Crowds and scenes: cinematic figures of collectivity

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This article is one part of a larger project on cinematic figures of collectivity. The roots of this project lie in my interest in the figure of the extra in classical Hollywood cinema, and in the ways in which extras participate in the thickening of social texture within narrative worlds. This interest extends, as well, to what in French are called les *acteurs de seconds rôles*, and in English "character actors". We may see the extra and *acteur de seconds rôles* as building blocks in the construction of filmic collectivities, as raw material for, respectively, the crowds and *groupes restraints* (small groups) which will be one of our concerns in what follows.

Parallel to this interest in cinematic figures of collective life, and, indeed, outside of the study of film, I have been involved for some twenty years in reflecting upon another figure of collective life, that of the cultural "scene". The word "scene" has circulated for almost a century in journalistic and everyday discourses on culture. Typically, it designates loosely-bounded social groups devoted to particular styles or genres of culture, as in references to an "alternative rock scene" or "Montreal's experimental dance scene." Recently, "scene" has been the focus of a more rigorous theorization within sociologies of culture, which have attempted to insert "scene" within a broader typology of terms designating cultural "regions", such as the Bourdieusian *champ* (field) r the "art worlds" conceptualized by Harold Becker[i]. If the social location of a *champ* is often taken to be tightly circumscribed by the gathering of various kinds of capital (cultural, symbolic, etc.), and if Becker's "art world" names a set of solid supports for artistic activity, "scene" has always designated a more fluid social unity. Typically, by "scene", we mean the regular gathering of people united by their devotion to a particular cultural "object" (such as a style, form or movement), in loosely-bounded events and places marked by an effervescent sociability.

My challenge in this article is that of attempting to bring together these two parallel trajectories in my work as a researcher: on the one hand, an interest in those figures of collective life that one finds in cinema; on the other, my fascination for this extra-cinematic cultural form that one calls a "scene". A first observation is that the encounter of cinema and scene may occur at multiple levels. Outside of the film text itself, the cinema will generate a great many scenes, such as those which coalesce in festival openings, film premières, or the ongoing life of those spaces of exhibition, like the BFI Southbank (in London) or the Cine Tonalá (in Mexico City), where film-going is embedded in rich contexts of sociability (of eating, drinking and conversation). It is easy to point, as well, to innumerable films which represent cultural scenes in documentary or fictional form – for example, the "Club Med scene" recreated in key sequences in the fictional *Adieu Phillipine* (dir. Jacques Rozier, 1962) or the New York vogue dancing scene examined in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990; dir. Jenny Livingstone). The question to be asked here is whether there are specifically cinematic figures for representing cultural scenes, figures we might differentiate from those which show us other forms of cultural life, such as the crowd or the small social group.

The crowd, the small group

The status of the crowd in cinema has been the object of intermittent commentary in recent decades, principally by French thinkers. For Marie-Josée Mondzain, as for Georges Didi-Huberman, the figure of the crowd must be thought in conjunction with that of the extra, which is its raw material. Both crowd and extra, Mondzain argues, are products of modernity and, in particular, of the first World War – that war of both great masses of combatants and of the singular unknown and nameless soldier[ii]. For Mondzain, this relationship of anonymous individual to mass is replicated in cinema, in the difference between extra and star, and further mirrored in the distance between film viewer and performers on the screen. Extra and viewer are produced as communities of people without names, peripheral to the stars who shine on the screen and at the centre of filmic action[iii]. For Didi-Huberman, we may read, in the representational status of the crowd in cinema, the denial of any human agency, the reduction of the people to an entity which is simply made to exhibit itself[iv].

In other, recent commentary on the cinematic extra and crowd, neither are any longer understood as products of the early 20th century age of mass warfare and urban anonymity. Rather, the

contemporary extra comes to stand as the perfect embodiment of Hardt and Negri's late modern multitude, the dispossessed, contemporary figure with little more than their bodily substance to sell, under conditions of absolute de-subjectivation[v]. Here, the extra is no longer the historical equivalent of the World War I soldier, but, rather, of the 21st century mobile, migrant worker, transporting their body from one precarious economic situation to another, unheard and unnoticed.

