

On what should the new cinema be based?

David Walsh
17 June 1996

In previous articles we have attempted to give some indication of what was best in the San Francisco film festival. A number of valuable films, with truthful, passionate and even lyrical moments, were screened. Many of the filmmakers present, from a variety of countries, demonstrated their intelligence and sincerity. Individual films from Korea, Iran, the former Soviet Asian republics, India and the US in particular stood out.

No one who takes a serious look at the current cinema as a whole, however, would be fooled by the assertion that all is well in filmmaking. On the contrary, the sentiment that serious filmmakers, performers, students of film and audience members probably share more than any other is profound dissatisfaction. This is a healthy indicator that a new mood is already gaining ground. But first, we must ask, what has film been like in the past decade or two?

Everywhere one hears complaints about the sterility and mediocrity of the commercial cinema. Very little is to be expected from the large American studios, firmly in the grasp of giant conglomerates. When executives from these outfits speak of "artistic decisions" it is only a slip of the tongue. The gap between the technology at the large studios' disposal, capable of producing breathtaking illusions, and the intellectual and moral poverty of their productions has grown to alarming proportions. Hollywood filmmakers, by and large, have everything at their disposal except something to say. Whatever their conscious aim, the immediate effect of their impersonal, bombastic productions is to stultify and numb the spectator and render him or her temporarily incapable of critical thought.

Western European and Japanese filmmaking are not in much better shape: farces without real laughs, melodramas lacking drama, "erotic thrillers" which don't even scratch the surface of the psyche. Everywhere--pretty, blank and interchangeable faces. The absence of Hollywood's pyrotechnics only throws into greater relief the paucity of ideas. South American filmmaking, with a few exceptions, merely leaves the impression of moral and political retreat. The great majority of directors from Australia and New Zealand appear to have only one ambition--to head for Los Angeles and lose their personalities and integrity as rapidly as possible.

Has the collapse of Stalinism, proclaimed with fanfare as the rebirth of intellectual freedom, produced an artistic renaissance in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union? This question answers itself. It is now clear that the former artist-"dissidents," even those who courageously opposed the old dictatorial regimes, nourished themselves on very thin ideological gruel indeed. The most honest have produced nothing of substance, the worst simply sold themselves not necessarily to the highest, but the first, bidder.

When it comes to so-called alternative film, the picture, in general, is no brighter. American "independent" filmmaking has been in recent years an

exercise in trivia. The not very dramatic or picturesque exploits of confused, middle class 25-year-olds will remain in no one's memory for long. The entire international milieu of self-pitying "radical" feminists and gays has produced next to nothing of enduring value. Any serious critical treatment of the smirking fellowship of "hip, urban" cynics (Jim Jarmusch, the Kaurismaki brothers, etc.) can only be considered another symptom of intellectual decline.

There have been, of course, honorable exceptions to all this: Asian film directors such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien and some of his colleagues in Taiwan; Iranians Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf; certain members of China's "Fifth" and "Sixth" generations; Korean Park Kwang-su and others. And there are of course others, but the number is strictly limited.

Conformity and glorification of wealth

One could make the same severe accusations against so many of our contemporary films: that they lack intensity, depth and purpose and exhibit the most wretched conformism in glorifying wealth, law and order and the existing state of things. What has become of the spirit of revolt which animated the most serious artists in the first half of the twentieth century? It wasn't only the French Surrealists who would have subscribed to the notion, advanced in 1930, that "Everything remains to be done, every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste to the ideas of family, country, religion." What can be said in defense of a film industry whose most consistent hero, in various guises, is the policeman?

The arguments, made by studio representatives and their apologists, that the public gets what it wants and deserves what it gets are simply self-serving. Particularly when the decisions about what the public gets (and, therefore, by this logic, what it "wants") are made by the ignorant, wealthy executives of huge corporations that monopolize greater and greater control over a multibillion-dollar entertainment industry. In reality, whenever an intelligent piece of work dealing with social or historical problems has been made accessible to masses of people, they have responded. And if more artistically and emotionally demanding works do not capture a large audience, whose fault is it? The individual fed on nothing but pabulum for years on end is surely not to blame if he or she has digestive problems when suddenly presented with boeuf bourguignon.

The economics and social relations of filmmaking explain some of the problems. One-hundred-million dollar budgets do not permit experimentation or encourage examinations of social problems. A greater share of movie-making than at any previous time is firmly in the hands of large enterprises, with a vested interest in the status quo. Filmmakers and performers tend to come, as perhaps never before, from the more privileged layers of the upper middle class. When successful, they receive fantastic amounts of money and live behind high, well-guarded walls, far

removed from the social reality of the overwhelming majority of the population. Such people, motivated only by greed and careerism, have never produced anything of value. But the obvious fact that the film industry is precisely a privately-owned industry does not explain, for example, the emptiness of the independent cinema or, in general, the lack of protest and resistance, the lack of intellectual and artistic ferment and ferocity. It's not simply that things have been awful, but that so few have been disturbed by it!

At long last, as we suggested above, a new mood appears to be gaining ground. Dissatisfaction, disgust and even shame are potentially revolutionary sentiments. Many people recognize that the current cinema reflects modern life very poorly. The question becomes: on what should the genuinely new art and cinema be based?

