

Kuhle Wampe: Politics of Montage, De-montage of Politics?

Gal Kirn

Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences And Arts

Kuhle Wampe (Brecht and Dudov, 1931)¹ is an extraordinary cultural product by the collective that was deeply involved in the formation of Weimar cinema.² Members of this collective were Slatan Dudov, who participated in Fritz Lang's production of *Metropolis* (1927), Hanns Eisler, who composed music for Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin, die Sinfonie der Großstadt*, 1927), while Ernst Ottwald was a distinguished novelist and a screenwriter. Bertolt Brecht did not have major experience in film production,³ although he collaborated with Karl Valentin in the preparation of film *The Mysteries of a Hairdresser's Shop* (*Mysterien eines Frisiersalons*, 1923). At that time, Brecht was developing his 'materialist aesthetics' in trying to conceptualise the answer to the question: what is political art?

Kuhle Wampe is indeed a political film, but also provides interesting formalist innovations and can be qualified as an art film. The film was very often seen as a propaganda film that promoted solidarity within the working-class. But one must say that it was not highly esteemed within the Communist Parties in Germany and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it was the first and, I argue, also the last serious communist film produced in Weimar Germany. My intention is to show that the film provides a complex understanding

¹ Apart from being the name of a film, 'Kuhle Wampe' is a real place and is located near the Müggelsee, a huge lake to the east of Berlin. Kuhle Wampe translates literally as 'cool belly,' but in Berlin dialect it means 'empty belly.'

² For an authoritative account of the history of Weimar cinema, see Kracauer (1947).

³ Film history has predominantly ascribed *Kuhle Wampe* to Bertolt Brecht, even though Brecht himself advocated the idea that film was a collective effort and not just the product of one author. We will employ Brecht's name to signify collective effort for simplicity's sake.

of the contemporary political situation that can be of relevance to politics today. At the same time, the film collective used various techniques, especially montage and music, which contributed to the view that film was art and not just a part of the 'cultural industry'. As Silbermann (1995) lucidly describes it, Brecht himself was pioneering a conception that film as art could be used in a revolutionary way.

This point brings us to the general context of a post-war Germany that was still in political and economic crisis. On the Left, there was a general impression that film was not art and that it was not worth investing in film as such.⁴ The Communist Party leadership took a firmly bourgeois position and supported 'high' culture vis-à-vis film.

My analysis will undertake a triple task. In the first part of the article, I will focus on formalist aspects of film (principally montage); the second part will move on to the question of reality and representation, which is connected to the question of content; and finally, I will show precisely where the film breaks with the content and why the political message of the film is more complex than it appears at first reading.

Montage

The entire film can be viewed as an appropriation of Soviet montage techniques. In his exhaustive account of *Kuhle Wampe*, Silbermann defines montage in the following manner:

[It] is rhetorical, interruptions (expository titles, inserts, songs, choruses), contrasts of sound and image (commentary, voice-off, autonomous music), documentary-like quotes (Berlin streets and architecture, newspapers headlines) and disruptive editing (unusual camera angles spliced together, sudden extreme close-ups, direct address to the camera). (1995, 43)

At the beginning of the film, the spectator is immersed in a carefully edited landscape of railroads and factories in the industrial site of the never-sleeping city. The spectator's gaze is captured by the massive expanse of big factory chimneys. The accompanying music emphasises the grandeur of industrialised urban spaces. This portrayal has many aspects in common with the Ruttmann's representation of the city. Ruttmann masterfully 'paints' Berlin as an enormous machine that grips individuals and unbinds them from their former social ties with family and community. If the city is in Ruttmann's account represented as the ultimate cage of the inescapable modern condition, the industrialised city in Brecht's

⁴ For a more detailed account on this background, see Silbermann (1995).

account carries a much more ambivalent meaning: a potential for either suicide or solidarity. Moreover, for Brecht, the city functions as a metaphor for *the* political scene: the scene of class struggle.

