

Letters from WSWS readers on Elia Kazan and the Oscars

25 March 1999

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the excellent Internet site and, in particular, for the excellent article by David Walsh on Elia Kazan, "Filmmaker and Informer."

I'm wondering if you would have a list (speaking of lists) or know where I can find, say the Internet, a list of the notables at the Oscars who stood and applauded as opposed to those who sat and did not applaud when Kazan received his special Oscar award.

By the way, I also find it curious, and not a little ironic, that Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro gave Kazan the award... Interesting in that both appeared in *Guilty By Suspicion* --a film about a McCarthy era film director, De Niro, whose career was ruined because he refused to inform.... Scorsese also appeared briefly in the film as a director who rather than inform moved to Europe.

And here they are giving Kazan an award!

I suppose they have their reasons. Then again maybe I don't want to hear them.

In any event, thanks again for nothing less than an EXCELLENT site and for publishing an excellent, thought-provoking article by Mr. Walsh.

Keep up the great work!

TF

To the editor:

A fine column on Elia Kazan's Oscar night. There are numerous people who could have been considered for honorary or posthumous Oscars, artists who gave a large part of themselves in the creation of the early film industry in this country. Where are the special awards for artists like Thelma Todd, Clarence Muse, Boris Karloff, Louise Beavers? If the purpose of the award is to honor those whose contributions were overlooked in an earlier era, Hollywood wouldn't have had to look as far as awarding anything to Elia Kazan. It's a political bust for sure.

People were outraged at the Kazan award, and it is well many were. Those who dismiss this frustration with the patronizing buzzwords, "politically correct" are modeling their monumental ignorance. For a long time, we've gotten to hear about how the new "politically correct" is the new McCarthyism, but the craven attitude of many as Hollywood honors the artist as HUAC informer is the clearest indicator that McCarthyism is not dead, but merely sleeps.

MHP

To the editor:

David Walsh mentions the presence of Colin Powell [at the Oscars]. The Kazan Award was part of a greater theme of American nationalism and militarism that was being promoted to a huge national and international audience. Colin Powell was not just honored but was given the task of identifying *The Thin Red Line*, which had a decidedly anti-war content as Walsh has analyzed, with the more

patriotic Spielberg *Saving Private Ryan*. In addition, Spielberg is too big a personality in Hollywood not to have known that his film would be used at the awards to promote the still-potential Republican candidate Powell.

Also, the use of ex-Senator and astronaut John Glenn to present film clips on heroes was part of this theme. Although it included figures like Louis Pasteur, it had a definite nationalist flavor, including Audy Murphy.

It is not an abstract point of propaganda to point out, as the *World Socialist Web Site* does, that the growing social crisis requires capitalism to marshal all the machinery of its power. I think there is a direct connection between the Kazan award and the election campaign pamphlet just distributed in my union, the United Federation of Teachers, by the incumbent bureaucracy which stresses that some of the opposition candidates "hand out 'Fight For Communism!' leaflets." Although the UFT leadership has always been strongly anticommunist, red-baiting by associating an entire opposition, which is far from having a communist program, with the politics of some of its members is a McCarthy-type tactic that has not been used openly in some time.

What the Academy Awards indicate was not just a reflection of the increasing movement to the right of sections of the capitalist class but a declaration by an important section of it to be part of that movement. A closer investigation of the role of the Hollywood moguls now is probably in order.

HL

To David Walsh and editor,

I want to thank you for consistently intelligent and provocative film criticism. But more than that, your essays wed a sensitive appreciation of film aesthetics to sophisticated, engaged, and reasonably open-minded politics. How wonderful and rare this is!

As you know, in this country (USA) popular film criticism (as opposed to academic criticism, which has its own problems) tends to be wholly, or at least avowedly, apolitical. Nearly the only "political" film criticism I have seen is to be found in marginal and sectarian Leftist newsletters; this kind of criticism is typically blind to aesthetic issues and pretty simpl-minded when it comes to politics, too.

I appreciated your piece on the controversy surrounding Elia Kazan's being given a "lifetime achievement award" by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences on March 21. You are one of the few writers to point out that what Kazan's misdeed was--not just snitching on his friends but consciously (and with malice, aforethought) aiding the advancement and hegemony of an ideology and a system which has done major damage to our society--not to mention the American cinema.

