

Léon Moussinac and L'Humanité as a Cinematic Force

Activist Cinema and Cultural Activism in the Interwar Years in France

Valérie Vignaux

Translator: James Gussen



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3468>

ISSN: 1777-5302

This article is a translation of:

Léon Moussinac et *L'Humanité* du cinéma. Cinéma militant et militantisme culturel dans l'entre-deux-guerres en France - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3180> [fr]

Publisher

Société française de photographie

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 May 2011

ISBN: 9782911961274

ISSN: 1270-9050

Electronic reference

Valérie Vignaux, "Léon Moussinac and L'Humanité as a Cinematic Force", *Études photographiques* [Online], 27 | mai 2011, Online since 11 June 2014, connection on 10 June 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3468>

This text was automatically generated on 10 June 2022.

Propriété intellectuelle

Léon Moussinac and L'Humanité as a Cinematic Force

Activist Cinema and Cultural Activism in the Interwar Years in France

Valérie Vignaux

Translation : James Gussen

- 1 In France between the First and Second World Wars, artists and intellectuals reflected on the mission of cinema, and their ideas helped to legitimate the nascent art form not only in aesthetic and cultural terms but also socially. With his column in the communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, Léon Moussinac¹ was one of the most influential figures in this process. So much so, that a close reading of his articles and an examination of his activities and convictions, places in question the accepted view of cinema during this period. Most writers have tended to distinguish sharply between the 1920s, which saw the emergence of *ciné-clubs*, or film clubs, as well as a cultivated or *cinéphilique* approach to the 'seventh art,'² and the 1930s, which witnessed the development, under Moussinac's influence, of an activist cinema within the Communist Party.³ Yet an analysis of Moussinac's writings and his activities within the party's cultural organizations reveals at their base, a belief in film as a mass art form. Cinema can be used to acculturate and educate the great mass of the population, and like other practices (for example, photography and theater) it is capable of serving the goal of cultural democratization, in which the primary emphasis is on the use that is made of the medium, sometimes to the detriment of the works themselves. Considerations like these lend nuance to the prevailing account of the cinephilic activities undertaken during the interwar years and the postwar period, which tend to be described as efforts to transmit a certain cinematographic taste or quality.⁴ With this in mind, I offer a brief introduction to Léon Moussinac, describing his interventions in the cinema insofar as they reflect his conception of the medium. Combined with an analysis of films produced at the time, this portrait will make it possible to take a different view of his cinephilic activities, revealing a kinship between gestures and uses that are generally considered distinct, one from the other, not only between the transmission of a knowledge of cinema and the making of actual films but also between photography and

film. Finally, because it leads to a new understanding of the period and its principal concerns, the reconstruction of Moussinac's activities and commitments also leads us to question the methodologies commonly employed in the field of film history.

Film: Seventh Art or Mass Medium?

- 2 Léon Moussinac was born in Laroche-Migennes on January 19, 1890. His father, a railway inspector and trade unionist, died when Léon was just seventeen years old. Forced to work 'in order to support himself and his mother,'⁵ he nonetheless continued his studies, first obtaining a law degree and then devoting himself to literature. Beginning in 1909, he published articles in *La Revue Française*, but his activities were interrupted by eight years of military service, first as a conscript and then as a combat soldier in the Great War. His earliest texts on cinema were published in 1919 in *Le Film*, a journal edited by Louis Delluc, his friend and former schoolmate at the Lycée Charlemagne. Parallel to his role as *secrétaire général* (managing editor) of *Comœdia Illustré* (1919–21), Moussinac launched the cinema column of the *Mercure de France* (1920–26) as well as that of *L'Humanité* (1923–33), where he went on to publish more than 350 articles over a period of ten years.
- 3 His initial objective was to gain artistic recognition for the cinema, and he worked together with most of the film clubs of the time, which, like the clubs for 'expert' amateur photographers,⁶ included both artists and intellectuals. He was a member of the very first such organization, the Club des Amis du Septième Art (CASA), which was founded in April 1921 by Ricciotto Canudo, and he also belonged to the Ciné-Club de France, established by Louis Delluc. In 1924, after the deaths of their presidents, these two clubs merged to become the Ciné-Club de France, of which Moussinac became vice president.
- 4 The Ciné-Club de France screened major works by French and foreign filmmakers (Louis Delluc, Abel Gance, Jean Renoir, Alberto Cavalcanti, Jean Epstein, Serguei Mikhaïlovitch Eisenstein) in a number of theaters in Paris (the Colisée, the Artistic, and Aux Ursulines); it also organized lectures. Moussinac wished to free cinema from the constraints of the film industry and worked to secure both a public and institutional legitimacy for it. He arranged the first exhibition specifically devoted to film, which took place at the Musée Galliera in March 1924, and also saw to it that cinema was represented at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes of 1925. It was at this time that Moussinac joined the Communist Party and, like most of his contemporaries, became interested in using film for instructive purposes, as he wrote: 'While our passion for cinema is rooted in its tremendous expressive possibilities from an artistic point of view, it also commands our interest because of the important role it is called upon to play in the realm of education.'⁷
- 5 Moussinac was disappointed that film clubs were exclusively concerned with defending the economic and artistic interests of the profession, and so, at the party's request in February 1925, he conceived the project of a traveling movie theater called the Cinéma du Peuple. His hope was that by educating the public in the subtleties of cinematic language, he would be able to influence cinema itself, since the elites 'have permitted the establishment of a financial power hostile to art and a mercantile force which must now be overthrown.'⁸ In December 1925, the Communist Party deputy Paul Vaillant-Couturier introduced a bill in the Chamber of Deputies which envisaged the creation of

