

The limitations of Ed Harris's Pollock

David Walsh
31 March 2001

Pollock, directed by Ed Harris, screenplay by Barbara Turner and Susan Emshwiller, based on the book, Jackson Pollock: An American Saga, by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith

Pollock, directed by actor Ed Harris, treats the last 15 years of American painter Jackson Pollock's life, from his encounter with fellow painter Lee Krasner (whom he was to marry) in New York City in 1941 until his death in an automobile accident on Long Island in 1956 at the age of 44.

The film uses material from a number of sources, especially the biography, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith (1989).

Pollock begins in 1950. The artist is approached by a woman clutching a copy of *Life* magazine, which had done a spread on him, asking for an autograph. He looks off, anxious, wondering. The film goes back nine years in his life. Pollock is a struggling artist, cursing Picasso and living with his brother Sande and his wife. He is obviously a troubled soul, prone to bursts of violence, depression, drunkenness.

Pollock encounters Krasner. She is enthralled by his paintings. Over the course of a number of years she sacrifices some part of her own career to further his fortunes in the art world. She also provides him some degree of emotional stability. He meets legendary art patroness Peggy Guggenheim and in 1943 has his first one-man show, where he also encounters art critic Clement Greenberg, later to be his champion.

Krasner and Pollock move to Long Island, where she isolates him from old friends and he tries to stop drinking. Accidentally, while working on a canvas on his studio floor, he invents his famous drip technique (paint was allowed to fall from the brush or can on to the canvas) in 1947. The resulting works bring him great success, including the famous *Life* piece two years later. His good fortune, however, does nothing to resolve his personal difficulties. On the contrary, he is haunted by the sense that he's a fraud.

Five years later. Pollock's recent shows have not met with success. Greenberg has more or less deserted him. Pollock is drinking like a fish, having affairs. His relationship with Krasner is at the breaking-point. They scream insults at one another. When she is off in Italy, he takes up openly with his girlfriend. One night, particularly drunk, he drives his car, with his mistress and a friend of hers as passengers, off the road at high speed and dies in the crash.

Ed Harris spent years thinking about and preparing this film, apparently since he read the book by Naifeh and Smith soon after it came out. He took up painting in the early 1990s. He explains, "I've been painting and drawing off and on since I became committed to making this film. I had a little studio built so I'd have enough floor space to work on larger canvases." Indeed Harris is most convincing when he reproduces Pollock's drip technique.

The film has a certain air of seriousness about it. Harris's efforts, one feels, are genuine and sincere. He wanted to communicate something of Pollock's anguish and honesty, and perhaps something of his own, as an actor in the commercial film industry. Marcia Gay Harden is endearing as Lee Krasner, perhaps too endearing, but her performance is an honest one as well. *Pollock* is Harris's first effort at directing a film, after performing in nearly 50 over the past two decades, and he has accomplished the work

in an intelligent and straightforward manner.

The difficulty, however, is that film is so narrowly focused and so limited in its approach that the most essential truths about Pollock and his circumstances are permitted to escape. The script by Barbara Turner and Susan Emshwiller assembles a number of biographical details, without ever making profound sense of them. The artist's downward spiral is predictable and predictably presented. Pollock is tortured when we first encounter him, tortured throughout, and this quality is ascribed entirely to personal psychological causes.

Harris comments: "A desperate need for approval usually forces one into doing that which is recognizable.... Pollock's need for approval bordered on the psychopathic and yet his even deeper need to create art that had no hint of the lie about it, drove him to make art that had never been made before and was certainly fair game for ridicule and abuse."

This does not take us much closer to the specifics of Pollock's situation, and indeed the film's script is a bit of a template. Any number of apparently self-tormented painters, composers, writers and so on could be made to fit the general characterization Harris provides. We are still left with the question, what was Jackson Pollock's particular dilemma?

The "Problem of Pollock" and, more generally, the "Problem of Abstract Expressionism" and postwar American painting are enormous ones. There is a large body of literature on these issues, much of it confused or deliberately mystifying. At the outset, one should make clear that the fate of Pollock and his fellow painters was *directly* bound up with the most pressing and inescapable political problems of the mid-twentieth century: the growth of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and the Communist parties around the world, the character of Trotsky's opposition to Stalinism and the tragic fate of the socialist revolution in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the nature of American society as it emerged from World War II.

