

# Film, history and socialism

## Part Two

By David Walsh  
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*We are posting here the concluding part of a talk given by David Walsh, arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site, to a meeting organized by graduate film students January 17 at York University in Toronto, Ontario. The first part was posted January 22. Also see “Questions and answers at David Walsh’s talk at York University in Toronto.”*

I want to point to a few remarkable features of the 1930s’ film industry in the US, which I hope are suggestive and will serve to illustrate more general trends.

The “hardboiled” social dramas produced at Warner Brothers in the 1930s are certainly a fascinating subject. A number of reasons are offered for the studio’s penchant for social criticism, including the political views of Jack Warner in the early 1930s, when he was one of the few studio executives who championed Roosevelt, as well as the studio’s relative independence from the banks. In any event, from *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* in 1931, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* in 1932 and *Wild Boys of the Road* in 1933 to Raoul Walsh’s *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), *They Drive By Night* (1940) and *High Sierra* (1941) and Michael Curtiz’s *The Sea Wolf* (also 1941), Warner Brothers presented a series of films, although often sensational and simplistic, that provided some picture of American society’s difficulties, its seamy, disordered and sometimes poverty-stricken side.

Left-wing writers, directors and actors had a good deal to do with this. *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, for example, were two of the definitive gangster films of the decade. The screenplay for *Little Caesar* was written by Communist Party member Francis Faragoh and starred Edward G. Robinson; James Cagney starred in *The Public Enemy*, which was co-written by John Bright, another party member. Robert Rossen, also in the CP, wrote *The Roaring Twenties*, with Cagney and Bogart, and *The Sea Wolf*, which featured Robinson and John Garfield.

*Black Fury*, released in 1935, is a film worth noting. Directed by Michael Curtiz and featuring Paul Muni, it recounts the story of an immigrant coal miner caught in the crossfire between crooked union leaders, Machiavellian coal operators and brutal strike-breakers. Its ultimate message is confused to say the least, but the film’s sympathy for the miners and hostility to the forces of law and order are clear.

A review from the *New York Times* in 1935 makes interesting reading. It begins: “Hollywood, with all its taboos and commercial inhibitions, makes a trenchant contribution to the sociological drama in ‘Black Fury,’ which arrived at the Strand Theatre yesterday. Magnificently performed by Paul Muni, it comes up taut against the censorial safety belts and tells a stirring tale of industrial war in the coal fields.... [W]hen we realize that ‘Black Fury’ was regarded by the State Censor Board as an inflammatory social document and that it has been banned in several sectors, we ought to understand that Warner Brothers exhibited almost a reckless air of courage in producing the picture at all.”

*Black Fury* was proscribed in several states due to its depiction of the beating death of a miner by company thugs. The fictional murder was based on an actual incident in Imperial, Pennsylvania, in 1929, when a

miner was beaten to death by the coal and iron police.

With all its peculiarities, the film, like many of those turned out at Warner Brothers, is forcefully done. And these things don’t come out of the blue. The personalities, histories and thinking of those involved collectively generate the intensity of the work. Pick a favorite film from the 1930s or 1940s, check into the background of the director, writer, lead actors, cinematographer, composer, art director—in many cases, you will be astonished. A world of culture and often politics lies behind their efforts.

Take another film by Curtiz, *Casablanca*, not his finest, in my opinion, but certainly memorable. First of all, there is the director himself about whom I will say a few words in a moment. Then there’s Bogart, a man of the left; Ingrid Bergman from Sweden, with her refinement and artistry; Paul Henreid, born in Trieste, then part of Austria-Hungary, and later blacklisted in the 1950s; Claude Rains, one of the greatest figures of the British stage in the 1920s, taught by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the founder of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, and who went on to teach John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier; Peter Lorre, a Hungarian Jew and refugee from Germany, a former member of Brecht’s acting troupe, who played Gayly Gay in Brecht’s *A Man’s a Man* in Berlin; co-writer, Howard Koch, who was in the Communist Party; and composer Max Steiner, who had studied with Gustav Mahler, written for the theater and emigrated to the US along with Erich Wolfgang Korngold and numerous other composers.

