

## On Compromises

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### I.

When discourses of film theory and political philosophy converge, it is often in a mutual state of unhappiness—one that can only be remedied by appeals, it seems, to notions of autonomy. For instance, where John Stuart Mill saw happiness in the key of compromise, as the tension between Liberty and Authority—which is just one way of describing happiness as the ground of affable and productive social relations in which gross social inequities are more closely tended to than are private satisfactions—radical film and political theorists have regularly viewed compromise as something forced. Freedom is understood strictly in terms of what can only be found outside of any social unity.<sup>1</sup> Compromise is what happens to us—hence our unhappiness—and not something we choose to do for the sake of being happy together inasmuch and as often as possible.

This is, for example, the general drift of Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni's influential essay "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," in which they understand film as:

...ideology presenting itself to itself, talking to itself, learning about itself. Once we realize that it is the nature of the system to turn the cinema into an instrument of ideology, we can see that the filmmaker's first task is to show up the cinema's so called "depiction of reality." If he can do so there is a chance that we will be able to disrupt or possibly even sever the connection between the cinema and its ideological function.<sup>2</sup>

If the filmmaker can recognize what is understood here as a direct and causal relation between representation and the social, one in which representation nevertheless organizes the social on a strictly illusory and always involuntary basis, then what will be disrupted is the false sense of need and illusory sense of unity that mass art provokes:

Certainly there is such a thing as public demand, but "what the public wants" means "what the dominant ideology wants." The notion of a public and its tastes was created by the ideology to justify and perpetuate itself. And this public can only express itself via the thought-patterns of the ideology. The whole thing is a closed circuit, endlessly repeating the same illusion.<sup>3</sup>

What Comolli and Narboni go on to do here is to enumerate a list of types of films, privileging those that "throw up obstacles" to ideology by adopting more a reflexive strategy over those that give it free pass, as if the construction of a taxonomy of progressive and regressive styles were itself unburdened by ontological suppositions. But most importantly, what we see here is a distinction between the popular and the avant-garde that is meant to effect a sense of autonomy, which, once achieved, will collapse any sense we may have of the popular, or more simply, what can be united under the pretense of false consciousness. And this division in the social body can only

take place, one supposes, if we are forced by the filmmaker to give up what might otherwise be said to bring us pleasure, or the happiness we might experience by virtue of what we share, even if all that we share is our delusions about the social. If the enlightened filmmaker denies us the familiar conventions of popular cinema, then we may not find happiness, but we will be in the service of truth. However, this presumes that once we rid ourselves of one illusion no others will present themselves, and, more importantly, that truth is there to be had if we can just learn content ourselves with a less social conception of what it means to be happy. The decision, in either case, does not belong to us and there can be no compromise between categories.

In terms of political theory, we might consider the example of Trotsky's *Terror and Communism*, written in 1920, at the height of the Russian Civil War. After suggesting that there is nothing logical about revolutionary terrorism—indeed that it would be better understood as a necessary response to tsarist violence—Trotsky nevertheless suggests that it is also above reasonable moral reproach:

The state terror of a revolutionary class can be condemned “morally” only by a man who, as a principle, rejects (in words) every form of violence whatsoever—consequently, every war and every rising. For this, one has to be merely and simply a hypocritical Quaker.<sup>4</sup>

By Trotsky's logic, the existence of any violence whatsoever, even a use of violence that we may oppose, cancels out the possibility of opposing revolutionary violence wherever it may occur. The possibility of compromise—an appeal made *in words*—is ruled out in advance as hypocrisy. And if something is ruled out on the grounds of hypocrisy, it is because of a perceived lack of moral consistency, a mendacity that only violence can correct because violence is conceived of as the truth beyond or beneath representation. The assumption of an originary violence—of a truth in violence—makes impossible any discrimination between what might otherwise and more productively be understood as historical contingencies. What the truth of violence covers over is the decision of the one over the many, even if in the name of the many; a certainty that brooks no disputation and regards that certainty as secondary to what has been proven inevitable simply because it has happened before. Violence is not logical, Trotsky says, just necessary and true.

What binds these two works—one, an instance of film theory, the other a famous work of political theory—has to do with a general mistrust of representation, whether as images or words. Truth is rendered in both as that which is guaranteed only in suffering, in the displeasure that we will never choose for ourselves. And in both cases, displeasure leads to autonomy, which is understood as liberty, even though it is hard to know in what sense. For Trotsky, violence was necessary to the final overthrow of tsarism and the realization of the Bolshevik state, but the appeal to violence as a truth beyond disputation leaves no theoretical (and thus practical) basis upon which any dispute within the newly formed bloc might be resolved. That is, violence might produce a new unity, but what it does more enduringly and consistently is to dissolve them. For Comolli and Narboni, a truly resistant, autonomous work must conform to certain aesthetic prerequisites, and thus earn for itself a sense of belonging to a category of image production predicated on autonomy, precisely because anything that might

cause pleasure can only be understood in terms of ideological mystification. Every unity is understood as a false unity. For this reason, so much of radical film theory demanded a kind of violence to the image (albeit a very different kind of violence than what Trotsky was defending), and thus the spectator.