Apart from this introduction, there are several other significant examples of montage. If it is true that the introductory 'job hunting' scene somehow provides a classical *topos* for interpretation, other important montage-scenes worth mentioning are: the 'suicide' scene of the son (Franz); the 'false' engagement party in *Kuhle Wampe*; and the final scene on the train. All of these scenes use various montage techniques and are equally important, but here we will concentrate on the scene of Franz's suicide.

Suicide

Kuhle Wampe is a film that portrays the everyday life of the normal working-class Bönike family. The family is experiencing hard times: both the father and Franz are unemployed; the mother is a housewife and only Anni has a job in the factory. At the beginning of the suicide scene, the family's lunch is accompanied by parental moralising and the habitual argument. While the father claims that Franz has no right to the dole and that he ought to at least behave properly, Franz's mother insists on the liberal maxim that everyone can succeed if they want to and if they put enough effort into it. This speech contrasts with the earlier narrative images of the 'job hunt'. Each new argument that the parents voice is juxtaposed with a subsequent shot of bicycle wheels spinning. We can understand the job hunt as a metaphor for the agonising condition of the resigned and impoverished working-class that has to struggle for everyday survival. It is striking that Franz does not respond while the memory of the job hunt is still so vivid. Drops of sweat dry on his body. He is blocked. But his sister Anni defends him and in order to prevent an escalation of the fight, the mother warns them about disturbing the neighbours. Petit-bourgeois mentality is exposed in details throughout the film, but this is one of its more pointed manifestations. Franz's silence is symptomatic of the whole narration of the film as it resists the process of spectatorial identification.

The spectator's assumption that this fight is a routine occurrence is contradicted in the following episode. The sister leaves for a date with Fritz, the mother goes to fetch water, and the father goes (where else than) to a bar. Franz sees the banner: 'One should always love his beloved' and in the same second his final decision is made. His fate is sealed. This final episode presents the coldness and calculation of the anti-hero's behaviour. The

whole activity is presented as if he is doing something he does every afternoon. The camera shows him from behind. He looks out of the window for the last time. At that moment there follows an extraordinary and well-punctuated *travelling* of the camera that slowly and rhythmically scans his watch. He takes it off, places it on the sill, and removes the flowers. The viewer then sees his hand grasp the top of the window frame, flex with tension, then let go. As a climax to Franz's suicide, the silence of this episode ends with his scream. His next step is a step into void; he commits suicide. His activity is extremely calculated. He takes off his watch so that his family can still use it. His action formulates itself as a last, Protestant will. In addition, he is careful not to damage the flowers; as a good son, he is aware of the care his mother takes of them. Franz's personality assumes a Kafkaesque character. Like Gregor Samsa, Franz seems to bear every domestic pressure. The superegoic demands of his parents haunt him up to his final act. His suicide ought to be an act of freedom, a freeing from all social obligations. But Franz kills himself not only because of the desperate situation of the working-class, but because he took the parental demand 'deadly' seriously. His act can be read as an ultimate loyalty to a nuclear family and its perverted and authoritarian dynamics.

Moving to a more formal interpretation of the scene, we see a juxtaposition of three different activities, 'image-movements' that could be perceived simultaneously at the time of the suicide. The central emphasis is ascribed to the activity of Franz. This image is constantly juxtaposed with two other images. The first image is of the mother carrying a heavy bucket of water up the stairs. This image is accentuated with the sounds of laborious steps. The second image is focused on Franz's bicycle in the hallway. This bicycle hangs in mid-air, unable to perform its normal function. It echoes the rotating wheels of the job hunt. These images create a complex multivalent event. At the moment of Franz's suicide one can hear his scream. It is the only word – or, more correctly, the only sound⁵ – that he emits in the entire film. This scream is as non-human as the sounds made by the insect Samsa. Franz's final scream is contrasted with the steps of his mother. There is no silence after death. The steps persistently echo along the images of their apartment, until the camera finally fixes on the image of the bicycle.

