

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Nightcleaners (part one) **Rethinking political cinema**

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It's difficult to think of many films which have elicited the kinds of response *THE NIGHTCLEANERS* has, both within the Women's Movement and on the Left in general. There have been two dominant types of response to the film, both resulting from a clash between the nature of the film, the sort of expectations people usually take with them to the cinema, and ideas about what "political cinema" should concern itself with. The first dominant reaction is that the film is "unwatchable." In its search for new forms of political cinema, the film seems to lose its coherence. The second aspect of the film which has infuriated many people is that it does not appear to give a blow-by-blow account of the nightcleaners' campaign itself: It is therefore not a "useful" film to tell people about these kinds of struggles. However, these reactions mirror people's unthought-out assumptions about what political filmmaking is, rather than what the actual film does and the intentions of the filmmakers.

What these reactions demonstrate most clearly is the widely held assumption about the necessity for political cinema to produce the effect of realism, to show things as they really are. This question of realism in the cinema should not be confused with that of naturalism in other art forms. The central difference between the cinema and other art forms is that the cinema mechanically reproduces reality through the camera. This has led to the widely held belief that reality can be recaptured on film as in no other art form. In this way, the idea of "realism" has, throughout the entire history of the cinema, been used as

an artistic justification for its existence. Often the term “realism” is used as a label by film critics as a substitute for “highly valued” and little more. The argument usually runs: This film is good because it lives up to *my image* of the essence of the medium. That is, the true nature of film is that it impassively reveals the world as it really is.

This attitude has been, to a large measure, taken over unquestioned by political filmmakers. It is an aesthetic position which is particularly strong in the field of television documentary. Here the viewer, through camera style, use of commentary and editing (e.g., the MAN ALIVE series) is made to feel that what is being presented to him/her is objective and impartial. The camera is supposed to be a neutral observer on the scene, and what we see is presented as the “truth” of the situation. Often people see the manipulative aspect of television solely in terms of its political content. In fact, it is in the aesthetics of television forms that television’s greatest ideological weapon really lies. It is a weapon which is used to encourage the passivity of the viewer, to suppress thought and to stress what is, rather than what might be. Political films usually aim at changing the content of the film, using the same mode of filmmaking as television documentaries. They present the “correct” position (e.g., the Newsreel Group’s new film on abortion) without opening up the contradictions within the situation or encouraging the viewer to think for him/herself. In this aspect they are just as oppressive as the established media.

Too often audiences and people writing about political films elevate their own dominant assumptions and their subjective responses into a way of judging a film without realizing that these aesthetic problems should be examined more fully. THE NIGHTCLEANERS is a film which radically challenges such assumptions and the ideology which spawned them. As such, I think it is the most important political film ever to have been made in this country.

The film was begun in December 1972, and Part 1 (Part 2 is not yet completed) took over four years to complete. It was conceived of originally very much in conventional terms, using extensive interviews, a neutral camera and all the other gimmicks characterizing TV documentaries, but this time from the nightcleaners’ point of view (intended for use in the campaign). However, the film grew into something quite different at the editing stage. Faced with their basically TV-style material, and comparing this with their experience during the shooting of the film, another conception of the film began to emerge, out of discussions and experiments around the editing table. The result is a film which, rather than tracing a series of political events in time, attempts to involve the viewer in a process of consciousness-raising. In

this process we (as the filmmakers say)

“will come to realize both the poverty of our own consciousness and the real possibilities for enriching it.”

Someone I spoke to who saw the film remarked on how the images stayed with her for days (unlike traditional forms of documentary) in a quite disconcerting way. The film questions the traditional passivity of the spectator in the cinema. It attempts to create a situation whereby the viewer is not only able to participate, but is in fact required to do so—to make his/her contribution, as the filmmakers have done, to the process of meaning-production which is the film.

(By this I mean that a film of this kind makes a break with the idea of art as self expression, which is essentially a bourgeois idea. Instead it poses the idea of film as a product, where the act of filming and the act of viewing comprise two moments of equal value, neither having priority over the other. In this way the traditional division between work and leisure in capitalist society, with the viewer as passive consumer of the film, is broken down. The film is a material object in which meanings are produced, not by the filmmaker alone, but by the filmmaker and the viewer together.)

The filmmakers also reject the widely held assumption that it is possible to give a report of such a struggle, no matter how committed one may be as a filmmaker, without intervening in that event in some way. As a result, the film contains within itself a reflection of its own involvement in the history of the events being filmed. It is an involvement which necessarily restated and redefined the events themselves. This aspect marks the film off from almost all political films which take their form from television. It does not attempt to document events as they happen.

All we see are fragments from these events, often cut off quite arbitrarily, or frozen for us on the screen, sometimes repeated again and again. But, gradually, the systems which order and unite the various political, ideological and cultural events and processes become apparent as the film progresses, if we the viewers are prepared to try and become aware of them. All the contradictory elements in the struggle are brought to the fore and examined in the film (e.g., working class consciousness together with traditional ideas about the family; internal stresses between the cleaners and union representatives; class differences between the leafleters and the nightcleaners).

Simultaneously, the film incorporates various aesthetic devices (e.g., slow motion) to describe the nature of the work in great detail, and not

least the devastating isolation, soul-destroying boredom and exhaustion.

One of the questions posed by the film, and perhaps its most important question for all of us is, what is a photographic image? Is it transparent and self-evident in its meaning? Or is the question a more complex one? Can one just go somewhere and rely on the camera to record mechanically the real social processes at work? How is meaning produced in an image or a series of images editing together? *THE NIGHTCLEANERS* isolates images, reframes them, replaces the synchronized soundtrack with different sounds. It uses black leader, inserted in between shots, so that the screen goes black and we have time to think about the image we have just seen. The film scrutinizes the kinds of images we are bombarded with daily in the media so that we see them afresh.

The process by which they produce meaning is brought to the fore. We are made conscious of the way in which images, while appearing natural and obvious to the spectator, through their connotations, produce other meanings relating to the dominant ideology of the society in which we live. Conventional documentary techniques of editing have been developed which gloss over and disguise these aspects of the image. Their aim is to confirm the naturalness and unproblematic nature of the image—the taken for granted world of the dominant ideology by which we live. Despite certain shortcomings in this respect (e.g., sometimes the demands put on the spectator are too great) *THE NIGHTCLEANERS* could provide the basis for a new direction in British political filmmaking—if critics and other political filmmakers are prepared to abandon their reactionary TV ideologies. Approaching the film is rather like approaching a book. With a book the reader always has the opportunity to go back, and reread some point which he/she has not been able to understand at the first reading. With most films, this is not the case—the viewer is trapped. One of the most innovatory aspects of *THE NIGHTCLEANERS* is that it attempts to trace this process of rereading. We are no longer consumers of the film. We become part of a learning process.

Finally, something must be said about the central theme of the film which is the distance between the lived experience of the middle-class Movement women involved in the struggle and the cleaners themselves. This point is made visually near the beginning of the film when we hear Movement women on the soundtrack discussing the notion of female sexuality, while we see an image of a cleaner working alone in a high office block shot at a distance and from below. The incongruity of sound and image make their point, a point which is returned to again

and again in the film to be amplified, re-examined and explored further. The problem of class differences and the divisions within the socialist movement are rarely dealt with in political films. Too often these contradictions are repressed by filmmakers in favor of a cozy romanticism. THE NIGHTCLEANERS presents an honest vision of what such political work really entails. As Sally Alexander in her excellent article in *Red Rag*, No. 6, about the campaign points out,

“The women’s movement like the rest of the left, still has to learn how to popularize its ideas and politics successfully.”

As the filmmakers themselves say, if one were making a film about any other struggle it would not be possible to talk about such things: “Women’s Liberation has taught all of us.” As the Women’s Movement is redefining the class struggle, so is THE NIGHTCLEANERS redefining the struggle for revolutionary cinema.

Notes on distribution

THE NIGHTCLEANERS, Part I. Produced by the Berwick Street Collective, distributed by The Other Cinema, England. Part 2, due to be completed later this year, deals with the strike in Fulham of the Civil Service Union women. It is planned to bring a pamphlet out with the film.

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