A few years ago I conducted this experiment on *A Canterbury Tale*, “an odd and vaguely unsettling film directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, released in 1944. The film, whose title echoes Chaucer, is an exploration of ‘Englishness,’ made under wartime conditions and for patriotic purposes.”

I discovered this about the filmmakers, aside from Powell: “The co-director of *A Canterbury Tale*, Emeric Pressburger, was born Imre Józef Pressburger in 1902 in Miskolc, Hungary (then Austria-Hungary). According to a biographer, ‘Educated at the Universities of Prague and Stuttgart, he worked as a journalist in Hungary and Germany and an author and scriptwriter in Berlin and Paris. He was a Hungarian Jew, chased around Europe (he worked on films for UFA in Berlin and in Paris) before World War II, who finally found sanctuary in London.’

“Cinematographer Erwin Hillier, born in 1911 to a German-English family, studied art in Berlin in the late 1920s. The famous director F. W. Murnau was so impressed by Hillier’s paintings that he asked him to work on *Tabu*. Instead Hillier ended up working for Fritz Lang on *M*.”

“Born in 1886 in Germany, production designer Alfred Junge began working in silent films in 1923. By the time of *A Canterbury Tale* he had worked with Alexander Korda, Marcel Pagnol, King Vidor, Carol Reed and Alfred Hitchcock as production and art designer.

“The composer of the film’s score, Allan Gray, was born Josef Zmigrod in Tarnów, Poland (then Austria-Hungary) in 1902. He studied under the pioneering modernist Arnold Schönberg. A biographer notes,

‘To pay for his tuition he composed popular, jazz-influenced tunes for cabaret acts in Berlin. Josef took his pseudonym from Oscar Wilde’s narcissistic hero, Dorian Gray.’

“The individual in charge of visual effects, W. Percy Day, had worked on Abel Gance’s celebrated *Napoleon* (1927).”

And I asked: “Is it any wonder that today’s films often appear pale and weak by comparison?”

Curtiz, director of *Black Fury* and *Casablanca*, offers an instructive example. Born Mihály Kertész, “in a well-to-do Jewish family in Budapest,” according to a biographical account in the *New York Times*, “he ran away from home at age 17 to join a circus, then trained for an acting career at the Royal Academy for Theater and Art. He worked as a leading man at the Hungarian Theatre before directing stage plays and then films.” In 1919, a socialist republic was declared in Hungary, which was drowned in blood by the forces of counterrevolution only a few months later. The *Times* account goes on, “When the Hungarian film industry was nationalized by the new communist government in 1919, Curtiz packed his bags and headed for Sweden, France, Germany, and Austria.” Various other accounts make the same point.

This is fine, and would warm the heart of any red-blooded anti-communist, except it doesn’t happen to be true. Far from packing his bags, Curtiz was a member of the revolutionary arts council that supervised the newly nationalized film industry in the Hungarian Soviet republic. Other leading participants included Alexander Korda, later prominent as a director and producer in the British film industry, and Bela Lugosi. Georg Lukacs, of course, was also a participant in the short-lived Hungarian socialist government, along with film theoretician Bela Balázs.

Thirty-one films were made during the four months of revolutionary rule in Hungary, only two of which have survived. One is a 12-minute film by Curtiz, entitled *My Brother is Coming*. Graham Petrie writes that the work, “is based on a revolutionary poem...whose words appear on the screen rhythmically inter-cut with the images of the hero returning from political exile and imprisonment, seen at first as an individual waving a huge red flag and finally being joined by an ever-growing crowd as he nears home and is reunited with his family before giving a speech to a procession assembled in the street outside.” This is the man who “packed his bags” at the approach of the revolution, according to the *Times* and others.