Nevertheless, I do not wish to suggest that we abandon radical political film theory, nor radical politics more generally. Just the opposite. What I would suggest instead is that we might take more seriously the dead-end that radical theory takes in its insistence only on displeasure, which is, as I am suggesting here, always predicated on a claim that truth is an unhappy event. For one, if we abandon the idea that the work of the political is the excavation of truth—and it is tempting not to do so precisely because we are so accustomed to denying the status of truth to any image that offends us—we might be in a better position to see the work that images can do in and for the social, especially as we come to understand the social as something that cannot be, and should not be thought to be, beyond representation. Likewise, if we understand the movement of the social as a process of representation, then we are in a better place to understand just how important it remains to think images politically, but to do so on the promise of pleasure instead of violence, happiness instead of deception. We might begin, then, by thinking about the terms of compromise and recognition rather than identification and interpellation. To proceed in this way is to bring moving image theory even closer to political philosophy, and allow us to both understand and effect change in the social along more peaceable and productive lines.

## II.

My title is borrowed from an essay written by Lenin on September 1, 1917. The plural of compromise should be noted, even if it is less pleasurable to pronounce—significantly less tidy on the page and far too wobbly off the tongue. To speak of compromise in the singular, as we have seen in the case of Trotsky, is to offer nothing of the sort—a demonstration only of the relative and dangerous inflexibility of belief and certainty. *This is the one thing I can do, and I will do nothing more.* The singular is aggressive, stubborn, and entirely unhappy.

The compromises that Lenin was entertaining when he wrote this essay were, by contrast, multiple and related to his ongoing cooperation with the Mensheviks and the Socialist Revolutionaries in the Provisional government to achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat by peaceful means. The compromise could be struck only because the Mensheviks and the S.R. agreed that a government could not be formed with the Kadets. Most importantly, this moment was one in which a distinction needed to be made between a forced compromise and a voluntary one. The former was represented by the Bolshevik's participation in the Third and Fourth Dumas. The voluntary compromise, by contrast, was what could be struck with the S.R./Menshevik block, which Lenin imagined as a true democracy:

The medley of voices in the “bloc” is great and inevitable, for a host of shades is represented among the petty-bourgeois democrats—from that

of the completely ministerial bourgeois down to the semi pauper who is not yet capable of taking up the proletarian position. Nobody knows what will be the result of this medley of voices at any given moment.<sup>5</sup>

Lenin did have an idea, or at least a worry, a lingering skepticism about how well the compromise would work—which is a normal effect of any compromise, so long as that worry remains de-emphasized. Lenin expressed this worry in a long footnote, which I quote here in its entirety:

The above lines were written on Friday, September 1, but due to unforeseen circumstances (under Kerensky, as history will tell, not all Bolsheviks were free to choose their domicile) they did not reach the editorial office that day. After reading Saturday's and today's papers, I say to myself: perhaps it is already too late to offer a compromise. Perhaps the few days in which a peaceful development was *still* possible have passed too. Yes, to all appearances, they have already passed. In one way or another, Kerensky will abandon both the S.R. Party and the S.R.s themselves, and will consolidate his position with the aid of the bourgeoisie *without* the S.R.s, and thanks to their inaction... Yes, to all appearances, the days when by chance the path of peaceful development became possible have *already* passed. All that remains is to send these notes to the editor with the request to have them entitled: "Belated Thoughts." Perhaps even belated thoughts are sometimes not without interest.<sup>6</sup>

What Lenin's worried note makes clear is the temporal dimension of any compromise. It can come too late. Made at the wrong time, it can also fail—becoming less an instance of compromise than a trace of deceit. Compromise, in the moment of a failed mutuality, has to be understood instead as strategic failure. But if something can be described as strategy then it is no longer a compromise. Not, in any case, for the deceived. To compromise, I would suggest, is to decide without agency in the moment of a mutual suspension of instrumentality, and for the sake of the greater good for *all* parties within a bloc. This is why Lenin concludes that "On Compromises" might be better understood as "Belated Thoughts." Belated, he says, but not without interest. Not without interest because any voluntary compromise—we can only infer—retains the promise of revolution without violence, change without bloodshed.

A belated thought is not without interest because it can also become timely; peace should always be on time, and yet it seems to be the one thing that always comes too late, as Derrida so often reminded us. One feels this tardiness very strongly in the history of revolutionary political theory—for instance, in Fanon's pained realization in *The Wretched of the Earth* that decolonization would not be the result of a "friendly understanding," especially as the colonial subject—in most instances—grew up with a gun at his nose and barbed wire around his block. To be, for the colonized, was already to be compromised; it was to live in a permanent state of risk and disenfranchisement that was always someone else's decision. One cannot compromise when one has nothing more to surrender.

We might also consider, and by sharp contrast, Žižek's analysis of the 2005 riots in the Paris suburbs as an instance of superfluous violence, one that nevertheless occurs and occurs *as unnecessary*:

If the much repeated commonplace that we live in a post-ideological era has any sense, it is here. There were no particular demands made by the protesters in the Paris suburbs. There was only an insistence on *recognition*, based on a vague, unarticulated *ressentiment*. Most of those interviewed talked about how unacceptable it was that the then interior minister, Nicolas Sarkozy, had called them "scum." In a weird referential short circuit, they were protesting against the very reaction to their protests. "Populist reason" here encounters its irrational limit: what we have is a zero level protest, a violent protest act which demands nothing.<sup>7</sup>

Žižek's description of the riots as a short circuit, in which the protestors only protest the way that the protest itself was described, is entirely ungenerous. It presupposes, for one, that North African immigrants in the suburbs were unaware of the discriminatory character of French modernity and the development of the suburbs in the first place, not to mention the sense of disenfranchisement that immigrant populations live with daily. Recognition *is* the demand; its lack, the source of *ressentiment*. The gap between lived experience and the way in which that experience remains absent as both news and as popular culture produces antagonism. Moreover, with the increasing popularity of rap in France at the time—especially as the nation began to embrace popular representations of suburban immigrant life around figures like Diam's and Kery James—one can imagine how easy it would be to contemplate one's abjection and to revolt. Resentment emerges when one realizes that things could be otherwise.

