation, whereas political cinema can only depict the “closed totality” of the event by suppressing the gaps in the fragmentary testimony of militant film. Political cinema tries to stitch the disconnected fragments of militant film together; to repair the frayed fabric of time.

I shall return to this debate below, but so much is clear: militant film and political cinema constitute two correlated subject-positions in relation to historical time. Either film is conceived as a means of historical agency, participating in the revolution, or cinema is conceived as an agent of historical memory, inscribing the revolution within the cinematic archive. In relation to this dichotomy, I shall argue that The Secret Agent presents something like a third term. In other words, Douglas’s film does not negate or avoid this dualism, but exposes it to our view. The Secret Agent constantly moves between these two positions, exchanges their viewpoints without identifying with either one. And once we step into the film installation, we are not just spectators of this exchange. We are not simply watching a game played by others; rather, we become implicated within the sets of the game itself.

II. “Such was the house, the household, and the business ...”

Douglas’s The Secret Agent consists of twelve episodes that are dispersed across a smaller number of sets – the American Embassy, a cinema-cum-bookstore, a café, and various street and office scenes. Furthermore, each opposing pair of screens corresponds to a particular category of space. The north-east and south-east screens, for instance, support the projection of those scenes that are situated, besides the American Embassy, in various offices of the Portuguese state apparatus (i.e. the police and juridical system). The central pair contain scenes that are situated in the “public” locations of a café and the streets of Lisbon, whereas the final pair are reserved for what can be best described as a more hybrid space. It represents, on the one hand, a domain of experience that is antithetical to the institutions of social control (eastern screens), but, on the other hand, it does not constitute a purely autonomous space of private life. What appear on the easternmost screens are images of the “house, household, and business” of Verloc, as Conrad puts it in a revealing manner (p. 13). Here, private and public, commercial and domestic, political and intimate dimensions of life become blurred.
In the original novel, Verloc runs a stationery shop with pornographic articles as a convenient cover for his clandestine activities. In Douglas's version, Verloc has become the owner of a movie theatre, which doubles as a bookstore of surrealistic and revolutionary literature. On display in the lobby of the cinema are, for instance, titles by André Breton, Georges Bataille and Pierre Klossowski. Douglas's use of a cinema as Verloc's place of business is a direct reference to an earlier adaption of Conrad's novel, namely Sabotage (1936) by Alfred Hitchcock. In Hitchcock's version, the story is situated in London during the 1930s against the rising threat of German fascism, although the exact political context of the movie remains unclear. Sabotage diverges much further from the original plot of Conrad than does Douglas's film, yet in both cases they remain faithful to Conrad's formula of "house, household and business", locating Verloc's business and household within the same house, like overlapping circles. At least, in Douglas's film we are given to presume this fact as the camera doesn't actually penetrate into the domestic space, unlike Sabotage. The scenes remain limited to the lobby, the projection room and the auditorium of the cinema. Furthermore, an interesting exception is made for the recurrent shots of the auditorium in which a small audience is shown, at an angle from the camera, gazing up at a movie screen. At no moment is it actually shown what they are watching on the screen, but there are many clues that suggest it is Bertolucci's Last Tango in Paris. I shall return to this self-reflexive device below, but it is relevant to note that the images of the audience are not projected on the same screen as the other interior shots of the cinema. Instead, they appear on the central screens with the street and café scenes.

Unlike bourgeois ideology of the nineteenth century that dictates that the private dwelling remain isolated from the street, the "house, household and business" where Verloc lives with his wife and her younger brother Stevie represent a radically heterogeneous space. Here, Conrad writes, Verloc "carried on his business of a seller of shady wares, exercised his vocation of a protector of society, and cultivated his domestic virtues" (p. 4). As in Conrad's novel, Douglas's film constantly underscores the fact that the boundaries between private and public, lawful and clandestine, domestic and economic existence are highly permeable. There is only one entrance into the shop/cinema and this door, in Conrad's account, "stood discreetly but suspiciously ajar" (p. 2) in the evening.

One might argue, therefore, that the cinema/house in The Secret Agent functions as an allegorical site of modernity where the intimate sphere of sexuality mutates into a public spectacle, a historical process that began with that dusty shop window described in Conrad's novel which displayed "photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls" and would culminate with those recurrent images in Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle (1975) of couples watching striptease dancers on television from the comfort of their homes. According to this interpretation, Verloc's cinema/house would symbolise, therefore, how "pleasure passes through the image" in modernity, condemning us to a world of standardised experience in which only here and there "the cry of anarchisms, marginalisms and individualisms" can rise. And the same interpretation might be backed up by referring to a scene in Robert Kramer and Philip Spinelli's Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal (1977), where the camera strays from an iconic photograph of the Portuguese revolution, showing a soldier with a red carnation in the muzzle of his gun, to a magazine stand in which numerous pornographic magazines are displayed. On the soundtrack, we hear Kramer's voice-over complain that "unusually large numbers [of the Portuguese] work in shops, and crafts, offices and services", and that these employees of the tertiary sector, in contrast to the factory and agricultural workers, lacked a revolutionary spirit. What they desired instead was a return to stability and order.
With the end of the old regime, censorship was lifted and the market for erotica would boom in Portugal. Douglas's film registers this ambivalent aspect in an equivocal manner: is sexuality to be counted as part of the cultural revolution or as part of the capitalist spectacle? The screening of Last Tango in Paris in Verloc's cinema is a symptom of this dilemma, which was central to the radical politics of the era. Bertolucci's controversial movie had been banned in pre-revolutionary Portugal, but audiences flocked to see it after it was released in 1974. Yet Bertolucci's film had not only been censored by conservative governments, it had also had many detractors among leftist film critics, writing, for instance, in Cahiers du cinéma. To them, Last Tango in Paris was not only misogynistic; it constituted a betrayal of the core principles of cultural revolution.

