

On a theory of "sources"

by Sam Brody

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The following article has a curious history, which gives a sense of the peculiar ideological and personal rivalries of the "dirty thirties." Brody's "On a Theory of 'Sources'" was written in March, 1930 in letter form and originally sent to *Close Up* as a criticism of the "source" theory of Harry Alan Potamkin, the journal's U.S. correspondent and a respected critic on the Left. Briefly, Potamkin felt the need for cinema to attempt a deeper exploration of its subject matter so as to "get at the source of its content." The "source" of the contemporary Negro for example, was not to be found in his or her class standing but rather in the elaborate psycho-ethnographic background of African dances, rituals, folklore, etc. (see "The Aframerican Cinema" in *Close Up*, August 1929). It was Potamkin's position that "we are always what we were" and this "source" overdetermines other influences or situations. *Close Up* refused to print Brody's pugnacious but soundly Marxist reply. However, Brody remained on good enough terms with Potamkin to interview Eisenstein with him in May of 1930 in New York.

Brody then sent the article to *Experimental Cinema*. At that time he was an associate editor and Potamkin the New York correspondent of that journal. The editors, Lewis Jacobs, Seymour Stern and David Platt, asked Potamkin to reply to Brody in the form of a critical discussion. Potamkin, for whatever reason, refused the assignment but the editors assured him that this would not affect his relations with the magazine. Soon afterwards however, Potamkin resigned from *Experimental Cinema*, and in the November, 1930 issue of *Close Up*, he delivered a scathing attack against his former associates, calling their aspirations "a malodor which is even worse than the stench of the west coast marshes." Somewhat perplexed by all this intrigue and venom directed towards them, Jacobs, Stern and Platt went ahead and printed Brody's article in early 1931 (*Experimental Cinema* Vol. 1, No. 3). *Experimental Cinema* and *Close Up* remained on unfriendly terms for a couple of years only to reunite in mid-1933 when the affair over Eisenstein's *Que Viva Mexico!* exploded internationally.
— the Editors

Elie Faure presented us with a useful term when he invented the word "cinemetaphysics." In recent years there have arisen enterprising young cinema enthusiasts in a number of countries to whose writings and activities Faure's learned term applies to perfection. All these groups and individuals may be designated as "cinemetaphysicians," the word meaning those who, having emerged from some field — usually the literary — wherein they have failed to capture laurels, seek to heap upon the comparatively virgin field of the movie a sort of high-sounding witchcraft which awes the uninitiated and nauseates the wise.

It is the belief that Mr. Potamkin has taken his place in the ranks of this tendency that prompts me to write this article.

For well over a year he has consistently expounded in *Close-Up* a theory of "sources," which has so far remained unchallenged. The deeply fallacious implications of this theory, or method, the originality of which its author is so proud, became alarmingly apparent when, commenting upon Vidor's HALLELUJAH! in an article entitled "The Aframerican Cinema," he developed the thesis that a study of African origins is indispensable for a correct filmic portrayal of the American Negro.

"... I want one (a Negro) as rich as the Negroes in Poirier's documents of Africa. *I am not interested primarily in verbal humor, in clowning nor in sociology.* (Emphasis mine — S.B.) I want cinema and I want cinema at its source. To be at its source, cinema must get at the source of its contents. The Negro is plastically interesting when he is most negroid. In films he will be plastically interesting only when the makers of the films know thoroughly the treatment of the Negro structure in the African plastic, when they know of the treatment of his movements in the ritual dances, like the dance of the circumcision, the Ganza..."

I might begin by asking Mr. Potamkin since when he has learned to dispense with sociology in his cinema, when only a few months ago, in an article published in *Monde* entitled "Cinema Americain," he wrote:

"Of all American films, the comic film is the most highly developed. This phenomenon is above all due to the impetus given to it by a foreigner, Charles Chaplin. The contribution of Chaplin to American films was on two planes: controlled stylistic expression, and *social reference or satire*" (Emphasis mine — S.B.).