a museum, a library of specialized publications, and a *cinémathèque*. This bill may be compared to that introduced by Jean Macé, founder of the Ligue de l'Enseignement, who conceived of the first public libraries in France in an effort to promote reading and literature.

- 6 In 1928, Moussinac created Les Amis de Spartacus, a film club for the masses which screened representative films of cinematic art, whether French or Soviet. Despite their success, the screenings were halted because the clubs did not have sufficient copies to supply the branches that had been established in the suburbs; the Paris police chief, Jean Chiappe, also banned the screenings, claiming that they amounted to disturbances of the peace. Nevertheless, Moussinac continued his efforts to educate the public, and called on viewers to demonstrate in movie theaters by booing or applauding the films. He also gave them access to the pages of *L'Humanité*, so that they might try their hand at criticism. In doing so, he was carrying out the recommendations of the 1930 International Union of Revolutionary Writers conference in Kharkov, which envisaged worker correspondents, or 'rabcors,' who would work with the artists and intellectuals already belonging to the party to strengthen the influence of communist ideas. Together with Paul Vaillant-Couturier, Moussinac actively participated in the party's cultural policies by helping to create a Fédération du Théâtre Ouvrier de France as well as a Fédération Ciné-Photo. In charge of party publications, he chaired its Bureau des Éditions as well as the Éditions Sociales Internationales,⁹ and in 1932 he created the magazine *Regards*,¹⁰ which was illustrated by photographs and whose film column was written by Georges Sadoul.
- 7 Arrested and jailed for his political opinions in April 1940, Moussinac was released in 1941 and joined the Resistance. Shortly after the war, Léon Moussinac, who was not only a journalist but also a writer of plays as well as fictional and biographical narratives, held leadership positions at the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (1947–49) and the École Nationale des Arts Décoratifs (1946–59); he also worked with the Institut de Filmologie.¹¹ He died on March 10, 1964, while working on a book about Louis Delluc.

Film and Cultural Democratization: Amateurs and Professionals

- 8 Moussinac participated fully in activities that sought to use film to educate the public as well as to advance the cause of cultural democracy. However, the idea of a truly popular cinema, one realized and produced by the people themselves, independently of the dictates of industry or business, was not without its problems. Indeed, the very notion of such a cinema was paradoxical, since its component terms were so starkly contradictory. Because of their inexperience, members of the working class needed to be trained and supervised by cultural professionals who tended to belong to the middle or upper middle classes; the works produced had to satisfy standards that had been established by artistic elites, and were thus foreign to the new filmmakers. In order to encourage the rise of a cinema that would truly belong to the people, its promoters had, simultaneously, to educate the people in the subtleties of cinematic language, procure the funding needed for making films, and also reconsider the modes of evaluation. For this reason, they agreed to privilege the actions, the process of apprenticeship, rather than the *œuvres* – that is, education rather than culture – since,

due to a lack of expertise or funding, the films themselves did not meet the prevailing standards. All of these factors help to explain why, in a relatively short period of time, less than a decade, so many organizations came and went, each with a different name but with their objectives and individuals supporting them remaining constant.

