

**“Gaumont Offers ‘La Russie Rouge’ and All Paris Takes Sides”:
Working-Class Activism in Paris Cinemas, 1921-1922**

In the Autumn of 1921 a film caused riots in the cinemas and streets of Paris. *La Russie rouge*, a Gaumont documentary about post-revolutionary Russia that had been manipulated in order to serve as anti-Bolshevik propaganda, ignited a fire that had been smouldering among the city’s many Communist Party members. The protests escalated when the chief of police, Robert Leullier, ordered that *La Russie rouge* was to stay on the city’s screens and sent undercover agents to supervise the screenings. In the altercations that ensued, bourgeois *boulevardiers* and plain-clothed police joined forces to clamp down on Communist activists who interrupted screenings with shouts and revolutionary songs, leading the daily Communist newspaper *L’Humanité* to accuse cinemas of “brainwashing” on behalf of the state.

Scholars have noted the joining of Communism and cinephilia in Léon Moussinac’s *Les Amis de Spartacus*, a short-lived association established in 1928 on the basis of shared admiration for Soviet cinema (Gauthier 1999; Vezyroglou 2012; Gauthier, Vezyroglou, and Perron 2001; Barnard 2003; Vignaux 2011). This mingling of cinephiles and leftists has often been seen as indicative of cinephilia’s innately progressive and universalist appeal. However, we would be mistaken in naturalising the mixed audience present at Moussinac’s 1928 screenings. Moussinac did not become a film critic for *L’Humanité* until 1923;¹ in 1921, the Parisian working class had no advocate among the burgeoning group of intellectual film critics. For the same reason, it would be anachronistic to see the cooperation of the Communist Party with the likes of Germaine Dulac, Jean Renoir and Jean Epstein in the late 1920s and 1930s as illustrative of an essentially democratic and classless film culture in the years following the Great War.² The shared democratic horizon that enabled these screenings towards the end of the 1920s was by no means characteristic of the cinema experience of audiences at the beginning of the decade. Far from being an intrinsically inter-class movement, cinephilia was carved out of a preexisting working-class cinema culture by a bourgeois elite of theatre critics, poets, writers and their

muses who saw working-class cinema-going as more of a nuisance than as a culture in its own right. Only once they had gained official recognition for the notion that cinema was suited to the disciplined, polite, and moneyed sphere of bourgeois entertainment did cinephiles reach out to working-class audiences from a position of educated superiority.

In this article, I use the protests against *La Russie rouge* to show the perspective of non-elite audiences on the role of cinema in Parisian public life in the early 1920s. In urban working-class neighbourhoods, cinemas served as local community houses, and the films shown there were seamlessly integrated into a wider fabric of working-class sociability constituted by community organisation, political activism, schooling, fund-raising, and non-cinematic forms of entertainment. Drawing on newspaper accounts and archive material such as government intelligence reports, I show how working-class audiences saw the appearance of several anti-Bolshevik films in 1921 as a politically fraught intrusion into their communal spaces. Against this background, the self-consciously apolitical and formal appreciation of *La Russie rouge* by cinephile critics such as Louis Delluc would have appeared to working-class audiences as part and parcel of a systematic disciplining of proletarian publics by the official and unofficial representatives of the bourgeois public sphere. It was this perception, in turn, which in late October 1921 led to the creation of two short-lived Communist film exhibition networks, *le Bon Cinéma* and *le Cinéma du Peuple*, to combat what Communists increasingly saw as *cinémas gouvernementales* and *cinémas bourgeois*.

Paris cinemas between working-class activism and anti-Bolshevism

During the first week of protest against *La Russie rouge*, Bernard Lacache, the journalist who provided most of the coverage of the protests in *L'Humanité*,³ asked: “The cinema, the people’s theatre, open to all—was it, too, going to join the capitalist offensive against Moscow?” (*L'Humanité*, October 17, 1921).

With at least eight anti-Bolshevik films screened in Paris in 1921, the answer seemed to be a resounding yes. The Russian Revolution appeared to be the theme of choice during the autumn of 1921. *Cinémagazine* (September 21, 1921) remarked on this trend at the beginning of the 1921/22 season, warning faint-hearted spectators in an article entitled “In Russia.”

Scenes of adultery and crime novels are old hat for our *scénaristes*! The Russian Revolution offers scenes that translate marvelously to the screen: houses in flames, chase scenes, killings... So for this season is announced: *Dans les Ténèbres*, scenario and *mise en scène* by Théo Bergerat [...] Then there is *La Russie rouge*...and that’s not all!!! Far West films will just have to hang in there. Nonetheless, we think it’s wise to remind those with a heart complaint that an aneurysm can be ruptured easily.

Beginning in Spring 1921, the twelve-episode anti-Bolshevik serial *A Woman in the Web* (Dir. Paul Hurst and David Smith, 1918) was screened in Paris cinemas as *Draga, l’héroïque princesse* (Icart 1997). That summer, Roscoe Arbuckle appeared in *Shotguns that kick* (Dir. Roscoe Arbuckle, 1914) as *Fatty Bolchevik* (*Cinéa*, July 1, 1921). In September 1921, *Dans la nuit*—a film released in Belgium as *La Russie bolchevique*⁴—was protested by spectators of a Malakoff cinema. This was the Norma Talmadge film *The New Moon* (Dir. Chester Withey, 1919) that had been released in ten first-run Parisian cinemas in early May 1921.⁵ In the film Norma Talmadge plays Marie Pavlona, a princess forced to escape from her palace after an attack by a group of anarchists, one of whom later falls in love with her and forces her to be his mistress by ordering the “nationalisation” of all women (*The Moving Picture World*, May 24, 1919). During a scene where Norma Talmadge skirts the attention of the Bolshevik Kameneff, the audience reportedly whistled at the screen and protested the negative portrayal of the revolutionaries to the point where the manager had to remove the film from his program (*L’Humanité*, September 13, 1921).

Four more anti-Bolshevik films added to the anger of leftist groups during this Autumn of Communist discontent. First, *The Uplifters* (Dir. Herbert Blaché, 1919) was released in late September as *La Nouvelle adepté* after censors disapproved of the working title *Les Gaietés du Bolchevisme*.⁶ Second, *The Black Monk* (Dir. Arthur Ashley, 1917) released in France under various titles—including *Raspoutine, le pope noir* (*Rasputin, the black priest*) and *La Vie de Raspoutine, le moine scélèrat* (*The Life of Rasputin, the Criminal Monk*)—had a limited release in Paris in early September 1921, showing at three of the city’s cinemas and one suburban cinema. *L’Humanité* (September 26, 1921) reported on a fifteenth-arrondissement screening of the film at Splendid Cinéma Palace:

After showing the revolutionary movement under Kerensky, a man is shown, made to look like Lenin, who seizes power when bribed by Germany. At the moment when the screen announced - “At the head of a few bandits” - our comrades from the fifteenth arrondissement and the Sporting Club (*Évolution Sportive*), along with a majority of the audience, greeted this filth as it deserved. The film had to be stopped after the majority of the 3000-member audience unanimously broke into *L’Internationale*”.

A Communist delegation was sent to the cinema’s manager and was able to have the film removed from the programme. The newspaper called for readers from other arrondissements to follow the example of the fifteenth: “Wherever we or our friends are insulted and disparaged let us accept the challenge” (Ibid.).

Dans les ténèbres (Dir. Théo Bergerat, 1921) was released on the same day as *La Russie rouge*. The film was commissioned by the government propaganda service but was initially refused a government release visa after its press screening in June 1919 (*Bonsoir*, July 17, 1920). According to film historian Roger Icart (1997, 38–9), this was the first film released as part of a government programme called the *Service cinématographique de propagande antibolchevique* (The cinematographic service of anti-Bolshevik propaganda) directed by one Captain Gillet. According to *L’Humanité*, Bergerat’s film involved scenes of women being forced to drink and dance on the tables, and even raped by Red Army

soldiers as part of the “nationalisation of women” under Bolshevik rule (*L’Humanité*, October 19, 1921). Finally, *La Tragédie russe* (of which little trace remains), a collaboration between Lordier cinemas and Jean Benoît-Lévy, was also screened that autumn (*L’Humanité*, October 18, 1921). Consequently Lacache asked his readers to boycott Lordier’s cinema, the *Folies Dramatiques* on Boulevard Saint-Martin in the tenth arrondissement (*L’Humanité*, October 17, 1921).

