

Samuel Brody interview

The camera as a weapon in the class struggle

by **Tony Safford**

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AS U.S. leftwing film production of the thirties enjoys a cautious renaissance, "people seriously concerned with the nature and meaning of the Marxist film look back on that period with respect, amazement and, no doubt, a certain degree of romanticizing. Samuel Brody, an organizer of the Workers Film and Photo League and writer for the landmark New Theater and Experimental Cinema recalls the first days of American radical film production and its legacy with all its vitality and characteristic ideological flavor. He remains today an upholder of the League's original position on the Marxist film: the rapid and continual production of newsreels, short documentaries and compilations "born in the heat of the class upheavals of the time."

Here Dziga Vertov is admittedly Brody's main source of inspiration. Vertov, more than anyone else, provided a format and method for the creation of leftwing films in the early thirties and many radical documentaries since then (although it is odd how Brody glosses over the neglected work of Victor Turin). On the theoretical level, the Films of Vertov and the early efforts of the League attempted to deal with the problem of what was called "external montage," the juxtaposition and contrast of shots externally related to one another so as to produce an effect not contained in any individual shot. As Brody described it,

"Reality recorded on film strips and... built up into wholes embodying our revolutionary interpretation of events."

While sounding perhaps like Eisenstein, this is more correctly a restatement of Vertov's formula:

"kino-see + kino-write + kino-organize = Kino-Eye" (cinematic truth).

And following Vertov, Brody warned that the cinema in the class struggle knows no

"happy medium" between the histrionic recreation of reality and directly recorded reality itself."

It was this extreme and rather limited position held by the leadership of the League which, in 1935, forced its split and the formation of Nykino and eventually Frontier Films by Leo Hurwitz, Ralph Steiner, Paul Strand and others under greater inspiration from Pudovkin, Dovzhenko and Joris Ivens than Vertov. This split was not without bitterness however, and Brody still refers to those forming Frontier Films as "an elitist group ... who looked up on us as the great unwashed" and he is contemptuous of their "cinematic recreation." In fact, Brody's own considerably longer amounts of time-block-buster productions, so to speak, "Brody's intellectual integrity (inflexibility?) disallowed any compromise with this talented group. Thus he effectively barred himself from any active participation in Frontier Films, thought by many to be the most important U.S. leftwing film group. Finally, it ought to be kept in mind that Brody's own "cinematic recreation" is not, as he himself calls it, ontological film-essays, as is so very much in vogue today. For Brody, Vertov is, like himself, a filmmaker single-mindedly dedicated to perfecting the cinema as a weapon in the class struggle. The rest, according to Brody, is cheap talk.

Q: Could you tell me something about your intellectual and artistic development. How did you start in leftwing film production? Influences?

A: False modesty aside, I'd prefer to touch ever so lightly on what you call my "intellectual and artistic development." My formal education consists of less than a year in New York's high school for precocious boys—Townsend Harris at CCNY. Picked up the little I've learned from roaming the bookstalls along the Seine in Paris, the used bookstalls on 125th St., and the incredible library of the YMHA at 92nd St. and Lexington Avenue in New York. My old man was a journeyman tailor whose life was consumed and ground to dust in London, Paris, and New York sweatshops. Yet he still found time to initiate me into the eye-opening truths of Marxism and the unorthodox notion that living and acting for social change was more important than making a lot of money at the expense of one's fellow-man.

Q: To what extent do you think your generation's artistic and political commitment was due to the Soviet experience? To the internal conditions of Depression United States?

A: My generation's "artistic and political commitment" preceded both the Russian Revolution and the 1930s economic crisis, of course. There have always been those dedicated to revolutionary change in even comparatively "normal" periods of social development. Marxism is not a "sometime thing" as the popular song has it. The Soviet experience and the Great Depression brought into the ranks of the revolutionary needs of our world hundreds of "peop" who in no-forerists times remain uncommitted and inert. The answer then is, yes, the Soviet experience and the Depression had an overwhelming effect on my generation's artists, writers and intellectuals. I refer you to Daniel Aron's *Writers on the Left* for a detailed elaboration of this phenomenon (it's liberal dress, but the facts are there).

Q: For a young Marxist filmmaker what was the impact of first hearing Eisenstein lecture at the Sorbonne in 1929?