This is why and when violence becomes thinkable as possible, but not—I would submit—thinkable as necessary. To decide that it is necessary is to be certain, in turn, that the violence of 2005 in the suburbs of Paris is contextually identical to the violence of the F.L.N. in the years of decolonization. The moments are related, but not identical. The difference is where the prospect for a peaceful revolution resides. The protestors of 2005 are the inheritors of a revolution whose violence was entirely just and for the reasons described by Fanon. Moreover, we are speaking here about a generation of North African immigrants now living in low-income housing produced during the Algerian War in an effort to return France to the French, Paris to Parisians, as the racist logic of colonial France goes. For this reason alone it would be difficult to imagine how the residue of French colonial policy would not be felt in the suburbs, the lack of representation and equality felt today as a result of deeply sedimented values in French culture. These are the values that made possible Sarkozy's call, following the riots, to rid France of the *sans papiers* in the first place. The call, for many, was effective because it was recognizable—it no doubt felt right, and felt so as historically familiar and objectively true.

To speak here of sedimentation is to invoke the relation between sedimentation and reactivation that Ernesto Laclau expropriates from Husserl in *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* in an effort to understand the ways in which "the sedimented forms of 'objectivity' make up the field of what we call the social."<sup>8</sup> Reactivation, by

contrast, is the means by which the constitutive activity of thinking is restored to what has become sedimented. Or as Laclau puts it:

The moment of original institution of the social is the point at which its contingency is *revealed*, since that institution, as we have seen, is only possible through the repression of options that were equally open. To reveal the original meaning of an act, then, is to reveal the moment of its radical contingency—in other words, to reinsert it in the system of real historic options that were discarded—in accordance with our analysis above: by showing the terrain of original violence, of the power relations through which that instituting act took place. This is where Husserl's distinction can be introduced, with certain modifications. Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a "forgetting of the origins" tends to occur; the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade.<sup>9</sup>

Reactivation, then, is the disruptive work of the political, as Laclau has defined it. The political produces the social and is also what can remain buried. As an imaginative act—as the articulation of an absence in the social that must be rectified—the political is what, as Laclau says, prevents the social from "merely reproducing itself through repetitive practices."<sup>10</sup> We might say, then, that the 2005 riots exposed the radical contingency long concealed beneath the repetition of social forms that were instituted in the 1950s; it was a moment of recognition, the reawakening of historic options long repressed that will now need to be acknowledged *and* modified.

As an opening for the political, recognition—which produces reactivation—is also what would allow for change without bloodshed, which is largely what the 2005 riots involved. The violence done was largely to private property—to cars and public buildings, which do not obtain the status of being in any instance. Moreover, private property, in this instance, bears an important relation to Žižek's supposed short-circuit, and the rioters outrage about the manner in which their own protest is being represented back to them by the then Interior Minister of France. We can only assume that Žižek understands representation here as merely epiphenomenal, ancillary—at best—to what *is*, to the cause of what appears unmediated beneath and as truth. If the protestors are absurd for being angry about being represented as scum, then the real problem can only be said to reside outside of discourse, outside of the realm of the political. We can only presume that what *is*, in this instance, is the absence of a stable ground upon which the validity of any given claim can be measured.

Sarkozy could only agree. To refer to the protestors as "scum" is to produce at the level of political discourse the very terms of social objectivity. It could only reactivate what had appeared *as* objective, and did so by way of an eidetic reduction that can only ever succeed on the basis of a willed consistency within representation itself. What appeared as the essence of North Africans—"scum"—could only appear so because the political is the ground of the social. It is what makes the appearance of certain cars and certain buildings in certain neighborhoods seem natural and inevitable. Car burning and window breaking is a rupture in representation, an effort to reactivate the discourses that appear to us not as discourse but as what is. *Here is where these cars belong in and as nature*. If these acts provoked Sarkozy to refer to the protestors as scum, it was only in

an effort to justify force by reference to the truth of the social—the horrible essence of the North African and the poor—and to silence the re-awakening of an awareness of the contingent character of social relations. It is not that the protestors demanded nothing; rather, they proceeded from it, were energized by the nothing and nowhere that gives ground, but gives it only because ground is both contingent and necessarily unstable. If the ground of the social is the political, what *is* can only ever be organized by representation. And that's a good thing, provided that representation is understood as both political *and* contingent; social objectivity more properly understood to be a dream of the metaphysician.