Think of it! The "social reference" is here considered as one of the two main factors in the films of Chaplin, who Potamkin believes is largely responsible for the "tremendous development" of the American comedy.

Further in the same article, its author recommends as a "source" for the present-day American cinema, Sidney Drew, an early comedian "who introduced the satire of servants of the petty-bourgeoisie into the American movies." [1] And again: "CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT, a broad and marvelous satire on the high American bourgeoisie... (!)" Potamkin points out in that same article that in order to perfect the "essence of its themes" the American cinema must refer back to its early history which he claims is replete with sociologically significant subjects. (What are "sociologically significant subjects," Mr. Potamkin?)

Even if the source theory be conceded, why this ardent clamor for reference to the sociological film as an American source and at the same time the assertion, "I am not interested primarily in ... sociology," when possible sources for Negro cinema are considered? Am I to accept this as a new brand of *discrimination*?

I want Potamkin to inform me how he would go about the matter of making a film on the American Negro without consideration for the socio-political motive that underlies every phase of Negro life in the United States. Mind you, I am not asking for a thesis, but consider the work of the Russians whose praise he has sung so loudly. There is great cinema because there is real insight into its only important source, the dialectic movements of the social organism and its motor: the class struggle.

If it is Negro plastic he is after, he and that only, (are you not diving headlong into the polluted waters of "art-for-art's-sake," Potamkin?) then Potamkin is deeply mistaken when he asks for a study of "Negro structure in the African plastic..." *Capitalist America has created a new Negro who in virtue of his position in the American social structure is as far removed from his African origin as his so-called "white-nordic superiors" are from theirs.* Read Prof. Reuter's essay on the subject, and you will learn that even in the sphere of plastic we have nothing to find at the African source. No, Mr. Potamkin, we "are" *not* "always what we were"; this is a vulgar and unscientific concept. The Negro of 1930 is *not* (even physiologically, take note!) what he was in 1870. In sixty years the black population of the United States has become so transformed that official figures place one third of its total in the mulatto group. The ratio of this transformation is at the present time so great that within fifty years Potamkin's "wooly, tall, broad-nosed and deep-voiced" Negro may be somewhat of a rarity in America. The assimilative process goes on despite the fact that the American ruling-class is segregating the Negro worker and pitting his white class brother against him. The inescapable fact that a white bourgeoisie exploits both the Negro and white worker is the determinant. [2] *The class issue governs above everything else.*

The almost complete metamorphosis of the Negro on American soil in a comparatively short historical period is the most instructive and essential feature to consider in any approach of the problem. While an investigation of origins can have great value both historically and in this case also anthropologically, it cannot, in the instance of the American Negro, bring us one step closer to the revelation of the laws that govern the history of the black man in capitalist America. "Aframerican" is obviously a fallacy.

The conception of "sources" in this case can only lead us back to the O'Nealian philosophy so slickly expounded in "The Emperor Jones" that even Potamkin, by his own admission, was able to swallow it whole. "We are always what we were." "Emperor Jones" says as much: Only a thin veneer separates the American Negro from his African origin (read "source"), and under primitive conditions he will revert to the fears, hysteria and superstitions of his tribal forefathers.

How strange these fairy-tales must seem to the Negroes in the steel-mills of Pittsburgh, the packing-houses of Chicago, and the coal-pits of Pennsylvania! Hollywood would rather go back to all the "sources" in the world than film the real American Negro. Any documentary film on the life of the American Negro would pack more tragedy per foot of negative than a thousand falsehoods like HALLELUJAH! (But Hollywood is the monster-filter of capitalism through which is sifted American reality, and that is why we cannot expect it to give us the truth about Black America in its films.)

Giovannitti's lines come to my mind:

"I call you to the bar of the dawn to give witness if this is not what they do in America when they wake up men at midnight to hang them until they're dead."

