



REVISIONING EUROPE: THE FILMS OF JOHN BERGER AND ALAIN TANNER

by Jerry White

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CONCLUSION

I began this book by asking what constitutes political cinema. I have tried to answer that by discussing work that John Berger and Alain Tanner did together, and sometimes alongside one another. Several crucial elements have emerged throughout that discussion: a rigorous but never uncritical relationship with the political and theoretical idealism of the 1960s and 70s, a period that was indeed very fruitful from a politico-aesthetic standpoint, and a parallel insistence that there is much important political work to be done on the level of form; a continuous intertwining of fictional and realist aesthetic patters, and a parallel instance on the inseparable and coequal nature of the political and the personal. The political sensibility of Berger and Tanner was always close to the ideals of the internationalist left, but this period in their work is marked by the strong influence of specifically Swiss ideas about politics and collective action. Their shared work shows, then, that there are basic problems both in cinema and political practice that must, and just as importantly *can*, be reconciled by way of creating an artistic practice that seeks a just society. Like all fully formed artists, they have found the answers to these basic problems by being part of the society that formed them and their work. To return to the quote from Berger's photo-book *A Seventh Man* with which I opened this book, "The subject is European, its meaning global" (7).

Tanner is especially slippery on this matter, and I have tried hard throughout to illustrate the degree to which these films are defined by concerns specific to Switzerland, despite what Berger identified as Tanner's love/hate relationship with the place (Appignanesi 302). Tanner has recently been making a lot of waves in Switzerland on this front. He said in

an interview published in the Swiss national daily *Le Matin* on 8 February 2004 that “Swiss culture doesn’t exist. We are neither a nation nor a people, nor for even greater reasons a culture. Besides, Switzerland has become an unfilmable country” (20).¹ This strongly echoed what he would go on to write in his memoir *Ciné-mélanges* (published three years later), which I quoted in the introduction: “The Swiss do not form a people, and do not have a culture, but attach themselves to a bunch of others” (84).² This kind of talk, predictably, drives Swiss pundits nuts, and that *Le Matin* interview prompted Jean-Louis Kuffer to reply (in the 23 February 2004 issue of the rival newspaper *24 heures*) that “Swiss culture is alive and well; moreover, we can see it ... in the films of Alain Tanner” (ellipses in the original).³ But he had harsher words as well: “If there is no Swiss culture, then we might as well dismantle institutions like the Office fédéral de la culture or Pro Helvetia, as we wait for the market to once again sanctify stars like Pipilotti Rist and Mario Botta. Alain Tanner is certainly the last one to think like the neo-liberals, and yet his disillusionment well and truly risks giving the game to them.”⁴ There is indeed an unfortunate intersection between grouchy talk about national identity meaning nothing and the desires of globalized capitalists to eliminate all impediments to their activities.

This is clearly unintentional on Tanner’s part, but more importantly, grouchiness like this doesn’t really represent the position he has staked out, especially the position he was staking out at the time he was working with Berger. In a very nuanced 1970 speech he gave in Paris (titled “Histoire du cinéma suisse”), he said that “under fire from Hollywood allies, Swiss culture was completely menaced by colonization.” He went on to say that “Our streets, our houses, our compatriots, have started to transform into things that are seen, looked at, commented on. Swiss cinema, a national cinema, is of little importance to us in and of itself: we simply want that filmmakers who live in Zurich, Lausanne, or Geneva be able to express themselves, and Swiss cinema will follow” (Boujut, 170).⁵ Tanner’s real resistance is not to Swiss identity or national identity as such, but to sentimental patriotism; his desire for a Swiss cinema was driven not by nationalism but by anti-centralization. He is advocating for images that are autonomous.

This is discernable not only in the statements he has made but also in the films he made with Berger. The *Cahiers du cinéma*, in the considerable coverage they gave to *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l’an 2000*, understood this

well. Serge Daney, opens his text “Les huit *Ma*,” by writing that the film is defined in part by Tanner’s interest in “*topography* (Switzerland as the centre of the capitalist world, a mid-place where all borders meet, utopia)” (48, italics his).⁶ But it is the text by Serge Le Peron, “Ici ou ailleurs” (an allusion to the Godard-Miéville film of 1974–76) that is more expansive on the way that *Jonas*, among other films, really is engaged with Switzerland itself:

In Tanner’s films Switzerland (what it *symbolizes*, the capitalist system: in that Switzerland is an unreal emblem), is present but, as in a mirror, nullified, reduced to appearances. There are no clear signs of Switzerland’s customary existence (if you want to pretend that those exist): snow-topped peaks, banks and bankers, not even immigrant workers; when these signs appear (they are only, really, ghosts) they are emptied of signification; in *Jonas* the soft, fat banker in the nightclub, the immigrants “in passing,” the red lights of Geneva; the Swiss countryside reduced to an unrecognizable space.... First of all Tanner refuses the code (this space of tacit collaboration with international capital) that constitutes Switzerland; his characters have all the space that they *want*. (45, ellipses in the original)⁷

Le Peron is getting at the central paradox not only of *Jonas* but of all the work Berger and Tanner did together: Switzerland is clearly, unmistakably present, even if its familiar icons such as bankers (awfully important in *Jonas*) and mountains (the setting of a key sequence in *La Salamandre*) are stripped of their familiar meaning. Even though (and perhaps because) they resist the familiar iconography of Switzerland, these films are very clearly about the topography of Switzerland.