To a certain extent, these critics were correct. Speaking to a journalist of the New York Times in 1973, Bertolucci confessed that he had denounced his pre-1968 belief that "with film you could make a revolution". In Last Tango, Tom, a naïve young filmmaker, serves to present a rather facile satire of direct cinema. This character acts as the antithesis of the Italian director by submitting all of everyday life, including his own romantic life, to the unblinking gaze of the film camera. The obvious message of Bertolucci is that life does not provide cinema with authenticity, rather it is cinema, in the hands of Tom, which transforms life into a cliché. Thus Bertolucci saw fit to dismiss the efficacy of militant film as "an illusion of the petit bourgeois", whereas the Cahiers du cinéma would reject Last Tango in Paris in the very same terms. In The Secret Agent there is an echo of such disputes about the politics of cinema. After Michaelis enters the projection booth of the cinema to meet with the other revolutionaries, he declares his infatuation with the character of Paul, who has had previous careers as a boxer, an actor, a journalist, and a revolutionary. Teary-eyed, Michaelis observes: "Paul's loss reminds me of my own. It is a loss we will all share." To which Yundt replies with a sneer: "More bourgeois bullshit. The film is ridiculous. The Portuguese have been starved of such crap for so long they line up all day to lap it up."

But, perhaps, The Secret Agent proposes another way of dealing with this dilemma, which does not remain snagged on the dual horns of "sexual revolution" and "spectacle". It would be more correct to contend, with Giorgio Agamben, that modernity has made the "absolutely political (that is 'biopolitical') meaning of sexuality and physiological life itself apparent". If the "sexual revolution" was political, it was not because it represented liberation from bourgeois morality that was enacted in the political theatre of the social communes, but because sexuality was always already shot through with power relations. In this regard, it is significant that Winnie Verloc wears a similar blouse to that of the character Jeanne in Last Tango. In both films, Winnie and Jeanne kill their partners at the end under circumstances that are not clearly motivated. In both cases,
Hitchcock's Sabotage would bypass the central problematic of Conrad's novel by delivering Winnie into the hands of another male protector, a police officer.

Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 12.

Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 11.

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it will remain open to what extent their murderous act was spontaneous, intentional or even accidental. What really matters, however, is that Winnie and Jeanne are the only characters who acquire a sense of agency which will violently release them, if only for a brief moment, from their dependence upon another.

Winnie is arrested, as presumably Jeanne will be, but her future before the law is left undetermined. By way of contrast, Conrad's ending was more dire, driving Winnie to commit suicide. 31 There is more that needs to be said on this topic, but there is another element at play here that needs to be addressed first. An element that goes to the very heart of what is at stake in the concept of sexual politics that I have been discussing. Let me return, therefore, to Agamben's comment about the "absolutely political (that is 'biopolitical') meaning of sexuality". What Agamben is getting at here is the notion of "bare life", namely a body existing outside the civic order of morality and law. Take, for instance, the role of Paul in Last Tango, who, as Bertolucci has pointed out, regresses during the movie to a pre-Oedipal stage. Already during the first love scene with Jeanne, Paul proposes that they do not use their proper names and, rather than talking, he playfully begins to emit mere grunts. Paul stages, therefore, a kind of devolution of humanity from a speaking being who can discourse on right and wrong - the Aristotelian "political animal" - to a nameless, bestial state of existence - "bare life" - where the voice can only express emotions of pleasure or pain. 32 In the end, Paul lies curled up as a foetus at the feet of Jeanne and dies. In Conrad's narrative, the threshold between humanity and animality is marked by the ambiguous figure of Stevie, the autistic brother of Winnie. He is described by Conrad as "easily diverted from the straight path of duty by the attractions of stray cats and dogs, which he followed down narrow alleys into unsavoury courts; by the comedies of the streets, which he contemplated open-mouthed, to the detriment of his employer's interests; or by the dramas of fallen horses, whose pathos and violence induced him sometimes to shriek piercingly in a crowd, which disliked to be disturbed by sounds of distress in its quiet enjoyment of the national spectacle" (p. 9).

Whereas Stevie is portrayed as a confused individual who has great difficulties articulating his thoughts, he is also depicted as a deeply empathetic being who does not know how to distinguish between the suffering of animals or men. When he is confronted with such intolerable scenes, Stevie's body begins to convulse and he shrieks in horror, emitting, at best, monosyllabic words of protest. Not only is Stevie the only character who makes decisions on what is just and unjust outside the juridical framework of society, he is also the one whose body will be sacrificed in order to strengthen this very juridico-institutional system of power (even though this sacrifice is an accidental one). A fact that recalls the main conclusion of Agamben's Homo Sacer, namely that "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original - if concealed - nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power." 33 In this sense, Verloc is punished with death because he has overstepped the boundaries of sovereign power, which dictates that bare life (or the homo sacer of Agamben's title) can be killed but not sacrificed with impunity. And Stevie was not simply killed; he was sacrificed to a cause. Although he did not plan for his death, Verloc deemed him expendable, of no consequence, in comparison to Mr Vladimir's command to orchestrate a "display of imbecile ferocity".
III. “An impenetrable mystery ...”