Seeing *La Russie rouge* as part of a wider anti-Bolshevik trend in the cinemas, music-halls, and theatres can help us grasp the roots of the protests by Communist and Socialist groups during the Autumn months of 1921. According to Lecache, anti-Bolshevik propaganda came “in many forms, from the most stupid to the most ignorant.” He remarked, “It is currently pushed so far that it far surpasses its objective” (*L’Humanité*, September 26, 1921). This trend was not contained to cinemas. *L’Humanité* often accused music-hall singers of poking fun at well-known members of the Socialist Party (the *Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière*) like Jean Longuet, Pierre Rénaudel and Barthélémy Mayéras (*L’Humanité*, December 29, 1919). Little direct action was taken in the offending music-halls, cabarets and café-concerts, and Communists who protested would often be thrown out of the establishment. Indeed, *L’Humanité* held the silence of activists toward anti-Bolshevik “satire” and songs partly responsible for the number of inflammatory films offered to Paris audiences in 1921. For example, the 1920 winter *revue* with Mistinguett at the Casino de Paris (*L’Humanité*, October 17, 1921) featured her famous ditty “Paris qui jazz” which included the following stanza:

If that’s life
Well, I’m telling you
Without being *sociolo* (socialist)
It’s not *rigolo* (fun)
And I’m sick of it!⁷

Such comic reference to leftist politics could also be found in songs performed in variety film programmes. During the Christmas season of 1919 one young woman, annoyed by an anti-Bolshevik

song from a stage performer at the luxury Salle Marivaux cinema, stood up and cried, “Vivent les bolcheviks!” (*L’Humanité*, December 29, 1919). In addition, theatrical performances could carry anti-Communist propaganda, as was the case with Henry Kistemaecker’s play *La Passante* (1921), which opened at the Théâtre de Paris in late September 1921 (*L’Humanité*, September 26, 1921). The play’s action moved between Soviet Russia and Russian aristocratic émigrés in Paris, and was praised for injecting contemporary politics into its melodrama by using revolutionary Russia as a backdrop and thus addressing an “evolving illness” and a “burning contemporary problem” (*La Petite Illustration*, October 29, 1921).

Another source of the underlying tensions which anti-Bolshevik films brought to the surface was the latent conflict between the cinema industry and leftist organisations such as the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the tenants’ organisations and trade unions. These tensions were both class-based and spatial; when they erupted in protest, they brought the working-class periphery into the bourgeois boulevards at the center of Paris, resulting in a direct collision of two opposing publics: the audience of neighbourhood cinemas and that of luxurious cinema palaces.

The Capitole cinéma just off the place de la Chapelle, where protests were held on the first night under the surveillance of local police, is a case in point. This grand cinema, “built by war profiteers” (*L’Humanité*, October 15, 1921), was somewhat of an intruder in this working-class area. When war broke out in 1914 many apartment buildings were left half-finished, and in 1921 many remained empty in otherwise lively neighbourhoods while many families were homeless due to rent increases and evictions. Their plight made headlines throughout the year. In February, for example, fifty-eight families were evicted from an apartment building on boulevard de la Villette after the building was sold (*Bonsoir*, February 25, 1921). An article in *Le Peuple* addressing the construction of the new Louxor cinema the same month encapsulated local feeling: “While large families find themselves homeless,

cinemas are built on the corner of the boulevard Barbès and the boulevard Magenta” (Perron 1995, 25). In July, the eighteenth-arrondissement Socialist Party newspaper *La Butte Rouge* (July 9, 1921) argued: “If these were cinemas being built, they would have been finished a long time ago; giving a home to films is good (at least for exhibitors), but giving a home to humans would be even better and whoever is responsible needs to resolve this half-solved problem now.”

If workers and their families saw vast cinema palaces as an affront to their community due to the serious post-war housing crisis, they continued to use the long-established neighbourhood cinemas—or the *cinéma du coin*, as *Cinéa* sarcastically called them (*Cinéa*, July 8, 1921, March 17, 1922)—as meeting places for diverse activities throughout the interwar period. Cinemas had long served a practical function for working-class neighbourhoods in Paris and its suburbs. A five-minute walk across the railway lines from the opulent Capitole cinema, for example, was the modest Cinéma Stephenson in the Goutte d’Or neighborhood, built in 1910 and totalling a mere 246 square meters (Meusy 2002, 361). The Goutte d’or neighborhood section of the Socialist Party, which co-organised the opening-night protest at Le Capitole, used the Cinéma Stephenson for political meetings, which sometimes included film screenings. One such event in April 1920 was presided over by Louis Sellier, the Socialist politician who would lead the Capitole cinema protest (*L’Humanité*, April 14, 1920). Despite being dwarfed by the vast Capitole, the Cinéma Stephenson provided a multi-purpose gathering site, a venue used for the general assemblies of the railway workers’ trade union, for the Union of Syndicats of the Seine, for meetings of the eighteenth-arrondissement tenants’ association, as a venue for Jeunesse meetings, for public debates on issues such as rising bread prices and the situation in Russia, and as a locale for May Day celebrations (e.g., *L’Humanité*, December 8, 1919, December 21, 1921, October 4 and November 10, 1922, January 21, 1925; *La Voix du peuple*, May 1919). Indeed, the Communist Party used Cinéma Stephenson for meetings and *soirées* for Jeunesse members until at least the early 1930s (*L’Humanité*, February 24, 1932). The Capitole and the Cinéma Stephenson thus

represented two different conceptions of cinema during the interwar years, one a bourgeois leisure space and the other a multi-functional venue at the service of the local community. The *Russie rouge* protests intensified this divide between neighbourhood cinema and cinema palace, and consequently between working-class and bourgeois publics. When activists shouted the opening lines of *l'Internationale* over the elite of Paris, then, it was not just a political and economic polarity being *mise en evidence*, but also opposing notions of the role of cinema as public space and medium.

The pragmatism evident in the *Russie rouge* protests had already been fine-tuned in general assemblies where unionists met to discuss pay rises and working hours and to choose representatives to negotiate with employers. This was an audience accustomed to coming together, taking decisions and moving into action quickly and effectively. During the 1919 industrial unrest, the bronze workers' union gathered at the Cinéma Soleil in the eleventh arrondissement, particularly during the metalworkers' strike in June, and the Cinéma des Bosquets in the thirteenth arrondissement formed a meeting place for striking workers of the Say sugar refinery in 1919, 1921 and 1922 (*L'Humanité*, June 17, 1919, October 12, 1921, July 21, 1922). In addition, meetings were held at the Cinéma des Bosquets by the railway workers' union and the thirteenth-arrondissement veterans' organisation A.R.A.C (*Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants*) which was politically close to the Communist Party (*L'Humanité*, March 6, 1921), and the same cinema functioned as a venue for fundraisers to aid victims of the Russian famine on "Russia Day" September 4, 1921 (*L'Humanité*, September 4, 1921).

The role of cinemas in industrial and political activism in Paris prior to and during the *Russie rouge* protests shaped how workers went about taking direct action to stop screenings of the film. Activists' behavior toward cinema exhibitors during the protests were similar to their behavior toward employers during strikes: They met at a cinema to choose representatives; representatives would then go to the exhibitor with their demands, and would return to relay the exhibitor's reply to the group and decide

whether further action should be taken.

La Russie rouge: Protest erupts

La Russie rouge opened to paying audiences on Friday October 14, 1921 in at least thirteen Paris cinemas and three suburban cinemas (*Cinéa*, October 14, 1921). Although the film is now considered lost, newspaper reports reveal that *La Russie rouge* began with actuality scenes of the Red Army, images of the Council of People's Commissars, and the arrival of Leon Trotsky in the Russian cities of Tula and Kursk. *L'Humanité* evaluated these scenes as authentic and claimed they did not insult the Soviet regime. The "forgery," however, began with the image of a protest march introduced by the intertitle "A Counter-revolutionary Protest." *L'Humanité* identified the protest not as an anti-Soviet popular protest in Russia but as a march organised in the Ukrainian city Nikolaev, which had been taken from the Red Army by the commander of the anti-Bolshevik Volunteer Army General Denikin and his lieutenant Slatscheff on August 18, 1919 (Mackiewicz 2009, 63). The marchers' flags carried the White Army slogan "Tout le pouvoir à la constituante" ("All power to the constituent"), a phrase which, along with their uniforms and cockades, allowed them to be identified as Denikin's partisans. The march had been the occasion for Slatscheff to remove sixty-two Communists and Soviet civil servants from prison in order to shoot them in Cossacks' Square. The corpses of these Communist prisoners remained for six days in the square, where they were filmed and later shown to Paris audiences under the misleading title "Victims of the Cheka."