There is a similarly critical quality to the relationship that the films have with theoretical matters, both film theory as such and Marxism broadly. Both Tanner and Berger are men of the left, although there is very little orthodox Marxism to be found in the work of either. I tried to establish in the introduction the kind of humanist socialism that has formed Berger’s world view (and which was voiced as early as 1958 by a Hungarian painter named Jonas in his novel *A Painter of Our Time*). While this politics shares a great deal with the internationalist left generally, there is very little in

Berger's work that could be considered part of a political orthodoxy or even doctrine, and this non-doctrinaire leftism characterizes the films he made with Tanner quite strongly. I also tried to establish in the introduction the degree to which Tanner's work was, since his very first days making commissioned documentaries for Swiss television, defined by a broad humanist engagement, one that was clearly influenced (both aesthetically and ideologically) by Jean Rouch. As he moved towards feature filmmaking, his political and formal touchstone became Bertolt Brecht, but this was less a matter of a turn towards the activist than a search for a new form of self-awareness. Rouch's documentaries were strongly self-aware inasmuch as they were frequently explicit about the degree to which the documentary image is always a spectacle; this is most clearly true in a film like *Chronique d'un été* but it's just as true of the films he made in Africa such as *Moi, un noir* or *Les maîtres fous*. As Tanner moved towards fiction filmmaking Brecht's writings were clearly more useful as aesthetico-political guide. But Brecht shares some common ground with Rouch, inasmuch as they were both, as was Tanner, searching for a socially conscious artistic practice free of coercion, one that placed the spectator in a dialogue with a work of art. Brecht wrote in a 1927 article published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* that "instead of sharing an experience, the spectator must try to come to grips with things" (23),⁸ and that coming to grips was an ongoing process, not one simply based in political propagandizing or polemic. "The spectator must try to come to grips with things" is an excellent way of summarizing the politics of these films that Berger and Tanner made together.

In the way in which this push to "come to grips" occurs on the level of form, these films are also clearly connected to the theoretical practice of the post-'68 *Cahiers du cinéma*, of which Tanner was a habitual reader. It is quite possible to move through the key texts of this period – work like Jean Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's two-part essay "Cinéma/idéologie/critique," Narboni's review of Costa Gavras's film *Z*, Jean-Pierre Oudart's two-part essay "Suture" – and connect them directly to the work that Tanner and Berger were doing. This is especially true of *Le Milieu du monde*, which I tried to show in Chapter 3. But it is more important to note a shared interest in the role of realist illusionism in creating a dominant film language, as well as a shared interest in finding workable alternatives to that dominance. When Tanner told the *Cahiers'* N. Heinic in a 1977 interview about *Jonas*

(in the same issue where the Daney and Le Peron texts were published) that “I call on certain relevant elements from the ‘classical’ code of representation: a feeling for the real, for example recognizable characters” (“An Interview with Alain Tanner,” 66),⁹ he wasn’t invoking any specific theorists or specific articles. But any regular reader of the *Cahiers* during this period would recognize the code-words of a politicized approach to form: “code de représentation « classique »” and “effet de réel” should definitely set off bells of recognition, especially given the impact of Roland Barthes’ 1968 essay “L’Effet de réel” (published in *Communications*) on the *Cahiers du cinéma* and its affiliated theorists. Berger’s aesthetic principles had more to do with the legacy of realism, a form whose renewal he saw as the best means to restore visual art to its proper place as a social agent. But the kind of realism Berger was advocating, the kind he helped create with the films he made with Tanner, was just as critical of the “code de représentation « classique ».” *La Salamandre*, *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas* are all keenly interested in quotidian reality, but they are also defined by visual patterns and narrative structures that call attention to themselves, which encourage the viewer to consider them as aesthetic objects formed by ideologically aware artists. Roland Barthes, in his short text *Leçon* (delivered as his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1977), explained this political understanding of form in terms that resonate strongly both with the post-’68 *Cahiers* and with the films of Berger and Tanner. He writes there that:

No “literary history” (if we must still write it) would be complete if it only dealt with the historical connections between schools of thought without marking the break which went along with a new prophecy: that of writing. “Change the language,” that phrase of Mallarmé, is concomitant with “Change the world,” that phrase of Marx: there is a *political* sense to Mallarmé, for those who have followed his work and who follow it still. (23)¹⁰

The choice between changing the world and changing the language is a false one: language is part of the world, and the world can only be understood through language. No film history (and I believe there is still a lot of it left to write, a history that includes marginal practices) would be complete

unless it recognizes that basic principle that nothing of ideological substance is ever accomplished without a parallel substance of form.

Just as these films are defined by a desire to reconcile formal and political rigour, they also try to reconcile the personal with the political. These are not simply narratives of leftist consciousness-raising or awakening; in *La Salamandre*, *Le Milieu du monde*, and *Jonas* alike, Berger and Tanner are presenting problems whose dilemmas are as strongly emotional as they are ideological. This is part of a desire to escape from the tyranny of reason, a philosophical approach that actually found some strong advocates in the pages of the post-68 *Cahiers du cinéma*. Recall Sylvie Pierre in the magazine's 1969 text on "Montage" calling some elements of Eisenstein's montage "dictatorial" because of "movements from one shot to another that preclude the spectator from ever escaping reason" (25).¹¹ Geoff Dyer's belief that Berger "vehemently refuses to succumb to a vulgar materialism which in its assertion of the primacy of the economic derides the claim of the spiritual and the cultural" (115) is key here. Materialism, like reason, is an important element of Marxism and of left politics generally, but to boil down all of existence to a matter of class relations is vulgar in the extreme. This kind of vulgarity was hiding just beneath the critique of *Jonas* offered in the pages of *Jump Cut* by John Hess, Linda Greene, and Robin Lakes, a critique that read the film solely in terms of adherence to orthodox, U.S.-led Marxism, feinting towards a culturally sensitive perspective by browbeating the filmmakers and actors "because neither they nor Tanner knows much about the daily lives of Swiss workers." In a later issue of *Jump Cut* (ironically the same one where Diane Waldman published her critique of "positive image" criticism), Hess returned to this particular fray and engaged Richard Kazis in a dialogue about *Jonas* and the American left's responses to it. He wrote there that "to call the film a great revolutionary masterpiece or some sort of model for political filmmaking is a little much. That calls for a closer look at the film's politics – which are sorely lacking" (36). To call the film a model for political filmmaking – which I think it is, along with *La Salamandre* and *Le Milieu du monde* – calls for more than that. It calls for an examination of the film's form, which I criticized the *Jump Cut* critics for neglecting in Chapter 4. But such a question just as urgently calls for an examination of the way that the film visualizes experience outside of politics as such. It calls for an examination of whether it is or isn't totalitarian in that Eisensteinian

way identified by Sylvie Pierre. *La Salamandre* is about the alienation that is part and parcel of capitalist society, but it is also about *alienation*. *Le Milieu du monde* uses a passionate love affair as a metaphor in the service of its critique of ideological normalization, but it is also about *sexual passion*. *Jonas* uses the dialectic between childhood and adulthood to evoke the political confusion of post-'68 leftists, but it is also about *time*, and the effect that has on *individual conscience*. While such considerations are connected to politics (as each of these films shows), they are not simply synonymous with politics. Recognizing the diversity of human experience (including cinematic experience: dominant vs. non-dominant forms) and the way that those diverse elements are intertwined is what lies at the core of Berger and Tanner's project. This goes quite a bit beyond an attempt to be sure that the films' characters have good politics.