And what did that plan consist of? In Conrad's version, it is implied that Mr Vladimir is a member of the Russian Embassy. The Russian government is disturbed by the lenient policy of the British state, which granted asylum to many Continental anarchists and revolutionaries. In order that the British government be forced to crack down on these political refugees, Mr Vladimir orders Verloc to orchestrate a “demonstration” that will shock the bourgeois public to the core of their existence. In order to achieve such a terrifying effect, an act of regicide is not sufficient. One must strike, Mr Vladimir propounds, at the very heart of bourgeois ideology, namely the unswerving faith of the middle class in science as the foundation of all material prosperity. Science is the “sacrosanct fetish” of modernity, but as it is impossible to throw a bomb into pure mathematics, Mr Vladimir suggests that Verloc attacks astronomy by destroying the Greenwich Observatory, site of the Prime Meridian. In short, Mr Vladimir proposes a symbolic attack on modernity; that is to say, the global time of capitalism itself. In Douglas's version of the story, the goal is the same, but the economic and technological conditions have changed. The greatest fear of the Portuguese, Mr Vladimir lectures with great foresight, is to remain stuck in the past as a “backward country” that is unable to connect to a prosperous future:

“What makes Portugal a modern nation?
The colonies it couldn't afford? Its useless industry?
No, it's that braid of copper under the Atlantic, Mr Verloc.
Why do you think a gang of fascists was welcomed by NATO for the last twenty-five years?” — Mr Vladimir

The target of Douglas's reincarnation of Mr Vladimir is communication technology: the central nervous system of the emergent system of post-industrial capitalism. To strike there is to create a void within the social network.

Conrad's novel and Douglas's film are organised around this void, or rather the unrepresentable event of a premature explosion that inadvertently rips Stevie apart, reducing his body to “a heap of nameless fragments” (p. 122). The narrative approaches the horrific scene in a highly circumspect manner, filling in the blanks while avoiding any direct, eyewitness account. In Douglas's film, Stevie is only mentioned, but never seen. He is, as Douglas explains, “invisible to everyone but Winnie, but still there. Just like the situations represented by the pairs of screens are there even when they go dark.” To become invisible appears to form a constant threat to the characters in The Secret Agent. They struggle to maintain their identity as if they live in fear of permanently dissolving in that “raw, unwholesome fog” (p. 121) that constantly swirls through the streets of the great capital, dissolving its solid forms into ghost-like shapes.

This anxiety of losing one's identity in the multitudinous city is fundamentally related to Conrad's doubt regarding the communicative efficacy of language. Deception operates on many levels at once, not least as symbolised by the duplicitous craft of the secret agent. The spy is an agent of artifice and deception — not only does he possess “every facility to fabricate the very facts themselves”, but he spreads “the double evil of emulation in one direction, and of panic, hasty legislation, unreflecting hate, on the other” (p. 196). In other words, the secret agent infects society with a subversive power of dissimilitude that cannot be controlled but will spread in all directions and, ultimately, turn upon its original host.


37 I shall leave aside a discussion of the highly suggestive comments on the socially disruptive effects of major power failures in, for instance, the writings of Marshall McLuhan and Félix Guattari.

38 A fascinating aspect of Sabotage is the frequent disassociation between perceptual and affective modes of experience, which induces a sense of shock in the spectator. The most famous example is when Wimme enters the cinema upon hearing of her brother’s death and joins a boisterous crowd watching the Walt Disney cartoon Who Killed Cock Robin?


Under such conditions, only subterfuge is able to combat subterfuge. Even the Assistant Commissioner, hot on the scent of the secret agent, must revert to the amphibious condition of the spy as he dissolves into the dense fog of the city: “He left the scene of his daily labours quickly like an unobtrusive shadow. His descent into the street was like the descent into a slimy aquarium from which the water had been run off. A murky, gloomy dampness enveloped him” (p. 208).

Stopping off at an Italian restaurant he reflects to himself that the patrons of this place “had lost in their frequentation of fraudulent cookery all their national and private characteristics” (p. 209). Yet, he relishes this immersion in the “immoral atmosphere” of the dining establishment, which makes him seem to lose more of his identity. He feels “unplaced”, which far from being unsettling gives him a pleasurable feeling of “evil freedom” (p. 209). Possessed by this exhilarating sense of independence, he once more advances into “an immensity of greasy slime and damp plaster interspersed with lamps, and enveloped, oppressed, penetrated, choked, and suffocated by the blackness of a wet London night, which is composed of soot and drops of water” (p. 211).

Such passages in Conrad’s The Secret Agent recall the similar horror expressed by the young Friedrich Engels in his The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844. Here the future member of the Communist League expressed his distaste of the turmoil of the new industrial cities, his repulsion by the blatant display of “the brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest”. Famously, Engels would compare this alienatory scene to a Hobbesian war of each against all, declaring that “the dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme” [36]. However, whereas the radical journalist developed an unshaking conviction in the possibility of awakening this slumbering mass and guiding it to a proper, revolutionary consciousness, Conrad did not share Engels’s emancipatory vision of the future. In the final paragraph of the book, the “incorruptible” Professor walks the streets of London, while averting his eyes from the “odious multitude of mankind” – a man who “had no future”. In The Secret Agent the social bonds forged between atomised subjects are precarious at best and are not capable of fully withstanding the natural forces of entropy [36].

Img. C
Revolutionary crowd in front of statue.
Robert Kramer and Philip Spinelli,
Scenes From the Class Struggle in Portugal, 1977
It should come as no surprise that little remains of this misanthropic (and modernist) trope of the monstrous crowd in Douglas's version of *The Secret Agent*. In fact, the few scenes shot in the street are almost completely depopulated. Nowhere do we see the festive crowds that appear in so many films documenting the early days of the so-called “Happy Revolution” and seem to embody the new sovereign body of the “people”, the camera constantly moving back and forth between wide-angle views of the demonstrating masses and close-ups of ecstatic faces. Except for the final scene, all that remains of this “demos” within *The Secret Agent* is the recurrent image of a small group of cinema spectators silently watching *Last Tango in Paris*.