The only trouble I had with your article was in its broader critique of the cultural politics of blacklisting and the uses of anticommunism for

the ruling class/bourgeois/reactionary elements. You seem to anthropomorphize class, suggesting that the power elites could visit revenge upon an individual and an ideology as one being. I think this is silly, as it suggests that only the powerful had any investment in anticommunism and those working class and poor folks who shared their prejudice were simply dupes. Anticommunism, as I understand it, was not strictly an elite phenomenon which was eventually integrated into the ideological programming of the American people. During the interwar years, as well as throughout World War II and afterwards, there existed a native working class anticommunist sensibility. The literature of the second Ku Klux Klan, among other things, testifies to this. One must have a very sophisticated understanding of the workings of hegemony and countersubversive ideology to explain how the Cold War consensus was reached. It wasn't strictly top-down as you seem to imply.

Now here's a contemporary example of the damage wrought by that consensus:

I would like to call to your attention an article in the online magazine Salon (www.salonmagazine.com) by Steve Erickson: <http://www.salonmagazine.com/media/eric/1999/03/17eric.html>. Erickson argues that Kazan does not deserve his lifetime achievement award. He asserts, as you do, that his films have been overpraised, and reminds us that his snitching before HUAC had enormous and odious consequences. To this extent I imagine we both agree with him.

In almost the same breath as he condemns Kazan, however, Mr. Erickson patronizes and belittles both the artistic achievements and the ideology of those Kazan helped to blacklist. Of the Hollywood Ten, he writes, they behaved with a "shrill indignation that was sanctimonious at best and hypocritical at worst, shrouding themselves in freedoms for which the ideology they believed had nothing but contempt." Later he refers to as "hapless Hollywood nitwits who got their heads lodged squarely up their asses searching for Stalinist paradise."

Here Erickson both reflects and contributes to the marginalization of Marxist thought in American political discourse, a process which continues unabated since the fall of the Soviet Union. He has domesticated Hollywood's Marxists as a pack of misguided but ultimately harmless children. Surely they were confused to the extent that they blinded themselves to the horrors of Stalinism. But many of those blacklisted had abandoned a hard-line, pro-Soviet outlook some years before; they were simply former members of the CP-USA who refused to be cooperatively contrite about their participation in that organization. Also, "the ideology they believed" was the official ideology of Bolshevism, not the cynical anti-ideology of Stalin--the former is compatible with ideals of freedom and democracy. And to call the Hollywood Communists nitwits is to deny the power of the contributions of Abraham Polonsky, Dalton Trumbo, and Cy Enfield. *Force of Evil* alone can refute this line of reasoning.

Anyway, it's interesting to me that even educated liberals and Leftists who sensibly condemn both Kazan and the Academy for honoring him, still feel the need to distance themselves from anything resembling a coherent Marxist ideology--or worse, feel the need to deny that people with such an ideology can make a contribution.

What do you make of this?

So thanks for the great writing. I appreciate it more than words can express!

JH

Middletown, Connecticut, USA

To the editor:

Hurray for Ed Harris and Nick Nolte. Neither applauded when Kazan was introduced, Nolte with his arms crossed, both looking grim. Quite a few remained seated, not applauding, but the Academy deliberately did a swooping shot of the audience, and panned the audience from the front so it was difficult to tell.

And three cheers for comic Chris Rock, who earlier in the show came out to present the award for sound editing and said, "And then there's this Kazan thing. I saw DeNiro in the back and Kazan had better watch out because DeNiro doesn't like rats." (This was obviously not in the script, and I doubt Rock knew DeNiro would be doing the presenting to Kazan.)

The whole thing went off very clumsily and self-consciously. All parties seemed ill at ease with the affair.

MJ

To the editor:

I agree with your evaluation of Oscar night and wished I hadn't wasted my time watching. You are correct when noting the quality of films that received awards. The entertainment was in poor taste to say the least. Thanks for your interesting and truthful message.

RB

Dear Editor and Mr. Walsh,

I have only recently discovered your web site and am enthralled by the content and the writing. Particularly interesting to me is the work of critic David Walsh. I'd like to comment on his essay on the academy awards.

I take issue with Mr. Walsh when he writes, "There is something pitiful and unseemly about individuals, even talented individuals, bursting into tears on receiving one of these awards." As a former aspiring actor, I know I wasn't alone in rehearsing an Academy Award acceptance speech over and over again. Besides having fun with the fantasy ("I'd like to thank the director, the cast and crew, etc.") I would find myself touched by the time I thanked my wife and family, touched to the point of tears. I was moved by Gwyneth Paltrow's speech and am frankly baffled by those who would criticize her reaction.

That said, I recognize that Mr. Walsh was making a larger point (don't you love letter writers who take one sentence of an article to point out flaws?) and I'd be remiss if I didn't also write how grateful I am for his essay on Elia Kazan receiving the lifetime achievement award which was educational, fair and superb in every sense.

Best,

CL

Santa Monica, California



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