This was true of the films that Tanner made following his collaboration with Berger, especially those films that expanded on the work that they had done together. Because although their collaboration ostensibly ended with *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000*, that's not really the end of the story of John Berger and Alain Tanner. Their coexistence after their collaboration took two forms: work on a series of short, experimental films for the television service Société Suisse de Radiodiffusion (SSR, now TSR, Télévision Suisse Romande), and a resurrection of the characters that they created together. By offering a brief discussion of *Ecoutez voir*, a series of shorts works on Super 8 and ¾-inch video that aired on Swiss television in 1977 and 78, I want to show the degree to which Tanner was, at the end of the 1970s, becoming more experimental in his sensibilities, which, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, was one of the reasons Berger had given to Richard Appignanesi to explain why they didn't work together anymore. Berger said in that interview that "Alain, I think, was more interested in making films of a looser structure, films which, in a certain sense, were more experimental in their narrative, whereas I, because of my experience in writing stories not for the cinema, had come to a different position" (306). This move towards the experimental, though, was more or less temporary, and Tanner soon returned to a more straightforward narrative practice. Among the works he would make over the next years were: *Light Years Away* (1980), which is set in the year 2000 and has a twenty-five-year-old protagonist named Jonas; *Fourbi* (1995), which is a story about a young woman named Rosemonde

selling her story of killing her rapist to a television station and the difficulties that the station's two writers and young actress have in understanding her; and *Jonas et Lila, à demain* (2000), which is simply about Jonas at the age of twenty-five, and his desire to make films. These feature films really are Tanner's; Berger is not credited on any of them. The degree to which they follow the concerns laid out by the films that they "remake" – *Jonas* and *La Salamandre* – varies considerably. What this post-*Jonas* work shows us overall is that Tanner not only remained significantly more invested in these cinematic narratives of Jonas and Rosemonde, he also became more invested in cinema itself than Berger ever was. Furthermore, what connects *Temps mort*, *Light Years Away*, *Fourbi*, and *Jonas et Lila à demain* is their shared interest in the technology of image-making itself. As Tanner became more meta-cinematic, Berger's work was becoming more broodingly novelistic, with his "Into Their Labours" trilogy (1979–90) embodying this. To a great extent, this later work turns the films that we had known as "theirs" into something else that is more clearly "his" – Tanner's.

The technology of filmmaking was quite literally the starting place for *Écoutez voir*. In a 1977 article for *Sight and Sound* called "Alain Tanner: After *Jonah*," Michael Tarantino interviews Tanner as he works on a film that he was then calling *Contre Cœur* (and which became 1979's *Messidor*). Tanner described *Écoutez voir* (which Tarantino calls *Écoutez voir*) for Tarantino, and Tarantino suggests that it "may be seen as a sort of a bridge between *Jonah* and *Contre Cœur*" (40). He explained the genesis of the series as follows:

It was Francis Reusser who started it. He was interested in three-quarter inch video and Super-8 film. Then there was Loretta Verna plus Anne-Marie Miéville plus myself. We decided to try something together and approached Swiss TV to find out if they were interested. They *were* interested, not so much in what we wanted to show or make but in so far as the technique was concerned. They know that Super-8 film is out there somewhere and so is three-quarter inch video, but they have no one who can really experiment with it. So they gave us a little money to work with, and they also gave us complete freedom to do what we wanted. (41)

There is a very concrete way, then, in which *Ecoutez voir* was a series about low-end image-making and the way that it can re-arrange perception; Tanner would return to this idea twenty-three years later, when he also returned to the character of Jonas in *Jonas et Lila à demain*. It was also a series that Berger was involved in, although at more of a distance. The Swiss TV guide *TV8*, in their 2 November 1977 summary of the series, noted that “As a sort of prologue, a first film by John Berger (author and Tanner’s screenwriter) presents the four authors.”¹² TSR has not been able to locate this “first film”; their crackerjack archivist Claude Zürcher speculated that Berger’s contribution was probably aired live, and would thus have not been preserved. Gareth Evans’ otherwise comprehensive catalogue of Berger’s television work also does not mention the series.

Tanner’s contribution to the series was called *Temps mort* (first broadcast 27 November 1977), and that film is made up largely, although not entirely, of images shot out of train or car windows on trips between Berne and Geneva. One early sequence begins with a shot showing a Super 8 camera mounted to a car window (presumably the camera whose images we have so far been seeing), and then follows with a reverse-shot of Tanner driving and smoking. The voice-over narration switches between a female and a male voice (Tanner’s); the woman usually talks about broadly philosophical topics, the male about filmmaking itself. Tanner told Tarantino that he was inspired to make the film because he had made that trip so many times that “I can’t even look out the train window, I hate it so much. It’s familiar and boring and something that I know too well, so I wanted to see what would happen when I filmed it” (42). What happens is, partially, that the landscape is rendered visceral or exciting by virtue of the spectator plunging through it. Charles, the elderly train engineer in *Jonas*, alluded to this effect when he told Marco how much he liked riding the rails at the head of the train “Do you still sometimes travel by train? What do you see? The countryside going by, like in the movies. Myself, I don’t go to the movies anymore. But in the locomotive, the countryside doesn’t go by. You travel inside. Always: inside, inside, inside. It’s like a kind of music. You go in front of yourself, right to the horizon, and then it goes right on, right to the place where the rails come together. And they never come together” (*Jonas Who Will Be 25*, 106).¹³ This is especially true of a shot towards the end of the film, during a rainstorm on a fairly narrow road. There is only rain on the soundtrack,

and the limited visibility created by the downpour is augmented by the graininess of the Super 8 image. It is a stirring sequence, partially because it is in such contrast to the relatively sedate, almost hypnotic road imagery that comes earlier in the film.