Those attentive to cinematic representations of the crowd will often find a golden age of such representation in the cinema of the late 1920s and 1930s. The crowd assumes the role of narrative agent in many films of this period, not merely in the self-consciously collectivist films of the post-revolutionary Soviet avant-garde, but in such popular genres of the 1930s and 1940s as the American social comedy (of Frank Capra, Preston Sturges and others) and the French social drama. In the 1932 French film *Coeur de Lilas* (dir. Anatole Litvak), for example, the story unfolds along the energetic lines of moving crowds, with the momentum of one set of collective movements passing on to that of another, as the story and its principal characters are seemingly pushed along by the social collectivity.   One of the most striking instances of this movement comes near the film's beginning, when a crowd, formed of converging groups of city-dwellers, rushes to the site of discovery of a murdered man. As the crowd organizes itself to view the body, it ceases moving so as to assume a spectatorial position. The camera moves across the people assembled, capturing their gestures and physiognomies in momentary detail.

Here, the movement of the crowd slows into the thickness of social texture. As the camera comes to focus on a limited number of individuals, we have passed from the crowd into the social circle, the small group. This restricted group is a beloved figure of collectivity in most forms of cinematic social realism: we find it in the working class neighbourhood communities of 1930s French cinema, in the poor quartiers of Montreal seen in the films of André Forcier, in the small-time cabarets of Mexican cinema, and so on. While Marie-José Mondzain sees the crowd as erasing individuality, and thus as totalitarian in impulse, other writers will embrace the smaller groups of mid-century social cinema as emblematic of democracy. Both Serge Regourd and Alain Badiou have advanced similar ideas in this regard: on the one hand, the small group assembling in a street, around a film's hero, is democratic, in the sense that the central character is embedded deep within the group, as if shaped by it and responsible to it.   On the other hand,

for both observers, the social circle is a compressor of time and the incarnation of a social taxonomy. For Badiou, the urban social group represents an accumulation, a stockage of left-over character types from several historical periods. Within it, residual, dominant and emergent forms of gesture, appearance and behavior are brought together in close proximity[vi]. In Regourd's analysis, *les acteurs de second rôle* serve to situate principal characters within a social thickness marked by fine gradations of centrality. In the French cinema of mid-century, he suggests, the type-casting and diversity of *seconds rôles* represent *une certaine idée de la France*a, functioning as "the incarnation of a common destiny rooted in individual creation.[vii] » Thus, if the crowd reduces the extra to a simple token – without value or identity – the small group, in which character actors are granted a few minutes in which to expand their persona, enacts the creation of a complex and enlarged social taxonomy. In an article published in 1977, Alain Badiou noted how the French cinema of the 1930s served as a veritable museum of professions, social roles and personality types which were all threatened with extinction: "Bistrotiers, concierges, balayeurs, poivrots, petites secrétaires, vacanciers ridicules, petits cadres, paysans madrés, profs chahutés, dessinateurs hilares, livreurs de vin et pompistes.[viii]" He would offer a similar taxonomy in a 1983 article on the French comic film[ix].

Scene

The small group of 1930s social cinema, so cherished by Regourd and Badiou, is often marked by effervescence and a public sociability, but it is not, we would suggest, a scene. Typically, it assembles in moments of community crisis – the discovery of a murder, the occasion of an argument – but it is not one moment in the ongoing sociability of a group united by taste, profession or a devotional relationship to a cultural object. If we move now, from the crowd and the social group to the concept of scene, we must first confront the number (and incoherence) of definitions of scene that circulate in the sociology of culture, in journalism, and in everyday discussions of culture. We may organize these definitions on the basis of two broad conceptualisations of scene, which I have further developed elsewhere[x] In one of these, the term "scene" belongs to a morphology of culture: it names a unity, a circumscribed region within culture, which takes its coherence from a cultural practice, a style, a genre of cultural expression. We may speak, for example, of a swing music scene in Paris, of a post-rock scene in Montreal, of the Brooklyn poetry scene. "Scene," in this sense, names the variety of practices, places,