I’m not suggesting Curtiz was a Bolshevik in Hollywood. The evolution of his political views is unknown to me, but one can tell that he brought a certain Central European vivacity, energy and tension to every film he undertook, shaped by the cultural environment and his participation in a revolutionary social experiment. Fassbinder called Curtiz an “Anarchist in Hollywood,” and paid tribute to his work. I strongly recommend many of his films, including *Captain Blood*, *Kid Galahad*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Four Daughters*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, *The Sea Hawk*, and in particular, *Mildred Pierce* and *Flamingo Road*.

Of course, the eventual and for the most part ignominious collapse of the leftists in Hollywood was far from admirable. To account for the relative ease with which a purge of many socialist artists and the intimidation of the rest were carried out would take us beyond our subject. The rotten politics of the Communist Party had something to do with it. The artists, lulled to sleep by the notion that postwar America would see some continuation or extension of the New Deal, or even an American “Popular Front,” were utterly unprepared for the monstrous imperialist predator that emerged in the late 1940s during the Cold War.

There is also the problem of celebrity in America. The horrifying execution of the Rosenbergs and the imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten—those CP members who were cited for contempt of Congress—notwithstanding, leftists in America did not face the prospect for the most part of outright repression in the postwar years. But the

left-wing directors and writers faced the possibility of exclusion, of being out of the limelight. In America, conventionally, you are everything or nothing. An Elia Kazan could not bear the thought of losing his celebrity status. To withstand public opinion in America especially requires not only courage but a long-term historical perspective.

No fascist counterrevolution took place in America, but a period of profound political and cultural stagnation set in, dominated by opportunism, the strangulation of the labor movement and the emergence of anti-communism as virtually a state religion. Anti-capitalist criticism was outlawed and remains outlawed. For the film industry, the ultimate consequence, with the disappearance of the last great figures, by the 1960s, was a severe deterioration and dissolution of what was finest and most insightful in Hollywood cinema.

The artist needs to be inspired by great purposes. American Cold War liberalism proved far too narrow and uninspiring a base upon which to construct a great and lasting cinema. A new cinema will have to arise on a new, far more critical foundation. In our view, the emergence of a consciously socialist current in North American filmmaking, which sets itself up in irreconcilable opposition to the entire economic and political structure and its psychology and morality, is crucial to that development.

This is an important part of the explanation for the decline, I believe. But certain things need to be added. Sometimes we’re told that the problem today is “money,” the domination of giant conglomerates. The problem of money and art didn’t begin with Louis B. Mayer. The Dutch painters of the seventeenth century were at the mercy of the market, and suffered for it. That didn’t prevent them from doing some extraordinary work. Mitry is correct in this regard, as long as capitalism exists, filmmaking will involve commerce. No, there are plenty of people around with sufficient financing and artistic independence, and very few of them are saying anything important. The problem is one of perspective, artistic and social.

The politics and the experience of recent decades represent one element of the problem. What have people experienced, what have they seen? You would have to be 30-35 years old for the Soviet Union to be more than a fleeting memory. You would have to be older than that to remember when American liberalism had some substance. The last great successful strike in the US took place in the late 1970s. We speak of the filmmaker with the unfurrowed brow, with relatively few important life experiences, no experience of a socialist or communist movement or of great struggles. It’s not his or her fault of course. Some of this will only be overcome with a great mass movement, which will break up much that’s stagnant, skeptical, uncommitted in the present-day artist.

There is, however, a specifically aesthetic question, which is bound up with the broader problems. Something has largely been lost in recent decades. What do all great films, from any source, have in common? What Trotsky called a definite and important feeling for the world. They make a genuine engagement with reality, with the way people are, the ways in which they behave. I’m not speaking of realism as a style or a literary school. One can treat life seriously in a cartoon or a science fiction film, or a re-enactment of Greek myth or a musical set on the moon.