- 9 In 1928, Moussinac, who had been taken to task by Virgile Barel in *Les Cahiers du Bolchévisme*¹² – Barel was a schoolteacher who proposed the making of militant films in an amateur format (9.5 mm) – was forced to acknowledge that the party's supporters had cinematic aspirations of their own. He was initially hostile to the idea and criticized the resulting films quite harshly, but following the Kharkov conference, he attempted to organize and supervise these initiatives. After actively participating in the establishment of the Fédération du Théâtre Ouvrier de France in 1931, he created, in the same year, the Fédération Ciné-Photo, which was intended to bring together party activists working in cinema and photography. This organization was immediately linked with the Amateurs Photographes Ouvriers (APO),¹³ which, as its name suggests, sought to promote the amateur access to equipment and skills for recording reality. In 1932, the party followed the recommendations of the Kharkov conference and created the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR), through which it hoped to attract supporters to join its cultural organizations.
- 10 At this point, the Fédération changed its name, becoming the 'Section cinéma' of the AEAR. It included not only prominent figures interested in film, but also those associated with photography or theater, most of whom had participated in the Surrealist movement,¹⁴ such as Jacques Prévert, Yves Allégret, Man Ray, and Georges Sadoul. The primacy given to cinema in the organization's title no doubt had to do with the fact that the medium of film made it possible to disseminate communist ideas on a much larger scale, but it also reflected the reality that film was the practice shared by most of these figures. Man Ray made films, and both Jacques and Pierre Prévert had also tried their hand at filmmaking. Following the political events of February 6, 1934, the 'Section cinéma' of the AEAR was replaced by the Alliance du Cinéma Indépendant (ACI), since the threat of war was now attracting many individuals to the party's cultural organizations. This was the period of the so-called '*main tendue*,' or 'outstretched hand,' which led to the union of all left-wing forces in a *Front Populaire*, and it was no doubt at this point that Jacques Becker and Henri Cartier-Bresson joined the movement. In a final phase, in 1936 the ACI became the cooperative Ciné-Liberté, which brought together as its leaders such celebrated figures of cinema as Jean Renoir, Germaine Dulac, Jean Painlevé, Henri Jeanson, and Gaston Modot.
- 11 The gradual transformation of the party's film organizations during the 1930s reflects the shifting of roles between amateurs and professionals, workers and members of the middle class, and also Moussinac's ability to rally around him individuals who were passionate about cinema and concerned with social equality. With Ciné-Liberté, the party's cinematography division underwent a reorganization that gave leadership positions to prominent figures who were known for their work in commercial fictional feature films, and whose political commitments symbolized the rallying of left-wing forces. Germaine Dulac, an activist within the SFIO (Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière), was at Moussinac's side at the Ciné-Club de France. Interested in educational cinema, she was president of the Fédération Française des Ciné-Clubs. Together with Marceau Pivert, she also led a film organization called Mai 36, which had similar aims. The Radical Socialists also joined the movement in the

person of Jean Benoit-Lévy. This filmmaker, a convert to the cause of educational cinema, had known Moussinac since the 1920s. His company was housed in the offices of Paul Lafitte, who published the works of Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein for Éditions de la Sirène. For Ciné-Liberté, Jean Benoit-Lévy made *Les Bâtisseurs* (The Builders), a film produced for the Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Bâtiment (National Federation of Construction Workers), and directed by Jean Epstein.

- 12 In addition to those who had shared in Moussinac's cinephilic activities during the 1920s, the movement was now joined by the 'younger generation,' to whom he had reached out in January 1932¹⁵ and who, while they joined the party, came from the middle or even upper middle classes. The most prominent among them were Jacques Becker, Georges Sadoul, and Henri Cartier-Bresson, but also Jean Painlevé, who became the president of Ciné-Liberté. Most of them were assistant directors – some of them (such as Jacques Becker with Pierre Prévert)¹⁶ had made short films – and they seem to have been entrusted with the task of training and supervising amateurs. The resulting hierarchy was accepted, doubtless because of the genuine will to share expertise as evidenced by screenings which sought to impart the critical elements of a cinephilic culture in order to reduce or eliminate cultural inequalities.

Cinéphilie and Cultural Activism

- 13 Educating the masses in the art of filmmaking appears to have been a critical, indeed fundamental component in the cultural democratization of film, an ambition present as early as 1928, with *Les Amis de Spartacus*, and one which lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War. Thus, it is not because they lacked the funds¹⁷ for actual filmmaking that the party's cinematographic organizations privileged 'cinephilic' screenings. Just how important this activity was in its own right was highlighted by an anonymous columnist in *Commune*:
- 14 'Ciné-Liberté's great initiative is the creation of a film club that will regularly present the classics of cinema ... This is one phase in its struggle to create a cinema that is free, honest, and human: screening and commenting on works that, despite the current state of cinematic production and the various forms of censorship, permit one to hope that, from the work of genuine creators, free and courageous, an art will emerge that is robust and worthy of the magical name that inspired our belief and is so full of promise: cinema!'¹⁸
- 15 That the level of education of the working class was probably quite low is an indication of the egalitarian ambitions of these screenings. The programs, which involved the participation of a speaker serving as pedagogue, were intended to situate the film in its artistic and historical perspective. In November 1933, Fernand Léger, a former member of CASA, provided commentary for an evening on the avant-garde, at which he showed his own film *Ballet Mécanique* as well as Man Ray's *L'Étoile de Mer*, Claude Autant-Lara's *Fait-Divers*, and Jean Vigo's *À Propos de Nice*. In December 1933, as part of a program devoted to Swedish films, the work of Victor Sjöström was shown. 'La Septième Séance,' a series put on by the AEAR, presented the 'genres of film' in April 1934 and spectators were introduced to Georges Lacombe's *La Zone* and Jean Painlevé's *Le Bernard-l'Hermite*, and Germaine Dulac spoke about 'the illegal censorship of the news.'¹⁹ In June 1934, a screening of 'cinema before the war' was shown, and included French farces such as Max Linder's *Onésime Horloger* and *Max et le Quinquina* and Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage*

dans la Lune.²⁰ On November 26, 1935, for the inauguration of the ACI at the Maison de la Culture, Claude Aveline organized a Jean Vigo festival and presented *Zéro de Conduite*, which had been banned by the censors. On January 10, 1936, the members of Ciné-Liberté were shown Walter Ruttmann's experimental documentary *Mélodie du Monde*. Beginning in November 1936, Ciné-Liberté organized a regular series, 'inviting its members to come re-experience the finest silent films in a cinematic historical retrospective'; the screenings were 'presented by Ciné-Liberté's critics.'²¹