A: I was well-nigh overwhelmed by the man's encyclopedic learning, his indescribable enthusiasm and vitality and exuberance. This impression was later confirmed for me when Harry Alan Potamkin and I interviewed him and Griqori Alexandrov in New York. An outsize *jeu de vivre* and appetite for knowing, doing, probing. He told us at the time that Pudovkin was mediocre! A bizarre facet of his character was a Rabelaisian taste for pornography.

Q: In retrospect it seems clear that the Workers Film and Photo League was extremely important, in initiating American leftwing film production. Could you tell me something about its spirit and credo?

A: I was the founder of the Workers Film and Photo League in 1931. The organization grew out of the peripheral cultural activities of the American section of the Workers International Relief (WIR), an international organization dedicated to supporting striking workers materially and culturally. "The camera as a weapon in the class-struggle" was our slogan. I was involved in all its organizational and creative activities in the 1930s. Its membership, fluctuating between 75 and 100, was mainly working-class with a sprinkling of middle-class intellectuals and technicians sympathetic to our progressive goals.

Q: What was the "Harry Alan Potamkin Film School"?

A: The "Harry Alan Potamkin Film School" was established by the Workers Film and Photo League to train working-class filmmakers. We needed editors, cameramen, projectionists, scripters, etc. I taught courses with Joseph Freeman, Leo T. Hurwitz, Jacobs, and Platt.

Q: Were you involved in filming the Hunger March to Washington in 1932?

A: Yes, I was involved in filming the Hunger March as well as the famous Bonus March. I was one of several cameramen sent along on the marches by the Workers Film and Photo League.

Q: Was there any government opposition to your film activities on these marches?

A: Only the routine badgering and harassment by the FBI.

Q: You must have faced monumental problems of financing. How did you support your activities and acquire funds for film stock and other equipment?

A: It must be remembered that we shot 35mm silent, using cut-rate "shortends" and beat-up old Eyemo and DeVry hand cameras plus the "portable" DeVry and Acme projectors. We raised money through membership dues, bazaars, and affairs. Even with the financial support of our mother organization, the Workers International Relief, it was always an uphill struggle. But our determination and dedication to the work we were doing overcame many obstacles. "Erobert Den Film!" (conquer film), proclaimed Willi Muenzenberg, the International head of the WIR, and we did!

Q: What was the impact on politically engaged artists like yourself on first seeing the Soviet film classics—POTEMKIN, MOTHER, OCTOBER, EARTH, TURKSIB? And to what extent did these films influence your methods?

A: What methods are you referring to? If you mean film methods, then yes, we were definitely influenced in our early gropings for a style in our newsreels and documentaries. Crude and primitive as our efforts often were, we strove to emulate the dynamism, élan and vitality of films like MOTHER and POTEMKIN. These were a revelation to us, both in form and content. When we'd get our hands on one of these films, we would take it apart frame by frame, carefully analyzing each shot.

Q: What was the impact of Dziga Vertov's? Why did you decide to translate writings by that director in particular?

A: It happened on the writings of Vertov in issue of Barbusse's *Monde*. Not only did they confirm my conviction that the film medium was its most effective and powerful level when its raw material was reality itself rather than the re-enactment and artificial recreation of it. But also, they revealed a new approach to filmed reality which in effect outlined a special grammar and syntax for what until then had been rather rudderless. I still believe that Vertov's contribution to film will someday be recognized for its watershed importance in the evolution of what came to be known as the "documentary," the film of reality.

Q: So you had read Vertov before seeing his films?

A: Yes. Doesn't the Bible say something about the "word came before the deed." That's wrong of course, but that's the way it was for Vertov and me.

Q: Do you see any particular format for radical filmmaking—documentary, cinema verité, and historical recreation? Did the Soviet experience play a part here?

A: Documentary. Cinema verité with an unequivocal "engageé" slant. Vertov I consider the true founder and theoretician of what is now called cinema verité. This I also derive *de rigueur* for film form in capitalist countries. In the socialist nations where the means of motion picture production are in the hands of the working class, the problem is obviously very different. There film form can be immensely diversified to include what you call "historical recreation" (IVAN THE TERRIBLE, ALEXANDER NEVSKY, CHAPAYEV). Experimentation with other possible forms is inevitable and has already resulted in film masterpieces that rank with immortal creations in other art forms such as painting, and music.

Q: In retrospect, it seems clear that two films by Pare Lorentz, THE PLOUGH THAT BROKE THE PLAINS (1936) and THE RIVER (1937) were virtual remakes of Victor Turin's TURKSIB (1929). At the time did you sense the importance of this film?