This self-reflexive motif of incorporating the audience-within-the-movie is, as stated above, appropriated from Hitchcock's *Sabotage* [Img. D]. As a matter of fact, there are a variety of crowd scenes in *Sabotage* that deserve to be distinguished. After Verloc commits his first act of sabotage in Hitchcock's film (later he is instructed to bomb Piccadilly Circus, which will result in the death of Stevie), a blackout occurs in London, but this does not have the intended effect. A festive mood takes hold of passengers in the Underground and a heading of next day's newspaper reads “Comedies in the Dark” [Img. E]. However, this spontaneous form of collectivity, which emerges in the context of a breakdown of the technological order, is very different from the angry mob that gathers in front of Bijou, Verloc's cinema, after the show was interrupted due to the power failure [Img. F]. The crowd demands reimbursement for their tickets on the basis of a “breach of contract”, whereas Winnie, in an attempt to calm the crowd, speaks of an “act of providence”. Hitchcock demonstrates, therefore, that the unexpected event can have two divergent effects on the multitude: surprise might result in a collective mode of elation, but it can also incite a revolt. The British director was all too aware how his dual tactics of “suspense” and “surprise” could backfire upon him. He would later admit that he had made a mistake in *Sabotage* by showing to the audience the actual moment in which Stevie is blown up (in contrast to either Conrad or Douglas). He had overstepped his boundaries as “sovereign” director in sacrificing Stevie to the cinematic system of suspense.
There is, of course, another important moment in film history in which the film
audience is shown on-screen, namely Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) [Img. G]. In Vertov's case, Hitchcock's problematic of how to control the cinematic
audience is approached from another end. For the Russian director, the purpose of
film is to awaken the revolutionary consciousness of the multitude, to “socialise”
them in the course of viewing the movie, and to this purpose the cinematic apparatus
must merge with the social assembly: the audience gains sovereignty by inhabiting
the cinematic machine in an almost literal manner. Yet the audience in Douglas's *The
Secret Agent*, unlike that of Hitchcock or Vertov, seems to remain largely unperturbed,
blankly gazing at the movie screen not unlike those movie spectators in the last film of
Debord, who “are staring fixedly” at the screen “so that the spectators find themselves
face to face with nothing but themselves” [Img. H]. Despite this specular relationship
between the spectator and the movie screen, Debord will repeat on the soundtrack
his uncompromised belief in the potentiality of a militant film that avoids being “gentle
with a public” so that “in the frozen mirror of the screen the spectators are not looking
at anything that might suggest the respectable citizens of democracy”.40 In relation
to the palimpsestic structure of Douglas's work, it is possible to think of the various
historical models of the spectator as being virtually present in the undifferentiated state
of Douglas's silent audience, which for us, the actual spectators of the movie, does
assume the definite contours of an emancipated, manipulated, activated, individuated
or socialised audience. This “tangled multitude” of spectators remains a blank entity in
the abeyance of that unforeseen spark that can ignite a specific connection between
percepts and affects.

Even so, the last words spoken in the film return us to Conrad's fear of the multitude:
“Ah yes. The crowd. Filthy countless multitude. Unconscious. Blind.” This comment is
made by the nihilistic character of The Professor, who constitutes the radical antithesis
of Winnie in Douglas's film (and, perhaps, in Conrad's novel as well). The Professor's pur­
pose in life is to embrace the state of “evil freedom”, which the Assistant Commissioner
has only possessed in a temporary manner. The Professor endeavoured to achieve an
absolute negation of all social conventions and moral structures (a rupture that only
Winnie would achieve in the novel, if only momentarily and by accident). In an amaz­
ing coincidence the figure of The Professor anticipates the proclamation of Friedrich
Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* that “I am no man, I am dynamite”, which would only be pub­
lished the year following Conrad's novel.41 With these famous words, Nietzsche made a
brazen attempt to internalise the anarchist violence of the historical moment within his
own philosophical project of an *Umwertung aller Werte*: “Yes. I am the first immoralist:
that makes me the annihilator par excellence.”42 Nevertheless, in contrast to Nietzsche's
supremely confident alter ego in Ecce homo, Conrad’s Professor remains wracked by self-doubt. He is not at all sure that the affirmative power of a “yes-saying life”, which passes through destruction, will not simply amount to a pitiful deed of self-annihilation, leaving no trace on the moral edifice of social life.\(^{43}\)

The Professor’s extremism drives him literally into the hands of death. He carries at all times a bomb upon his body that is controlled by a detonator, which works upon the same principles as a camera shutter.\(^{44}\) If anyone attempts to arrest him, he can bring the bomb to explosion, killing everyone, including himself, in the immediate environment. This threat of “mutually assured destruction” provides The Professor with an individual form of sovereign power. The Professor, in other words, exploits a specific dimension of the Hobbesian state of nature in which man is said to exist as a wolf to other men (homo hominis lupus). In the brutish state of nature, which in Hobbes’s Leviathan precedes the establishment of sovereign power, there is no “natural right” or dominance of the strongest over the weakest (e.g. The Professor) as the latter is always capable of slaying the strongest with a weapon.