This tragic event is followed by a 'comic' event. Brecht parodies a typical newsreel. The camera represents the views of neighbours, who are questioned in short interviews. The reactions are far from sympathetic, with the exception of one old lady who states that

⁵ For a detailed debate on the distinction between the voice and sound, see Dolar (2006).

Franz had had his whole life in front of him. This procedure uncovers the petit-bourgeois mentality of a mob of people, but at the same time it puts the 'objective' view of documentary newsreel in question. Aside from its comic effect, a tragic effect also takes place: it shows the complete absence of solidarity and any critical reflection among the working class.

Ideological reality versus reality

One of the key concepts we have to introduce here is the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or *distantiation effect*, that was primarily used in Brecht's *Epic theatre*.⁶ This effect aimed to break the link between the spectator and her identification with the hero of the play, and to shock her out of her uncritical capture by the entertainment. With the intervention of distantiation, spectators could participate in the construction of meaning and possibly even become able to distinguish between 'ideological' reality and 'actual' reality – the social relations that shape their lives. The *Verfremdungseffekt* is a weapon against identification. In the medium of film, it is precisely montage that enabled Brecht to achieve the distantiation effect. Montage is here a cognitive process and its effects take place on the micro-level in the spectator, who becomes aware that the 'content' itself is also split. Montage breaks with the 'normal' (linear, natural) film narration at the formal level; whilst at the same time, at the level of content, the spectator sees the juxtaposition of different ideologies and realities. Thus, it is not just form that is split, but also content.

One could sketch two basic objections to this kind of approach. The first objection is the binary construction between the reality and the ideology that we can judge as being 'too short'. This construction operates on the simplified vision of the ideology as the Engelsian 'false consciousness' that has to be un-covered in order to see the 'real' reality hiding behind the ideological veil.⁷ It is only after the spectator's 'successful' reception that the 'real' reality appears. However, as many have shown, the theory of ideology requires a much more complex approach.⁸ The other weak (or rather naïve) presupposition

⁶ For a good explanation of Brechtian *Verfremdung*, see Peter Brooker (2004).

⁷ Silbermann's interpretation reproduces this simple distinction when he describes the status of reality for Brecht, and for the film, in following terms: 'reality is not what the spectator sees but what the spectator re-cognizes, that which is behind the visible.' (1995, 43)

⁸ My inspiration in this regard is the theory of Louis Althusser, which reinverts the classical formula of ideologies as sets of ideas. One can label his approach as a materialistic theory of ideology. Ideas have to be conceived as material practices, with many varied forms, but nevertheless all exist in the

of this kind of analysis is located in its transparent and unmediated view of the spectator's conscious activity. This ignores the work of the unconscious. If it is true that spectators construct their own meaning, one cannot expect this 'pedagogical' effect to occur without some unanticipated effects. If the main target of the film concentrates on the rational and conscious processes of subject, then the need for a detailed analysis of the unconscious 'subject' is evident. How is the collective imaginary constructed? How are 'collective representations' remodelled in the film-process? What is the relationship between the spectator and the material?⁹ Even though these criticisms and questions are partially valid, I will try to show that we can read *Kuhle Wampe* as a much more complex experiment than these objections would allow. We shall try to refute these objections: first, I will show how the binary opposition (ideological reality – reality) is already 'sublated' in the film (through the role of characters and the critique of dominant ideology); and second, I will show how the Brechtian attempt to formulate political subjectivity carries productive dimensions and opposes the simple equation of 'proletariat = working-class + working-class consciousness'.

Role of Characters (Acting)

The distanciation effect is extremely powerful in the film's portrayal of characters. It consistently prevents any firmer identification of spectator with actors. One could even radicalise the thesis and say that there is something like a dissolution of the personality at work. Brecht paints characters in a de-humanising perspective, where dialogues are extremely limited and personal relationships are objectified in the light of the reification of social relations. Kracauer's (2004) critique of the dehumanising nature of Ruttman's *Sinfonie* holds as true for *Kuhle Wampe*. Both directors introduce a different relationship between (dissolved) characters and spectators and in this way they already reflect social relations. Brecht speaks from a class position that tends to articulate one of the consequences of the reification of social relations in capitalist societies as nothing less

form of social institutions. See especially his essay on ideology (1971). This theoretical framework is elaborated by Rastko Močnik (1993, 1999) and by many others, such as Žižek and Butler.