An appeal for recognition, then, is not a demand for authenticity—for an authenticity gone absent but still capable of being recovered nevertheless. Recognition is better understood as a question of representation. It is not a matter of finding in an image or a discourse an essential self—this image of me that has been waiting for me to arrive, where I shall find myself *as* it—but of seeing in an image or a discourse pure possibility; options for how things may be different. As Alexander García Düttmann has very convincingly shown, the one who seeks recognition and the one from whom recognition is sought can never be One, just as any single representation will never constitute my entire being. Thus, recognition is, in Düttmann's terms, a relation of non-identity, even though what one goes in search of when one seeks recognition is, in fact, identity. As Düttmann puts it:

If one wished to define recognition as a pure relationship of otherness, then one would not be in a position to explain how it is possible to relate to the other without a moment of sameness; if, conversely, one wished to define recognition as a pure relationship of sameness, then one would not be in a position to explain how it is possible to relate to the same without a moment of otherness. Finally, if one wished to define the relationship between sameness and otherness as a purely dialectical one, recognition becoming the conceptual epitome of a positive dialectic, then one would not be in a position to answer the question of what it is that distinguishes a recognition resulting from the sublation of otherness from a recognition, from that knowing-oneself-in-the-other that sub-lates difference in the non-identical in the unity of an identity, and that, rather than requiring or needing recognition, already comprises it within itself.<sup>11</sup>

Recognition thus presumes a multiplicity in being, difference-within-itself, even while felt as whole. Because being is multiple, and each being differently multiple, marked by consistencies and inconsistencies at once—though never in a state of incommunicable alterity—there is a spacing that makes recognition possible; room enough to perceive an other in some aspect. I perceive the same in the other precisely because the other is only same in some ways, other in other ways; always at once, but not in any stable proportion or relation. Thus, as Düttmann has shown, recognition cannot be conceived of in terms of a pure dialectic between same and other; a dialectic, presumably, that leads to a becoming-one, which is conceivable only in metaphysical terms, and as a statement of pure essence. Recognition should instead be understood as a function of reactivation, which I would like to understand here as the beginning of the work of the political. It is an impossible origin of representation—a process in which I imagine myself to belong to a community that I nevertheless constitute in an imaginative

process that proceeds from a lack I perceive myself to be experiencing. The plenitude I seek initially appears to reside in, and be conferred by, a being or beings in some partial way that will produce a sense of unity by way of a sublation of otherness that I require if the ground of the social is to be reactivated and exposed as contingent.

This way of understanding recognition poses an intriguing relation between recognition and compromise. If there is a multiplicity in being, then recognition itself can be understood as an act of voluntary compromise. If there will be a unity between the one that seeks recognition and the one or the many in whom, or by way of whom, recognition is sought, then what I am agreeing to in the act of recognition is the failure of any relation of identity, and I make this agreement for the sake of a solidarity provoked by an imagining, by *any* instance of representation. A representation can seem like me—must seem like me in some way, like the me I think I am but am nevertheless yet to become—but can only ever partially be so, lest the potential for recognition disappear beneath an all consuming otherness, or an all consuming sameness, to return to Düttmann's terms. If the sublation of otherness is fundamental to recognition, then what is other in the other remains present as other and thus productive of some other possible unity in which what was other once can also appear as same at some point and for some time. If being is open and multiple, then the act of recognition itself becomes context-dependent. Or as Düttmann suggests: "The fact that the recognizing relationship is one of inconstancy and tension, both homogeneous and heterogeneous, symmetrical and asymmetrical, reciprocal and interrupted by a caesura, indicates its dependency on determinate contexts."<sup>12</sup>

Context, however, is not a fixed totality, an unbroken frame in which the recognizing relationship settles into an order that could have been predicted. Another way of understanding the problem of context can be found if we think not of recognition, but of crisis. In "Criticism and Crisis," for instance, Paul de Man recounts the story of Mallarmé's 1894 lecture at Oxford, *La Musique et les lettres*, where he passionately proclaimed a crisis in poetry brought about by a younger generation of French poets— influenced by Mallarmé himself, of course—who were defying the rules of verse. His audience, as de Man tells it, was clearly nonplussed; they failed to see what all the fuss was about since "English prosody had not waited for some rather disreputable foreigners to start tampering with free verse; free and blank verse were nothing very new in the country of Shakespeare and Milton, and English literary people thought of the alexandrine as the base supporting the column of the Spenserian stanza rather than as a way of life."<sup>13</sup> The point, for de Man, is that the trouble of identifying any crisis—that is, of locating a stable and indisputable referent—has to do with the lack of a transcendental observer:

Historical "changes" are not like changes in nature, and the vocabulary of change and movement as it applies to historical process is a mere metaphor, not devoid of meaning, but without an objective correlative that can unambiguously be pointed to in empirical reality, as when we speak of a change in the weather or a change in a biological organism.<sup>14</sup>

For the sake of our discussion here, then, we should understand context as a question of crisis. For de Man, context is untranslatable, untransferable, and—worst of all, from the

point of view of one who might prefer to believe in a transcendent observer—most apparent at the moment in which a crisis is named. Context, especially as it is summoned in the naming of a crisis, is antagonistic and productively imprecise. Any crisis, once named, becomes catachrestic; it becomes the point around which a series of figures, forms, and events can be collected, or contextualized. It is catachrestic—a slight misnomer that nevertheless becomes productive of meaning—because there can only be disagreement about the terms of the crisis. De Man, for instance, notes that Mallarmé makes a stunning and odd omission from his list of young poets who are effecting this crisis: namely, Rimbaud. Historical context is always under the angular sign of catachresis; productive and always inaccurate, insofar as inaccuracy summons rival formations that it cannot ignore since historical change can only be articulated metaphorically. But in this way “crisis” is also constitutive. Mallarmé’s “crisis” is an instance of the political. It sets forth the terms of representation by which this community will come to exist—supposing, of course, that others might agree. It is a demand for recognition. And because it is an instance of the political, the call itself—as de Man’s characterization of an unimpressed audience of Oxford intellectuals makes clear—will reactivate a series of related “crises” in the history of Western prosody.