- 16 In an editorial in the organization's eponymous journal, the writer reminded the magazine's readers that the screenings had a pedagogical ambition, embodied by the presence and participation of a commentator: 'It was never the purpose of these events to show films simply to provide a few moments of pleasure for you! No! The point is to learn a lesson from these meetings! A lesson that is technical as well as moral and social! That is why, with the aid of our magazine's critics, who will introduce and discuss the films, we thought it would be interesting to offer an overview of the history of world cinema.'²²
- 17 That the screenings continued until 1939 suggests that they enjoyed a certain measure of success. It is uncertain, however, how many members of the working class actually attended them. The screenings sought to 'introduce their audiences to the finest works, ... to bring these works closer to the people,'²³ so that those audiences might come to appreciate the films, and thereby encourage the rise of independent filmmaking. For the promoters of a cinema of the people, the transmission of a cinephilic culture and the production of aesthetically or socially ambitious films went hand in hand. This position had been clearly expressed in the statutes of the Amis de Spartacus, and remained unchanged at the end of the 1930s. It was reiterated on numerous occasions in the bulletin of *Ciné-Liberté*: 'this universal hope which is also our fundamental goal: an independent film production,'²⁴ which will 'restore French film to the people of France ...', taking it back from the profiteers of film production, the cheating tradesmen, the fake stars.'²⁵ Thus, the party's film division now strove for independent film production, an impulse that led to the making of some fifteen films, including a number of feature films.

Popular Filmmaking and Militant Film

- 18 Aside from a few experiments, all of the films produced by the party's film division were made after 1934, when film professionals joined the movement. Among them, one may differentiate between short and feature-length documentaries comprising reenactments and images recorded at meetings and demonstrations, montage films primarily devoted to the Spanish Civil War, and feature-length fictional films. Except for the feature-length fictional films, such as *Le Temps des Cerises* by Jean-Paul Dreyfus/Le Chanois and *La Marseillaise* by Jean Renoir, these films did not enjoy commercial release. Shown at meetings by party supporters, they were designed to accompany discussions with the audience, either with the aim of delivering a message and persuading them of the cogency of the labor union organizations or as integral to an effort to raise funds; the films in support of the Spanish people are an example of the latter. The anonymous columnist of *Commune* describes this aim: 'On December 8, in collaboration with the Comité d'Aide à l'Espagne, Ciné-Liberté presented *Blocus*, a good and courageous *film romancé* [fictional film] about republican Spain. It was preceded by

a stirring documentary, *La Centrale Sanitaire Internationale* directed by Henri Cartier-Bresson] and Jacques Lemare, which was met with great enthusiasm.²⁶

- 19 In these films, the presence of the speaker is preserved, in that most of them carry out a *mise en abyme* in which we see the characters conversing, more often than not on a raised platform. The films may be seen as falling into the same three categories described by the movement itself. Ciné-Liberté defined itself as 'a true cooperative of technicians, workers, and artists, working together in complete harmony to produce *actualités populaires*, documents, and films romancés.'²⁷
- 20 The 'actualités populaires,' which include *Le Grand Prix Cycliste de L'Humanité* (1935), *Le Défilé des 500,000 Manifestants* (1935), *Grèves d'Occupations* (1936), *Garches 1936* (1936), *Le 9ème Prix Cycliste de L'Humanité* (1936), and *Magazine Populaire No 1* (1938), represent a substantial portion of the corpus. The credits of these films reflect the various organizations involved in making them: *Le Défilé des 500,000 Manifestants* mentions the AEAR and indicates that it was produced with the assistance of the Service Cinématographique of the SFIO ; *Le 9ème Prix Cycliste de L'Humanité* opens with a title reading 'Ciné-Liberté (ACI).' With respect to the images themselves, one has the sense that they were shot by amateur cameramen, while the editing was done by more seasoned filmmakers, for example Jacques Lemare, who is credited as the director of *Grèves d'Occupations* and who wrote the column on 16 mm, an amateur format, in the bulletin of Ciné-Liberté. *Grèves d'Occupations* is unusual in that it offers a close-up look at the daily lives of striking employees and workers, using images shot on location.
- 21 The newspaper *L'Humanité* is a constant presence in these films. Sometimes the events depicted, such as the bicycle races, were actually organized by the daily and the newspaper is also consistently portrayed by the cameramen, who record vans and banners displaying its nameplate. This visibility suggests that the *actualités populaires* were almost certainly intended to serve as the audiovisual arm of the newspaper, as a vehicle for its values and its 'popular' ambitions.²⁸ The repeated references to the newspaper and the fact that the images that make up these *actualités populaires* were shot by the very activists who also formed the intended audience suggests that the newspaper consistently collaborated in their production.
- 22 The critic Bert Hogenkamp, writing in *Image et son* in 1981, states: 'Thus, for example, the Amateurs Photographes Ouvriers (the APO) took no interest whatsoever in the new Fédération, although they should have been among its chief collaborators.'²⁹ In this he is mistaken. Those among the party's supporters who were amateur filmmakers or photographers actively collaborated, as producers of images, with the party's film and photography divisions. They shot footage for the *actualités populaires*, and their photographs were published in magazines – *Regards* contains many photographs credited to the APO – and they were certainly represented alongside professionals at the exhibition Documents pour la Vie Sociale,³⁰ which was organized by the AEAR at the Galerie de la Pléiade in 1935 involving some fifty exhibitors. It was one of the important exhibitions of the interwar period, with works by Jacques-André Boiffard, Pierre Boucher, Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Chim, André Kertész, Germaine Krull, Éli Lotar, Man Ray, and Willy Ronis.
- 23 According to the cinema critic Jeander, the movement was able to survive until 1939 only because of the action and commitment of the amateur photographers and filmmakers among its supporters: 'Ciné-Liberté gradually disappeared, because its Paris central office was unable to ship weekly programs to its fifty sections. The sections