⁹ In Soviet film we can follow this discussion within the framework of the different montage techniques used by Dziga Vertov and by Sergei Eisenstein. The former was extremely radical in his montage and his technique was not transparent. He tried to play with normative identification (anti-narrative, anti-dialogue – the so-called 'cinema-eye'). On the other hand, Eisenstein was much more pedagogical and he formulated a version of montage as 'cinema-fist'. Eisenstein himself said, that Vertov was ahead of his time; people were still not prepared for this type of montage (see Deleuze 1986). Can the same be said for Brecht – or should we see him as closer to Eisenstein?

than dehumanisation. This dehumanisation is not a caprice of the director, but precisely one of the fundamental processes that accompany the capitalist mode of production. One could argue that a more humanistic portrayal of characters would trigger the 'normal' process of idealisation. If Franz's suicide had been represented from a more 'humanistic' perspective, this would result in two possible extremes. It would have bound the family together and they would have embarked on a completely different life, full of love and solicitation for others. Kuhle Wampe would be portrayed as a society of sympathetic workers.¹⁰ The other possible extreme would have seen the family split up, beginning over again in new lives. But of course we see nothing like that. The Bönike family does not mourn and life returns back to business as usual. The humanist perspective at this point would remain within the horizon of petit-bourgeois ideology. Thus, the only revolutionary position within the film is *antihumanist*. It enables the spectator to see how cruel everyday survival is: workers have to fight unemployment, hunt for jobs, organize false engagements and struggles; they do not have money to pay the rent and their calculations must include every pfennig. Thus, it is not important to show how noble these people could be - that would remain in the service of the dominant illusion - but to show how objectified relationships within the working-class have become. Beyond Franz's 'Kafkaesque' character, he is also shown as a representative of the structural effect of unemployment, of the capitalistic mode of production and the patriarchal structure of (petit-bourgeois) worker-class family. Causality in Kuhle Wampe is thus *extra-individual*. This economic and ideological account should be complemented with our thesis that Franz is also a manifestation of a specific result of political class struggle. He stands at the place of the historical defeat of 'the Left', which was already tying a rope around its neck, for one must not forget the rise of Nazism at this point in Germany.

Ideology Criticised: The Petit-Bourgeois/Family Versus Collective Solidarity

In the first part of the film, the plot concentrates on the Bönike family, representatives of the petit-bourgeois ideology. Why is this portrayal crucial? First, it demonstrates that the film-collective was deeply involved in the analysis of a working class that was not a unitary entity. Moreover, the working class was internally split (and not only on political lines) and

¹⁰ Brecht is merciless in his portrait of Kuhle Wampe. It functions as a negative utopia with its petit-bourgeois principles reflecting the misery of the excluded.

practised a petit-bourgeois mentality.¹¹ Secondly, it proves our thesis that Brecht understood 'ideas' as having 'material existence,' that is, they have to be thought as concrete material practices. We can observe a similar analysis in Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (*Der Letzte Mann*, 1924). Murnau concentrates on the critique of the petit-bourgeois mentality and growing class differences in urban Germany. It is the story of a doorman, whose entire existence rests upon his uniform. This uniform functions as a sign of social status. Although, superficially, the film could be read as a critique of appearances - that is, the uniform of the doorman and money functioning as symbols of social power - I would like to suggest a more complex reading. The truth of the doorman as the subject of petit-bourgeois ideology lies precisely in the 'appearance' itself. His uniform, as *the* representation of his relations to others and to society in general, forms his subjectivity. It is precisely this appearance/representation that enables him to play the role of the first gentleman in his neighbourhood. When he loses his uniform, he immediately loses all respect and becomes a target of laughter. Thus, there is no other deeper truth behind his appearance. When he is stripped of his uniform, his subjectivity is dissolved. In the epilogue, the doorman is granted the opportunity to move outside his world; he inherits a large sum of money. By now he ought to be free from all social constraints; he buys new clothes and imitates the life of rich. He remains faithful to the world of appearances, willingly subjecting himself to the *Other* that he had served throughout his life. Hence, there is no reconciliation in the epilogue. The absence of reconciliation with the petit-bourgeois mentality is one of the key ideas behind all Brecht's work. Both films seem to say precisely that we should take these 'imaginary' appearances very seriously, especially if we want to trace a relevant theory of ideology, or indeed any theory of politics that tries to break with the existing situation.