materials, roles and interactions that gather around a particular cultural object. A scene, here, is both the container of all of these elements and the social unity that these elements produce in ongoing iterations of their interaction. Within a certain sociology of popular culture, scene, in this sense, came to replace other terms, like subculture or community, perceived as too essentializing in their suggestions of a deeply-rooted, shared identity, or as too human-centred in their inattentiveness to the material or locational dimensions of scenes. This definition of scene lies at the heart – implicitly or explicitly – of so many filmic representations of scenes, such as documentaries on musical genres and the worlds of fans and performers which surround them.

We may suggest, however, another definition of scene, one which detaches it from a morphology of cultural unities in which it sits alongside "subculture" and "community". This other definition is borrowed from the work of the sociologist Alan Blum. For Blum, a scene designates the spectacle of sociability within urban life. Scenes take shape when the intimacies of conversation and interaction transpire in public places, and are thus rendered visible[xi]. A sense of urbanity is produced in the constant rendering public of the intimacy of small groups, and in the ways in which such public intimacy becomes part of the visible landscape of cities. In street terraces, in the restaurants of *grands boulevards* (with their clientele visible through large windows), in art gallery vernissages and in the soirées of high society, sociability moves out of hidden and private places to coalesce within scenes. These scenes – often contiguous and overlapping – together produce the broader spectacle of social effervescence, which is itself a spectacle to be consumed and enjoyed. It is in this sense that we may speak, as one did in the past, of a St. Germain scene, of the Greenwich Village scene in New York, of the bar scene in London's Soho district. In histories of literary sociability, for example, "scene" would describe the fluid encounters of the literary tavern or café, rather than the more rigidly circumscribed spaces of the literary *cenacle* or salon[xii].

We are confronted, then, with two definitions of scene. One, to be found in the sociology of cultural work and consumption, and names an assemblage of bodies, practices, places and objects, all clustering around a cultural object which renders them coherent – a musical style, a literary practice, etc. In the second, more estheticizing definition, scene names the effervescence produced by urban sociability unfolding in public places, perceptible to others. If there is a relationship between these two definitions of scene, it rests on the fact that, if a scene takes shape

around a cultural "object", and names a key site of its production and consumption, our second sense of "scene" recognizes the transformation of these activities into a broader experience of urbanity. The poets and philosophers of St. Germain, the poets and radical journalists of Greenwich Village, and the musicians and artists of Soho all form scenes through the interactions which form one part of their cultural labour; in doing so, however, they produce a spectacle of interaction which adds to the store of sensations constitutive of urbanity, of the sensorial richness of urban life.

We have already noted the existence of innumerable films which document scenes of the first type, in particular those which have taken shape around specific musical movements or styles. Clearly, however, the cinema has been drawn to the second type of scene, to spectacles of urban effervescence. Frequently, these figure as simple ways of establishing context, at the beginning of films or in moments of transition. For example, three films of the 1950s *The Wrong Man* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1956), *Le désordre de la nuit* (dir. Gilles Grangier, 1958) and *French Can-Can* (dir. Jean Renoir, 1955) each begin with visually rich images of jubilant sociability set against the performance of music, before seeking out their central characters and following their narrative trajectories.

The question to be posed here is whether we might isolate certain stylistic conventions for the representation of scenes within cinema. In *La Dolce Vita*, Federico Fellini's film of 1960, the principal character, played by Marcelo Mastroianni, winds his way among the guests at a high-society party. For each person he passes, his host-guide reveals certain sordid details of their personal lives. "You know Jane? American, painter, who lives in Rome, as if it were a colony"; "little Eleonora, 80,000 hectares, two failed suicides", etc. We are confronted here, with a social scene at multiple levels : on the one hand, a more or less stable site of night life for high society, into which our main character enters, but also the flux of a world of perpetual effervescence, of a *milieu* forever on the move, wandering from one country to another.