A: I have never given any thought as to whether these films were what you call "remakes" of TURKSIB. Off the top of my head, I'd say that that notion is a touch far-fetched. Certainly they were not "remakes" as far as content. Influences are not always readily traced, especially in the film medium and in a rather turbulent historical period.

Q: In France, did you know Leon Moussinaf? Did he influence you in any way, or vice versa? What about Bela Balazs?

A: Yes, I knew Leon Moussinac in France in 1928 and 1929. He introduced me to Henri Barbusse for whose publication, *Le Monde*, I wrote a review of King Vidor's HALLELUJAH! Moussinac had a seminal influence on me as well as on a whole generation of young cinema workers. Especially influential was his remarkable pioneering study of filmic reality, *Naissance du cinéma (Birth of Cinema)* and his essays in the Communist daily newspaper, *L'Humanité*. An erudite Marxist thinker of the first magnitude, I never met Bela Balazs, but I had read his work, *Der Sichtbare Mensch*, which was subsequently translated into English as *The Visible Man*. An attempt at an aesthetic of film—basic and learned.

Q: What led you to be associated with the journal *Experimental Cinema*. A coeditor of the fourth issue was Alexander Brailovsky, my grandfather. Do you by any chance remember him?

A: I became associated with *Experimental Cinema* through my friendship with David Platt and Lewis Jacobs. They were the East Coast editors at the time. I never had the pleasure of meeting your grandfather. I do recall however that Seymour Stern sent us a manuscript that Brailovsky had submitted to him, which was rejected as being overly formalistic and obtuse for the readership we were aiming at.

Q: In your article "On a Theory of Sources," you stated,

"Hollywood is the monster-filter of capitalism through which is sifted American reality."

How did you mean this in 1931 and what does it mean today?

A: The Workers Film and Photo League carried on the struggle on two fronts: (1) by making films aimed at bringing the proletarian message of class struggle to the working class audience; and (2) to expose and combat the Hollywood lies that fill the American screens. During the early Fascist films we would boycott and picket. We occasionally went so far as to plant stink bombs in the theaters. And today Hollywood films still replace what ought to be, and has the potential to be, a highly progressive art. But there are so many books being published, so many films are uphilled struggle. But our determination and dedication to the people the less room there is for their creativity. And in that sense these Hollywood films are reactionary.

Q: So in that case, all films are political.

A: That is precisely what I believe. Exactly. By displacing other films, and by intrinsically being what it is—pap, filler for so-called entertainment.

In the same article you wrote,

"Sociological implications can never be avoided, no matter how aesthetically disinterested either a novel, a play or a film may be."

Could you elaborate on this briefly?

A: Indeed, I am not a disinterested art-for-art's-saker. The most "escapist" art is, by that very fact, sterile at best and reactionary at worst. This art abdicates the artist's responsibility to society and social progress. Daumier, Goya, Eisenstein, Balzac, Robeson, Hogarth, YES! De Kooning, Hollywood, Emshwiller, Anger, Kandinsky, Kline, NO! This is especially true in times of social and economic crises such as we are at present experiencing. What is art if it is not "engageé" ... and "enrageé" too, Potamkin longed for the aesthetic of "negritude." I wanted art at the service of black liberation.

Q: Also you wrote, "cinema needs more not less theory." When you wrote this it seems to me that the practice of theory and practice was resolved in a very natural way—from problem to theory, theory to practice. Could you elaborate?

A: You've read or heard the dictum that "theory without practice is sterile; practice without theory is blind." Theory has been defined as "congealed and encapsulated practice." Of all the arts, cinema is the youngest and most unexamined, only recently having been considered worthy of serious study by art scholars and historians. A rather belated attitude towards the graphic arts would have arrested painting, say, at the level of the comic strip, poetry at the doggerel level, and music at the pop level. The Hollywood factories ground out their some eight hundred films a year with a blueprinted formula for mass consumption and profits. The devil take the hindmost in the problems of art and film theory. Profit and creases were their only concerns. The very word "montage" was as foreign to these vulgar hucksters as some minor footnote in the *Kabala*. To us young progressive would-be filmmakers in the Workers Film and Photo League, the Soviet films and the writings of their makers were a welcome revelation guiding us through heretofore unknown territory to where we could learn the basic grammar of the medium, both in the making and the writing about films. For several years I wrote a column about films for the *Daily Worker*. The writings and creations of the Soviet directors provided invaluable in my evaluating and analyzing films both domestic and foreign. The bulk of the world's film production came out of Hollywood where the pragmatic box-office consideration was the sole guide to excellence and "art." Remember Goethe's deathbed yearning: "More light! More light!" That's what I meant when I wrote we need "more not less theory."