The Negro on the screen! What a vision! I want to take Potamkin by the hand and lead him to the hell-holes of Georgia and Alabama where "they wake up men at midnight to hang them until they're dead" ... I want to guide him through the slums of Harlem where black babes die by the score in pest-infested tenements. I want to show him *the twelve million* that King Vidor will never dare to approach. Let him then speak to me of "sources," and the "dance of the circumcision."

The whole recent discovery of the Negro in art bears the imprint of Potamkin's "source" ideology. The discovery was made by *respectable* whites who do not understand the modern American Negro and *who* beneath their worship of spirituals, jazz and African sculpture, hide a deeply traditional class contempt for him.

Van Vechten in literature, Covarrubias in art, and now Vidor in the film! Never mind the *yaller* girl. Let us even forget the cast recruited in cabarets to interpret Southern cotton-pickers, and the "Negro" songs composed by Irving Berlin. Has not Vidor told us about "the remarkable emotional nature of the Negro"? What is this atavistic color that permeates the entire film, if not a vulgar "source" philosophy? Remember for a moment the fraudulent baptismal scene, the stagey and exaggerated revival meeting, the emphasis on the hysterical and the primitive in every move of the characters.

HALLELUJAH! is bad cinema because its director attempted to substitute the white bourgeois lie about the Negro's mystico-religious and hysterical nature for the proletarian reality of the Negro as a doubly exploited member of the American working class. Neither the most thorough study of Poirier's films nor the closest scrutiny of African primitive art forms could have helped Mr. Vidor to give us a better document than what he has offered us in HALLELUJAH! The result might have been a more pretentious but hardly a better film.

Sociological implications can never be avoided, no matter how esthetically disinterested either a novel, a play or a film may be. Viewed in this light HALLELUJAH! is as spurious as ABIE'S IRISH ROSE. Unless one is working with purely abstract forms, this cannot be escaped. The construction of any concrete theme in art in which human material is involved strictly implies the drawing up of definite social relationships as a prerequisite.

Obviously, all this is very elementary. But Mr. Potamkin has skipped over these basic considerations into an impossible position where an esthetically abstracted Negro essence is the film has become the thing for him. And that is the reason why, in one of his perennial quarrels with Gilbert Seldes, after two pages of trifling on technicalities, it was only in passing that he found it necessary to mention... "the thematic false-rendering in the narration" of HALLELUJAH!

If we investigate Potamkin's application of the source theory to the Jew in the film, we find the same serious fallacy repeated. "...the importance of the Jewish physiognomy, like the Negro, an unexploited cinema plastic material, the singularity of the intensive Jewish gestures, and most outstanding, the Yiddish and Hebrew utterances as the material of the sonal film."

In the case of the Jew, Potamkin has been a little less specific and also a little less analytical of the matter. Try to go back to Jewish "sources" and you get as a result a most colorful mixture of almost every "source" in the world. May I again take the liberty to refer H.A.P. to a *scientific* source? Read the investigation by Karl Kautsky entitled, *Are the Jews A Race?* and you will discover that the modern Jew is even further from his sources than the American Negro. The Jew-type that you have in mind is vanishing from the earth even faster than the "wooly, broad-nosed Negro" is disappearing from the American scene. Kautsky has pushed his research so far as to prove conclusively that even the legendary Jewish proboscis is now only a memory. Rather sad for the Jewish-plastic enthusiasts, but a fact nevertheless.

A very interesting point. In his article on the Jew as movie-subject, Mr. Potamkin makes mention of almost every Yiddish film ever produced. Every gone-and-forgotten attempt is brought up to find its place in the scheme of the investigation. *Not a single word is mentioned about the film, which, its technical shortcomings notwithstanding, is in every respect the greatest one of the Jew ever made.* I have in mind the Soviet production entitled SEEDS OF FREEDOM. It is a film in which is portrayed the struggle of the younger Russian-Jewish generation against the conservative background of Yiddish orthodoxy. It is a dramatization of the birth of a new Jew who is beginning to shed the fetters of all his "sources" to merge with his advanced (revolutionary) class surroundings. In Hirsch Leckert, the hero, we see symbolized the emergency of the Jewish worker who is being remade by his social milieu.