The unfolding of this sequence is organized as a tableau of sorts, in which the camera moves laterally across a group of people. The passage of each individual or couple before the camera serves as pretext for the gossipy description offered by the evening's host. This sequence is faithful to the definition of scene I have already offered : we see intimacy rendered visible. However, the camera is interested less in finding a position of intimate proximity to the

characters than in cataloguing their variety in almost ethnographic fashion. What interests me in this sequence is the horizontality of the movement of both camera and characters, the use of a tracking shot to enumerate, to provide an inventory of the participants in this scene.

In an article on visuality in the literary works of Balzac, Renée de Smirnoff notes how, in many Balzacian texts, sequential narrative logic is interrupted in order to provide us with the extended description of a social tableau. Often , this interruption takes the form of long descriptive passages, of banquets or soirées at which people are present.   These tableaux, suggests Smirnoff, constitute scenes: they open a field of representation in which we find, exposed, the spectacle of human relations, stretched across a delimited space, as if organized for the reader's eye[xiii].

We may say that in cinema, as in literature, textuality works upon the spectacle of sociability to prolong it in time and extend it or flatten it out in space. This spectacle becomes the time/space of an enumeration through which we encounter the various people present in sequential fashion. The tracking shot encountered in *La Dolce Vita* necessarily unfolds in time, but in its movement across a series of bodies, each described or made visible in its turn, the travelling shot is approximating the sense of simultaneity we associate with the tableau. The flattened tableau, across which the camera moves, is a characteristic figure with which the cinema satisfies our desire to contemplate the members of a scene. The variety and number of these members produce a sense of effervescence which the relatively static posture of the human participants themselves is unlikely to suggest. The mobile, exploratory camera of the "scene-ic" tableau in cinema, which conveys a sense of loose and superficial relations, is to be contrasted with the immobile camera of the melodramatic tableau, as conceptualized by Peter Brooks in others, which captures human characters in the profound entrapment of their relations with each other [xiv].

The scene-as-tableau is a recurrent figure in film history. As we are introduced to the nightclub Rick's Place in *Casasblanca* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942), the camera moves left to capture some of the diversity of the population there assembled. Near the end of *Desperately Seeking Susan* (dir. Susan Seidelman, 1985), the film's central characters, now assembled in a group, enter the subcultural "Magic Club" located in New York's downtown. Their extended entrance is filmed as a lateral movement by which the various decorative elements and characteristic *habitué.e.s* of the club may be viewed in sequence, in what is in effect a mapping of an underground scene and

its subcultural space. In a bravura sequence in the French film *Bande des Fille*s (dir. Céline Sciamma, 2014), the film's central character, Marieme (Karidja Touré), enters a night-time party on a mission to recuperate something; in a single take, she moves across the space of the party, the camera registering the variety of faces and bodies constitutive of this particular scene (and, implicitly, highlighting Marieme's racial difference from those who are present).

In all of these cases, the time devoted to the lateral display of a scene is in excess of any narrative function such sequences must serve. As the contemplation of social surfaces, however, these sequences produce a sense of the social, not as a set of truths to be deciphered behind appearances, but as a set of spatial proximities and images of human bodies occupying space. If Jacques Rancière's recent reflections on the importance of "scene" to his philosophical work seem at a great conceptual distance from our own project here, we may nevertheless draw on his sense of the scene as a space of appearance and as a form of visual knowledge:

> Je pense que la question de scène est aussi liée très fortement à la question de l'apparence, au fait que l'apparence n'est pas le contraire de la réalité, la caverne, mais proprement la scène de la manifestation. Il n'y a pas une scène et une arrière-scène, une caverne et un lieu de la vérité; il y a un espace de l'apparence où on joue toujours apparence contre apparence[xv].

There are, however, cinematic treatments of scenes which invite a reading which goes below the surface, in search of a set of relations we may imagine as hidden but more real. Let us take the example of the short film *Vinyl*, réalisé par Andy Warhol en 1965. This film was ostensibly an adaptation of the novel *A Clockwork Orange*, by Anthony Burgess, and so we presume that we are going to see actors working to play characters and mount a fiction. In fact, in watching the film, we have the impression of seeing nothing more than members of Warhol's intimate circle amusing themselves. We see different people who were part of Andy Warhol's entourage at the time in which the film was made, in the mid-1960s: Carillo, Gerald Malanga, and the Warhol superstars Odine and Edie Sedwick. The spectacle of their presence, and of their interactions, exceeds any interest we might have in the fiction they are supposedly creating. Indeed, this fiction seems to be little more than a cover laid over the sociability of the social scene around Warhol. The everydayness and banality of the interactions in this sequence render any

transmission of Burgess' work almost impossible, and what holds our fascination is this glimpse of the Warhol scene in its moments of intimacy.

Building on remarks by Goffman on the experience of embarrassment we may experience at the theatre, Marion Froger has commented in interesting ways on those "improvised" sequences in films which render us, as viewers, embarrassed by the performances of actors who give free rein to extratextual relationships which are inaccessible to us. Just as we are embarrassed, she suggests, on finding ourself within an intimacy we have not asked for, we may also find discomfort at feeling excluded from a sociability which does not seem to acknowledge our presence[xvi]. In either case, if the sociability of a scene is able to penetrate the work, the work is able to transmit that to us only in incomplete fashion.

In this sense, *Vinyl* occupies a specific place within what I would call a "scenic economy" of cinema. If, in *La Dolce Vita,* a scene unfolds as an extended tableau, "enumerating", in the camera's movement, the diverse inhabitants of a social scene extended before us at the surface of the image, in *Vinyl*, we are confronted, rather, with the image of a weakly fictionalized situation behind which we glimpse, very easily, the effervescence of an extra-cinematic scene. We may say, of the cinematic treatment of scenes, that all such treatments participate in an economy of "*sceneness* " which may vary widely from film to film. This economy determines the extent to which a film is (a) offering for view the coherent presentation of a scene, whether fictional or not (as in *La Dolce Vita* or a documentary like *Paris is Burning*); (b) offering a lightly imposed fiction through which the documentation of an extra-filmic scene cannot help but reveal itself (Andy Warhol's *Vinyl*); or (c) most interestingly, hiding a real social scene behind a fiction maintained scrupulously by all those participating within it. To understand the later case, we might turn to the films of directors like John Ford or Rainer Werner Fassbinder, who worked with relatively stable companies of actors – so-called "stock companies" – across large numbers of films. In such cases, cinematic fictions are enacted by groups of professionals joined, much of the time, by bonds of friendship, longstanding personal relationships, and histories of collaboration. Behind these films, then, we may glimpse (or imagine) social scenes. However, these films document these scenes weakly; the sociability which constitutes them is hidden in the very depths of the fiction, to be glimpsed (or deduced) only in fleeting moments of oft-repeated

complicity or in what appear as moments of excessive comfort (or, on occasion, discomfort) between performers.

Cinematic scenes, then, may hide the "scene-ness" which underlies them, or reveal it a variety of ways. The subcultural credibility of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, for example, rests in part on the fact that a few of the human figures who appear during the sequence in the Magic Club were genuine participants in those extra-cinematic cultural scenes which inspired the elaboration of the film's fictional world (those of "downtown" performance art and music.) We may watch this sequence uncertain as to whether we are seeing some of the elements of a "real" cultural scene, or, instead, a fictionalized sociability which acts as a camouflage, blocking our access to that real scene by offering a substitute. In this respect, *Desperately Seeking Susan* poses the question which marks social scenes outside of the cinema – that of the decipherability of urban cultural life. Scenes, in the city, render culture visible and legible by rendering it public, by bringing it out of private acts of production and consumption and inserting into the public, visible spaces of sociability and conviviality. Contemplating such scenes, however, we may never be sure whether we are seeing the fullness of cultural life (the making of music, literature or subcultural experience) in those moments in which it exposes itself to public view, or whether this exposure is simply the ruse by which cultural scenes hide their private, inner logics behind an air of seemingly purposeless sociability.