merged into the unions, from which most of them had initially come, and administered themselves as best they could. The Paris section continued to operate until the war.’³¹

- 24 The ‘documents,’ or documentaries, no doubt include the films commissioned by the unions’ various sections. *Sur les Routes d’Acier* (Boris Peskine, 1937) was made for the Fédération des Travailleurs des Chemins de Fer, *Les Bâisseurs* (Jean Epstein, 1938) for the Fédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Bâtiment, and *Les Métallos* (Jacques Lemare, 1938) for the Union Syndicale des Ouvriers Métallurgistes. Also included in this category are the montage films depicting the difficulties faced by the Spanish people – *Victoire de la Vie* and *Espagne Vivra* (Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1936 and 1938), *Espagne 1937* (Luis Buñuel/Jean-Paul Dreyfus/Le Chanois, 1937) – and the films devoted to news of the party, for example, *La Grande Espérance* (Jacques Becker, 1937), which dealt with the 1937 French Communist Party conference at Arles. These films, which were credited to prominent film professionals, are formal hybrids. They are primarily based on montage, combining amateur images shot at demonstrations, fictional scenes performed by non-professional actors, speeches by political figures, and sequences of illustrative images organized on the model of the Soviet aesthetic of montage. It is also worth noting that most of them culminate in a sequence involving a crowd – that is, the people – assembled for marches or demonstrations.
- 25 Thus, despite their being credited to professional filmmakers, the films accord a prominent place to amateurs and dwell at length on the working class. The credits for the *Bâisseurs*, for example, indicate that the ‘two workers’ who retrace the history of building construction are played by ‘unemployed construction workers.’ In *Les Métallos*: ‘The characters of the workers are played by comrades from the union / The choral numbers were executed by the children of the Vouzeron colony and the little Spanish refugees.’ The presence of the working class – workers as actors and trade unionists playing themselves – ensures an authenticity not only of the spoken words but also of the characterizations. The viewers are not only able to identify with the characters, whom they resemble, but also with the various media depicted; in *Les Métallos*, for example, workers can be seen attentively reading communist magazines and newspapers, including *Regards*, *Ce Soir*, and *L’Humanité*.
- 26 The term ‘films romancés’ (fictional films), which is used to describe the last set of works, almost certainly refers to the feature-length films, which were made despite significant financial limitations. These were ambitious undertakings, with professional actors and fictional scenarios, and their production was certainly lengthier and more complex. They were designed to be shown at commercial theaters and intended to constitute a ‘social’ cinema whose aims were defined in March 1933: ‘These films ... must be, not films à thèse, or simple propaganda films, but great artistic films whose plots “express the ideology of the working class and are capable of strengthening the bonds of international solidarity.” These films would not be intended for the local sections of reformist organizations but commercially released.’³²
- 27 The films romancés include biographical portraits of the party’s leaders, such as *La Vie d’un Homme* about Paul Vaillant-Couturier (Jean-Paul Dreyfus/Le Chanois, 1938) and *Le Fils du Peuple* (anonymous, 1937) about Maurice Thorez. They sometimes combine fictional scenes with archival images and news footage, as in *La Vie Est à Nous* (1935) by Jean Renoir and *Le Temps des Cerises* (1937) by Jean-Paul Dreyfus/Le Chanois.³³ *La Vie Est à Nous*, the first feature-length film produced by the party’s film division, seems to constitute a formal archetype. Collectively directed by the generation of assistant

directors – among them Jacques Becker, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Pierre Unik, and Jean-Paul Dreyfus/Le Chanois – the film employs professional actors such as Jacques-Bernard Brunius and Gaston Modot, but also amateurs, members of the Fédération des Théâtres Ouvriers de France and the Chœurs Populaires. The film combines scenes of great realism shot on location with an inconspicuous camera: the market scenes in which a newspaper vendor selling *L'Humanité* is attacked by militiamen, sequences in which prominent party figures play themselves and repeat for the camera speeches previously delivered at party meetings, and segments in which the direction of the actors and the editing accentuate the fictional nature of the representation – one thinks, for example, of the auction scene with Gaston Modot directed by Jacques Becker, or of the extremely worldly and sophisticated gestures and expressions assumed by Brunius.³⁴