The second aspect that must not be overlooked is a feminist perspective. The patriarchal structure of the working-class family is exposed on many occasions, most evidently at the event of engagement party.¹² Because she is pregnant, Anni and Fritz have to marry but unlike the others, who get drunk and eat a lot, neither she nor Fritz participates in their engagement party. Ironically, none of the people who are supposed to be celebrating the young couple apparently care much about them.

¹¹ This analysis is not without relevance when analyzing the rise of Nazism and its encounter with the working-class. The social instability, high unemployment and economic impoverishment that affected the working classes most of all, in turn made them a fertile basis for fascist political discourse: these are all phenomena addressed in *Kuhle Wampe*.

¹² This scene is arguably remodelled from Brecht's one-act play, *Marriage* (1919).

However, the main protagonist, Anni, is portrayed as someone who tries to move beyond everyday social practices of her family and her entourage in *Kuhle Wampe*. Her strong determination shows in her decision about her own body. When she gets pregnant, she considers the possibility of abortion.¹³ Her father forbids her, but the result of this struggle is unclear. *Kuhle Wampe* is also one of the first films to treat abortion in a general conservative climate. Anni stands as a figure of female emancipation. Later on, she engages in a communist sporting organisation where she helps to construct other kinds of collective ties. These ties transcend petit-bourgeois mentality on the one hand, and the patriarchal family (and its disintegration), on the other. The principle that stands behind this alternative organisation is solidarity. We must therefore see Anni as a representative of an alternative principle, one of collective solidarity that is incorporated in the communist youth organisation. Her political principles are diametrically opposed to those of her brother.

The (Im)possibility of Political Subjectivisation?

So far I have shown how the central question of the film is organised around the representation of reality via montage. I looked mainly at the suicide scene that stripped back the petit-bourgeois mentality ('dehumanisation') and juxtaposed it to a 'real' reality – that is, the structural effects of the capitalist system. But on the meta-level, the suicide is a sheer 'escapist' political solution that could be read as a metaphor for a potential political defeat of the Left. In this final section, I will oppose to this political solution a more active engagement in politics that starts at the point of the sports festival. I will present a 'Brechtian' attempt at representation of the social change and of the subject who is to effect that change.

It is quite evident why the film was not acceptable to the official line of the Communist Party. The film is not explicit in its formulation, if and how the social change will take place and, of course more importantly, who will execute this change. Brecht does not give an unequivocal answer, but the formulation of a political slogan is condensed in the last sequence of the film, in the train-sequence:

'Who will change the world?' - 'Those who don't like it.'

¹³ This was also one of the main reasons for contemporary censorship of the film.

On a grammatical level, the 'subject' of change is not clear in this phrase. A first reading would claim that this phrase is naïve. Brecht offers nothing more than a simple negation of the existing situation; it is an empty gesture that does not lead to emancipation. How can one expect the individual to bring about collective social change? I suggest an alternative reading that thinks the politics of emancipation precisely through the political act of destruction of the existing order¹⁴ and advocates 'desubstantialisation' as its fundamental political process.