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[i] See, for example, Will Straw "Scènes : Ouvertes et restreintes." Cahiers de recherche sociologique, no. 57 (Autumn, 2014), pp. 17-32.

[ii] Marie-José Mondzain, Images (à suivre) : De la poursuite au cinéma et ailleurs, Montrouge, France : Bayard, 2011, p. 297.

[iii] Mondzain, Images (à suivre), p. 288.

[iv] Georges Didi-Huberman, Peuples exposés, peuples figurants. L'œil de l'histoire, 4, Paris : Editions de minuit, 2012, p. 11, 220.

[v] These are some of the arguments in Sven Lutticken, "Proletarian Acting," in Paul Willemsen, dir., Actors and Extras, Brussels: Argos Centre for Art & Media, 2009, pp. 75-86. See also Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire, London: Penguin Books, 2009.

[vi] Alain Badiou, « Le cinéma révisionniste » [1977] and « Notations interrompues sur le film comique français » [1983] in Alain Badiou, Cinéma, textes rassemblés et présentés par Antoine de Baccque, France: Nova Editions, 2010, pp. 63-71, 121-128.

[vii] Serge Regourd, Les seconds rôles du cinéma français: grandeur et décadence, Paris: Archimbaud/Klincksieck, 2010, p. 9.

[viii] "Bistro owners, janitors, sweepers, drunks, little secretaries, ridiculous vacationers, small executives, mad peasants, heckled teachers, hilarious designers, wine delivery men and gas station attendants" (translation by Will Straw). Badiou, ""Le cinéma révisionniste, » p. 64.

[ix] Badiou, "Notations interrompues sur le film comique français, » p. 121. Here, Badiou lists, as the disappearing types of French cinema, "Concierge, bistrotier, clochard, mémé tyrannique, mari minable, curé de bse, ancien adjudant, prostituée, camelot, garçon coiffeur, instituteur chahuté, Marie-Chantal du XVIe. »

[x] Straw, "Scènes : Ouvertes et restreintes."

[xi] Alan Blum, The Imaginative Structure of the City, Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2003, p. 173. See, as well, for a discussion of the "specularization" of sociability in certain meeting places marked by an engagement in c culture, Laurent Bihl et Julien Schuh, « Les cabarets montmartrois dans l'espace urbain et dans l'imaginaire parisien, laboratoires des avant-gardes et de la culture de masse (1880-1920) », COnTEXTES [En ligne], 19 | 2017, mis en ligne le 31 décembre 2017, consulté le 18 octobre 2018. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/contextes/6351 ; DOI : 10.4000/contextes.6351

[xii] See, for an extended and useful discussion of different categories of literary sociability, Anthony Glinoer et Vincent Laisney, L'âge des cénacles: Confraternités littéraires et artistiques du XIXè siècle, Paris, Fayard, 2013.

[xiii] Renée de Smirnoff, « Jeux de regards dans la scène balzacienne », Marie Thérèse Mathet (dir.), La scène : littérature et arts visuels, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001, p. 232.

[xiv] The classic description of the melodramatic tableau, highly influential in English-language film studies, comes in Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess [1976]. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995, p. 90.

[xv] Jacques Rancière (avec Adnen Jdey), La méthode de la scène, Editions lignes, 2018, p. 14.

[xvi] Marion Froger, "Improvisation in New Wave Cinema: Beneath the Myth, the Social," trans. by Will Straw, in Georgina Born, Eric Lewis and Will Straw, dir. Improvisation and Social Aesthetics, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 235-251.