The problems in the arts do not result from the light of human genius having suddenly dimmed or gone out. One has only to look at the extraordinary advances that have been made in various theoretical and applied sciences, medicine, computer technology, media technique and so on. Or in athletic achievement. Or even in certain areas, involving a high degree of craftsmanship and formal discipline, of musical performance.

The greatest stagnation and even decline have occurred in the spheres of politics and art (particularly the literary and dramatic arts). This is not accidental. It is in the areas of humanity's understanding of its own social organization and history--including the struggle to alter them--and of those arts most associated with the development of that understanding, where the most severe blows have been sustained.

The current situation in filmmaking and art can only be understood as a historical product. Cinema is 100 years old. Its history, more than that of any other artistic form, is intimately bound up with the great issues of the twentieth century.

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine those issues in depth, but this much can be said: the great artistic ferment of the post-World War I era is inexplicable outside an analysis of the expectations (and fears and disputes) aroused by the Russian Revolution, itself a product of half a century of socialist culture. This is not the same thing as saying that the artists, as a whole or even in large part, who participated in the artistic movements of the day were conscious revolutionaries. Far from it. But they lived and breathed in an atmosphere in which a revolutionary socialist tendency possessed great moral and intellectual weight. The critical-minded culture built up from the last third of the nineteenth century--interpreted in the broadest sense to include, for example, the development of psychoanalysis--was the crucible in which were formed the artistic geniuses of the first decades of this century.

The artists may not have agreed with the Marxists about the contradictions of capitalism, but there was a general, instinctive acknowledgment by the most insightful intellectuals in Paris, Berlin, London, Vienna, Budapest and, of course, Moscow, that the existing society was on its way out and thought had to be given to the cultural problems of the future human organization. Anyone who doubts that this has relevance to the American film industry need only consider the following list of filmmakers--all of whom worked in Hollywood--who were born or raised in Germany, Austria and Hungary between 1885 and 1907: Erich von Stroheim, Michael Curtiz, Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, William Dieterle, Josef von Sternberg, Douglas Sirk, Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer, Max Ophuls, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger and Fred Zinneman.

Stalinism and the attack on socialist culture

One might say that the atmosphere in the great cultural centers in the 1920s was an intellectual preparation for a revolution which, tragically, did not take place. The primary responsibility for this lies with Stalinism, which delivered the greatest blows, physically and spiritually, to that accumulated critical-socialist culture. The nationalist, counterrevolutionary bureaucracy in the USSR did not merely exterminate by the hundreds of thousands the socialist intellectuals and workers in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, it shattered the confidence of the best minds and spirits around the world in the possibility of creating a society freed of exploitation and oppression. It corrupted or demoralized generations of intellectuals. Put another way: in 1925 or 1935, the thinking of a serious artist dissatisfied with capitalism would have naturally gravitated in the direction of socialism. Is that the case today? It is not, and Stalinism, which has dragged the words "communism" and "socialism" through the mud, is principally to blame.

The first condition of a genuine artistic renaissance then is some degree of clarity--or at least a break with the most obvious falsifications--as to how humanity got itself into its present predicament. The false identification of Stalinism and Marxism, for example, must be rejected by anyone serious about addressing the crisis of culture. Film, theater and fiction in particular are too close to social life for anyone involved in their creation to be able to afford avoiding this task. Hegel maintained that art and social life were not accidentally related, "rather we shall discover that only through the one we shall fully comprehend the other." Their "overlap," as he termed it, has an objective character which the greatest Marxists have never ignored. Art is thinking and feeling in images. If social science requires artistry, so too does the filmmaker or novelist require a degree of science. The artist of today, to put it bluntly, has the task, in addition to the training in his or her own specialty, of studying history, especially the history of the 1917 October Revolution and the struggle against its degeneration. These remarks of Andre Breton in 1935 take on the character of an inescapable imperative in our day: "Not only can literature not be studied outside the history of society and the history of literature; it also cannot be written, in each era, unless the writer reconciles two very different concrete facts: the history of society up to his time, and the history of literature up to his time."

Art and social understanding

This is not primarily a call for works of a historical or social character, although such works are undoubtedly needed. It is a broader and, at the same time, more practical issue. We simply maintain that the art of the next period--whether epic in dimension or at the level of the most intimate--if it is to be enduring, must be animated by a far greater degree of social and historical understanding. It will be called upon to be so by circumstances beyond the artists' control.

This is not a call for work of an explicitly political character, although such work too has its place. The conflict between man's conscious thought and his lyrical expression, as Breton phrased it, cannot be resolved so easily. The artist must above all be true to his or her inner self, as long as this is not shallowly interpreted as taking the line of least resistance. There should be no taboos. Every aspect of human life, social relations and psychology must be freshly explored--"the dizzying descent into ourselves" undertaken, as well as the examination of more objective social

processes. The aim is the creation of works which, in Breton's words again, "bring about a perfect balance between the inner and the outer; it is this balance that objectively confers authenticity upon them."

The struggle today for more authentic art and cinema, from the point of view of either substance or form, does not begin from zero. In the first instance, there is the great body of past achievements to build upon. And no doubt much of the recent formal innovation which has so often struck one as empty and cold will prove to be of use, when joined to a purposiveness. A world of materials, forms, techniques will open up to the artist gripped by the understanding that the activity of interpreting the world imaginatively is linked with the activity of changing it.

Creative authenticity has only been attained through devotion to artistic and historical truth. This seems to us to be the general orientation which filmmakers and artists need to adopt.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact