

The Anarchist Cinema of Peter Watkins¹

By David Armitage

“This is round shot. This is what it does.” A three-pounder cannon fires its load; the camera moves into tight shots of its victims. The wounded men—boys, really—are hard to make out amid the smoke of battle and the graininess of 16-millimetre film. An authoritative voiceover tells us their names, ages, and conditions. Alastair MacInnes, twenty years of age: right leg severed below the knee-joint. Malcolm Angus Chisholm, twenty-four years of age: disembowelled. Ian MacDonald, thirteen years of age: shot. The style is pure news-reel: shaky photography, rough film-stock, confused action, on-screen interviews into camera. The battle was the last ever fought on British soil, in 1746, but we suspend our disbelief for the moment. Surely there wasn’t a camera-crew on Culloden Moor?

This is a short scene from Peter Watkins’s *Culloden* (1964). The film was first shown on BBC television in December 1964 to such strong audience reaction it was re-broadcast six weeks later (on the day I was born, as it happens).² Scenes like this established Watkins’ precocious mastery of his medium: he was not yet 30 when he directed *Culloden*. Only a few moments before the harrowing shots of the wounded, we saw the Whig historian Andrew Henderson cowering behind a stone wall, telescope to his eye, telling his viewers, like some eighteenth-century Walter Cronkite or John Pilger, why his vision would be compromised.³ (“It’s going to be very difficult to see what effect our cannon is having on the rebel lines.”) The omniscient camera sees what soldiers in the *melée* cannot. Announced objectivity is no help. Only daring anachronism can illuminate the battle historically.

¹ Forthcoming in *Perspectives on History* 51 (2013).

² Nicholas J. Cull, “Peter Watkins’s *Culloden* and the Alternative Form in Historical Filmmaking,” in *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), p. 93.

³ Author of [Andrew Henderson,] *The History of the Rebellion, 1745 and 1746: Containing, a Full Account of its Rise, Progress and Extinction ... By an Impartial Hand, who was an Eye-witness to Most of the Facts* (Edinburgh: R. Griffiths, 1748).

Peter Watkins shows what cinema can do in the hands of a director who confounds centuries and genres: revolutionize the relationship between history and film. He is the most important historical film-maker most historians have never heard of;⁴ indeed, I would go so far as to say that Watkins is the most important historical film-maker of the twentieth century. His latest film, *La Commune (Paris 1871)*, appeared in 1999 but he still actively promotes his own work: he is our greatest *living* historical film-maker. He also comments trenchantly on the “media crisis” wrought by the “Mass Audio-Visual Media” (MAVM) of film and television and their commitment to the “monoform”: rapidly-cut, fast-moving, narrative propelled by extraneous music and often spiced with prurient violence, projected *at* the audience but not engaged in communication with them.⁵ Watkins’ own unmistakable style—with its hand-held filming, long takes, tightly cropped faces, mostly monochrome stock, voiceover narrations, and non-musical soundtracks—can occasionally seem earnest, even overbearing. Yet immersing yourself in his historical films, as I did this past summer, makes watching most contemporary commercial movies unbearable—they feel antic, deafening, manipulative, and complacent. You do see film, and historical narrative, quite differently through Watkins’ eyes.

Watkins’ reputation rests on a handful of films. *Culloden*, *The War Game* (1965), *Edvard Munch* (1973), *The Freethinker* (1992–94, on the life of August Strindberg) and, above all, *La Commune* mark him as one of the few truly transformative—both aesthetically original and politically radical—directors the

⁴ Watkins is still the subject of only one monograph and one volume of essays, both valuable: Joseph A. Gomez, *Peter Watkins* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979); *L’insurrection Médiatique. Médias, histoire et documentaire dans le cinéma de Peter Watkins*, eds. Sébastien Denis and Jean-Pierre Bertin Maghit (Pessac: Presses universitaires de Bordeaux, 2010). See also James Michael Welsh, *Peter Watkins: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), and Antoine de Baecque, “Peter Watkins, Live from History: The Films, Style, and Methods of Cinema’s Special Correspondent,” in de Baecque, *Camera Historica: The Century in Cinema*, trans. Ninon Vinsonneau and Jonathan Magidoff (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), pp. 159–204.

⁵ Most of Peter Watkins’ writings on the “media crisis” can be found on his website: <http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/index.htm>, accessed 1 September 2013.

medium has produced.⁶ I suspect Watkins himself would find that judgment irrelevant: he has never been much of a *cinéaste*, gives little credit to his predecessors, and claims little kinship with his contemporaries. (Apart from a general debt to Italian neo-realism, Truffaut's *400 Blows* is a rare source for his cinematic grammar: the frozen face, turned to the audience, at the end of that film recurs often, especially in Watkins' earlier works.) He has always drawn less on other films than on other forms—especially photography from *Paris Match* and *Life*, newsreels, amateur dramatics, and community theatre. He is more openly indebted to historians—from John Prebble for *Culloden* to Alain Dalotel, Jacques Rougerie, Robert Tombs, and others for *La Commune*, for example—than he is to other auteurs. And he has always drawn heavily on the talents of his mostly amateur casts, who give new meaning to historical metaphors of “agency” and “action” in their central contributions to his films.⁷

Watkins' characteristic visual style evolved alongside this method and his earliest films—*The Web* (1956), showing a German soldier dodging French partisans in 1944; *The Diary of an Unknown Soldier* (1958) who faces boredom and fear in the First World War; and his first mature film, *The Forgotten Faces* (1960), a poignant recreation of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising—all feature non-professionals, an invisible narrator, as did *The War Game*, a future history of nuclear attack on south-eastern England that was banned for decades by the BBC.⁸ These early films shared a revisionist impulse to play out the past in the present tense that would have informed a host of unmade historical films Watkins had planned, on the

⁶ I do not deal here with Watkins' alternative histories of the near future—*Privilege* (1966), *The Gladiators* (1968), *Punishment Park* (1970), *The Trap* (1975), or *Evening Land* (1977)—which use many of the same techniques as his historical films with more variable degrees of artistic success, or with *The Journey* (1987), his 14½-hour documentary on the global anti-nuclear movement.

⁷ On Watkins' relationships with his actors, see John R. Cook, “Don't Forget to Look into the Camera!': Peter Watkins' Approach to Acting with Facts,” *Studies in Documentary Film* 4, no. 3 (December 2010): 227–240.

⁸ James Chapman, “The BBC and the Censorship of *The War Game* (1965),” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (January 2006): 75–94; Tony Shaw, “The BBC, the State and Cold War Culture: The Case of Television's *The War Game* (1965),” *The English Historical Review* 121, no. 494 (December 2006): 1351–1384.

Sharpeville Massacre, on Native American removal, and on the battle of Little Big Horn, among others. *Edvard Munch* brilliantly used the same techniques to reimagine film's potential as a biographical medium: no film better captures the mysteries of artistic creation, even though Munch is never shown painting. And *La Commune* is the most searching historical examination of self-government and its stresses ever committed to film.

The aims of Watkins' historical cinema could not be further from the costume-dramas that mostly pass for historical movies today. Those films are generally formalist, obsessed with superficial detail and mostly using the past as a place of escape from the present. By contrast, Watkins' films are anarchist, engaged in patient, sometimes chaotic, but always fruitfully collective productions engaged with contemporary politics. That anarchistic spirit goes back to the director's roots in amateur theatrical groups in post-War Britain. Watkins' films are at once tightly scripted and remarkably open (not least in length—none of his major works remotely conforms to the regularities of TV episodes or Hollywood time-constraints). Yet just as the historian strives to control her material, so the matter sometimes fights back. Watkins knows that feeling well, as his actors have sometimes rebelled against his direction. In *La Commune*, especially, he captures on film the growing tensions between direction and participation—"a long and ego-bound form and, an open and pluralistic form"—in the making of the film.⁹ This deliberately breaks the illusion but it immeasurably deepens the complexity of his engagement with history and memory.

La Commune is Watkins' anarchist masterpiece. He made it in thirteen days in an abandoned factory in Montreuil, on the outskirts of Paris with a cast of over two hundred participants who recreated the six-week experiment in socialist self-government. Most came to the project as activists not actors, with a pre-commitment to Watkins' own utopianism and to his desire to bring contemporary capitalist society (and its media) to account at the bar of the present. But the film is not one-sided: Watkins also advertised in *Le Figaro* and elsewhere for more

⁹ John Gianvito, "Peter Watkins—Notes and Questions (2): *La Commune*," *Cinema Scope* 25 (Winter 2006): 27.

conservative voices, who convincingly ventriloquize the bourgeoisie, the Thiers government, and other reactionary forces. The media intrudes throughout: two reporters for the independent “Commune TV” interview the historical/theatrical actors on screen (and receive increasingly angry pushback from the Communards as the crisis accelerates), while broadcasts from the official “Télévision Nationale Versailles” punctuate the action with pompous music, talking heads, and witheringly critical commentary on the failings of the Communards. The artifice is inescapable: shot in tight spaces, under even light, but in costume and in character, there is no pretense we are witnessing any other than a reconstruction with conscious anachronisms like intrusive TV reporters.¹⁰ Here Watkins’ critique of the media meets his historical method with spectacular effect—indeed, with accelerating energy as it goes out of control in the second half of the six-hour movie and some of his actors begin to turn against his artifice.

La Commune is a film centrally concerned with argument and organization, about collective responsibility and individual culpability, but not about “events” in the conventional sense of the term. Most of its major scenes focus on passionate discussions, filmed at generous length, with many faces in shot (a change from Watkins’ previous historical works). Where will the female Communards hold their meetings? How will each commune run its affairs? How should they respond to the repressive troops? Why is self-government breaking down? Who is this man Watkins to tell us what our scene should say, how our debate should unfold? The film captures the open-endedness of utopian revolution so immediately you forget the inevitability of the outcome. It is therefore easier to feel all the pain and confusion of defeat at the end. Two years after the Occupy movement began, the relevance of *La Commune* has only become more urgent.

Watkins and his actors learnt everything modern social historians could teach them about structure and agency, constraint and contingency. They live it, passionately and grippingly as they fashion the film, build and defend their

¹⁰ Roxanne Panchasi, “If the Revolution Had Been Televised: The Productive Anachronisms of Peter Watkins’s *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*,” *Rethinking History* 10, no. 4 (December 2006): 553–571.

communities, before our anxious gaze. And the actors have continued to live it. They formed an organization, La Rebond pour la Commune, which carries on the conversations opened by making the film.¹¹ They had to: French television originally showed *La Commune* in a graveyard slot, ending at 4 am, when almost no-one would watch it. But it is now readily available, on DVD and on YouTube, and should be viewed by anyone interested in the Commune, in politics, in history, or in the political possibilities of cinema itself.¹²

Watkins' oeuvre, up to and especially in *La Commune*, exposes assumptions about film now so deeply ingrained we hardly notice them. Why should a film be two hours long, but the average length of a shot about four seconds? Why does it need a soundtrack, professional actors, or the illusion of objectivity? Why not deploy a narrator, historical captions, and conscious anachronism? And why not use film as a critical, activist medium? Watkins' assault on media pieties has been so aggressive, so fundamental, that he has guaranteed his own marginality from the mainstream. He has spent most of his life in self-exile, scraping funding for his films wherever he could find it, but since the 1970s always outside the regular channels of finance and production. The greater availability of his works should enhance his reputation and his impact, not least among historians.

Watkins' experiments with history raise questions about our own versions of the monofilm. Do we have a version of the studio system, with journals and presses determining not just how but even what we should write? (Why should a monograph have six chapters, an article ten thousand words?) Should we, like Watkins, try new narrative devices, expand the range of actors we admit to our productions, admit more artifice, strive harder to broaden the engaged impact of our work? The films of Peter Watkins challenge us to rethink our mission by revealing the critical purchase the past can have over the present. As the director might say in one of his voiceovers, "This is history. This is what it does."

¹¹ <http://www.rebond.org/> accessed 1 September 2013.

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12e28qGeFAw;>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7gUe_jHHG0, accessed 1 September 2013.