It is precisely this violent mode of radical equality that, as Giorgio Agamben observes, provides a foundation for the sovereign power of the state. The sovereign, namely, preserves the natural right “to do anything to anyone, which now appears as the right to punish”.\(^{45}\) The Professor, on the other hand, in playing the “wolf” against the “Leviathan”, desires to assert his absolute state of impunity by means of threatening to kill himself (and others). In doing so, The Professor seems to confirm the conclusion of Agamben that our conventional mode of conceiving the political realm in terms of citizens’ rights, free will and social contracts is mistaken. From the point of view of sovereignty, the only authentic realm of politics will be that of bare life; that is to say, the state of exception where the rule of law is suspended.\(^{46}\) The PREC represented such a state of exception during which the power of the Portuguese government was provisional at best or, to put this differently, the political structure of the sovereign state remained in contention. There were those in the Portuguese situation who sought to prolong this state of exception in order to keep the momentum of the social and cultural revolution going and there were those who sought to momentarily intensify the state of exception in order to strengthen the repressive powers of the government. To pursue such a “strategy of tension” is to incite chaos in order to beget order and it is this strategy that Mr Vladimir prods Verloc to implement as agent provocateur.\(^{47}\)

In Douglas’s film installation the question of the limits of sovereign power — the threshold where the relation between law and violence begins to dissolve — surfaces on several levels. We have already seen, for instance, how the film installation vacillates on this very threshold of disassociation, withholding the spectator’s full access to the transcendental subject-position of classical narrative cinema. Recall, for instance, the doubled shot in which Verloc, and the viewer, were aggressively interrogated by Mr Vladimir.\(^{48}\) Furthermore, The Professor’s very derision of the “filthy multitude” makes clear that his “transcendental” position — Ossipon’s words — is not capable of releasing The Professor from a debilitating fear that his autonomy is but an illusion. He is terrified that this multitude will remain unmoved by an eventual deed of self-immolation and that, so to speak, he will pass into the darkness without leaving a trace in history.

With its characters constantly balancing on the threshold of disappearance in the “immense multitude” of the London streets, Conrad’s The Secret Agent poses not only the ability of writing to translate events into words, but also the capacity of words to propel humans into action. In particular, the anarchist doctrine of “propaganda by the deed” is submitted to the thoroughly corrosive effect of Conrad’s ironic style. The tale that Conrad set to paper in 1906 had been triggered by a strange anecdote: the “already old story” of a failed attempt by an anarchist to blow up the Greenwich Observatory,
site of the Prime Meridian, the central point of global time, on 15 February 1894.\textsuperscript{49} In his “Author’s Notes”, Conrad would describe this botched act of terrorism as “an absurd cruelty” and he was struck by the impossibility “to fathom its origin by any reasonable or unreasonable process of thought...so that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most resembling an idea, anarchistic or other”.\textsuperscript{50}

What attracted Conrad, then, to the event of 1894 was its “mad”, inscrutable character, a phenomenon that provides a common basis to all his tales. Typically, as Edward Said has explained, the narrative structure of Conrad’s novels is built upon “the swapped yarn, the historical report, the commonly exchanged legend, the musing recollection”.\textsuperscript{51} Yet, what sets these stories apart is the obscure kernel at their centre. Invariably, the topic of Conrad’s writing is “illusory, or shadowy, or dark: that is, whatever by nature is not easy to see”.\textsuperscript{52} It was to this incomprehensible crime, this inassimilable act, that The Secret Agent had to respond: its writing was a “necessity” for Conrad. The anarchist bombing had possibly been intended as an assault on the geopolitical organisation of time itself, but even though, as Conrad observed, the outer wall of the Greenwich Observatory did not even receive a scratch, it still seemed as if a rift in time needed to be repaired: “strange forms, sharp in outline but imperfectly apprehended, appeared and claimed attention as crystals will do by their bizarre and unexpected shapes.”\textsuperscript{53} At last he succeeded in reconstructing the “grisly skeleton” of the puzzling event, but even then the bones kept crumbling under his hands like dust.

Take, for instance, the journalistic report that Ossipon reads in the final chapter of The Secret Agent. The newspaper relates in sensational terms the fact of Mrs Verloc’s suicide (for which Ossipon, in part, bears the blame): “An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair!” (p. 435). Until the very end of the book, those few words – “an impenetrable mystery” – will obsessively repeat themselves in Ossipon’s mind, driving him to despair. Ossipon of all people, the ex-medical student, who prided himself on the “scientific” bent of his mind. Previously, he had imperiously diagnosed Stevie as a “degenerate” while invoking the anthropometric theory of Cesare Lombroso, but now his “scientific” mindset has been infected towards himself, forcing him to gaze upon “the mystery of a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythm of journalistic phrases” (p. 441). His state of mental decomposition becomes mocked by a mechanical piano in the corner of the café that strikes up the incongruous melody of a waltz.\textsuperscript{54}

This “impenetrable mystery” that haunts Conrad’s characters (and is symptomatic of his modernist, self-reflexive style) will never be fully dispelled. All that is revealed in Conrad’s novels, to quote Said once again, is “the exact contours of this obscurity”.\textsuperscript{55} What remain forever out of reach and, as a result, all the more desirable are those blank spaces projected within Conrad’s narratives: a visual realm that exists beyond words and where, in Said’s words, an “uncomplicated coincidence between intention, word and deed” might be achieved.\textsuperscript{56} Recurrent figures of such blankness in Conrad’s writing are those empty spaces on early colonial maps, which are marked as terra incognita. These cartographic expanses provided Conrad with a metaphor of those abstract spaces beyond inscription where all dissension between language and reality has dissolved. What is “obscure” may threaten the integrity of one’s self, but it also contains the potential to repair the rifts within the community of man, to restore human agency. Hence, in an ironic twist, the room of The Professor is described as having “nothing on the walls but the paper, an expanse of arsenical green ... with stains resembling faded maps of uninhabited continents” (p. 428).
IV. “She had become aware of a ticking sound ...”

Upon Winnie's first appearance in the film, she notices that a clock in the cinema lobby has stopped. She knocks on it, but the second hand refuses to move. This will prove to be a key scene when, later, Verloc dies in the same room. All seems quiet at first, until Winnie hears a sound like the ticking of a clock. She looks at the wall clock, which is still broken, and below, the corpse of Verloc: blood is dripping with regular intervals upon the floor, producing the ticking sound. This scene is modelled very closely on the novel and it condenses a major preoccupation of the novel with the subjective experience of time, which in Douglas's case is extended to connect with the curious temporality of the revolutionary event in which time itself becomes arrested.

Conrad's narrative implies that the only “revolutionary” in the story is Winnie. That is to say, she is the only one to fully renounce the bonds of civil society. She murders her husband after he caused the death of her beloved brother Stevie in a bombing attempt that went awry. This first death cancelled her “contract with existence” as she had only accepted marriage as a way to take care of the helpless Stevie. The second death would set her free, if only momentarily. Her killing of Verloc is described by Conrad as a sudden act of vengeance, more spontaneous than premeditated. Upon hearing the news of Stevie's death, Winnie is at first stunned. “Mrs Verloc gazed at the whitewashed wall. A blank wall – perfectly blank. A blankness to run at and dash your head against” (p. 347). This blankness indicates the complete dissolution of her consciousness into a form of “bare life”, akin to the deceased Stevie, who was now reduced to a “heap of mixed things, which seemed to have been collected in shambles and rag shops”. The “shattering violence of destruction”, brought about by the bomb that exploded too soon, “had made of that body a heap of nameless fragments” (p. 122). She will need to take another step before this transformation is complete. Only when she kills Verloc has she “become a free woman with a perfection of freedom which left her nothing to desire and absolutely nothing to do ... She was a woman enjoying her complete irresponsibility and endless leisure, almost in the manner of a corpse. She did not move, she did not think” (pp. 374-75). Nevertheless, for Winnie the passage of time would not be stalled for long and the dripping of blood would return her to her daily surroundings.
On which time was Portuguese society running in 1974? The authoritarian Estado Novo had clung to a colonial politics of lusotropicalism, which was woefully out of step with history. Not only had the Portuguese government not undergone the democratic reforms that had taken place in other Western European nations, but its reliance on the exploitation of its overseas territories kept the local economy in a state of underdevelopment. Due to the dire state of the Portuguese economy, a mass exodus of workers took place during the 1960s, and this flow of migrant labour only began to taper off in 1973, a year before the revolution, due to the oil crisis. In light of these circumstances, a common viewpoint on both the left and the right was that Portugal had some “catching up” to do. The country was said to lag behind either the European Economic Community or “really existing” socialism.

But to what “time”, exactly, did Portugal need to catch up? For some, the Carnation Revolution was fated to repeat the French history of May 1968 in which the labour unions and the Communist Party would forge a compromise with the established system of representational politics. In the aftermath, the more radical, extraparliamentary movements would either attempt to forge a “secondary society” of autonomous zones and collectives or they would go “underground” as terrorist cells, resulting in a fetishism of revolutionary violence that, wittingly or unwittingly, worked to the advantage of a strategy of tension. For others, such as the conservative Samuel P. Huntington, the Portuguese revolution belonged to a tradition of political reformation within bourgeois society, rather than a genealogy of political revolution that is enacted between opposing social classes and groups. For him, 1974 initiated a “Third Wave of Democratization” that would travel across the world, washing over Latin America and the Asian Pacific, before crashing ashore in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Only in two cases, Portugal and Romania, he argues, did a “revolutionary upheaval” occur, but in all cases the methods of democracy held sway through a consensual process of negotiation and compromise. There was, in his opinion, no other way.

But to posit that “there is no other way”, as Huntington did, is to reduce the potentiality of the Portuguese situation to a mere actuality. It does not matter whether one argues, like Debord, that 1974 repeated 1968 or, like Huntington, that 1974 anticipated 1989. If Debord’s perspective sounds more fatalistic, and Huntington’s more optimistic, it is the latter that is more dire. The consensus society that he applauds creates a people that, as Jacques Rancière has observed, is only present in the form of its statistical reduction. It is a people transformed into an object of knowledge and prediction that leaves no space for the appearance of polemics. What is no longer visible, therefore, within the closed system of total representation that is consensus society, is the theatre of politics as such; that is to say, a space of demonstration where a litigious speech act might express a wrong that is not, as yet, recognised as an admissible form of argumentation before the public tribunal of a “consensual” people. The role of Winnie in The Secret Agent is to help us remember how such litigious speech acts might emerge in a revolutionary setting. To this purpose, we shall encounter some of her doubles in the field of militant film. But first there is yet another clock that needs resetting.

With the end of the Bretton Woods system of monetary management in 1971, the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist organisation of capitalism was well under way, paving the way for the emergence of a neoliberal ideology of free markets and private entrepreneurship. As a result the very temporality of capitalism itself would undergo a mutation. Whereas in industrial capitalism a notion of analytic time served as the external measure of the labour process (the clock time of manufacturing), in post-Fordism it is qualitative time (temporality as the constitutive matrix of the social as a whole) that becomes the substance of social reproduction. Constitutive time is internalised within the capitalist system through the production, valorisation and management of “forms of
life". Or, to use Antonio Negri's more exact phrase, "in real subsumption the matter of command is social time". 61

What this means, in fact, is that post-Fordism consists of a revolution within a revolution. In short, it was the worker's struggle within the Fordist system that forced employers to respond with their own technological "revolutions" in the organization of work. 62

The resistance of the workers thus played itself out on two levels. On the one hand, a widespread "strategy of refusal" led to new forms of political subjectivity that sought the "appropriation of free time, liberation from the constraints of factory command, and the search for a new community". 63 We might recall, at this point, that Conrad would accuse the anarchists in his novel of being simply lazy, unfit for the discipline of labour: "For obviously one does not revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, self-restraint, and toil" (p. 78). Yet, according to a well-known thesis of post-workerist theory, the refusal of work could not last as revolutionary strategy. The alternative society of the 1970s that established its own autonomous zones and forms of life would ultimately be absorbed back into the new productive processes and communication forms of post-Fordism. And although Negri and others developed this analysis in relation to the political landscape of Italy, it is not difficult to see similar tendencies at work in Portugal during the PREC.

During the Carnation Revolution, like France in May 1968, Portugal was alive with the ambition to capture the process of the revolution on film, to record the multitude in the act of rebellion. 64 To this end, several militant filmmakers in Portugal, including a few foreigners such as Robert Kramer and Thomas Harlan, would employ the shooting methods of direct cinema by following certain individuals and collective groups as they tried to assert control over the path of the revolution. In regard to Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal, Kramer, for instance, commented that "superficially, when you get to Portugal you look to the political groupings to lead you through the maze". 65 Yet, it is an illusion, he claims, that the revolution is fought on the parliamentary level; this misconception is created and reinforced by the "bourgeois media". What he wanted to investigate, instead, was how deep the roots of the revolution extended among the people. What was happening in Portugal on the molecular level of everyday life? For the American filmmaker was convinced that Portugal was undergoing a truly "popular revolutionary process" that was taking place outside the representational system of the traditional parties and trade unions. In holding this conviction, Kramer showed himself to be child of the New Left movement in the US. Previously, he had worked with the New York Newsreel collective and then proceeded to make two docu-fictions, Ice and Milestones, which explored the set of "new subjectivities" that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s out of a communal "refusal of work" and "reappropriation of leisure time".
In contrast to the fear of the streets expressed by Conrad’s characters in *The Secret Agent*, Kramer wanted to descend into the streets with his camera in order to celebrate the destabilising power of the multitude he expected to find there. But how to find a way through this maze? Purely by chance the film team encounters a middle-aged, working-class woman at the meeting of a neighbourhood council in Lisbon and they decide to follow her. “So a thread would develop” and the woman becomes the Ariadne of the story, enabling Kramer to script his film: “A web emerges. That would be the ideal film, where the revolutionary process was actually reflected in people’s lives. Not just gotten at in interviews, but where you actually see the process.” The woman is filmed at the market selling flowers, within the domestic circle of her family that lives in a squatted building, and as a member of the multitude during various demonstrations. One of the more compelling aspects of the film is the manner in which it reveals how this woman acquires a more confident voice that is capable of audibly demanding an equitable share in the democratic society-to-come. Yet, as the movie progresses, the tide of the revolution turns. She senses that the autonomous movement of neighbourhood and workers’ councils is losing power and we see her becoming ever more fearful of her future.

Likewise in Harlan’s *Torre Bela* a documentary portrait is provided of an agrarian workers’ commune. In one scene, a representative of the commune negotiates with a radical wing of the MFA seeking permission to occupy the estate. Yet, in a remarkable inversion of the order between law and fact, the army officer replies: “First, you occupy and the law will follow.” Even though this advice would prove mistaken, there could be no clearer statement of how the multitude becomes a sovereign “people” through the appropriation of a territory. Between the universal rights of man and the rights to citizenship lies the no-man’s-land of a state of exception in which sovereign law is suspended. *Torre Bela* shows a community striving to decide upon a new relationship between those dual rights and, in one of the more fascinating moments of the film, the workers invade the home of the landowner, trying on their new identities as vocal, political subjects by literally donning the clothes of their former oppressor. Yet, what began as an encomium to the Carnation Revolution ended, like *Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal*, with a eulogy to a failed, utopian experiment.

“Of course, all of this arrives late,” Serge Daney would write after seeing *Torre Bela*. Although he is stunned by the precision of the film – rarely, he admits, has he seen such a faithful portrait of the making and unmaking of a “singular collectivity,
itself composed of singularities” – but the film is out of synch with its time. Its message was sent to a future that is no longer there to receive it. The critical position of Daney is complex and comes at the end of a lengthy debate in Cahiers du cinéma about the virtues of militant film versus political cinema. Whereas the militant film, to which the work of Kramer was reckoned, would receive higher praise than the work of, say, Costa-Gavras, there was one fatal flaw in the eyes of the Cahiers critics which both genres tended to share. Writing of the latter’s L’aveu (1970), Jean-Louis Comolli would denounce the fact that “everything must be ‘received’ by the spectator as though happening before his eyes, in his presence, in a ‘present’ which tries to pass itself off as that of the ‘real’ (and not of a film)”.

What is lacking in such films is not strictly a matter of political content (énoncé) but a failure to intervene on the level of the enunciative structure of the film. This is a well-known argument and I have already shown how the installation of The Secret Agent takes cognisance of this critical genealogy, but there is more to be said on this topic.

In a more recent interview, Comolli would recall that Cahiers du cinéma “ferociously” critiqued most militant films that were made during May 1968, but there was one important exception: Jacques Willemont’s La reprise du travail aux usines Wonder (1968), which shows a group of individuals gathering at the entrance to a factory. All the major characters of the historical event are there – the union organiser, the militant student, the factory supervisor, the striking workers – and they will engage in one final showdown before filing back to work.