Parisian Communists had been forewarned about the film's political content. In early September 1921 Gaumont had presented *La Russie rouge* in a private screening to exhibitors. The program described the film as "a sensational document, of passionate actuality, which revealed never-before seen, real-life moments," and carried portraits of Lenin and Trotsky on the cover (*L'Humanité*, September 7, 1921). The journalist for *L'Humanité*, Gabriel Reuillard, was present at the screening, and was angered

because the order and wording of the film's intertitles—"revolutionary repression" (*La répression révolutionnaire*), "the execution room of a revolutionary tribunal" (*la salle d'exécution du tribunal révolutionnaire*), "city neighbourhoods after the passage of Bolsheviks" (*des quartiers de la ville après le passage des bolcheviks*) and "corpses" (*des cadavres*)—made the corpses on the city square appear as victims of the Red Army. His interview with a Gaumont representative was published on the front page of *L'Humanité* with the title "Brainwashing through cinema: The Value of a Counter-Revolutionary Projection":

The journalist: "Can you tell me how you can prove that these corpses which you attribute to the Bolshevik repression are not the work of those savages serving under the orders of the assassins Yudenich, Kolchak, Wrangel, Denikin and others? You claim that your film has historical documentary value. It would only be fair that you show your documents."

The Gaumont representative: "I will introduce you to the Russian who can guarantee the authenticity of this film."

The Russian: "I can maintain that these reels come from Russia."

The journalist: "I'm not disputing that. I can see that they have the local colour. At least your Russians, your Russian crowds, your Russian corpses have a local colour that can't be mistaken. But you are telling me and the rest of the public: Here is the state in which the Cheka left a village and this is the number of victims they left there. Yet, how can you prove that these deaths and devastating scenes were caused by Cheka repression and not the counter-revolutionary troops? How will you get any free-thinking person to believe that the Bolsheviks would be naïve and, let's admit it, stupid enough to entrust you bourgeois capitalists with documents which would constitute formal proof of their crimes? [...] At one moment in the film you show the copy of an alleged order for the nationalisation of Russian women. What is the authenticating nature of this document? What's stopping anyone from showing an alleged order for the nationalisation of French women, which would carry the same worth? You must think the French public very naïve. Maybe you are not so wrong on this point. But do you really think, and be honest, do you think a serious man could be convinced by this childishness?"

The unnamed Russian claimed to have stolen the reels of film from the Soviet authorities, but neither he nor the Gaumont representative could provide proof of the Bolshevik crimes represented or the origins of the order for the “nationalisation of women.”⁸

The seeds had thus been sown for major disruption once the film was released in Paris cinemas in October. Following the first public screenings, the journalist Robert Pelletier demanded that Gaumont change the intertitle to “Communists shot by the White Army” (*L’Humanité*, October 23, 1921). The intertitles for the film listed in the daily newspaper *Le Matin* (October 16, 1921) can be added to those described by the *L’Humanité* journalist. They fell in the following order: “The Executive Central Committee” (*Comité central exécutif*), “The First of May in Moscow and the workers’ parade” (*le 1er mai à Moscou et ses cortèges ouvriers*), “Lenin addresses Moscow,” (*Lénine parlant à Moscou*), “The Red Army, a division of officers,” (*l’Armée rouge, une promotion d’officiers*), and finally, the offending scenes of the six-day-old corpses labelled as “Tragic visions” (*Visions tragiques*). Here *Le Matin* reported, “...under this last title, images parade across the screen which have provoked violent scenes in certain outlying neighborhood cinemas sparked off by members of the Communist Party.” Several cinema managers replaced the problematic intertitle “Tragic visions” with “Sorrows of the Civil War,” while others simply edited out the intertitles “Torture Chamber” (*Chambre des supplices*) and “Nationalisation of Women” (*Socialisation des femmes*) (Ibid.).

Many cinemas had already edited the film when it was screened for the first time on October 14. Some exhibitors had taken the precaution of editing out the images of corpses strewn across the street. No doubt to avoid protests at his cinema, the director of the Pathé-Journal cinema called *L’Humanité* the day before he screened *La Russie Rouge* to tell them that he had made the requested edits (*L’Humanité*, October 14, 1921). However, *L’Humanité* (October 15, 1921) found that even censored, “the film

remained a vile counter-revolutionary tool,” demanded “direct action from comrades in order to neutralise the film’s propaganda” and called upon its readership to ensure that the film had been edited to their standards (*L’Humanité*, October 14, 1921). In some cinemas confusion ensued when spectators interpreted the film as pro-Bolshevik propaganda. As one exhibitor speaking to *Le Matin* (October 16, 1921) claimed,

Several spectators came and accused me of promoting Lenin and Trotsky, and showing Bolshevik propaganda by including *La Russie Rouge* in my program. Others maintained that I was serving the cause of enemies to the Russian Revolution. Who should I believe? I’m simply passing a documentary before the eyes of the public without partisanship. *Voilà tout.*

The presence of Reuillard at the private screening of *La Russie rouge* allowed Communist and Socialist Party members to make preparations to reduce the effect of the film’s propaganda. Government intelligence reports from the third arrondissement section of the Communist Party reveal the direct action taken by the group in the week leading up to the film’s release and during projections in their local cinema, the Cinéma Saint-Paul. In 1921, the third arrondissement was seen as a hotbed of anti-government intrigue. Government intelligence reports from that year describe the nearby rue des Rosiers and rue des Écouffes as “Jewish revolutionary environments” (*milieux révolutionnaires juifs*).⁹ Many Russians and anti-militarist ex-soldiers under government surveillance lived in the *quartier*.

The third-arrondissement section of the Communist Party, including the youth group (*jeunesse*) and childrens group (*pupilles*), met at the *maison commune* at 49 rue de Bretagne, which shared the building with a popular local cinema, the Cinéma Béranger. It housed two separate *salles*, one on the first floor and a smaller one on the ground floor.¹⁰ The *maison commune* provides a good example of how cinemas served multiple roles in working-class arrondissements of the city. In this third-arrondissement

community centre, politics and cinema were inseparable. In a 1921 British *Proletcult* directory the building was listed under “labour colleges” as a Marxist School (*École Marxiste*) and Propaganda School (*École de propagandistes*) (Paul and Paul 1978, 212). It was here that the Communist Party *Jeunesse* members from the third, fourth, fifth and eleventh arrondissements who comprised the “Education through Cinema Group” (*Groupe d'éducation par le cinéma*) met. The group’s inaugural event was held during the Summer of 1921, presided over by the Socialist MP Ernest Lafont. All Communist Party, *Jeunesses* and Trade Union members were invited to attend. The programme consisted of a screening of a social drama, *Les Droits de l'enfant*, with “explanation and critique” by a member of the committee (*L'Humanité*, July 23, 1921; Weber 2002, 146). In October 1921, the group held their screenings at the *maison commune* as well as at the nearby *maison du peuple* on the rue Charlemagne and at the Brasserie du Tambour on the place de la Bastille. Invitation to these screenings was open to all activists and readers of *L'Humanité* (September 26, 1921). On October 1 they showed *Coeur de roc* (*My Little Boy*, dir. Elsie Jane Wilson, 1917), *Charlot apprenti* (*Work*, dir. Charles Chaplin, 1915), the documentary *l'Ascension de la grande Pyramide* (*The Ascension of the Great Pyramid*), and the cartoon *le Nain de la forêt* (*The Forest Gnome*) at the *maison du peuple*. Although advertised as “educational” (*conférences éducatives*), these evening screenings fell in a grey zone between private meeting of local activists and public, commercial entertainment. This ambiguity is evident in a *L'Humanité* advertisement for one such “educational” evening: “The inimitable *Charlot* figures in the programme. Enjoyed wholeheartedly by adults and children alike” (*L'Humanité*, October 6, 1921). In mid-October the group placed an advertisement in *L'Humanité* (October 13, 1921) for violinists to accompany the film programme, indicating their ambition to continue such screenings and to present the films in a professional manner.