- 28 Here too, the reference to *L'Humanité* is central, both legitimating and organizing the narrative structure of the film. After being shown a building façade on which we recognize the newspaper's nameplate, we see Marcel Cachin, the paper's director, opening mail sent in by readers, letters whose content goes on to provide the subject matter for the following scenes. The authenticity of the sketches is thus ensured, since they are inspired by the reports of the *rabcor*s or worker correspondents, that is, by amateurs.
- 29 The other great *film romancé* undertaken by the group was also entrusted to Jean Renoir. The film division chose to make a film on the French Revolution, which used the song, *La Marseillaise*, to represent this moment in history. In order to depict the opposition between the aristocrats and the people, the film highlights the difference between their cultures – cuisine, music, dance – while at the same time, by dwelling on vital necessities such as nourishment, it affirms the existence of a kinship in spite of class differences. The film shows how a song, the product of a popular or folkloric art form,³⁵ was able to embody the hopes and aspirations of a people, aid in the construction of a national identity, and thus make history. The use of crowd scenes to personify the people results in the construction of an ideal entity, a symbol of humanist universalism in spite of the distinctive identities that one imagines were extremely pronounced in this period, marked as it was by the existence of opposing nations: a philosophy of the popular, then, in which film is seen as the privileged instrument of a body of ideas come down from the Enlightenment, and *La Marseillaise* as its quintessential expression.

Militant Cinema and Cultural Activism: Questions for Film Historiography

- 30 When French and foreign researchers have studied the communist militant cinema of the interwar years, they have tended to limit their reflections to the 1930s, focusing on the films themselves, most of which were produced after 1932. Because they split the period in this manner, they fail to appreciate the critical role of Léon Moussinac in the emergence of communist filmmaking; in keeping with the party's policy of openness and broad left-wing solidarity, he left it to others to personify a movement that was nonetheless defined and organized by him. This, coupled with his 'disappearance' as an author – his articles and statements were attributed to others – has led the majority of commentators to downplay the role of the Communist Party and to characterize the

filmmaking groups as 'left-wing' organizations, failing to notice their close links to the newspaper *L'Humanité*. The fact that after the war the actors of the time were compelled by the Cold War to conceal their communist convictions also helped to minimize the party's involvement. It is also worth noting that most researchers have judged the films by the standard of commercial fictional features and have thus regarded the short films by artistic, cooperative, or noncommercial groups as 'ersatz' productions or crude experiments.

- 31 Having borrowed their aesthetic criteria from the realms of art and literature, these researchers acknowledge the collegial activities of filmmakers, actors, and authors, such as the experiments of the theatrical group Octobre. What is missing, however, is the recognition of the collaboration between amateurs and professionals or filmmakers and photographers, all committed to recording historical reality. The participation of prominent figures like Jacques Becker and Henri Cartier-Bresson (though their works were not actually recognized until after the Second World War) has led most of these interpreters to underestimate the collaborative nature of the movement, thereby erasing the amateurs from the picture when, in fact, their participation in the process was critical; it confirmed the success of an endeavor whose goal was precisely to be 'popular.'
- 32 When we consider the context in its historicity – that is to say, the entire period, from the 1920s through the 1930s – we rediscover the intellectual legitimations that made the production of filmic works possible. By following the writings and activities of Léon Moussinac, we rediscover a path of reflection on film itself and its social aims, aims that are inherent in its nature as a mass medium. In the process, it emerges that the contributions of the Communist Party were not confined to the making of films alone; on the contrary, they were an integral part of operations of cultural democratization that also encompassed other artistic practices such as theater and photography, and which, in the case of film, included efforts to educate the public in the art of filmmaking.
- 33 Thus, communist militant cinema as expressed between the wars – with its combined attention to culture and education, with both the making of films and screenings – came very close to being a form of cultural activism. It belonged simultaneously to the categories of educational, amateur, and art film, without any one of these practices coming to dominate the others. As such, film of this period forms part of a larger historical trajectory, one that legitimates noncommercial uses of the medium by linking them up to the humanist ideals of knowledge and education that led up to the French Revolution. It also shows that the conventional periodization which regards the Second World War as a historical divide is inappropriate when one turns one's attention to social practices involving film, since from the 1920s to (at least) the 1960s the medium of film was used for purposes of social education.
- 34 The author wishes to thank Catherine Bensadek of the Service des Archives du Parti Communiste and Sébastien Layerle and Julie Cazenave of Ciné-Archives, the audiovisual archives of the Communist Party.