What does Brecht do with this final slogan? He demands that the spectator recognises a subject. Next, the spectator must name the subject, but this step is very unclear, so I will elaborate its political stakes with the help of Rancièrian-Badiouian terms. First: a spectator certainly thinks about the potential subject of change, perhaps a working-class, communist youth organisation, or even the inhabitants of *Kuhle Wampe*. Second, the naming of that subject is absent from this process. There is a fundamental juxtaposition between the petit-bourgeois family and the collective engagement of a communist organisation, but this contrast is not elaborated and cannot be thought in terms of 'event'. The actual process that is at work in Brechtian politics is the thinking of the (im)possibility of the proletarian subject, a subject that is always-already present, but is invisible to the dominant order (capitalism) and subjected to the dominant (liberal, petit-bourgeois) ideology of the society. On an empirical level, the working class is subjected to the dominant ideology and its practices (such as alcoholism, escapism, petit-bourgeois mentality) and therefore cannot constitute the revolutionary class as such, but only an empirical entity. But the famous utterance that calls for the subject of change does not call upon an already formed political entity. The subject that is already present will have to be formed during the political process of subjectivisation.

Brecht thinks the 'empty' (abstract) space that can or cannot be occupied by a certain subject in a specific historical moment. This empty space is (concrete) space that is not linked to any privileged public or private space. It is not important whether workers from the empirical world can function (be *subjected*) as proletariat. Moreover, it is precisely this gap that is at work in the film; that is, the gap between the working-class that is represented as 'ugly and bad' and the subject that has to be formed in the process of the subjectivisation. The only predicate that is apparent for the new subject is that the change

¹⁴ The breaking with the existing situation is conceptualised within Badiou's general theory of event. See especially, *Being and Event* (2005a).

will come from those who are thoroughly unsatisfied with their mode of living. The gap between the formal and empirical is the fundamental starting point of every theory of politics.

Politics that deserves its name (true politics) is constituted through the rupture with the existing order; the proletariat will arise from the dust of petit-bourgeois families. Politics has to be thought in terms of the impossible (or in Lacanian terms, the Real), but at the same time it has to be conceptualised as a political act, where its main processes are destruction and constitution that re-form existing material. This material is on the one hand 'subjective', that is, the existing social groups/classes have to be desubstantialised from their 'natural' position in the order of society; but on the other it is also the objective conditions that are at stake when this constitution takes place. This is part of the general process of desubstantialisation. It is only through desubstantialisation that the proletariat, or any kind of political subject, appears.

This can be thought in parallel with Stathis Kouvelakis's conceptualisation of the proletariat as a 'non-class' that can be inserted into a described gap. At first, he equates the proletariat with antagonism:

To name the 'proletariat', rather than describe its 'condition', and to identify it with the negativity of a non-class which reveals the antagonism inherent in bourgeois society, rather than treating it as a massive empirical fact destined to be absorbed by the ideal figure of human plenitude. (2003, 350)

The plot of *Kuhle Wampe* can be seen as a bitter critique of the working-class - in the Engelsian sense of the word (as a sociological entity) - and can be seen as homage to workers' self-management and engagement in collective projects that open up the possibility of a new subjectivity.¹⁵ The 'positive' and 'a priori' subjectivity is *substantialised* in the film in the communist youth organisation. This type of organisation could be seen as a relevant political example in the obscurantist time of the late Weimar republic. But we have to add that, with the ultimate phrase in the film, all the 'substance' is deconstructed and any 'a priori' conception of the subject cannot come into being. The phrase becomes a slogan that is organised around the fundamental axiom of equality.¹⁶ It is also complemented with a solidarity song. Brecht and Eisler wrote this song to fight against

¹⁵ Kouvelakis' critique is also concentrated on the dubious link between class and 'class consciousness,' which is never direct. The reality and the possibility of emancipation are much more complex.