Considering the deep-rooted traditions of film exhibition within politically active working-class communities, it is not surprising that leftists sprang into direct action to disrupt screenings of *La Russie*

rouge. Due to the presence of an undercover government agent we know that during a meeting on September 3, 1921, the group debated at length whether to register their cinema association with the *Préfecture de la Police* so that they might procure films more easily. According to the anonymous agent, most members opposed the idea.¹¹ The same year the *Jeunesse Communiste* groups of the third, fourth, fifth and eleventh arrondissements asked the *Comité d'éducation of the Internationale des Jeunesses Communistes* for “educational and propagandistic” films, and requested that their demand be forwarded to the Communist Party’s education committee in Moscow.¹²

Government surveillance reports show that fifty members of the *Jeunesse Communiste* gathered at a meeting in the *maison commune* on October 12. The first topic on the agenda was to hear from the young group of representatives who had been sent to discuss the film *La Russie rouge* with the manager of St. Paul cinema. A report sent from the unnamed agent to the Ministry of the Interior’s Director-General of the National Police and forwarded to the Chief of Police reads as follows:

The Party wanted to know whether the film “La Russie Rouge”—which will be projected at the Saint-Paul and Tivoli cinemas—included elements of anti-Bolshevik propaganda. The manager of “Tivoli” received a delegation of members of the *Jeunesse Communiste* on this subject. The manager assured them that the film was purely documentary. That it was even to the advantage of Lenin and Trotsky. “This appears to be true,” added the speaker (a member of the third arrondissement *Jeunesse Communiste*): “the manager showed us 260 metres of film; on the screen you can see Lenin cheered by the People.” “The Party doesn’t want to neglect an opportunity to protest in front of the screen. An abundant group of representatives will attend the screenings at Saint-Paul. At Tivoli, the other branches will take care of the same task. There will most probably be reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries at the screenings; negative comments are likely, they must be silenced at all costs. That will be easy because this neighborhood is mostly Communist.”¹³

Accompanying the report was a letter in which the Director-General of the National Police wrote,

“Today screenings of a film which interests the third section of the Communist Party are to begin at the Tivoli and St. Paul cinemas. Protests and incidents are not improbable.”¹⁴ The “other branches” that were planning to deal with Tivoli were the tenth arrondissement Communist and Socialist Party groups. The meeting between the *Jeunesse Communiste* delegation and the Tivoli manager was relayed in *L’Humanité* (October 13, 1921), which warned its readers that the struggle was not yet over, and that they would have to defend their cause a second time if the cut images were edited back into the film. At Tivoli, *La Russie rouge* was placed at the end of a programme, which included the first episode of *Les Trois mousquetaires* (Dir. Henri Diamant-Berger, 1921) and *Peppina* (*Poor Little Peppina*, dir. Sidney Olcott, 1916) starring Mary Pickford. Three thousand spectators reportedly attended the screening (*L’Humanité*, October 16, 1921).

In the eighteenth arrondissement, local sections of the Communist and Socialist Parties immediately took action to obstruct screenings. Notices appearing in *L’Humanité* inform us that Socialist Party members of La Chapelle and La Goutte d’Or were called to an emergency meeting on Wednesday October 12 at the Salle Garrigues to plan their strategy. Their convocations appeared in *L’Humanité* (October 12, 1921) under the Socialist Party notices as follows:

18e Chapelle.- rue Ordener, Salle Garrigues. Extrême urgence. Cinéma.

18e Goutte d’Or.- rue Ordener, Salle Garrigues. Extrême urgence. Cinéma.

The two groups planned to take action during a screening at the Le Capitole two nights later. This vast first-run cinema scheduled *La Russie rouge* first in the evening’s programme, the segment usually reserved for the documentary short. Other posts on the programme were the first episode of the eagerly awaited serial *L’Orpheline* (dir. Louis Feuillade, 1921) and the equally anticipated first installment of *Les Trois mousquetaires*. Sandwiched between these two crowdpleasers was the perhaps poorly chosen

war drama, *Pour l'Humanité* (*The Heart of Humanity*, dir. Allen Holubar, 1919).

As soon as *La Russie rouge* began, an interruption came in the form of Charles Joly, the Socialist city councillor. He marched determinedly from his seat, climbed up onto the stage despite interventions from the police and looked out onto the “sympathetic crowd” who had fallen silent, many of them attending the screening to protest. Joly explained to them the villainous objective of the anti-Communist film where “atrocities committed by the war-mongering Wrangel’s gangs are attributed to Russian revolutionaries who were the victims of them!” (*L’Humanité*, October 15, 1921). He waited for the programme interval before returning to the stage, this time joined by his colleague, Louis Sellier, one of the founders of the French Communist Party. In unison they warned the cinema manager that “if he continues to provoke the anger of the working-class population of these two neighborhoods [la Chapelle and la Goutte d’Or], it will be by force that we will stop this scandal.” In the next day’s issue of *L’Humanité* (October 16, 1921) workers were rallied to attend the Capitole cinema again to see if their demands had been met. Returning the next evening, Communist Party members found *La Russie rouge* had been pulled from the program. Some, however, found a reason to protest all the same and shouted “Down with war!” during a battle scene in *Hearts of Humanity* (*Le Matin*, October 16, 1921).

Also on the opening night, the fourteenth-arrondissement section of the Communist Party gathered its members at the Montrouge Cinéma. The party members sat through a documentary about watersports, the fifth episode of the ciné-roman *Le sept de trèfle* (dir. Lino Manzoni and René Navarre, 1921) and *L’Idole brisée* (dir. Maurice Mariaud, 1921), before they were able to begin their protest of *La Russie rouge*. By that point the impatient activists did not wait to see if the exhibitor had edited out the massacre scenes. They immediately interrupted the first newsreel images of Lenin with such “passion and authority” (*L’Humanité*, October 15, 1921) that the film had to be taken off and replaced with the

programme headliner, *Le Signe de Zorro* (*The Mark of Zorro*, dir. Fred Niblo, 1920), starring Douglas Fairbanks who, incidentally, had just arrived in Paris with Mary Pickford (*Cinémagazine*, October 14, 1921).

After the eventful opening night of *La Russie rouge*, the third arrondissement *Jeunesse* group met again. Thirty members were present at the meeting, presided by the seventeen-year-old Roger Gaillard, treasurer of the Comité d'entente des Jeunesses communistes de la Seine. According to the intelligence report sent to the police chief on October 18,

The meeting was brief, as most of the attendees had to go on to different cinemas. FILM LA RUSSIE ROUGE – The screening of this film at the Cinéma Saint-Paul was strongly applauded: the *jeunesses* group can be satisfied with the manager agreeing to edit out 223 metres of the film (the segments which could have harmed anti-Bolshevik organisations in France.) Nonetheless, we will continue to send representatives to all screenings to prevent the edited segments being screened again.¹⁵

As the first weekend drew to a close, Socialists, Communists and cooperatives felt happy with what they had achieved. The film had been taken off programmes in most cinemas, and at the Tivoli and Saint-Paul cinemas thousands of spectators had praised Lenin and Trotsky. At the Cinéma Magique in the fifteenth arrondissement, the manager promised the inter-union committee (*Comité Intersyndical*) to delete another anti-revolutionary film from its programme (*L'Humanité*, October 17, 1921). At the Cinéma Lecourbe, the fifteenth arrondissement's Communist section forced *La Russie rouge* from the screen "in agreement with the spectators" (*Ibid.*). At Lyon Palace the audience whistled down the film on Saturday October 15, and the local councillors of the twelfth arrondissement Jean Garchery and Jean Morin managed to persuade the exhibitor to take the film off the programme (*L'Humanité*, October 16, 1921).