NOTES

1. See Georges SADOUL, 'Préface,' in *L'Âge ingrat du cinéma*, Léon MOUSSINAC, 5–23 (Paris: Éditeurs français réunis, 1967).
2. See Christophe GAUTHIER, *La Passion du cinéma, cinéphiles, ciné-clubs et salles spécialisées à Paris de 1920 à 1929* (Paris: Association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma/École nationale des Chartes, 1999).
3. See Pascal ORY, 'De Ciné-Liberté à La Marseillaise, espoirs et limites d'un cinéma libéré (1936–1938),' in 'Culture et militantisme en France: de la Belle Époque au Front populaire,' ed. Madeleine REBÉRIOUX, *Le Mouvement social*, no. 91 (April–June 1975): 153–175; and Pascal ORY, *La Belle Illusion. Culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire (1935–1938)* (Paris: Plon, 1994). For the work of foreign researchers, see Elisabeth GROTTE STREBEL, 'French Social Cinema and the Popular Front,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, no. 12 (July 1977): 499–519; and by the same author, 'Le droit à la libre critique et le procès Moussinac-Sapène (1928),' *Travelling*, no. 43 (March 1975): 17–19; Jonathan BUCHSBAUM, 'Toward Victory: Left Film in France, 1930–35,' *Cinema Journal* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 22–52; Bert HOGINKAMP, 'Le mouvement ouvrier et le cinéma,' *Image et Son*, no. 346 (November 1981): 125–35; and by the same author, 'Léon Moussinac and the Spectators' Criticism in France (1931–34),' *Film International*, no. 2 (2003): 4–13; and 'Film, propagande et Front populaire: à la défense des intérêts des cinéastes et des spectateurs,' in *Une histoire mondiale des cinémas de propagande*, ed. Jean-Pierre BERTIN-MAGHIT, 215–32 (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2008); Laurent JULLIER et Jean-Marc LEVERATTO, *Cinéphiles et cinéphilies*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).
4. See Antoine DE BAECQUE, *La Cinéphilie: Invention d'un regard, histoire d'une culture, 1944–1968* (Paris: Fayard, 'Histoire de la pensée,' 2003) and Fabrice MONTEBELLO, *Le Cinéma en France depuis 1930* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005).
5. G. SADOUL, 'Préface,' in *L'Âge ingrat du cinéma*, L. MOUSSINAC (note 1), 7.
6. See Clément CHÉROUX, 'Le jeu des amateurs,' in *L'Art de la photographie, des origines à nos jours*, ed. André GUNTHERT and Michel POIVERT (Paris: Citadelles et Mazenod, 2007).
7. L. MOUSSINAC, 'Cinéma et enseignement,' *L'Humanité*, December 24, 1926.
8. L. MOUSSINAC, 'Introduction,' *Naissance du cinéma*, in *L'Âge ingrat du cinéma*, L. MOUSSINAC (note 1), 32.
9. See Marie-Cécile BOUJU, 'Léon Moussinac éditeur engagé (1935–1939),' *Annales de la société des amis de Louis Aragon et Elsa Triolet*, no. 9 (2007): 114–21.
10. See Gaëlle MOREL, 'Du peuple au populisme, les couvertures du magazine communiste *Regards* (1932–1939),' *Études photographiques*, no. 9 (May 2001): 44–63.
11. See François ALBERA and Martin LEFEBVRE, eds., 'La Filmologie de nouveau,' *Cinémas* 19, nos. 2–3 (Spring 2009).
12. Virgile BAREL, 'Comment attirer des assistants à nos causeries pour sympathisants,' *Les Cahiers du bolchévisme*, July 1928.
13. The APO were the 'reporters of the class struggle, whose task it is to translate the political and economic struggles of the workers and peasants into images.' They had a photographic laboratory and organized demonstrations, photography outings, and competitions. Their goal was to 'supply documents to the proletarian press,' and many of their photographs went on to illustrate the pages of the magazine *Regards*. See *L'Humanité*, June 7 and 14, 1931.
14. It was Moussinac who arranged the meeting between Jacques Prévert and the agitprop theater company *Prémices* which led to the creation in 1932 of the group *Octobre*. *Octobre* was an agitprop theatrical collective that included Jacques Prévert, Raymond Bussièrès, Jean-Paul Dreyfus/Le Chanois, and Paul Grimault (see Michel FAURÉ, *Le Groupe Octobre*, Paris: Éditions

Christian Bourgois, 1977). In 1932, Jacques and Pierre Prévert acted in *Prix et Profits* (Prices and Profits), a film made by Yves Allégret for Célestin Freinet, with production stills by Éli Lotar.

15. 'The newest and youngest arrivals, who are currently victims of the worst exploitation by the international film industry,' 'Un appel,' *L'Humanité*, January 22, 1932.

16. Jacques Becker and Pierre Prévert codirected two short films, only one of which has survived, *Le Commissaire est Bon Enfant* (The Police Chief is an Easygoing Guy, 1935); the production stills were shot by Éli Lotar.

17. See J. BUCHSBAUM, 'Toward Victory' (note 3); and B. HOGENKAMP, 'Film, propagande et Front populaire' (note 3).

18. ANONYMOUS, *Commune*, no. 63 (November 1938): 1948–49.

19. ANONYMOUS, 'Spectacle prolétarien,' *L'Humanité*, April 11, 1934.

20. ANONYMOUS, 'Spectacle prolétarien,' *L'Humanité*, June 19, 1934.

21. ANONYMOUS, *Ciné-Liberté*, no. 5, November 1, 1936.

22. ANONYMOUS, 'Éditorial: l'activité reprend!,' *Ciné-Liberté*, no. 5, November 1, 1936.

23. ANONYMOUS, 'Province,' *Ciné-Liberté*, no. 1, May 1, 1936.

24. Ibid.

25. Jean RENOIR, 'La Marseillaise,' *La Flèche de Paris*, May 30, 1936, quoted in 'Il y a 35 ans La Marseillaise,' *La Revue du cinéma, Image et son*, no. 268, February 1973.