Q: Often a Marxist film will try to explain a historical situation and all the conditions which led to that situation. Do you see any recent attempts as this kind of cinema?

A: I think the Soviet films such as ALEXANDER NEVSKY, IVAN THE TERRIBLE, BALLAD OF A SOLDIER and SEEDS OF FREEDOM and many more such films have "explained" or at least have made a good try at explaining "historical situations." On the other hand, to be so rigid as to expect any film to hew to a close Marxist view is sometimes to look a little horse in the mouth when we consider domestic independent products like HEARTS AND MINDS, for instance. Or some of the documentaries by Wiseman which powerfully expose a situation. A number of the so called "Third World" films also have this quality. In any case, that's a big order you're asking, and not easy to strictly define. Eisenstein told us that when Stalin saw a preview of ALEXANDER NEVSKY, Stalin turned to him and said: "Comrade Eisenstein, you're a Bolshevik!" What do you think, Tony?

Q: What do you think a political film can do? Whom should it reach? Godard used to speak of the "cinema as a gun." To what extent do you think a film can bring about social change?

A: What is a political film? Or, conversely, what isn't? I've already touched on this question in a previous reply. At this juncture of history, I think that films should be slanted to reach the widest spectrum of the population, including the disaffected sections of the middle class and intellectuals, but appealing most directly to the most decisive and potent component of our capitalist society: the working class. I'm not quite clear as to what Godard means by "cinema as a gun" (after all, he's a Maoist and carries his barricades in his backpack). I'm afraid to take this too literally. We've hardly reached that stage, don't you think? If he's simply setting that up as a metaphor for the class struggle, well, that's another matter. No single medium, be it literature, painting, theatre or whatever can do anything about social change, of course. But in historical conditions ripe for such change, the film can certainly make a potent contribution in this regard, probably more so than other creative media.

Q: Why more so than any other media?

A: Because I think its effect is cumulative. We grow up with film as a culture, right? We see many films and this has a certain effect on us. The total effect, of course, orients your consciousness in a certain direction—it can be reactionary, it can be revolutionary, it can be innocuous. But it cannot be said that any single film can do anything like that. Although pivotal creations in art such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in this country, or Diderot's work in his day, or Rousseau, helped bring about a revolutionary situation, it wasn't just a single creation but so many others and, of course, the objective conditions which make for revolution and social change. So I think in the case of film it is the totality of what we see, but not a single film.

But in the case of the Russian films, it must be said, that intellectuals and artists in the 1930s who saw all of these great films couldn't possibly totally escape the content. They saw that here was a different technique, a different aesthetic, and at the same time, a revolutionary content. And that helped push them towards a more Marxist and revolutionary outlook on life in general. How can you separate the Russian Revolution from OCTOBER?

But still I think the cumulative effect of film as such holds true. That is why in the 1930s with the Workers Film and Photo League we tried to do as many short films as possible, not just one epic-making production that really wouldn't accomplish anything.

Q: How would you describe the function of radical film criticism in the thirties and today? Is there a difference?

A: In the thirties, movies were no more the "opium of the people" than they are today, or always have been for that matter (although I'm inclined to grant TV that dubious distinction in our time). The role of radical criticism therefore remains the same: a consistent and relentless analysis and exposure of that commercial establishment product that numbs the will and brain of the masses and contributes to concealing and detaching the thrust of the working class in the struggle against the danger of war, unemployment, racism, the problems of the aged, and cultural dissolution.

Q: Today, perhaps the greatest controversy in political filmmaking is whether a revolutionary form is needed to express a revolutionary content. To what extent was this a concern for you in your early Marxist film work?

A: Again we come back to the problem touched upon in a previous question: theory, form, content, etc. I firmly believe that for the left there can only be one viable form of filmmaking and that is the documentary form of "engageé" reality. This is true also in a practical, pragmatic sense. The split in the old Workers Film and Photo League in the thirties was the result of a principled disagreement as to whether we ought to concentrate on short documentaries born in the heat of the class upheavals of the time or concentrate on enacted, recited "features" produced over considerably longer spans of time—blockbuster productions, so to speak. The result was a split away from the Workers Film and Photo League and others who looked upon us as the great unwashed who could not be initiated into the more lofty realms of cinema art. Life itself provided the answers when this group finally exhausted its energies and resources in the production of films which, by the time they were finished, were obsolete in relation to current events. Even if one were to set aside all other objections to this policy, the exhausting and endless quest for funding such films drained the group of most of the creative drive and energy needed to create such long-range projects. The fallacy of such an approach would be immeasurably compounded today by the fact that films are not silent as they were then. This film technology and costs (plus the inflation factor!) have proliferated in almost geometric progression. The long, enacted, or re-enacted form is therefore completely ruled out for our time.