Policing the bourgeois cinema

The police were paying close attention to working-class activities in Parisian cinemas. From the perspective of the police, surveilling the boundaries of acceptable political expression in cinemas was a natural extension of their duty to prevent violations of the property and propriety of the bourgeois public sphere. In addition to the undercover agent's reports, the police files of the French National Archives contain press cuttings of every article *L'Humanité* published on *La Russie rouge*. One report dated November 3, 1921, notes that "a rapid study of the industrial areas of Paris gives the impression that all French workers are Bolsheviks. Their attitude with regards to Lenin, Soviet power and representatives of the French Communist movement is very favourable. French labour believes that Bolshevism and Soviet power are the only way out from France's very complicated internal and external situations."¹⁶

Leftists and anti-militarists, on the other hand, had long been suspicious of state propaganda in cinemas. In *L'Humanité* (March 30, 1921), Marcel Martinet complained of propagandistic newsreels, and it was widely felt that cinemas were being used to "brainwash" citizens by showing images of "kings, presidents, generals and archbishops" in order to "maintain the simple admiration of the public." It had also long been obvious that the police were hostile to working-class audiences' use of cinemas for political purposes. For example, on September 3, 1921 ("Russia Day") when youth group and Party members collected money for victims of the Russian famine in Montmartre cinemas, "overzealous police" forcibly removed and arrested them despite the express permission of the exhibitors (*La Butte Rouge*, September 17, 1921).

In October 1921, the *Préfecture de la Police* had assured Louis Sellier, the Communist Party delegate, that *La Russie rouge* would no longer be shown in cinemas (*L'Humanité*, October 16, 1921). Rather

than fulfilling his promise, however, the police chief reinforced police presence in cinemas (*Le Matin*, October 16, 1921). The police enforcement of the *Russie rouge* screenings made the bond between class politics and cinemas clearer than ever. Not only did police violently intervene, some in uniform and some disguised as *boulevardiers*; the bourgeois *habitués* themselves spontaneously took on the role of the police, helping to identify and expel protestors from their luxury cinema palaces. The result was that violence escalated and anger intensified.

There were riots and police violence on October 16 at the Palais des fêtes, the Montrouge Palace, the Cinéma-Danton and the Olympia de Clichy. On October 17 unrest spread to the Gaumont-Théâtre on the boulevard Poissonnière, and on the following two days it affected the central cinemas Electric-Palace and Aubert-Palace on the grands boulevards. The first major altercation between police and protestors occurred at the Palais des fêtes. The disruptions were so great that the riots made headlines across the Channel. *Variety's* (November 4, 1921) headline read: "Riots Result When Feature Pictures Red Russia's Ruin. Gaumont Offers 'La Russie Rouge' and All Paris Takes Sides."

Since the initial showing of the Gaumont feature "La Russie Rouge" (Red Russia) the whole city seemingly has taken part in a series of riots demanding its suppression or insisting on its continuance. By passing it by the censor, the government seemingly took sides in its favor and the public has not been cooled by the discovery that the scenes in it most damaging to the Lenin-Trotsky cause were faked.

According to *L'Humanité*, Communists' anger in the cinema reached a climax when the intertitle "Nationalisation of women" appeared on the screen and spectators shouted, "It's false! Vivent les Soviets! Vive Kameneff! Vive Trotsky!" The whole cinema reportedly broke out into song with the *Internationale* and *Révolution*. As singing spectators emptied out into the street, they found police waiting for them with batons raised. A fight broke out and one protestor was arrested

(*L'Humanité*, October 17, 1921). As the police charged the crowd, activists were forced to take shelter in the Café des fêtes on the corner of the rue Quincampoix and the rue aux Ours. In the café the police hit two customers, one a war-wounded ex-soldier with a wooden leg named Paul Rochet and the other a lobotomised ex-soldier named Henri Lucas. *L'Humanité* (Ibid.) described police agents no. 49 and 357 of the third arrondissement as having “behaved like brutes.” A delegation of protestors then went to speak with the cinema’s manager and had no difficulty in persuading him to delete the offensive scenes. *L'Humanité*, however, demanded that the film be removed completely.

At the Montrouge Palace the fourteenth section of the Communist Party, accompanied by Charles Joly and Jean Morin, took action. Police arrested a prominent Communist Party member named R. Métayer, but he was immediately freed by his fellow protesters (*L'Humanité*, October 18, 1921). At the Cinéma-Danton on the Boulevard Saint-Germain a delegation persuaded the manager to make the necessary edits, while at the Olympia de Clichy, Communist Party members cheered Lenin and Trotsky and made such a commotion that the film was interrupted and the manager deleted it from the programme (Ibid.).

At the Gaumont-Théâtre discussions with members of the second section of the Communist Party led to a fight and the police charged in with force. Clément Delsol and Sorbet, secretaries of the second-arrondissement Communist Party section, were brought to the *commissariat* and beaten. Following these incidents, Marcel Cachin called the police chief and tried to persuade him to ban future screenings of the film. The latter declared himself in no position to stop the film from being screened, nor, he argued, could he pressure exhibitors to edit out the offensive scenes (Ibid.). This was a trigger for the protests to continue. The promise to Louis Sellier had not been kept.

Two of the ensuing protests on the boulevard des Italiens in the central entertainment district became particularly symbolic of the forced exclusion of working-class activists from cinemas. In addition to

luxury cinema palaces, the boulevard was home to theatres such as the Opéra comique, music-halls, and banks such as the Crédit Lyonnais headquarters. Aside from the Electric-Palace (no. 5) and Aubert-Palace (no. 24), there were at least three other major cinemas on the boulevard des Italiens, including Cinéma Salon Aubert (no. 8), Pathé-Palace (no. 32) and the Salle Marivaux (no. 13). On the nights of October 19 and October 20, activists from peripheral working-class *quartiers* went to the Aubert-Palace and the Electric-Palace to “prove to the *boulevardiers* of Paris that [they] had the courage of [their] opinions and that [they] were going to make them be respected” (*L’Humanité*, October 21, 1921).

At around 9.45 PM, around forty activists from the ninth-arrondissement Communist Party and the A.R.A.C were present at the Aubert-Palace to protest the film, which was being shown uncut. As the first images lit up the darkness, cheers hailing Lenin, Trotsky, Kameneff, the Red Army, and the workers of Moscow rang through the packed-to-capacity theatre (*L’Humanité*, October 20, 1921). One patriotic Aubert-Palace *spectatrice* shouted back to the angered leftists “Long live France” and another spectator “Down with the Soviets!” All the while scenes of Trotsky entering Tula and Kursk flickered across the screen. When the falsely labelled massacre appeared, the protests became so loud that the projectionist had to stop the film and the crowd launched into the *Internationale*. At this point policemen dressed as bourgeois spectators jumped into action and knocked over activists, arresting half a dozen of them, including the journalists René Reynaud and Guy Tourrette. *L’Humanité* added that several “strumpets” (*péripatéticiennes*) and two or three “good timers” (*noceurs*) pointed out protestors to the police. At one point, bourgeois spectators themselves joined in the brawl. Their violence even reached the columns of the conservative daily newspaper *Le Figaro* (October 20, 1921), which wrote that “...outraged spectators [...] manhandled the protestors, who were then thrown out of the cinema by police officers supervised by Mr. Marchand, the chief superintendent [*commissaire divisionnaire*].”

Outside, party members from the eighteenth arrondissement who had been refused entrance to the cinema contented themselves with cheering Lenin on the boulevard des Italiens before being charged by police lines. During the protest, the anarcho-syndicalist and general secretary of the *Comité central des Comités syndicalistes révolutionnaires* (CSR) Pierre Besnard “was dragged outside, beaten up by nameless thugs, handcuffed and brought to the police station” where he was placed in a cell by police whom *La Butte Rouge* (October 29, 1921) described as being “on edge” and “aroused by beautiful and bored demi-mondaines” from the cinema. Once all protestors had been ejected from the cinema by the “entertainment police” (*police des spectacles*), spectators returned to their seats and the programme continued (*L’Humanité*, October 20, 1921).