Trotsky speaks beautifully of this quality, which, he says, “consists in a feeling for life as it is, in an artistic acceptance of reality, and not in a shrinking from it, in an active interest in the concrete stability and mobility of life. It is a striving either to picture life as it is or to idealize it, either to justify or to condemn it, either to photograph it or generalize and symbolize it. But it is always a *preoccupation with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art.*” (Emphasis added)

It’s difficult to add much to that. We need to revive an interest in the artistic concentration on character and human personality, on the plausibility and authenticity of the human situations that are dramatized, on psychological and social realism (not Stalinist “Socialist Realism,”

which had nothing realistic, or “socialistic,” about it). It’s a matter of a certain approach to life. Nothing will come of a desire to show off or impress, to be the most coldhearted or frenzied or bloodiest or cynical among your contemporaries—this is a race to the bottom.

The individual starting out in cinema today can’t immediately surmount all the objective difficulties; one can’t invent what one hasn’t experienced. But this approach to life, this deep concern “with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art,” *that* it’s possible for *anyone* to assimilate and adopt.

A few points in conclusion. When we speak of our Marxist approach, we mean by that, if you like, a “classical Marxist” approach. We reject most of what passes for Marxism in academic circles. I would like to make a few comments in that regard.

First, a small example of what I mean, which may be instructive. In J. Dudley Andrew’s *The Major Film Theories*, published in the mid-1970s, the author is describing the views of certain “militant” French leftists at the time. Speaking for them, he says, in bourgeois art “a lie...destroys every possibility of meaning except for the neurotic repetition of the dominant ideology. This lie is the product of our culture’s insistence on the representation of the real. It insists first that reality is visible; second that the scientific instrument of the camera can capture it. The Marxist-Leninist critics,”—please, note, “Marxist-Leninist critics,”—“launch their attack even here, claiming that the supposedly scientific instrument of the camera is far from neutral, that, like all science, it serves the ruling class. It does this by propagating the visual codes of Renaissance humanism (perspective) which put the individual at the center of a kind of theater spectacle unrolling before him,” etc., etc.

Of course, everyone has the right to clown around at one time or another, but it’s bad form to do so in false colors. This is not “Marxism-Leninism,” but the leftism of clever French schoolboys and girls, some of which we still hear today. Genuine Marxism has always had the deepest commitment to the achievements of culture, which are humanity’s property, not the property of the ruling elite. In 1920, precisely to counter the efforts of the Russian counterparts of these “militant critics,” Lenin proposed a resolution explaining that “Marxism...far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch...has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.”

The notion that reality is invisible and the camera can’t capture it is another bit of foolishness. First of all, any serious film work strives precisely to uncover what is not immediately visible. This is true for Howard Hawks as well as Eisenstein. If what’s meant by this is that the filmmaker is always so imprisoned by his or her class position that no general truth can emerge from the work, this is simply false for the reasons we’ve already discussed. The honest artist is not merely a congealed expression of his social standing, he or she transcends that in penetrating reality, as the scientist does. Otherwise, every previous art work created within class society would have to be thrown on the scrap heap.

Of course, the artist never goes beyond his or her social limitations *absolutely*, but then he or she never goes beyond other sorts of limitations *absolutely either*—age, sex, nationality and so forth. The question is: is the artist capable of generating *relatively* truthful pictures? It’s on this that the French and other “left” metaphysicians stumble. Because of the impossibility of a *single* work achieving absolute objective truth, they rule out partial, imperfect truths, which contain “grains” of absolute truth. We can’t jump out of our skins entirely, but that doesn’t prevent the human mind from reflecting and expressing reality truthfully. And those truly thoughtless and stereotyped views are presented as “Marxism.”

A more serious trend, the Frankfurt School is certainly one of those often presented as a Marxist tendency in art and literary criticism. Its

leading members were immensely educated, cultured and articulate individuals, but their thinking was greatly influenced by the defeats and tragedies suffered by the working class and socialism, in particular, the triumph of Hitlerism in Germany. Politically, they remained aloof. They also remained silent during Stalin’s genocidal war against the Old Bolsheviks and Russian socialism generally in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, finding that the “most loyal attitude” and not wishing “to publish anything that might damage Russia.”