It is also startling because of the sequence that directly precedes it, which isn't road imagery at all. For although Tanner's interview with Tarantino gives the impression that the film is made up entirely of footage shot right out of car and train windows, there are other kinds of images here as well. The sequence right before the rainstorm is made of images shot in a train station café; there is a shot of two guys (one of whom playfully shakes his fist at the camera), followed by an interview (in synch sound, no less) with these two guys, and then a montage of close-ups of people eating. Just as the aforementioned flash of shot/reverse-shot involving the camera mounted on the car takes us close but not quite into the visual grammar of conventional narrative cinema, this brings us very close but not quite into the grammar of conventional documentary. But we don't stay there long; this is a very short interview sequence. Then Tanner takes us right back into the realm of the purely kinetic road imagery, and does so with a vengeance, as the rain pelts down and the soundtrack fills up with its sounds.

The closing words of the film's commentary are Tanner saying that "Le fabrication du film, c'est déjà le film": the way a film is made is already the film. This was an ongoing concern of the work that he made with Berger: the degree to which formal choices are the place where the real meanings of a film are to be found. It was also why he remained interested in television: following Marshall McLuhan, Tanner believed that it was the technology of television itself that contained its meaning. Three years later, he wrote in his essay "Télé-Aphorismes" (which I discussed in Chapter 1 and which I reprint and translate as Appendix 1) that "McLuhan understood the inner workings of television very early on, that is to say that the real message transmitted by television isn't the content of this or that broadcast, but the phenomenon of 'television' itself, in the sense that it transforms social habits, modes of perception and relating as it imposes a standard and homogenous vision of things through a completely confused language that neutralizes all content and transforms it into signs that only refer back to themselves" (29).¹⁴ This is *Temps mort* to a "T." Tanner uses a repetitive form to emphasize the degree to which a sort of voyage has become banal

for him; there are *a lot* of shots out car and train windows. But he chooses to break up this uniformity visually, and he never breaks it up in the same way; he inserts one and only one example of completely still imagery, shot/reverse-shot, talking-heads documentary, and hand-held footage. And he even breaks up the shots out the window by overwhelming us with rain, but again, only once. What we have, on a purely visual level, is a lot of monotony that is interrupted by little bursts of different visual forms. These images shot out of trains and cars may look like dead time, but that illusion only hides the reality that many different forms of perception lie along this road, waiting to be discovered. Tanner's critique of the way that modernity dulls our senses begins with the simple choice to violate what he calls television's "completely codified language" by putting consumer-grade Super 8 film onto the national television service. But he also refuses to impose his own "standard and homogenous vision of things," even though you get the sense from the Tarantino interview that *Temps mort* is made up *only* of material shot out of trains and cars. In fact, the film is quite diverse visually, and it is in that *visual* diversity, and the challenge that poses to television as a medium, where its critique of homogeneous vision is to be found. To follow the old engineer Charles from *Jonas*, he is showing us the movie-like landscape of riding from trains, the music-like landscape of driving, and several other visual forms as well.

The series *Ecoutez voir*, and especially Tanner's contribution to it, is very close to the kind of work that his compatriots Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville were doing at this time. Indeed, Miéville was one of the filmmakers who contributed a film to *Ecoutez voir*. She and Godard had just finished two very long, experimental series for French television: *Six fois deux : sur et sous la communication* (1976, about 6 hours in all) and *France/Tour/Détour/Deux/Enfants* (1977, also about 6 hours in all). It's thus strange to see Jérôme Prieur, in France's *Quinzaine Littéraire*, offer the argument about *Jonas* that it "is sometimes curiously close to *Six fois deux*, Godard's series of broadcasts" (26).¹⁵ Prieur has in mind a shared concern with broad philosophical issues like time, and that's a fair enough point. But if he had waited a few months, and tuned into Swiss television, he would have found a real companion for *Six fois deux*. These Godard-Miéville series are far more meta-cinematic than anything in *Jonas* and are built on the premise of exploring different forms of televisual communication. That's especially

true of *Six fois deux*, which even includes an episode on a Super 8 filmmaker named René, who seems to have the same approach to filmmaking that many Sunday-painters have to oils and watercolours. This sort of exploration was the project for *Ecoutez voir* as well, and thus it's no surprise to see Miéville involved. These are television series about television itself, and the way that it was transforming our perception of the world and our ability to communicate. But they were also both series about the specific sorts of interventions that could be made by low-end image technologies, such as Super 8 or ¾-inch video. The possibilities for transforming a form of image-making that seemed increasingly close to consumer-capitalist domination seemed to be coming from consumerism itself; Tanner, like Godard and Miéville, saw Super 8 as a implement of struggle (one among many, but an important one) against a mass media whose strategy for expansion seemed, by and large, defined by homogenization.