At the Electric-Palace the following evening, the anti-Bolshevik film was programmed between *L’idole brisée* (Dir. Maurice Mariaud, 1920) and *Miss Fatty au bain* (*Miss Fatty's Seaside Lovers*, dir. Roscoe Arbuckle, 1915), ending with the ninth episode of the Aubert ciné-roman *Nick Winter et ses aventures* (Dir. Garbagni, 1921). *L’Humanité* described the scene at the beginning of the screening: “In this luxury theater where demi-mondaines and loafers indulge their boredom on the back of the Russian Revolution, the cops had sat themselves down comfortably. They were spread out generously among the velvet seats which they lazed upon with an indecency fortunately masked by the darkness of the cinema” (*L’Humanité*, October 21, 1921). The bourgeois clientele and wealthy foreigners thus sat side by side with members of the local division of the Communist Party while policemen disguised as bourgeois *boulevardiers* sat amongst them with their truncheons hidden under their coats. Upon entering the cinema, the few dozen Communist and Socialist Party members recognised the incognito police officers who, in turn, quickly spotted the activists in the crowd. *L’Humanité* (Ibid.) wrote,

From the beginning of the screening, Mr. Leullier’s civil servants took note of those of us who cheered—and with such heart!—Lenin and Trotsky. If the truth be told, the demi-mondaines were willing to help them in their task. In

such a way that, after beginning to sing out the *Internationale*, protests broke out and the virtuous police of the government didn't have to do much to find us. They knocked over some of us, hit others and threw out those remaining.

The bourgeois Electric-Palace regulars, then, just as those of the Aubert-Palace, had no qualms about joining the police in their violent removal of the men from the cinema. Despite their bruises, the activists felt that their protest was successful: *La Russie rouge* was taken off the bill that night and they had brought their protest to the top tier of Paris pleasure-seekers, "right to the heart of Paris" (Ibid.).

Cinephile Apoliticism

As the Ministry of the Interior wondered how to quell Bolshevism among French workers, film critics grappled with the problem of a working-class public, who they believed were preventing French cinema from gaining the prestige it deserved by deterring the support of the intellectual and political elite. During the years following the Great War, intellectual film critics had grown increasingly impatient with the vibrant working-class cinema culture. Working-class audiences were not only rowdy and undisciplined; they were also lamentably indifferent to young directors such as Louis Delluc and Marcel L'Herbier, and their preference for *ciné-romans* over sophisticated Swedish and US imports such as Victor Sjöström, Mauritz Stiller, and D.W. Griffith was preventing France's political and social elites from taking cinema seriously. In 1918 Louis Delluc had been optimistic in the mass public's support of French art cinema. Encouraged by the positive reception of working-class audiences to Abel Gance's *La Dixième symphonie*, he had expressed optimism about the working-class Faubourg audience, which, "despite its almost unanimous lack of culture," had displayed "acuteness, taste and insight" (Delluc 1998, 160). The Autumn of 1921, however, were months of great disillusionment for Delluc. He was deeply disappointed at negative audience reactions to two films that in his eyes were changing the course of cinema history: *The Phantom Carriage* (Dir. Victor Sjöström, 1921) and *El*

Dorado (Dir. Marcel L'Herbier, 1921) (*Cinéa*, March 3, 1922).

The film critic Lionel Landry wrote in *Cinéa* in 1921 that the difference in taste between, on the one hand, the working-class and provincial public (*le public populaire et provincial*), and on the other hand, the public of the city (*le public des villes*) was that the first “wants the film to have a moral and happy ending” while the latter “asks for something darker and complex, less conventional.” Landry noted the problem this created for intellectually ambitious filmmakers: “Since one cannot make films aimed at a minority, which would be caviar for the people, one is obliged to sacrifice a film’s profound character” (*Cinéa*, May 6, 1921). In practice, the differences in ticket prices would normally separate the elite from their working-class servants even in cinema palaces, where audience numbers could reach 3000. When this separation failed, however, exhibitors would sometimes see it as a problem. The cinema manager of the Mimosas in the seventh arrondissement, for example, wrote in a report to owner Serge Sandberg that “The population is mainly maids, small businessmen, officers and Ministry employees; I don’t think we can count on an aristocratic clientele, as the cinema is not able to cater for two distinct clienteles.”¹⁷ This led Riciotto Canudo—in the first meeting of the *Club des amis du septième art* (CASA)—to advance the idea of a cinema hierarchy (*hiérarchie des salles*) so that the elite, intellectual public would not have to mix with working-class spectators. In Canudo’s view, working-class modes of spectatorship should be relegated to working-class neighbourhood cinemas (*salles populaires*), allowing serious spectators to enjoy films in their own elite cinemas (*salles élités*) (*Cinéa*, May 13, 1921).¹⁸

The riots at Palais des fêtes held particular importance as the cinema was managed by Léon Brézillon, the president of the cinema exhibitors’ trade union (*la chambre syndicale des directeurs de cinématographes*). The Palais des fêtes was the city’s first “multiplex” cinema with 2000 seats divided over two floors and separate programmes in each (Meusy 2002, 305–6). In 1921, Brézillon was at the

centre of a pro-French cinema campaign that argued that cinema should be given the same respect as the theatre and other highbrow art forms. Earlier that year, during a mass meeting of the *Chambre syndicale de la cinématographie française* in the presence of several parliamentary figures at the Palais de la Mutualité, Brézillon had argued that “The cinema no longer wants to be considered a fairground attraction and a dancing bear keeper. It wants to be assimilated to the theatre and benefit from all its advantages, from the freedom and consideration which is reserved for the theatre” (*Hebdo-Film*, January 29, 1921; *L'Écran*, January 22, 1921; *Le Cinéopse*, February 1921). The riots, then, struck at the heart of a French film industry eager to be accepted as a respectable bourgeois art form.

The ire of leftists would not have been softened by most film critics, who largely ignored the protests and the anti-Bolshevik content of the films. By focusing entirely on the films’ formal and aesthetic qualities, they provided an intellectual, “impartial” rationale for the anti-Bolshevik front of exhibitors, bourgeois publics, and the State. When the *La Russie rouge* was shown in Louis Delluc’s habitual cinema *Le Colisée* it was advertised as “an eloquent documentary of extraordinary emotion.” (*Comoedia*, October 14, 1921). One *Cinéa* journalist, Ture Dahlin, described the reception of the film there as one of “deathly silence and shivers” (*Cinéa*, November 18, 1921). During a screening in Barbès, however, the audience reacted with “howls, whistles and gun shots.” Failing to mention any of the specific complaints about the film, then, we are left with the representation of an unreasonably unruly and violent working-class public. In his criticism of the film for *Paris-Midi*, at the height of the protests on October 20, 1921, Delluc (1990a, 259) similarly wrote:

This documentary... is making all of Paris run—or scream. I don’t believe that it favours or disfavors any party. It evokes the Slavic tragedy powerfully and is moving on many levels. Certain images, like the repression and recognition of the corpses have an astonishing dramatic value. Among the many silhouettes, of which we would have much to say, let us signal that of the *mater dolorosa*, who, with mad gestures, flails around in horror in the

terrible mass grave. We feel that the cinema doesn't use to its advantage all of these possibilities for information.

With these silent, yet eloquent pages, this film has made amends for much silence.

Delluc's curtailing of political issues in his film criticism was not limited to *Russie rouge*. In his *Paris-Midi* review of the Norma Talmadge film *The New Moon* Delluc (1990b, 243) wrote,

It is enough to say [that this film] is full of qualities. There is a vast series of American films with nothing transcendental, yet rich in hundreds of details which are well-observed, ring true and are always animated by a well-paced movement... This is one of those... The Russian imitation story holds nothing of great interest. One cannot, however, not follow the story. We don't know where they want to lead us and we don't want to know – but we go anyway. It seemed to be a bloody tragedy. We don't shiver, we shout out: "It's charming!" just like we say "That was so much fun!" after a good drama. And then there is Norma Talmadge. I admired her so much last night that I thought myself able to describe her to you. But then I remember a literary portrait of her written by the very talented Louise Fazenda, the slapstick Philomena of Mack Sennett's troupe: "Norma Talmadge—Poppies in the cornfield. A candlelit dinner. Jasmine scent in the evening breeze. Martens." ..And does that not evoke the Rimbaud of *Illuminations*? But yes, but yes.

Finally, René Boisyvon, film critic for the daily newspaper *L'Intransigeant*¹⁹ and advocate of the renaissance of French cinema (*Le Film*, September 1920), wrote (*L'Intransigeant*, October 19, 1921):

We might advise protestors to be a little wiser and better-humoured. After all, a film is not something to be taken so tragically. We have other, more solid terrain, for engaging in political struggles.