¹⁶ For a concise conceptualisation of equality as a political axiom and principle, see Rancière (1995) and Badiou (2005b).

political repression and the rise of Nazism. Brecht formulates an appeal for social change that tends to handle the impossible of the situation and asks two strategic questions: how to break with the existing order? How to prevent the rise of Nazism? Thus we can find two formal aspects in his ultimate gesture: the appeal for social change that becomes a maxim which articulates the impossible and intolerable conditions of the excluded,¹⁷ on one side, and the universalisation of the position of subject as a carrier of social change, on the other. Anyone can qualify as the subject if she practices and verifies the principle of equality, if she unties her 'natural' position in the order. With a political act, symbolic and real, the new subject will break with the existing material and attempt to recombine its elements. In Brecht's case, this universal position should be ascribed to the proletariat. The phrase implies precisely the gap between the sociological entity of working-class and the (future anterior) possibility of the rise of proletariat.

Class Politics?

Towards the end of his article, Silbermann (1995) suggests a critique that is not very convincing: if it is true that the absence of workplace politics is displaced in the image of sports festival, this does not mean that Brecht has moved away from class politics. It is precisely the moment of *de-localisation* (from the Party, not from class) that was so radical and which the Party found so problematic. On the one hand, Brecht moves beyond a simple vision of politics that shows political struggle as struggle for state power where political parties play the main role. On the other hand, even though he refers to the factory as a site of the working-class, he does not set it as a space for political action. Brecht is already thinking beyond the factory as the spatial paradigm of class politics. This shift is radical. It was unquestionably too radical for the Communist Party. Thus, *revolutionary* politics has neither a privileged place nor a privileged (substantialised) subject. This means that every revolutionary politics is always singular. It does not mean that it has to remain abstract, while it is necessary that politics happens in concrete circumstances. It always localises and identifies with certain groups, but its forms and effects can never be predicted. In the film, this identification remains within the framework of class struggle.

¹⁷ What could be a better example of the excluded than the unemployed workers, with their disintegrated families, living in the barrack settlements of Kuhle Wampe? Kuhle Wampe remains invisible to the eyes of dominant community. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Kuhle Wampe try to live peacefully their own petit-bourgeois lives. Isn't the most impossible demand precisely the demand to emancipate Kuhle Wampe from petit-bourgeois ideology?

There is an important class moment in the film. It is formulated (and localised) during the last sequence on the train, in the dialogue concerning the crisis of the coffee market. A supporter of extreme nationalism suggests that Germany should have colonies. His thesis is as follows: when we have colonies, we will have coffee and when we have coffee, we will sell it according to our terms and gain profit from it. At that moment, a communist comrade intervenes. He asks the nationalist, who precisely embodies the 'we' that he is always referring to, 'Who will profit from it? *Us?*' The comrade explains that it is certainly not him, or the old lady sitting over there or the gentleman sleeping in the other part of the train. Nobody among 'us' will make any profit from colonies. He does not provide an answer to the question of who will receive the profit, but rather establishes a sharp class line where one can see punctuated division between classes. In addition, he also signals how an ideological mechanism works. At the moment when an individual recognises herself in this collective 'we', when she is 'interpellated' as a subject, in this specific case, one can talk about the extreme nationalist subject that demands German interests - she becomes a part of this 'we'. Here, we can see another important lesson at work: the dominant ideology is not solely the ideology of the dominant class. On the contrary, the dominant (nationalistic) ideology can easily become a part of the exploited and marginalised classes. Thus, the link between a specific class ideology and a specific class is undermined. This is one of the most important theses of *Kuhle Wampe* and therefore one can claim that true class politics should work on the level of theorising ideology and its effects (re-identification).