Context, then, is that which brings a relation into focus as contingent and necessarily unstable. It sets the terms by which something or someone can be recognized in a particular way, but only by way of a misnomer. And as a misnomer, the sign can never be identical to that which it refers. For instance, when George W. Bush declared of his antagonists in Bentonville, Arkansas in 2000, “They underestimated me,” two meanings came to the fore in the same moment: misunderstand and underestimated—neither of which he was capable of articulating. “Misunderestimate” refers, in the logic of the misnomer as we make sense of it, to misunderstanding. Thus, the misnomer proceeds by a relation of non-identity. It refers to a meaning not related in the conventions of standard usage to that word (misunderstand), while producing sense on a different register—i.e., we understand all too well that we could, and should, lower our estimation of him even further. The misnomer re-routes the signifier away from what we would normally be inclined to think of as its proper referent, and in so doing, reveals the contingency of language that renders the notion of a mistake impossible by way of the impossible relation between sign and referent that it most comically announces. If we get the joke—and it cannot be overemphasized that Bush probably did not intend it as such—we do so by way of a context that we share imperfectly. The misnomer finds sense in our frustration with the repeated acts of brutality authorized by this man who seems not to grasp the most basic elements of language and is (was) charged with the highest degrees of responsibility and agency in the U.S. The context is shared imperfectly because our understanding does not depend on our experience and memory of the same exact instances in a specified, closed quantity. It does not matter whether I’ve seen five press conferences, in which this unsettling mixture of brutality and stupidity are present, and that you’ve seen twenty-five. Recognition of the joke’s meaning—supposing that a joke’s meaning can be unintended and still be a joke—merely requires some overlap and will appear at some historically contingent moment. Some may even get the joke later (the ones, I can only suppose, who need a little more convincing). If we require a more determinate temporality and a requisite quantity of instances, then we no longer have a context, but a system. Moreover, we fail to

understand the representational basis of the misnomer that makes context possible and productive, but only ever as one possibility among others.

Seen as such, recognition presents an opening to compromise. It is bound up with compromise precisely because the historical context in which I find myself preparing to respond to what appears before me is a vast field of historical contingencies, whether recovered in reactivation (Laclau) or merely in what appears to us now as yet another series altogether. In voluntary compromise, I remain open to what is possible, knowing that once possibility disappears—when the social appears objective—any compromise will be forced. A forced compromise can only ever lead to violence since it involves only subtraction without decision—a subtraction that nevertheless fails to appear as subtraction, owing to a totalizing sameness or a totalizing otherness, which follows from the sedimentation of the political within the social. No risk, then: what is given up is what has already been demanded of me. When I go to the airport and disrobe with strangers in a hurried fashion I am engaged in a forced compromise. It is something I have to do. This, as we know, fuels resentment—a resentment that is gradually disappearing beneath the weight of so much sedimentation. *This is simply how things are now. I can no longer remember what used to be allowable.* If I can no longer remember how it used to be, my forgetting might become the ground of a new utilitarianism in which I participate by dint of my own forgetfulness. It is an agreement that I cannot help or be helped to make, and that implicitly occurs for the assured safety of all who pass. And we all know what happens when we let our resentment in the airport emerge—how much longer it takes us to go on with everyday life.

### III.

The idea of voluntary compromise in the service of peaceful change that I have in mind has to do with our relation to popular culture as an instance of the political, as the imagining of a better way. We could say that the revolt of 2005 was internal to the logic of the suburbs themselves, but I can't help but think that it had more to do with its constitutive outside: the representation of something better than what is already present, even if it is not exactly what we all want—precisely because no representation can ever be exactly what we all want. A voluntary compromise, in which I imagine a unity of fellow sufferers, may also come about in more negative representational terms, in an image of me (“scum,” for instance) that demands resistance, lest what offends me in that image be hypostasized as the true essence of me, and the “they” to which I will be said to belong. Popular culture can be the very thing that cues recognition, insofar as it reveals a lack, which in turn amplifies resentment and triggers reactivation. But as an instance of voluntary compromise, reactivation will occur in a more peaceful form, even if the moment of recognition was expressed, initially, as violence.

If we carry this understanding of recognition and voluntary compromise back to film theory, some unexpected possibilities present themselves. The form of popular culture that I have in mind is classical narrative cinema—the recurrently bad object of radical film theory.<sup>15</sup> The form itself is universal—the name bequeathed to us by Aristotle—and has been under protest in Marxist and psychoanalytic film theory for decades for precisely this reason. As a universal form, classical narratives are most often understood as a three-fold operation: in the first act, an antagonism is stated; in the second, the antagonism is expanded; in the third act, resolution is found and order restored.<sup>16</sup> In

Aristotelian terms, the spectator undergoes an experience of catharsis in which his or her unhealthy emotions—which find temporary expression on screen—are purged. Pleasure is also said to be what secures us as peaceful—or one might say pacified—citizens of the state. In this way, the experience of catharsis is also the work of mediation, the establishment on screen of a sense of moderation that follows the on-screen expansion of crisis, conflict, and disorder. Most classical narratives depict crisis as a way of establishing context: a group of people, a closed set of places, and a finite temporality (finite, that is, in the context that the crisis names and then collects). Classical narratives, we are told, make us moderate, and our moderation, in turn, perpetuates the social in its more sedimented form. Or as Siegfried Kracauer once put it:

A producer...will never allow himself to be driven to present material that in any way attacks the foundations of society, for to do so would be to destroy his own existence as capitalist entrepreneur. Indeed, the films made for the lower classes are more bourgeois than those aimed at finer audiences, precisely because they hint at subversive views without exploring them. Instead, they smuggle in respectable ways of thinking.<sup>17</sup>

For now, Kracauer's description will have to stand in for the Marxist and psychoanalytic critique of classical narration as it was developed in increasingly specified terms throughout the last fifty years. It is, suffice to say, the kind of film that Comolli and Narboni had in mind when they wrote "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism." What Kracauer points to is a Marxist logic of base and superstructure, one that assumes the image—this respectable way of thinking—to be causally related to the economic base that it protects in turn. In other words, the image masks the source of structural inequality. For this reason, film theorists on the left—with whom I feel a deep sense of belonging—have called over the years for the development of a counter cinema. It is what underlies every claim for the autonomy of the avant-garde—namely, that the autonomy of the subject can only follow from the autonomy of the aesthetic. However, it might just be that the aesthetic autonomy demanded by political film theory may very well be beholden to a logic of causality. To insist on it might very well be to occupy a category of forced compromise—a site of relative autonomy in which the political becomes less likely to reactivate the social. For one, the development of counter cinema practices—no matter how important they are, and how much I admire them—have not had the revolutionary effect so long hoped for in Marxist and radical psychoanalytical film theory. If we accept the category of the avant-garde as that which is to be distinguished from the popular—if we content ourselves with notions of aesthetic autonomy or advanced art—we merely reinforce our minoritarian position in oppositional terms, which any dominant class will only ever respect by referring to us as elitist, incommunicable, or merely arty.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the superstructural images of moderation described by Kracauer and others have obviously not imploded. For them to do so, capital—as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have shown us—would have to contain within it the seeds of its own undoing, a scenario which assumes in turn that capitalism is causally motivated and that antagonism itself resides within capital—indeed, that capital has an inside.<sup>19</sup>

What I would suggest, instead, is that classical narratives are merely fables of causality; their universal character—their structural repetition through time—is what produces

sedimentation. If crisis becomes the point around which a context is formed, then the repetition of crisis in each instance, in each new film, takes on the appearance of an essence. Crisis is what always recurs, and does so as context; it gathers together beings in a place in order to solve a crisis that nevertheless brings the world we are watching together in a particular way, again and again. The pleasure of classical narratives—the happiness they seem to afford us—should thus be understood as the pleasure of sedimentation, which is another way of describing apperception. Classical narratives are fables of causality precisely because the lack they work to fill is contingency itself. Crisis is thus constitutive of narrative, and in turn the repetition of narrative in its classical dimensions effects a sense of essence that it cannot support since crisis, as I have argued, is catachrestic. And if crisis is catachrestic it is also a misnomer. Crisis always leads to a gathering, but what is gathered in every instance is something altogether different, even if the movement through three acts persists as a cultural form. A classical narrative presents us with images of a world ordered by causality, but it does so on the basis of a misnomer, according only to a sign that can only gain its clarity by what it gathers and not by that to which it can actually be said to enduringly and causally refer. In this sense, we could say that every classical narrative is an affront to both metaphysics and the religious conception of origin—no matter what stories they tell, and even when they tell religious stories. That is, if we agree that classical narration is a political form, then we can only mean that it works to foment collectivity around something that has gone missing—namely, causality itself. And until we can irrefutably prove that the universe is not contingent, classical narratives are likely to remain with us—but they will only do so as representations of something that does not exist and that will likely go on not existing.

This, of course, is also the danger of classical narration. The same sedimented field of objectivity that allowed for Sarkozy's racist calls for the removal of the *sans papiers* to be heard—and felt as right—is the work that classical narrative can do. Because what recurs beneath the content of any particular instance is a fable of causality: a structure without any particular content. It can also move us in a direction that I will not agree with, depending on the moment in which I experience it. And yet, if we agree that classical narrative, as a universal form, is always concerned with producing a sense of moderation in the spectator, and that it reproduces images of causality in every instance and through time—and what is more, that they do so because of a lack that will likely never disappear, since the lack in this case is causality itself—then we would also have to admit its possibility as a progressive political form. To understand the work of mediation that classical narrative does in terms of the production of moderation is thus to recognize, in turn, that what these films continually present to us is the appearance of voluntary compromise. Of course, not every voluntary compromise will work out, as the lesson of Lenin attests. The effectiveness of any compromise is always itself historically contingent. But in this way, we can also say that once recognition occurs in a particular moment, a demand can be made, and the political emerges as an imagined alternative—an alternative without any particular content.