The *Russie rouge* protests came just six months after Canudo's speech at CASA's first meeting, where he had argued that *salles élités* should be established so that serious film connoisseurs would not have to mingle with unruly workers. During the protests, a divide which until then had only been discursively constructed in the writings of cinephile critics like Canudo and Delluc was now brutally

enforced by French police in the chic boulevard cinema palaces of central Paris. The forced removal of worker activists from luxury boulevard cinemas and police enforcement of anti-Bolshevik propaganda led leftists to name pro-government cinemas *cinéma gouvernementales* (*L'Humanité*, October 22, 1921) and *cinémas bourgeois* (*L'Humanité*, December 5, 1921). *Le Populaire* (November 5, 1921) remarked that “Pathé is no longer anything like Pathé.” It only rubbed salt into the wound when Louis Aubert, who persisted in keeping the film on his screens, was promoted *Chevalier* of the Legion of Honour for his “loyal services” in October 1921 (*L'Humanité*, October 25, 1921; *Cinéa*, October 21, 1921).

“A cinema of the people must arise to oppose the bourgeois cinéma.”²⁰

Scholarship on early 1920s French cinema culture has all but overlooked working-class audiences. What little scholarship exists has either ignored working-class spectators altogether or viewed them in light of the intermingling of cinephiles, Socialists, and Communists in *Les Amis de Spartacus* of 1928, thereby projecting backward a kind of high-brow universalism onto early 1920s audiences. Attention to the *Russie rouge* protests presents a different picture, and allows working-class spectators to emerge from obscurity as carriers of a historically and locally specific tradition of film consumption and cinema-centred sociability. From the perspective of non-elite audiences, political activism in cinemas was not so much a violation of public morality as a natural extension of already existing working-class cinema culture. Their spectatorship was conditioned by the everyday use of cinemas in working-class neighbourhoods as spaces where political engagement and leisure came together.

Against this background, it becomes clearer why *La Russie rouge* provoked such anger among working-class audiences. No longer malleable spaces for entertainment and community organisation, certain cinemas, in particular the large cinema palaces, now appeared to them as tools for the bourgeoisie “to maintain its influence over the working class.”²¹ Consequently, Communist Party

members and sympathisers felt an urgent need to place their cinema culture on a more secure footing. From late October 1921, therefore, two short-lived cinema networks with close ties to the Communist Party were established. *Le Bon Cinéma* was created by the eighteenth-arrondissement Socialist Party (SFIC) newspaper *La Butte Rouge* (*La Butte Rouge*, October 29, 1921).²² The feminist newspaper *La Voix des Femmes* similarly created *Le Cinéma du Peuple*,²³ which held screenings at the Saint-Ouen community hall, la Bellevilloise in the twentieth arrondissement, and the learned society meeting hall (*Salle des Sociétés savantes*) in the sixth arrondissement (*La Voix des Femmes*, October 27, 1921 and *L'Humanité*, December 5, 1921). The police enforcement of *La Russie rouge* screenings in Paris cinemas thus directly provoked the creation of two alternative exhibition networks.

The *Cinéma du Peuple* had its inaugural screening at the *Bellevilloise* on October 19, 1921, in celebration of the fifth anniversary of the socialist feminist newspaper *La Voix des Femmes*. Noëlie Drous first gave a talk on the subject of educational cinema, followed by a programme that included scientific, comic and social education films (*La Butte rouge*, October 12, 1921; *La Voix des Femmes*, October 13, 1921). According to Drous, the purpose of this alternative cinema network was to elevate the public's film taste and to train them to recognise political propaganda in cinemas (*La Voix des Femmes*, October 20, 1921). She wrote, "It is with pleasure that we have seen how certain of our comrades have welcomed the tendentious film which under the title "La Russie Rouge" attempts to systematically misrepresent the experience pursued by our Russian brothers. We dare to believe that if the *Cinéma du Peuple* can live, the public, which no longer accepts political lies with such ease, will soon refuse to tolerate lies anywhere we now see them, in morals as in art. We dare to believe that in the future *Judex* or *La Main qui étreint*²⁴ will be welcomed on the screen with the same ... enthusiasm as *la Russie rouge*." The *Cinéma du Peuple* was not mentioned again after October 1921.

The eighteenth-arrondissement newspaper *La Butte Rouge* had been extremely vocal during the *Russie*

rouge protests and had expressed anger at the arrest of their comrade Besnard during the Aubert-Palace unrest. The newspaper's secretary Fernard Morelle argued that it was not enough to "continue whistling and booing *la Russie Rouge* and all future films" like it. Rather, Morelle saw it necessary to create an alternative exhibition network. The *Bon Cinema* was the idea of one Herbert, a former cinema manager, cameraman, and student of Pathé who was now the secretary of the eighteenth arrondissement tenant's organisation, and who aimed "to destroy the influence of provocative and lying cinemas" (*La Butte Rouge*, October 29, 1921). Morelle noted that, due to the lack of true "socialist films" the exhibitors would have to choose films from the *grandes maisons cinématographiques*, and aimed to prove that even in these companies there were "good films" to be found. "Against *Russie rouge*, we will match *La 10e symphonie* (Dir. Abel Gance, 1919) or *le Rêve*" (Dir. Jacques de Baroncelli, 1921). To *Les Mystères de New York* and other American nonsense, we will prefer *Travail* (Dir. Henri Pouctal, 1920) and *La Terre* (Dir. André Antoine, 1921), or this marvellous film, a fierce indictment of war: *J'accuse*" (Dir. Abel Gance, 1919) (Ibid.). The creation of *le Bon Cinema* was announced in the *Internationale*, the *Journal du Peuple*, and *l'Humanité*, all of which asked readers to buy shares so that the group might be able to build cinemas in the suburbs (*La Butte Rouge*, December 24, 1921). In the group's manifesto Morelle was optimistic that the *Bon Cinéma* could rival any Parisian cinema due to Herbert's expertise. The group aimed to attract members of the general public as well as activists to their screenings. The profits were to be split into five parts: Three fifths would go back to the *Bon Cinéma* to pay for film and cinema rentals and two fifths would go to various activist organisations such as the tenants' group and Communist groups (Ibid.). The benefitting organisation would be in charge of selling tickets and seating spectators. The inaugural screening was held at the Saint-Ouen community hall thanks to the cooperation of the sympathetic mayor Emile Cordon who presided the screening. The overall message of Morelle was that "Shouting down provocative films in bourgeois cinemas is all well and good, but we must be able to erect against these brainwashing establishments our own healthy and honest, brain-cleansing cinemas" (*La Butte Rouge*, October 29,

1921).

The first *Bon Cinéma* screening was held on November 6 at the *salle des fêtes* in Pantin at the close of the second day of the 4th Jeunesse Communiste Federal Congress, in order to raise money for the *Jeunesses de la Seine* (*L'Humanité*, November 1, 1921). The first week's programme included, in addition to documentaries, comedy shorts and a live singing act, *La Paix chez soi* (Dir. Robert Saisdreau, 1920) and *La Double existence du Docteur Morart* (Dir. Jacques Grétilat, 1919). The second week's program included *Le Droit de tuer* (Dir. Charles Maudru, 1920) and *La Dette de Simone* (1919) with child star Simone Genevois. In the first week screenings were held at the working-class cinemas Cinémas des Acacias in Ivry and the Bellevilloise; in the second week venues also included the Saint-Ouen community hall and the Union des Syndicats. Future planned screenings were to include *La Terre* (Dir. André Antoine, 1921), *Travail* (Dir. Henri Pouctal, 1919), *J'accuse* (Dir. Abel Gance, 1918), *La Dixième symphonie* (Dir. Abel Gance, 1918) and *Les Larmes du peuple* (Dir. Mario Roncoroni, 1918) (*La Butte Rouge*, October 29, 1921).