I cannot agree that today "the greatest controversy in political filmmaking is whether revolutionary form is needed to express a revolutionary content." If there is such a "controversy," then it is sterile, academic and unrealistic. Who today is making "political" or radical films responding to the needs of the hour? No Film and Photo League, no Frontier Films. The colleges throughout the nation are now producing some 10,000 film and TV majors a year and what I've called "the rage to film" shows no signs of abating. I see them come in droves to Tom Brandon's showings of films we sweated out in the thirties. But I've learned that the main thrust of their interest is NOT in the social and political events of the period, but rather in the KIND of films we made then. An obsessive interest and curiosity in form and technique, but hardly in the earth-shaking events. In the light of this central fact—and I hope you can agree—then it must be said that we are patently pointless to indulge in fruitless exchanges involving problems of "revolutionary form and content." This inevitably becomes an easy substitute for organizing viable progressive filmmaking groups who in the very process of *making* films would provide the needed solutions—technical, aesthetic, political.

Q: Were you in this country during the investigations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities?

A: Yes, I was in the U.S., during the witch hunts. I was one of its minor victims (kicked off the WPA for refusing to sign a loyalty oath and a few years later). It goes without saying that many of my friends and comrades were severely victimized by the HUAC; many of them lost their livelihood or had to leave the country.

Q: You indicated to me that you've remained active in local Marxist media groups. Could you briefly discuss your present work and do you feel a continuity with your earlier work?

A: Trying to keep that my present poor health permits, I am desperately trying to extend my left pinky in progressive film activity. It isn't easy. I've had a number of occasions managed to corral small groups of activists involved in filmmaking in one phase or another. But the insurmountable thing seems to be that young people have lost the instinct for collective work and organization which made it possible to scale mountains in the thirties. This is especially true in the corrupting centers of Hollywood where the pressure for careerism and selfish individual climbing overwhelms the young would-be filmmaker. And it must be remembered that the present-day costs of even the most modest film effort are staggering. Only a collective of the dedicated and determined people can get anywhere, and even then the obstacles are colossal.

Yes, we need a new left film organization that would be tailored to the needs of our time, with the "rage" not merely for film for its own sake, but to put this powerful medium at the service of progress and change. Why this has not yet happened even on an elementary scale is a puzzle to me. I tried with might and main to get it so far have failed to stir up sufficient interest. I'm still trying, however. I'm also a member of the Socialist Media Group in San Francisco and have lectured on films before meetings of the New American Movement.

Q: T.W. Adorno has asserted that the only choice of a politically committed artist at this point in history is to create a negative art. Do you agree in the context of the thirties and today?

A: I emphatically disagree with Adorno. What the hell is a negative art? Are dreck like TOWERING INFERNO, HINDENBURG, KING KONG, and "positive," "what is the then? Is POTEMKIN positive or negative? And if "positive," what is the criticism? I find such pronouncements a mere juggling with words. What the "politically committed" or "negative" art people at this juncture is revolutionary art dedicated to revolutionary transformations of society. Any other formulation is mere intellectual lobotomizing. Are THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS, THE BATTLE OF LENINGRAD, and HEARTS AND MINDS positive or negative? You tell me, was Daumier a "negative" artist? Was Goya? Was Zerk negative or positive? I think the work we did in the thirties, crude and amateurish as was so many of our efforts, could hardly be considered as "negative."

Q: On January 23 of this year you must have learned of an event that seriously grieved you—Paul Robeson's death. Do you ever have the opportunity to work with this great man?

A: The death of an American giant like Robeson, who was such a heroic and noble personality on the American scene for so many years, represents a tragic and overwhelming loss to all who loved him through the great social earthquakes of the 1930s and 1940s. I can't think of any one personality who even remotely approached his stature as an artist and spokesman for the black masses. I think it speaks well for you to bring up his name and to remember him. I met Paul Robeson only once at the Soviet Pavilion of the New York World's Fair of 1929 (I believe that was the year). His huge hand came near crushing mine in a warm handshake, and I can still hear that thunderous laughter as others crowded around him for autographs and fraternal talk.