The Super 8 experimental phase, though, was fleeting; Tanner turned right back to narrative filmmaking with 1979's *Messidor*, and following that he made another narrative film that revisited the most famous character that he had created with Berger. *Light Years Away* (1981, released in French as *Les Années lumière*) is a strange film, and there are few critics who see this as among his strongest work. The film is generally known as *Light Years Away* because it was Tanner's first film in English since 1957's *Nice Time*. Rather than the bustling Piccadilly Circus at midnight, the setting here is the west coast of Ireland, specifically the damp, rocky region known as Connemara. Its protagonist is a young man named Jonas, who we find out about halfway through the film (when he is at a lawyer's office taking care of a will) is twenty-five years of age, and born in 1975. You'd never know the film was set in the year 2000; Tanner remarked sardonically to the *Cahiers du cinéma*'s Serge Toubiana that "It's set in the year 2000 to show that nothing changes" (x).¹⁶ For a film so self-reflexive (its protagonist having been so important to a film that Tanner had made just a few years earlier), it seems strange that it is actually adapted from a novel: Daniel Odier's *La voie sauvage* (Odier was interested in mysticism, and has also translated several Indian spiritual texts into French). The film, like the novel, tells the story of a young man who, searching for some kind of enlightenment and discouraged by a series of dead-end bar jobs in the city (unnamed, but in the film visibly Dublin), is taken in by a mysterious, flight-obsessed old-timer

named Yoshka. Todd Gitlin saw the narrative as hopelessly banal, writing in his 1984 article on Tanner for *Harper's* that "Austerity got the better of Tanner, and we were left with a countercultural sorcerer's tale in the mode of Carlos Castaneda" (70). By this Gitlin presumably means that the spirituality embodied by Yoshka – who talks to birds and insists that Jonas, as a rite of initiation, restore and then man a gas station that lies alongside a road that literally nobody drives on and then turns out to have no gas anyway – is thin, sentimental and undemanding, and that sounds about right to me.

What is noteworthy about the film is its use of landscape. Gitlin's *Harper's* article also argues for the existence of "a sequence of five films, all lyric and melancholy explorations of ways out of complacent bourgeois Switzerland" (69). These were *Charles mort ou vif*, *La Salamandre*, *Le Milieu du monde*, *Jonas*, and *Messidor*. That seems like a reasonable way to understand Tanner's evolution throughout the 1970s, and, given that, *Light Years Away* really is the next step; Tanner leaves bourgeois complacency by actually leaving Switzerland. Geneva and its environs may have been following the patterns of city-swallowing-country that we see underway in *Jonas*, but the west of Ireland circa 1980 was still proving remarkably resistant to this.¹⁷ The reason, of course, was the desperate underdevelopment that had characterized the region for centuries, both before and after independence. The way that this sort of underdevelopment appears in the film is slightly edgier than the basically congenial rural bohemianism that characterizes the farm of *Jonas*. Yoshka's compound, such as it is, is rendered by Tanner as dirty, rusty, cold, and wet, in a way that creates a very viscerally evoked misery for Jonas, a misery that is quite absent from *Jonas qui aura 25 ans*. But the politics of this misery, of this desolation, the reasons that Connemara has proven so resistant to integration by the metropolis, are absent. There is nothing in the film about British colonialism, nothing in the film about the often shocking indifference of the newly independent Irish state towards its hinterland, nothing about the long history of insularity and xenophobia that characterized a lot of the culture of western Ireland, nothing even about the linguistic specificity of the place (Connemara is home to the Republic of Ireland's largest and most intact Gaeltacht, or Irish-Gaelic-speaking area). The place becomes almost abstract – a bit like the landscape between Geneva and Berne in *Temps mort*, really. It is never even identified

as Ireland; the only way anyone would know this would be by identifying accents (including that of the Irish actor who plays Jonas, Mick Ford), or by identifying visual cues (such as Dublin's River Liffey and Hay'penny Bridge, visible from the window of Yoshka's lawyer, or the stony, rainy landscape so distinctive to Connemara).

This is very different from the way that Berger was representing a similar landscape during this period, and Tanner's movement away from an engagement with bourgeois materialism was very different from Berger's movement away from an engagement with bourgeois materialism. *Light Years Away* was released two years after Berger published his novel *Pig Earth* (1979), the first of the trilogy of works about peasant life in alpine France that I have mentioned already. The text of the novel itself is highly detailed about the economic and political pressures that peasant communities faced. Berger asserts in the book's "Historical Afterword" (which I mentioned in the last chapter) that "No class has been or is more economically conscious than the peasantry. Economics consciously determines or influenced every ordinary decision which a peasant takes. But his economics are not those of the merchant, nor those of bourgeois or marxist political economy" (197). In addition to a vigorous engagement with economic complexity of Europe's margins that is missing in *Light Years Away*, Berger was also becoming interested in those margins' political paradoxes. Just as *Light Years Away* sees Tanner abandoning the politics of Switzerland for an engagement with a spare spiritualism, *Pig Earth* sees Berger abandoning the ideological wrangling between metropolis and village for an engagement with what he calls "peasant conservatism." He writes of this ideology that:

Peasant conservatism, within the context of peasant experience, has nothing in common with the conservatism of a privileged ruling class or the conservatism of a sycophantic petty-bourgeoisie. The first is an attempt, however vain, to make their privileges absolute; the second is a way of siding with the powerful in exchange for a little delegated power over other classes. Peasant conservatism scarcely defends any privilege. Which is one reason why, much to the surprise of urban political and social theorists, small peasants have so often rallied to the defence of richer peasants. It is conservatism not of power but of meaning.

It represents a depository (a granary) of meaning preserved from lives and generations threatened by continual and inexorable change. (208)

Both Berger and Tanner were, then, breaking with the political project that seemed to reach a peak with *Jonas*. But even though Berger's break seems to invoke the dreaded spectre of the conservative, it really is Tanner who, at this time, was moving away from traditions of struggle and activism. Berger did become more conservative during this period, but this didn't mean that he started campaigning for Thatcher. Indeed, in addition to becoming more conservative, his work also became more intensely socialist. The ability of tightly knit communities to resist the totalizing forces of capitalist-led modernization is the central topic of the "Into their Labours" trilogy, and of later novels such as *To the Wedding* (1995) and *Here Is Where We Meet* (2005). Tanner, on the other hand, was using a character that he and Berger had created as signifier of leftist redemption in a way that basically ignored economics, and which used modernization as a kind of ghostly spectre signifying either doom or the antithesis of dreams (through images of the decaying gas station which so impedes both his and Yoshka's spiritual evolution) rather than as a social force. I reject the idea that *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* is about the defeat of politics. That is what we see in *Light Years Away*.