Consider, for instance—and as just one possible context—the last few months of the Bush administration; the months, that is, leading up to what would become the election of Barack Obama. Many of us in the U.S. had at that point lived for eight years in a state of forced compromise, living, as we all did, under the state of exception and the Bush

administration's willful indifference to the physical and socio-economic well-being of its constituents. However, as became quite clear in these final months, especially as Republican candidates began to distance themselves from Bush in an effort to secure their party's nomination and eventually the presidency itself, there was a demand—on the left and the right—to put an end to what had been occurring. Our collective dissatisfaction—the lack of moderation, reason, and justice that so many of us felt (and feel)—became, as such, a contingent ground of the political. It united us—eventually and for some time—in what Laclau has called a chain of equivalence. Equivalence, as Laclau makes clear in “Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” is not the same thing as identity. In a chain of equivalence, unification is achieved on the basis of shared partiality—on the de-emphasization of difference for the sake of unification. What unites any group is what that group collectively lacks—i.e., lawfulness, reason, moderation. Or as Laclau has argued, “It is not...something positive that all of them share which establishes their unity, but something negative: their opposition to a common enemy.”<sup>20</sup> The differences that pertain between members of a given unicity, however, remain present. The presence of difference within a chain of equivalence is also what prevents a hegemonic formation from taking on a totalitarian character, precisely because it cannot emerge on the basis of identity. The chain of equivalence can be undone by difference just as easily as it can be formed. What this means for us is that to be a part of any unicity is also to make a voluntary compromise, such that the demand articulated at the level of the political—the desire of justice that is currently absent, let's say—can be most forcefully heard and effect change in peaceful terms. To change in peaceful terms means that we have to find a point of agreement across traditional party lines, compromises that make the chain of equivalence possible; a bloc dense enough assure the delivery of a new government. Hence, the arrival of the so-called purple state.

During this moment of political upheaval, when both the left and the right seem united by what each collectively lacks, even if we cannot agree entirely on what we all need, the repetitive insistence on compromise in classical narratives—the ritual appearance of moderation and mutual assurance—plays an interesting, and progressive role in the movement of the social. Indeed, this insistence can—and may very well have helped to—unite groups that would otherwise remain opposed, and precisely because the particular content of any given compromise in a universal form is unimportant. It is the operation of compromise that matters, not what is being depicted in any given instance. Consider, for instance, *The House Bunny* (d. Fred Wolf), released in the summer of 2008—in the months, that is, just prior to the election. The film tells the story of Shelly Darlington (Anna Faris), a Playboy bunny who, through the machinations of a rival playmate is forced to leave the Playboy mansion and re-enter everyday life, penniless and without shelter. Shelly wanders into sorority row and the signs of her former life appear to her: groups of women living together in large homes suggest to her a sense of belonging. She becomes hopeful; she seeks recognition. Shelly happens on a particular sorority, Zeta Alpha Zeta, which is on the brink of ruin. Owing to a lack of popularity—which stems, according the logic of the film, from its members' status as bookish, tacky, and unattractive nerds—the sorority has failed to recruit enough young women and thus faces the possibility of losing its charter and house. Needing a place to live, Shelly brokers a compromise with the young women: in exchange for being named house mother, and thus providing her with a place to live, she'll help the young women to recruit the rest of the women they need to retain their house. What the film goes on to

enact, however, is a larger compromise. Shelly encourages the women to become less bookish and more beautiful, while the sorority sisters encourage Shelly to become less shallow and more bookish, all in an effort to secure a relationship with a “normal” guy. As a result, the sorority becomes more popular with men, and thus attracts enough new female recruits, and Shelly gets her man.

These are, for better or worse, fairly familiar terms in the vernacular of classical narrative. Indeed, they comprise the kind of arrangement and on-screen compromise that has worried feminist film theorists for a long time. There is nothing particularly progressive about the terms of compromise offered in *The House Bunny*, and the dance sequence that accompanies the closing credits is enough to make any reasonable person—or, at least, anyone over the age of sixteen—feel embarrassed. Probably, if you haven’t seen the film, or even if you have, the compromise on offer—and the terms of the crisis itself—seem entirely retrograde. Obviously, I don’t believe that women become more attractive as they become less smart. If I’m being honest, though, I would admit that the smarter a woman is, the more attractive she would appear. But I also do not see any reason to generalize my own preferences. Even if I detest the retrograde gender politics of the film and the specificity of the compromise it enacts—i.e., that social mobility depends on decreased intelligence and improved bust lines (which is to say, diminished)—I may take pleasure in the operation of compromise itself, burdened as I had been by the voice of a lawless, hostile, and ideological administration. I can forsake my differences knowing that the member of the religious right sitting next to me in the theater is also getting comfortable with compromise, taking pleasure in the idea that something has to change rather than insisting on what must remain the same, at all costs. What matters in this unicity is not what we share but what we all in this moment lack. I may prefer the compromise that sees Shelly become more worldly and more self-conscious about her own sexual objectification, whereas the man next to me might prefer the compromise he sees these sorority girls enacting for the sake of popularity and solvency. What matters at this moment is, to borrow Laclau’s terms, not what we share, but what we lack.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that *The House Bunny* is responsible for the election of Obama, or that its rhetoric of compromise was what finalized the appeal across party lines for cooperation—in much the way that *Triumph of the Will* (albeit in distinctly opposite terms) is so often said to have cemented the Nazi masses. Films don’t organize the political all by themselves. People do. I am simply suggesting that the context brought to bear by crisis in the film—Shelly’s loss of community and her traditional sense of herself, of how and where she belongs—appeared at a moment in which Barack Obama’s call for unity and cooperation across party lines was gaining traction. Many other films did the same thing. They always do. At the same time, Obama represented the terms of voluntary compromise in the broadest and most consistent fashion and his discourse aligned itself with the universal logic of classical narration. And if we understand classical narratives as fables of causality, as ceaseless representations of what is missing in the world—i.e. causality itself—then the movement of the political can be understood as the alignment of discourses about voluntary compromise that are themselves united on a larger basis: on the understanding, however implicit, that the social can be re-organized because there is no determinate and metaphysical ground of the social. Our being is subject to change, individually and socially, because our