Theodor Adorno, whose comments about Stalinism those were, is one of this tendency’s principal representatives. In his postwar writings on the “Culture Industry,” he expressed dismay at the condition of art and culture. He abhorred the “industrial” standardization of art works; the narrowing of the gap between empirical reality and culture; the elimination of the distinction between image and reality that “has already advanced to the point of a collective sickness”; the transformation of culture into “baby-food”; the leveling down of art within itself so that there are “no longer any real conflicts to be seen”; the “iron grip of rigidity despite the ostentatious appearance of dynamism” in modern culture; and many other features of mid-twentieth century culture. Many of these criticisms and descriptions are accurate and just.

However, they are deeply one-sided and ultimately superficial. Adorno and his co-thinker Max Horkheimer viewed the growth of the productive forces itself as planting the seeds of destruction. They anticipated various contemporary forms of Green thinking by blaming the Enlightenment (with its emphasis on man’s domination of nature), technology and industry for society’s supposed regression.

As a German colleague, Peter Schwarz, explained in a recent lecture, “According to Marx and Engels, the productive forces developed by capitalism come into conflict with the capitalist property relations, initiating an era of social revolution and providing the basis for a higher, socialist form of society. Horkheimer and Adorno hold the opposite view. According to them, progress of the productive forces inevitably results in the stultification of the masses, in cultural decline, and finally in a new kind of barbarism.”

This conception infuses Adorno’s postwar writings on culture. He writes: “The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. Ever since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the market-place they had already possessed something of this quality. But then they sought after profit only indirectly, over and above their autonomous essence. New on the part of the culture industry is the direct and undisguised primacy of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy in its most typical products.”

Adorno, to be frank, often writes like the petty bourgeois who is dismayed by the disappearance of the small corner store and the independently owned bookstore, who bemoans the building of a supermarket in a rural area. These are the inevitable cruelties of modern capitalist development. He laments, in one comment, that no homeland “can survive being processed by the films that celebrate it, and thereby turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness.” There is something of the nostalgic philistine in these comments.

No one is more scathing than our movement about present-day culture. The commodification and trivialization of art is a pressing problem. However, we view this problem historically and objectively. Culture is a contradictory phenomenon. The machine enslaves humanity, but it also holds the key to its liberation. Under capitalism, technology is turned against humanity in a destructive fashion. Socialism and opposition to technology have never had anything in common.

As Trotsky noted, “a voyage in a boat propelled by oars demands great personal creativity. A voyage in a steamboat is more ‘monotonous’ but more comfortable and more certain. Moreover, you can’t cross the ocean

in a row-boat anyway.”

Adorno concluded that modern monopoly capitalism “abolishes art along with conflict.” The film industry, he wrote, “strikes the hour of total domination.” These morbidly pessimistic conclusions were false. Art and culture have certainly entered a deep crisis. Even today, several decades later, however, it would be wrong to speak of the abolition of conflict or total domination. Art cannot save itself. The crisis of the entire social order will generate opposition from the most farsighted artists. The great technologies created by capitalism will help to undermine its influence.

Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer and the others lived through great tragedies. They were deeply disoriented by the events and drew the direst conclusions. One cannot justify their thinking and action, but they lived under very difficult moral and political conditions.

Far less excusable are those postmodernists and left postmodernists who accommodate themselves to or even celebrate the debased culture that Adorno and the others decried. I would like to refer briefly to the work of Fredric Jameson, longtime professor at Duke University and the author of numerous books of criticism, another figure presented to students as a Marxist in the field of art and culture.

As a writer, Jameson is guilty of verbal exhibitionism, working in a dense and obscure manner, which makes portions of his work incomprehensible except to the elect. How someone can even refer to the Marxist tradition, which concerns itself with the political education of wide layers of the population, and hermetically seal himself off through his language remains a mystery. I would suggest that the linguistic obscurantism, consciously or not, serves to conceal the relative poverty of the ideas expressed.

In various essays and books published in the recent decades, Jameson makes clear his own morbid pessimism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the other Stalinist regimes, the universal triumph of global capitalism, the absence of any alternative to the present order, the absence even of a “new international proletariat,” render the possibility of social convulsion, much less “the ultimate senescence, breakdown and death of the system as such,” a virtual impossibility, at least for the foreseeable future.