Tanner and Berger's characters then sat fallow for quite a few years, until Tanner's 1995 film *Fourbi* (which he co-wrote with Bernard Comment). This is less a re-make of *La Salamandre* than it is a telling of a similar story using the same basic characters. The most important of those characters, of course, is Rosemonde herself, and a young woman named Rosemonde is the protagonist of *Fourbi*. The two films have a basically identical opening sequence, a long shot that tracks alongside Rosemonde as she walks next to the Rhône in Geneva (Rosemonde looks slightly broody in *La Salamandre*; in *Fourbi* she is gesticulating wildly with her hands as she listens to a Walkman). But rather than someone who shot her tedious uncle under circumstances that nobody can quite establish, *Fourbi*'s Rosemonde killed a man who raped her and was then acquitted of murder. And rather than Pierre, the *engagé* but relatively hard-nosed freelance journalist and his dreamy poet collaborator Paul (whose actors, Jean-Luc Bideau and Jacques

Denis, make cameo appearances in *Fourbi*, the former as a butcher and the latter as a barman), we have here Kévin, a pony-tailed TV producer (who offers occasional bursts of American-accented English) trying to get in on the ground floor of a new private television network, and his pal Pierre, who he hires to work up a show based on Rosemonde's story. The argument that *La Salamandre's* Pierre and Paul have about Rosemonde and reality – where Paul spins a great story about Rosemonde being from a poor, ignorant and giant Catholic family and an exasperated Pierre replies “It's reality that interests me... .. things!” – recurs in *Fourbi* as Kévin saying to Paul that he should make the TV show “fiction, but based on reality; a film like any other!”¹⁸ There are a lot of similarly minor changes to familiar parts of the narrative: it is not really the writers but the actress who is to play Rosemonde (played by Tanner's daughter Cécile) who tries and ultimately fails to befriend and understand her; instead of learning early in the story that Rosemonde had had a child and given it up for adoption, in *Fourbi* we learn in the film's final shots that Rosemonde is pregnant, etc.

But the key change is a matter of shifting from a critical sensibility regarding communication generally and mass media forms such as television secondarily to a more acidic and cynical indictment of televisual voyeurism. Kévin clearly plans to make Rosemonde's traumatic tale of being raped into a sort of reality-TV show, and at one point Paul tells Marie of a plan to allow the audience to vote as to whether Rosemonde is guilty or innocent. The show's major underwriter is a dog food manufacturer called Doggy Bag (the film's title is the name of the company's mascot, who the four main characters are walking along the Rhône as the film ends), and keeping them onside is a constant concern for Kévin. The hard, cold crassness of television is thus on constant display here, both in emotional and economic terms. It is no minor plot point that the show based on Rosemonde's life is being developed for a private television network; such networks had been relatively uncommon in French-speaking Switzerland, and their emergence throughout the 1990s did seem to be a harbinger of the loss of televisual idealism about communicating with the general public in new ways. In *La Salamandre* Berger and Tanner were critiquing such idealism along largely philosophical lines: the indeterminate nature of interpretation, “The object is not purely perceived, but it is *there*,” etc. In *Fourbi* this sort of idealism is basically beyond critique; the idea that Rosemonde could be meaningfully

represented is practically off the radar screen. The state-run service of the 1970s might not have been able to deliver on its promises of civic engagement via modern communication, but by the 1990s we are in an increasingly privatized landscape where words like “engagement” or “communication,” or even “promises,” are more or less irrelevant. The lone figure of engagement is Marie (who, being played by his daughter, is certainly readable as an autobiographical stand-in for Tanner himself), who tries to build the sorts of connections with Rosemonde that Paul had sought in *La Salamandre*. Furthermore, Karin Viaud’s performance as Rosemonde is wonderfully vivid; she presents her as full as life and dynamism, but also just on the edge of what could be very real mental illness. Her performance is more technically demanding than Bulle Ogier’s 1971 turn as Rosemonde, I would say, for the 1995 incarnation is a genuinely damaged person, and yet also someone who is verily overflowing with a zest for life. Ogier’s Rosemonde was more detached (and more genuinely alienated), but the depth of that detachment made her a bit easier for the viewer to understand her. Viaud’s Rosemonde, though, really is a quandary; she is passionate and broken in equal parts, as though these were two elements of a single dialectic. The final scene, where she lags perpetually behind Marie and the two guys as they walk the dog, finally confides to Marie that she is pregnant, and answers “of course” to her question of whether she will keep the child, is nothing short of luminous (and, of course, recalls the climactic scene of *Jonas*). The television of committed writers and directors is clearly dead; for Tanner in *Fourbi*, the medium’s last hope appears to be in idealistic performers, who still believe that actors can, with enough commitment, present the mystery of everyday life.

More than any of the other films he made based on his collaborations with Berger, Tanner’s *Fourbi* feels deeply pessimistic. This is especially so in the light of his “Télé-Aphorismes” essay. He wrote there that “one of the most interesting recent shows on TV Romande was done by an Italian feminist group which obtained authorization, as part of its standing, to re-enact a rape trial. Using lightweight gear and in black and white. Will ‘great’ TV enter into the courtroom?” (26).¹⁹ Here, fifteen years later, is the travesty of that rigorous, tele-political engagement: a reality-show-style recreation of the trial where the audience gets to vote on *the rape victim’s* guilt or innocence. For anyone who knows Tanner’s work, the hardness of that fall,

especially as it is realized through a re-telling of one of his best films, is discernable.

It took Jonas himself to pull him out of this funk. 2000's *Jonas et Lila, à demain* (also co-written with Bernard Comment) is the most hopeful of Tanner's "Berger sequels," and like *Temps mort* and *Fourbi* it uses the process of image-making to communicate this view of the world. Like *Light Years Away* this is another story of Jonas in the year 2000, but this is a very different Jonas. Instead of the alienated, mystically inclined, Irish-accented drifter, this Jonas is a film student, in love with a young African immigrant named Lila. His mentor is an elderly man named Anziano, an old filmmaker who now lives in relative seclusion in Marseilles (in a possible nod to *Le Retour d'Afrique*, he tells Jonas at one point that he is at this house because an old friend of his is spending two years in Africa). When Jonas has his expensive, school-owned video camera stolen, Anziano gives him a tiny hi-8 camera, warning him that it is dangerous because it will free him.