identities do not exist ahead of us and as a determining essence—which is what these films suggest on the basis of their repetition through time. One cannot compromise something that cannot actually be changed. And as I have already suggested, the trouble with this position—and it is a trouble with no remedy—is that the discourse of voluntary compromise that every classical narrative enacts on the basis of a crisis could easily serve discourses that I entirely disapprove of. Nevertheless, those discourses can only be articulated as truth; they cannot actually be grounded in it. As such they cannot give direct passage to a determining essence. No one, I submit, would be compelled to make or see classical film narratives if a determining essence were not what goes missing in each instance, again and again. One can represent causality, but one cannot produce it—not, that is, in any metaphysical sense. To be sure, discourses of causality also find their sedimentation in classical narratives. But those narratives can also provide a basis for recognition—the voluntary compromise that we will all have to make in order to form a community that does not yet exist—that produces the reactivation of the social, and does so precisely because the political, or representation itself, is the ground of the social. And representation begins when something has gone missing, or has only ever been missing. Otherwise, we would only ever speak of the thing itself.

Perhaps, then, the pleasure I experience with classical narratives is not pathological; nor is it a sign of my interpellation in the system of Capital. Rather, the pleasure that the endless cycle of such films brings me, even when such films require a temporary de-emphasis of difference, is the renewed awareness of the absence of causality. It is, thankfully, an experience we have been having again and again, and for centuries. It is also what allows us to make a change in being, individually and socially; to find new ways of being happy together, even if that happiness can only every be partial because it is shared and defined on the basis of a lack—the lack in whose name happiness so often announces itself. But without sharing, there would be no social—something we must recognize even if it means adopting something like a utilitarian conception of happiness. How, in other words, would autonomy and solitude be a solution to the problems of the social? What we say of cinema, we shall also say of the social.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Consider, for instance, Simon Critchley's recent call in *Infinitely Demanding* for a brand of anarchism that does not mirror the totality of the state that it has just undone. What he calls for instead is the model of the artistic avant-garde: "It seems to me that the great virtue of contemporary anarchist practice is its spectacular, creative and imaginative disturbance of the state. Contemporary anarchists have created a new language of civil disobedience that combines street-theatre, festival, performance art and what might be described as forms of non-violent warfare." *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism,” *Film Theory and Criticism*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 815.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Terror and Communism* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 58.

<sup>5</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works, Vol. 2* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 205.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 206. The emphasis and ellipses are Lenin’s.

<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 74-75. The emphasis is Žižek’s.

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York and London: Verso, 1990), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 34. The emphasis is Laclau’s.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander García Düttmann, *Between Cultures: Tension in the Struggle for Recognition*, trans. Kenneth B. Woodgate (New York and London: Verso, 2000), 62.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>13</sup> Paul de Man, “Criticism and Crisis,” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>15</sup> Much of what I am saying here is, I believe, equally true for television. Ultimately, I am not all concerned with questions of medium specificity. Television, however, presents an interesting complication, owing to the open-ended temporality of the narrative it constructs; open-ended insofar as most television shows, I can only suppose, begin without a definite end in mind, temporally-speaking. So, for the sake of simplicity, I will just be speaking here of the standard feature length narrative film—but in very bad faith, where television is concerned.

<sup>16</sup> The most influential account of the principles of classical narration in film is no doubt David Bordwell’s “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Theory*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 17-34. Many other examples could be cited. The proof of its universality (its sedimentation) are the legions of introductory film texts that rehearse the same distinction that I have offered above—too many, in fact, to warrant quotes around my own account. The character and nature of its universality, however, awaits better definition than one finds in these standard accounts.

<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies,” *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 291.

<sup>18</sup> In many respects, I owe this idea to Phil Solomon. Speaking at Oklahoma State University on September 11, 2008, Solomon began by expressing his dissatisfaction with the term avant-garde, reminding us all that it is a military term for the front line. And as Solomon pointed out, we all know what happens to those who go to battle in the front line. Solomon suggests that we might think of avant-garde cinema, instead, as poetic filmmaking. I’m inclined to suggest that we cease making any generic or class distinction between types of film and filmmaking practices. If it were up to me, we would be able to see a film like *Psalm II: “Walking Distance”* (1999) in the same theater, and with the same regularity, as any more “mainstream” work.

<sup>19</sup> See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" in *Emancipation(s)* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 40-41.