Present-day society, in his view, is a nightmarish “multinational global corporate network” so complex that it is essentially ungraspable intellectually and unrepresentable artistically, except through allegory. He writes that the present system is “so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves.”

This is a remarkable statement. Why should we take Jameson’s word for it? The present state of global capitalism surpasses the “natural and historically developed categories of perception.” How can this be so? We don’t find this to be the case in our political or intellectual work. It is certainly beyond the capacities of any one individual to grasp the essence and operations of this world system, but that has always been the case. The task of the artist has never been to work out a full-fledged global perspective, but to discover and grapple in concentrated form with the greatest dilemmas of his or her age, to explore and ultimately concretize those dilemmas into imagery.

At any rate, in opposition to that undertaking, Jameson proposes his theory of the “political unconscious.” According to this conception, which owes a good deal to Ernst Bloch, as well as Ernest Mandel, the mysteries of the “cultural past” and presumably the present can be solved “only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot,” the history of the class struggle as it has unfolded through its various stages. He writes, “It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative...that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity.”

On the one hand, this is a truism. Every work of art, no matter how flimsy, tells us something about the class struggle, that is, social reality.

What else could it do? “However fantastic art may be,” Trotsky said, “it cannot have at its disposal any other material except that which is given to it by the world of three dimensions and by the narrower world of class society.” The most dimwitted television program provides some insight, for instance, into the mentality of the social layer that created it, its banality and indifference, and so forth.

Jameson suggests that literary works need to be treated as symbolic acts revealing contradictions that a society cannot solve and tries to conceal. The work is then read carefully, by the specialist, to uncover the contradiction.

This literary creation takes place unconsciously. And here, I believe, is the truly pernicious side to this theory, which can only work against the most pressing cultural issue of our day, the development of *conscious historical and social knowledge* by the artist.

Jameson argues that “self-consciousness about the social totality”—i.e., some grasp of the present world situation—is not arrived at by a conscious process. He writes, “My thesis, however, is not merely that we ought to strive for it, but that we do so all the time anyway without being aware of the process.” He describes the “conspiratorial text,” the work that best sums up our condition apparently, as “an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality.” He goes on to speak about the “geopolitical unconscious,” and, further, to assert that “it is only at that deeper level of our collective [unconscious] fantasy that we think about the social system all the time.”

It’s difficult for me to imagine anything more irresponsible at this moment in history, when art and culture suffer so severely, provide such weak and impoverished pictures of life, precisely due to the lack of conscious, rational cognition of reality in art, than this sort of appeal, which amounts to little more than a throwing up of one’s hands and an accommodation to the present terribly backward cultural condition. Marxists look at the present culture and propose a struggle; Jameson argues that it will all work out because our unconscious is registering world reality in any event.

Our view runs in the opposite direction. The unconscious comes into play in art in a rich and meaningful manner only to the extent that there is conscious, purposeful intent, that the artist *knows* what he or she is about. Only under those conditions do intuition and the non-rational assist in the artistic creation. At present, we have loads of unconscious fantasy, mostly the self-involved, narcissistic fantasy life of middle class individuals with no experience of life and little to say.

Our conviction is that no one carries out enduring artistic work without knowing important things, without exhaustive study of his or her art form *and* the world. Hegel writes that the serious artist “has to call in aid (i) the watchful circumspection of the intellect, and (ii) the depth of the heart and its animating feelings.” It is therefore an absurdity to suppose that poems like Homer’s “came to the poet in sleep. Without circumspection, discrimination, and criticism the artist cannot master any subject-matter which he is to configure, and it is silly to believe that the genuine artist does not know what he is doing.”

As a final word, that will suffice. The genuine artist *knows* what he or she is doing. It’s our conviction that progress in filmmaking lies along the line of knowledge, study and struggle, both artistic and social. We have great confidence that a new generation of film artists will choose that path.

*Concluded*

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