Tanner does indeed present Jonas as freed because he is able to make images in a new way, and this affects his political as well as his emotional life; this duality is where the film's clearest debt to Berger is visible. The first images that Jonas makes with his camera are of garbage dumps and (in a clear nod to the imagery of *Temps mort*) landscapes shot out of windows of cars and trains. But then he and some friends decide to make what one of them calls "ciné-tracts, comme à l'époque," referring to the famous group of shorts that both were filmed and shown during the strikes of May '68. At first these are videos of pranks, most of which are simply chaotic: they first put on ski masks, kick a soccer ball in the china section of a department store, and then (in a clear nod this time to *La Salamandre*) they all go onto a Geneva tram and simultaneously light up cigars (as one woman protests vigorously, a well-dressed old codger comes over to join them). But they turn melancholically political as well. Jonas makes one video when Lila's perpetually broke father takes him for a ride on the garbage skiff that he pilots down the Rhône. Another sequence has Jonas showing Anziano his video footage of an anti-military protest in Geneva that had turned violent; he marvels at the images, saying "La police protègent l'armée de la population; c'est une belle métaphore, non?" And they are intimate: Jonas and Lila film each other in bed, and later on Lila and their actress friend Irena (who Jonas met when he interrupted the shooting of a Russian-mob-financed

porno) shoot each other as they have sex with Jonas. This mixture of subject matter shows a diversity of concern, a real humanist engagement, that was largely missing from the original ciné-tracts “à l’époque.” Those were, more or less, documents of an evolving series of strikes; they were highly functional. Not so the videos shot by Jonas. The way in which they mix material that is materialist (garbage), anarchist (cigars on trams), insurgent (street protests), and personal (sex), strongly recalls the concerns of the films Berger and Tanner made together, especially *Le Milieu du monde*. Geoff Dyer is one critic who has very keenly pointed to Berger’s sense of radical politics as needing to encompass more than the economic single-mindedness of Marx. This is surely visible in *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l’an 2000*, a film that I, in perverse agreement with its harshest critics in *Jump Cut*, see as defined by a preference for Rousseau over Marx. It is visible in *Jonas et Lila à demain* as well, and Dyer could very well be writing about that film when he explains how Berger’s work overall rejects an apolitical formalism:

At the same time, he vehemently refuses to succumb to a vulgar materialism which in its assertion of the primacy of the economic derides the claim of the spiritual and the cultural. The strains and creaks in his early work were the product of his having to maintain this refusal in the face of the rigid base superstructure model which was then dominant within Marxist thought. Recently, however, the model of base superstructure has been challenged, notably by Raymond Williams [in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*] as “essentially a bourgeois formula; more specifically, a central position of utilitarian thought.” (155)

Escape from utilitarianism, an ideological cousin of normalization, is a big part of *Jonas et Lila*. Jonas is engaged with material concerns, but he is also longing for a fuller connection, if not to the spiritual and the cultural, then to the emotional and the cultural.

This is manifested not only through images that challenge Swiss culture’s reputation as clean, orderly, and rational, but especially at the end of the film. This ending is dominated by grainy video images of Jonas and Lila’s trip to Senegal. Lila is in most of this footage and Jonas can be heard off-screen, presumably holding the camera. The climax comes when Lila

is reunited with her grandmother, who she surprises by knocking on the door of her crowded apartment complex. Like the ending of *Fourbi* there is a slightly overwhelming quality to the images (“bouleversant” would be the word in French). But whereas this quality in *Fourbi* came from a sense that any future for moving images lay with committed actors, here the sense of the sublimely emotional comes from the degraded video image, the simplicity of someone capturing the everyday with a distinctly unpretentious technology. These images are full of the sort of context which Berger has argued that photographs need to respect – the feeling of personal histories of immigration, or feelings of the loneliness of return (Lila laments on the voice-over how she doesn’t remember much of the language, how these people consider her a European now), or the bustle and confusion of crowded markets when experienced by outsiders. Berger wrote in his 1978 essay “Uses of Photography” (published in *About Looking*) that:

The private photograph – the portrait of a mother, a picture of a daughter, a group photo of one’s own team – is appreciated and read in a context *which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it...* Nevertheless such a photograph remains surrounded by the meaning from which it was severed.... The contemporary public photograph usually presents an event, a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event. It offers information, but information severed from all lived experience. (51–52; italics his)

These videos feel like private images, demanding to be read “in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it.” But they are part of a public, fictional work, one that tries to represent political, social, and emotional experiences in all of their complexity. *Jonas et Lila à demain* thus sees Tanner coming full circle from where he found himself with *Temps mort*. Using low-end, consumer-grade imagery, his task is to recover the submerged expressiveness of the everyday: the landscape between Geneva and Berne, garbage boats on the Rhône, apartments in Senegal crowded with families. *Light Years Away* and *Fourbi* were less successful works, if for no other reason than that they were marked by an

abandonment of the socio-political in favour of either abstract mysticism or cynical pessimism. *Temps mort* and *Jonas et Lila*, on the other hand, are films that, although made without Berger's collaboration, strongly reflect that greatest of postwar English writers' desire to find both a politics and an aesthetics that tightly integrates the ineffably quotidian. Berger and Tanner, no: but these films are made by Tanner, with Berger always in their philosophical shadows.

So perhaps this is what constitutes political cinema: a practice that tries to expand our understanding of both cinema (and so uses a non-dominant form) and politics (and so moves beyond vulgar materialist assumptions about human experience), and which does so by intertwining the two. The 1970s saw an experiment in this kind of filmmaking; it was not *sui generis* (it had important connections in work that had been done in the 1950s and 60s, in both television and literature), and it didn't simply vanish like an extinguished match (work in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s attempted to continue elements of the project). But these three feature films that John Berger and Alain Tanner made together – *La Salamandre*, *Le Milieu du monde*, and *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* – deserve a more central place in the history of European cinema than they have heretofore been afforded. Their vision is unified without being repetitive, and it is a vision of a society wrestling uncertainly with modernity, a vision rendered in a way that renews narrative film language but does so from *within* that language's traditions. Given the challenges that a globalized Hollywood cinema represents (and has represented, basically since the end of the First World War) for people engaged with political cinema, filmmakers and critics alike, discussion of these films could hardly be more urgent.