And I know that Potamkin has seen SEEDS OF FREEDOM.

The consideration of cinematic plastic by no means becomes a minor one simply because a prototype at the "source" cannot serve our purpose. On the contrary, new structures, new gestures, new atmospheres, new forms beckon the real artist.

Unlike Mr. McPherson, editor of *Close Up*, I am of the opinion that the cinema needs *more* and not *less* theory. But let us learn to distinguish between correct theory and the eclectic humbug which results from attempts to be original at all costs. Excluding isolated and individual contributions of value to the theory and esthetics of the cinema, we may safely say that only the Russians have created a scientific system in theory which has fully proven its value in practice. This theory must be deepened and enriched with our further investigations and experiences in the cinematic field, but the creator of misleading theoretical concepts is as criminal as "the geographer who would draw up false maps for navigators." The mental gymnastics of the French bourgeois cinema esthetes gall me as much as pragmatic America's contempt for all theory. More clarity and less confusion! Less phrases and more science!

In the last year there has become noticeable a change of heart in their former attitude towards the Russian film on the part of many bourgeois intellectual cinema circles throughout the world. Some are complaining of "too much theory." A French bourgeois critic, formerly friendly to Russian films, recently wrote about his weariness of the Soviet *kino*. Another French cineaste has spoken of his disgust while emphasizing what he terms "the falsehood of the Russians." (Rene Clair). The French cinema world actively boycotted Eisenstein during his stay in Paris. And, in America.

Potamkin has already said: "I do not think the Russian kino has as yet found a method that suits its profound material ... the Russian films had better find a new method..." [3]

This was said by one who only a short time ago devoted whole articles in praise of the "old method." And take note of the almost throbbing "had better." I think I can detect more sincerity in Seldes's "technical trick" formulation.

I'll wait and see

Paris, March 1930.

NOTES

1. On this point a young Hollywood critic has the following to say: "Potamkin's mention of an insignificant bourgeois actor, forgotten today even by his former admirers, Sidney Drew, is an affectation that is typical of Potamkin's writing of the last year. Who was Drew, anyway? A thousand others also satirized the servants of the petty-bourgeoisie. This type of light, gay, chuckling satire is of no more significance than the type of satire that the servants of the bourgeoisie require of film-creators than the humor of Will Rogers is like the humor of a cartoon in the *Daily Worker*. It is affectations of this nature that make Potamkin's writings sterile, sophisticated to the point of nauseous glibness ... He is so anxious to show that he knows every Tom, Dick and Harry that has ever appeared before a camera or that ever ground out a six-reel piece of kitsch, that he misses the vital essence of his material."

2. This does not mean, of course, that the Negro is not faced with special problems within the working class — problems which necessitate new means of combat as part of the proletariat's broader revolutionary struggle. Lying, for instance, is obviously a part of the oppression of Negroes as a race.

There is a bourgeois school of thought that denies the existence of a "Negro problem" on the ground that assimilation will eventually eliminate the Negro from the American social scene. This is a reactionary evasion of a sore in the capitalist system.

The fact that the Negro is changing through assimilation does not mean that he is not now the most exploited member of the American working class.

Both the "source" theory and that of "eventual assimilation" are therefore reactionary.

The object of this article is to show that in dealing with the Negro as subject-matter for the film, Potamkin has merely reversed an old bourgeois "idea" into another just as counterrevolutionary. Instead of evading the issue by claiming a "natural" solution in some distant future, he has escaped to Africa. Between these two theories, the oppressed American Negro worker remains suspended in mid-air between his past and his future.

3. *New Masses*. New York, December 1929.