“It is a film which, without intending it and probably beyond what the filmmakers had in mind, harboured contradictions. Everybody played their roles. This, indeed, was our version of the cinema, where the cinema intervenes in order for everyone to appear in their true social and ideological situation, playing their proper roles, and doing so, as is often the case, to utter perfection ... The presence of the cinema induces a field of attraction, a magnetic field in which things appear as they really are ... there is an inscription of the real here.”

Once again, as in Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal, an anonymous woman speaks out, becoming the centre of attention. She flails against the betrayal of the others who seem willing to give up everything they had been fighting for. Refusing to return to work, she holds firm while the others turn their backs upon her and crowd towards the factory gate.
“This type of cinematic situation is not only unrepeatable,” Comolli declares, “it is not even capable of being prolonged.” Sure enough, but as I stated earlier, the point of The Secret Agent is not to repeat the claims of political cinema or the militant film, but to play off their similarities and differences. And in that sense, The Secret Agent is as potent as La reprise and Scenes from the Class Struggle in Portugal in its capacity to provide a mise en scène of the revolution and staff it with allegorical figures. And like La reprise, most of these figures are doomed to repeat the same old patterns of political behaviour. Except, that is, one singular character. “From a certain point of view,” the Assistant Commissioner observes in the novel, “we are here in the presence of a domestic drama” (p. 314). A point of view that Stan Douglas would probably have us share, but only if we remain aware how the circles of the domestic drama expand far beyond the house, the household, and the business. “Few if any of the characters in The Secret Agent”, Douglas notes, “are able to grasp what was unusual about the Carnation Revolution, they all try to apply old solutions to what is a new and unique event”. There is only one slight gap that appears in this edifice, opening and closing with each cycle of the film. This interval is not simply figured by the central void around which the film is structured, the unrepresentable event that is always “two weeks later” or “two weeks earlier”. The absent Stevie is, of course, the placeholder of this empty spot; he is placed on the threshold where the “closed system” of sovereignty opens onto the outside of a bare life. Nevertheless, it is Winnie Verloc who comes closest to passing through to the other side, even though she will eventually be cast back from this turbulent zone and into the arms of the law due to the treacherous behaviour of Ossipon.

V. “Revolution, legality – counter moves in the same game ...”

“They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me. I must play their game of not seeing I see the game.” — R. D. Laing

Time and time again, Conrad describes politics as a kind of schizoid game that is played according to a fixed set of rules that mask a fundamental set of social contradictions. The point is never to disrupt this game or, worse, call attention to the conventional nature of its rules or the ground will give out beneath your feet. If the world doesn’t quite adapt to the expectations of the game, due to such spoilsports as the “anarchists”, the only proper remedy is to retreat into another, more artificial version of the game. At the end of every workday the Assistant Commissioner entered his club in order to play a game of whist. His partners “all seemed to approach the game in the spirit of co-sufferers, as if it were indeed a drug against the secret ills of existence” (p. 145). Douglas does not replicate this scene, but when Ossipon and The Professor debate their respective political standpoints in a café, the one trying to outwit the other, the facing screen shows a game of billiards being played on the other side of the room. Later, when the two meet each other in the same bar, The Professor will accuse the other revolutionaries of moulding their identities on the social system they propose to negate. “You see?” The Professor quips. “You can’t even bear to hear anything conclusive. You revolutionaries are slaves to convention as much as the police. The police play their little games and so do you. But I don’t.” And earlier on, when Ossipon is caught citing a
passage from R.D. Laing's *Knots*, Yundt retorts: "R.D. Laing is an ass ... Like all relativists he refuses to take a position. He wants to be on everybody's side."  

To be disappointed by the game of politics is one thing, but Conrad demonstrates that it is even more tragic to mistake the nature of the game one is involved in. Verloc realised too late that his wife was not playing along with him; that, indeed, she was no longer playing at all. It's all the more ironic that the chameleonic Verloc would become the dupe of his own game of deception. Isn't it the speciality of the secret agent to appear to be playing a game that one is not? Several such situations are sketched out in *The Secret Agent* whereby an inferior pays lip service to the rules of his superiors, while trying to continue a more profitable game on the side. The greater evil that lurks beneath all these games is, of course, that of a total freedom in which identities are lost within a "coruscating whirl of circles".  

As I have noted, not everyone predicted that the Carnation Revolution would end in "cosmic chaos". History would merely repeat itself according to already established patterns. Henry Kissinger, for instance, said to Mario Soares, chairman of the Socialist Party, that he was destined to be Alexander Kerensky. (The simile would prove wrong, of course, as the "Kerenskys won" in Portugal, to Huntington's great satisfaction.) Likewise, as Douglas has observed, few, if any, of the characters in *The Secret Agent* comprehend what is singular about the events they are living through, but that does not entail that "revolution" and "legality" are indeed simply counter-moves in the same game. Conrad was eager to dismiss the revolutionary doctrine – whether communist or anarchist – that it is possible to completely destroy the sovereign order of legality and, thereby, gain access to a realm beyond all conflict. If both Conrad and the revolutionaries of his time were correct in connecting the revolutionary moment to an arrest of time, a stopping of the clock, they were both mistaken in grasping "legality" and "revolution" as either each other's antithesis or each other's complementary. In deploying such notions as the radical out-of-field and bare life in relation to Douglas's *The Secret Agent*, I have suggested that we need to comprehend the nature of this suspension of time (and legality) in other ways. The Portuguese revolution took place on the threshold of the post-Fordist society and what occurred during this prolonged state of exception holds many messages for our own present. If not the angel of history, Winnie is at the very least the messenger who constantly circles around this void. She is thereby able to invoke those other, nameless women of revolutionary time that we have encountered in the movies of, among others, Robert Kramer. Together they join hands in calling across the brink of time.