By the end of December 1921 this alternative exhibition group had been booked by the Inter-union committee of the fifteenth arrondissement (*Comité Intersyndical du 15e*), the workers' association for the war-wounded of Boulogne (*l'Association ouvrière des mutilés de Boulogne*), the nineteenth arrondissement section of the Communist Party, the Dressmakers Union (*le Syndicat de l'Habillement*) and the Kremlin-Bicêtre *Pensée libre* group (*La Butte Rouge*, December 24, 1921). However, like the *Cinema du Peuple*, the group was short-lived. *Le Bon Cinéma*'s final appearance in *La Butte Rouge* (January 14, 1922) is in the title of an article reporting on a resolution by the Marseille Communist Party Congress in favour of using cinemas for communist propaganda. The final word came in a *L'Humanité* article cautioning readers that a man was accepting loans and subscriptions for *Le Bon Cinéma* although he, in fact, had no ties to the Communist Party (*L'Humanité*, June 10, 1922).

In attempting to evade state discipline, these two grass-root exhibition groups differed from *Les Amis de Spartacus*, which was organised by Jean Lods and Léon Moussinac in 1928. Like *Le Bon Cinéma* and *Le Cinéma du Peuple*, *Les Amis de Spartacus* aimed to teach working-class audiences to appreciate new French and Soviet film art rather than the adventure serials and melodramas so popular in bourgeois cinemas. Unlike the earlier networks, however, *Les Amis de Spartacus* enjoyed a distinctly elitist patronage, its most notable members being the Viscount of Nouailles and the Duke of Beaumont. (Weber 2002, 165). Perhaps partly for that reason, *Les Amis de Spartacus* is a well-known chapter in the history of French cinephilia.

The government protection of bourgeois viewing habits, the exclusion of leftist activist spectators from cinemas and the subsequent emergence of alternative communist exhibition networks reveal that the development of cinema publics in the early 1920s was a political issue, not just a matter of cinephile taste versus low-brow, popular taste. In 1921 use of the word “cinéphile” was not yet widespread, French intellectual film culture had not yet been institutionalised through the creation of the *Ciné-Club de France* in November 1924 and the *Studio des Ursulines*, the first of the *salles spécialisées*, in 1925. Though short-lived, both *Le Cinéma du Peuple* and *Le Bon Cinéma* indicate an emerging separation of film publics founded not on taste but on class politics. If the new illustrated film press was a discursive site where cinephiles such as Louis Delluc could renegotiate the status of cinema as a respectable, intellectual pursuit and a vital cultural product of interwar France, during the *Russie rouge* protests cinemas themselves became physical sites for cultural negotiation. As opposed to the columns of the film press, however, the latter sites were subject to state surveillance and to the discipline of police and bourgeois spectators.

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¹ Bibliothèque nationale de France. Département des manuscrits. Fonds Marcel Martinet.

² According to Vignaux (2011), Germaine Dulac joined the Socialist Party in 1925 (*Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière* - SFIO). In 1932 the *Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires* (AEAR) was created with a cinema section that was named the *Alliance du Cinéma Indépendant* in 1934 and in 1936 became *Ciné-Liberté*. Jean Renoir, Germaine Dulac, Jean Painlevé, Henri Jeanson and Gaston Modot were all members of the “section cinéma” of this group (formerly the *Fédération Ciné-Photo*). Jean Epstein made the film *Les bâtisseurs* (1938) for the builders’ trade union *Fédération des travailleurs du bâtiment*.

3 *L'Humanité* was the 4th largest newspaper in France with a circulation of 200,000 in late 1921. Archives du Parti communiste français. 3 Mi 7/ 23. Fonds 533. 10, Jeunesses Socialistes - Jeunesses Communistes, 1913-1924, dossier 3183 - 3185 : Jeunesses Communistes: correspondance, rapports, 1921. Letter from Maurice Laporte dated November 2, 1921.

4 See response to reader with pseudonym Bob in the *Ciné pour tous* letter column “Entre Nous.” *Ciné pour tous*, June 17, 1921: 4.

5 The hierarchy of exhibition in Paris meant that the film arrived in this small suburb to the south of Paris five months after its initial release. The film was initially banned by censors in December 1920. See *L'Écran*, December 18, 1920: 1.

6 *Cinéa*, October 14, 1921. The Film Daily described the film as an “amusing and timely satire on the lives of the free-thinking, little-working “Bolshevists.” May Allison played a New York stenographer who, after attending several political meetings, began to feel downtrodden by her new “capitalist” employer Saul Chilpik. She leaves her job and moves in with one of her “comrades” Harriett, who exploits her as much as her former employer by leaving her to do all the housework. She even discovers that the “Harvard tramp” she is in love with is already married. Disillusioned with the “Bull-sheviki” lifestyle she returns to her old life after being tracked down by the son of her former employer. *The Uplifters*, which according to *L'Humanité* (October 15, 1921) “film profiteers have

thought up with very little imagination,” was placed on the newspaper’s list of “Films to be Banned.” Also see Icart (1997, 35–41).

7 “Si c’est ça la vie / Eh bien, je vous l’déclare / Sans être socialo / C’est pas rigolo / Et moi j’en ai marre!” Lyrics to “J’en ai marre” written for Mistinguett by Albert Willemetz et Maurice Yvain for the 1920 revue “Paris qui jazz.”

8 Government programmes that declared women property of the state were widely reported in France. See for example *Lectures pour tous*, April 1, 1919; *Études*, May 5, 1919.

9 E.g., a September 12, 1921 surveillance report of the “Russian Jew” Dokolinsky, a regular attendee of the *maison commune* meetings. Archives nationales. Police générale. F7 13490.

10 There had been a cinema on the ground floor of the building known as the American Cinéma since 1907 (Meusy 2002, 168–9). It seated 150 spectators and was quite narrow—just over 6 metres wide and 29 metres long (Meusy 2002, 168). At the end of 1908 a Socialist cooperative (*Union des coopérateurs socialistes*) made the building along with the American Cinéma into their *maison commune* (Meusy 2002). In December 1918, the Béranger cinéma was created by a Mr. Joret, who equipped the first-floor meeting room for cinema projections (*Bulletin municipal officiel de la Ville de Paris*, February 27, 1918).

11 Report dated September 7, 1921. Archives nationales. Police générale. F7 13490.

12 Archives du Parti communiste français. 3 MI 7 / 23. Fonds 533. 10. Dossier 3183 – 3185: correspondance, rapports, 1921.

13 Report dated October 14, 1921. Archives nationales. Police générale. F 713490.

14 Letter dated October 14, 1921. Archives nationales. Police générale. F7 13490.

15 Archives nationales. Police générale. F7 13490.

16 Untitled and unsigned report in folder “Notes russes.” Archives nationales. Police générale. F7 13490.

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- 17 “Rapport sur le cinéma Mimosa.” Département des arts du spectacle, Bibliothèque nationale de France. Fonds Serge Sandberg. Les salles à Paris et en région parisienne 1907-1928. 4o – COL-59/313.
- 18 Canudo’s call for a cinema hierarchy was echoed by Léon Moussinac in “Cinématographie.” *Mercure de France*, August 1, 1921.
- 19 His articles also appeared in *Le Film* and *Cinéa* as well the popular film weeklies *Cinémagazine* and *Ciné pour tous*. He created his own film magazine, *Ciné-coulisses*, in 1921 with F. Vareddes. He was also among the attendees of Louis Delluc's lecture on cinema as *art populaire* the same year.
- 20 “Vie Économique et Sociale: Communications: Le Bon Cinéma.” *L'Humanité* December 5, 1921.
- 21 David, Raymond. “Rapport de propagande.” Archives du Parti communiste français. 3 MI 7 / 23. Fonds 533. 10. Dossier 3183 – 3185: correspondance, rapports, 1921.
- 22 Not to be confused with the cinema close to the Champs-Élysées named *Le Bon Cinéma* at 10 rue François 1er in the eighth arrondissement.
- 23 Not to be confused with the 1913-1914 *Cinéma du Peuple* cooperative (Mannoni 1993) or the 1925 *Cinéma du Peuple* created by the Secours Ouvrier International with Léon Moussinac as artistic director (*L'Humanité*, February 27, 1925).
- 24 The first episode of *Les Mystères de New York*, the Pathé Pearl White serial assembled from *The Exploits of Elaine* (Dir. Louis Gasnier, 1914), *The New Exploits of Elaine* (1915) and *The Romance of Elaine* (1915).