26. ANONYMOUS, 'Ciné-Liberté continue à travailler au bon cinéma,' *Commune*, no. 65, January 1939, 121.

27. *Comœdia*, July 14, 1936, quoted in 'De Ciné-Liberté à La Marseillaise,' P. ORY (note 3).

28. Jonathan Buchsbaum has pointed out that the decision to produce news reports was a response to the censorship of the filmed press after February 6, 1934, a practice denounced by Germaine Dulac, the director of *France-Actualités*, the magazine of the Société Gaumont, during a lecture in April 1934. Buchsbaum notes that such news reports actually supplied the content of Jacques Prévert's texts for the group Octobre, where they were arranged in a manner inspired by Soviet montage. See J. BUCHSBAUM, 'Toward Victory' (note 3).

29. B. HOGENKAMP, 'Le mouvement ouvrier et le cinéma' (note 3).

30. 'The Photography Section of the AEAR, to which we owe this fine exhibition, ... asked every artist to submit "documents of social life," which could take whatever form they chose. Nearly fifty photographers, indisputably the best professionals in France, hastened to respond to the AEAR's invitation, and their submissions constitute a thrilling collection ... Special panels with documents from the archives of *L'Humanité*, *Populaire*, *Regards*, *Infra*, and bourgeois agencies provide an unvarnished look at the workers' struggle and repression in the capitalist countries: France, Spain, the United States, etc. Needless to say, the montages of John Heartfield, the creator of the photomontage, have an important place in this exhibition.' ANONYMOUS, 'Documents de la vie sociale,' *L'Humanité*, May 31, 1935.

31. JEANDER, 'Les ciné-clubs,' in *Le Cinéma par ceux qui le font*, ed. Marcel Defosse, 287 (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1949).

32. Émile CERQUANT, 'Film social,' *L'Humanité*, March 24, 1933.

33. Jacques Becker, Georges Sadoul, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Pierre Unik developed a project for a film *romancé* against the militia entitled *L'Araignée Noire* (The Black Spider).

34. Brunius wrote for *La Revue du Cinéma* but also for *Regards*. A close associate of Buñuel, he participated in the editing of *Un Chien Andalou*.

35. Folklore was celebrated in a similar manner by Georges Sadoul in his description of *Grèves d'Occupations*: 'Even the very best folkloricists, in developing a field of study that is only half a century old, have made the mistake of considering folklore – popular customs – as a purely rural phenomenon. [*Grèves d'Occupations*] proves just the opposite. In the thousand entertainments that have accompanied large-scale strikes, the working class, with its verve has created ceremonies

that are linked to popular traditions and themselves form part of those traditions ... This is just one aspect of the excellent film by Ciné-Liberté. But it is indicative of the tremendous historical and cultural interest of this great documentary.' Georges SADOUL, 'Documentaires,' *Regards*, no. 137, August 27, 1936.

ABSTRACTS

In France between the World Wars, artists and intellectuals reflected on the mission of cinema, and their ideas helped to legitimate the nascent art form not only in aesthetic and cultural terms but socially as well. With his column in the Communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, Léon Moussinac was certainly one of the most influential figures in this process. So much so, that a close reading of his articles and an examination of his activities and convictions, places in question the accepted view of cinema during this period. By analyzing his writings and his activities within the party's cultural organizations, this article demonstrates that they were consistently informed by a conception of film as a mass art form. Film is understood as a medium that may be employed to acculturate and educate the great mass of the population, a view which underscores the kinship between activities that are generally considered distinct from one another: militant cinema and cultural activism.

AUTHORS

VALÉRIE VIGNAUX

Valérie Vignaux is an assistant professor at the Université de Tours. The author of monographs (Jacques Becker ou l'Exercice de la Liberté, Liège, Céfal, 2001; Jean Benoit-Lévy ou le Corps comme Utopie. Une Histoire du Cinéma Educateur dans l'Entre-Deux-Guerres en France, Paris, Association Française de Recherche sur l'Histoire du Cinéma, 2007) and analyses of films (La Religieuse, Liège, Céfal, 2005; Casque d'Or de Jacques Becker, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Atlante, in the series 'Clefs concours cinéma,' 2009), she is also publication co-ordinator for the journal 1895, and has edited three issues (Archives, no. 41, October 2003; Émile Cohl, no. 53, December 2007; Marius O'Galop et Robert Lortac, Deux Pionniers du Cinéma d'Animation, no. 59, December 2009). She is currently working on a book about Georges Sadoul (she is the editor, with Clément Chéroux, of *Portes, Un Cahier de Collages Surréalistes de Georges Sadoul*, Paris, Textuel, 2009).