What is even more important is the fact that *Kuhle Wampe* practices *avant la lettre* the famous Benjaminian prescription: the *aesthetization of politics* (Nazism) is countered by the *politicisation of aesthetics*. Brecht politicises a sports festival that will later be re-appropriated by Nazism and its advocates. When comparing it to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1936) one can distinguish these representations in several different ways. The Nazi director tries to present a uniform body of the nation, where the subject of change has already been substantialised in the German nation, *Volk*; whereas, as I have shown, Brecht leaves room for the individual on the one hand and moves towards a process of desubstantialisation. There is no *a priori*, organic unit present in Brecht's portrayal of masses. Riefenstahl praises the beautiful body and tries to aestheticise the political event.¹⁸ The sheer setting up of bodies uniformly concentrated on one central

¹⁸ See, for example, Elsaesser's article on Riefenstahl (1993).

point - the *Führer* - is diametrically opposed to the representation of the political event at the end of the sporting competition in *Kuhle Wampe*. There, a real existing group called 'Red Megaphone' performs a play about solidarity between tenants and a landlord and is greeted with general enthusiasm. But the young activists and sportsmen are not organised hierarchically. Their bodies are not organised in a disciplined order. If Leni Riefenstahl aestheticises Nazi politics, Brecht performs the procedure of politicising the aesthetics of a sport event. One has to fight Nazism precisely on its own terrain and not avoid the prescription to think Nazism (Badiou, 2005c). Against Nazi organisation, Brecht establishes a communist youth organisation. It is true that his presentation of the competitive sport event remains ambivalent,¹⁹ but the political position behind the representation remains important and firm.

My analysis has concentrated on questions of montage and politics. If montage enabled a specific type of representation of reality, one could say that, in Brecht's case, the stake behind the use of montage was pedagogy. And this pedagogical approach is always already linked to a certain politics. In *Kuhle Wampe* (and in his art in general) Brecht tries to track a specific point that usually remains uncovered or intentionally hidden - that is, a point of re-presentation of politics, to paraphrase Althusser. Indeed, the place of politics in art appears only very rarely. I have tried to show that Brecht also produces a certain type of 'demontage' of politics. Politics cannot be 'montaged' (edited) and one cannot anticipate the effects of its rupture. It is precisely in the divorce (*dé-liaison*) of ideology and class, in the divorce between the category of class as a sociological entity and class as a political subject, that there lies a possibility of revolutionary politics, of a politics that breaks with the existing situation.

Instead of summing up key points I would like to suggest a dialectical synthesis that works upon the film's key metaphors. *Thesis*: The first part of the film is concentrated around the wheel (job hunters), the wheel that rolls in the emptiness; or, in other words, it merely rotates without producing any real effect ('desire').²⁰ We could read it as a metaphor for the dead-end situation that supposedly might be traversed in the 'escapist and conformist' spirit; that is, in the image of Franz's suicide (in fact, only a realisation of the superegoic demand). As a metaphor on the meta-level, we can argue that this subjectivity means the end of the possibility of class-proletarian politics and the possible fall into

¹⁹ One can detect irony in the song that promotes competition and victory.

²⁰ We could also refer here to the Expressionist symbolism of rotating figures, as symbols that always circle around the authority without being (fully) able to escape it.

Nazism, or a retreat from politics. *Antithesis*: This metaphor is contrasted by the youth organisation and the event of the sports festival. The possibility of alternative politics is embodied by the voluntary work, collective solidarity and determination for social change. Metaphors in this part are far more subtle, starting from the play staged by 'Red Megaphone' to the repeated communist song on solidarity and paddling of canoes on the river that always 'reach' their goal ('drive'). There is a logical contradiction between these two consistent positions (thesis, antithesis) and they present two diametrically opposed solutions, or subjectivities, to the class struggle. However, to formulate a true revolutionary politics, one has to insist on an inconsistent point that enables a politics that drives towards the Real, towards the impossible. The proletarian revolution in Weimar Germany, after the fall of the Spartacus league, at the moment of the rise of Nazism, is precisely the moment that is impossible to imagine. *Dialectical synthesis*: If these two modes of subjectivisation are confronted in the film, they never actually come together or confront each other in real space. It is only in the train-sequence that different 'ideological' positions are expressed and the final concluding utterance about social change takes place. It is not a metaphor but a political axiom of equality that enables us to think a truly revolutionary politics. This political utterance is a political act that called for action at that time and also calls for action today.

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