Notes

- 1 “La culture suisse n'existe pas. Nous ne sommes ni une nation, ni un peuple, ni à plus forte raison une culture. D'ailleurs, la Suisse est un pays infilmable.”
- 2 “Les Suisses ne forment pas un peuple, n'ont pas une culture, mais se rattachent à plusieurs autres.”
- 3 “Bref, la culture suisse existe bel et bien : d'ailleurs nous l'avons rencontrée ... dans les films d'Alain Tanner.”
- 4 “S'il n'y a pas de culture suisse, autant démanteler les institutions telles que l'Office fédéral de la culture ou Pro Helvetia, en attendant que le marché sacré de nouvelles stars à la Pipilotti Rist et autres Mario Botta. Alain Tanner est sûrement le dernier à penser comme les néo-libéraux, et pourtant son désabusement risque bel et bien de faire le jeu de ceux-là.”
- 5 “De plus, sous le feu de l'artillerie hollywoodienne et de ses alliés, la culture helvétique était carrément menacée de colonisation.... Nos rues, nos maisons, nos concitoyens commencent à se transformer en choses vues, regardées, commentées. Le cinéma suisse, le cinéma national, peu nous importe à la limite : nous voulons simplement que les cinéastes qui vivent à Zurich, Lausanne ou Genève puissent s'exprimer, et le cinéma suisse suivra.”
- 6 “... la *topographie* (la Suisse comme milieu du monde capitaliste, mi-lieu où se recourent toutes les frontières, utopie).”
- 7 “Dans les films de Tanner la Suisse (ce qu'elle *symbolise*, le système capitaliste : car la Suisse est d'emblée irréelle) se retrouve mais, comme dans un miroir, annulée, réduite aux apparences. Il ne s'y trouve aucun des signes pleins de l'existence coutumière de la Suisse (ce par quoi on prétend qu'elle existe) : sommets enneigés, banques et banquières, ni même travailleurs immigrés ; quand ces signes apparaissent (ils ne font effectivement que des apparitions) c'est vidé de leur signification : dans *Jonas* le banquier gras et mou dans la boîte de nuit ; les immigrés « en passant » ; les feux rouges de Genève ; la campagne suisse ramenée à un espace non reconnaissable.... D'abord Tanner refuse le code (cette espèce de convention tacite du capital international) qui constitue la Suisse; aussi ses personnages ont tout l'espace qu'ils *veulent*.”
- 8 “Nicht miterleben soll der Zuschauer, sondern sich auseinandersetzen” (*Über Realismus*, 38).
- 9 “... je fais appel à certains éléments relevant du code de représentation « classique » : effet de réel, personnages reconnaissables par exemple.”
- 10 “Nulle « histoire de la littérature » (s'il doit s'en écrire encore) ne saurait être juste, qui se contenterait comme par le passé d'enchaîner des écoles sans marquer la coupure qui met alors à nu un nouveau prophétisme : celui de l'écriture. « Changer la langue, » mot mallarméen, est concomitant de « Changer le monde », mot marxien : il y a une écoute *politique* de Mallarmé, de ceux qui l'ont suivi et le suivent encore.”
- 11 “... les passages d'un plan à un autre ôtent au spectateur toute possibilité d'échapper au raisonnement.”

- 12 “En guise de prologue, un premier film de John Berger (écrivain et scénariste de Tanner) présente les quatre auteurs.”
- 13 “Ca vous arrive encore de voyager en train ? Qu’est-ce que vous voyez ? Le paysage qui défile, comme au cinéma. Mais dans la locomotive, le paysage ne défile pas. Vous allez dedans. Toujours : dedans, dedans, dedans. C’est comme une musique. Vous allez devant vous, jusqu’au horizon, et puis ça continue, jusqu’à l’endroit où les rails se rejoignent. Et ils ne se rejoignent jamais.”
- 14 “MacLuhan [*sic*] avait compris très tôt le mécanisme profond de la télévision. Ce qui signifie que le message réel transmis par la télévision n’est pas le contenu de telle ou telle émission, mais le phénomène « télévision » en lui-même, en ce sens qu’il transforme les habitudes sociales, les modes de perception et de relations, qu’il impose une vision standard et homogène des choses à travers un langage complètement codifié qui neutralise tous les contenus et les transforme en signes qui ne renvoient qu’à eux-mêmes.”
- 15 “... le film de Tanner est curieusement parfois très voisin de *Six fois deux*, la série d’émissions de Godard.”
- 16 “Il est situé en l’an 2000 pour montrer que rien ne changera.”
- 17 That’s not true anymore, of course. In the *Cahiers du cinéma* interview with Serge Toubiana about *Light Years Away*, Tanner went on to say that “Really, here, in this region, it was like this in 1950, thirty years ago, so there’s no reason that it would be different in the year 2000, in twenty years” (x) [“De toute façon, ici, dans cette région, c’était comme ça en 1950, il y a trente ans, donc il n’y a pas de raison pour que cela soit différent en l’an 2000, dans vingt ans”]. The Republic of Ireland actually underwent enormous changes in the 90s and 00s as a result of its “Celtic Tiger” economy, changes that did indeed reach into Connemara, parts of which have become a de facto suburb of Galway City.
- 18 “Un fiction, mais d’après la réalité. Un film comme les autres !”
- 19 “Par exemple, l’une des émissions les plus intéressantes de la TV Romande ces dernières temps fut le fait d’un groupe féministe italien qui obtient l’autorisation, à partir de son statut à lui, de rendre compte d’un procès de viol. En matériel léger et noir/blanc. La « grande » TV serait-elle entrée dans la salle du tribunal?”