Left-wing politics

Jackson Pollock's father, LeRoy, had been a socialist and his son became one too. As Naifeh and Smith note, "From his first encounter with socialist ideas ... LeRoy responded to their call for fairness and equality." LeRoy Pollock supported socialist labor leaders such as Eugene V. Debs, the radical Industrial Workers of the World and, in 1917, "celebrated at the news that the workers of Russia had taken control of their government. Of his five sons, two would become active in the labor movement and one would join the Communist party. The other two would become artists" (p. 29).

Naifeh and Smith observe that the future painter was introduced at an early age to left-wing ideas, but that it was the city of Los Angeles in the late 1920s "that finally pushed Jackson into the turbulent world of radical politics." In 1929, after various confrontations at his high school, Pollock wrote his brothers, "The whole outfit think I am a rotten rebel from Russia" (pp. 132, 145).

After moving to New York in 1930, Pollock studied with the American regionalist Thomas Hart Benton (with whom his older brother, Charles, had also studied). The Mexican painters and muralists—José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros—impressed him from the early 1930s. Rivera had been in the Communist Party, but split with Stalinism

and joined the Trotskyists. Siqueiros was a loyal Stalinist and later took part in an assassination attempt against Trotsky. Many of Pollock's friends were in and around the Communist Party. In April 1936 he went to work in Siqueiros' studio in New York, where preparations for May Day were being made, and participated in the May 1 parade along with the float he had helped build.

By the late 1930s, Pablo Picasso, especially his "Guernica," and the surrealists—Joan Miró, Max Ernst and, above all, André Masson—became critically important for Pollock. Many leading surrealists came to the US and New York City in particular to escape fascism and war in Europe. Pollock participated in the International Surrealist Exhibition in 1942 held in New York, although he never considered himself a member of the movement.

The influence of Trotsky's ideas within New York intellectual circles was significant, although relatively few understood or cared to grasp their Marxist essence. The wretched character of Soviet "Socialist Realist" painting in particular impelled many into the camp of "anti-Stalinism." Lee Krasner was a sympathizer of Trotsky or the state capitalist deviation from Trotskyism, the group led by Max Shachtman, as were a number of the future abstract expressionists, including Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, as well as the three prominent art critics of the postwar period: Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Meyer Schapiro. With many, however, reeling under the blows of American democratic-imperialist propaganda and losing confidence, if they ever had it, in the revolutionary capacities of the working class, anti-Stalinism quickly transformed itself into simple anticommunism in the war and postwar years.

Treating the development of the abstract painters in the US as a purely internal affair of art history is absurd. As Trotsky said of the poet Mayakovsky, "Where could artistic harmony come from in these decades of catastrophe...?" Ironically, American painting emerged from provincialism and assimilated the most modern technique at a time of extraordinary political tragedy: the betrayal of the October Revolution, the rise of fascism and the threat of another world war. By the time the American painters could speak in mature tones, let's say, they found speaking itself an increasingly painful and even dread-laden prospect.

By the late 1940s, while the media in the US, driven by Cold War imperatives, celebrated the triumph of American painting and the shift of the art world's capital to New York, the painters themselves were horrified by many aspects of postwar American society.

Disappointment, disillusionment, despair—these moods came to predominate. Marxism, or some version of it, gave way to psychoanalysis and not Freudian psychoanalysis at that, but Jungian, with its reactionary "collective unconscious," mythologizing and universal archetypes. There took place, as one commentator put it, a "rush inward."

As Serge Guilbault suggested, in his useful but one-sided account, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983): "They [the painters] were sick of politics and therefore thought they were sick of history as well. By using primitive imagery and myths to cut themselves off from the historical reality of their own time, they hoped to protect themselves from the manipulation and disillusionment they had suffered previously... (p. 77)

"For them ... the political situation had become hopeless in its complexity and absurdity.... The avant-garde retained traces of political consciousness, but devoid of direction. The political content of their art had been emptied out by the use of myth. Pollock, Rothko, Gottlieb, [Barnett] Newman—the avant-garde painters who talked about their art, did not reject history, because it was there in all its hideous features, snapping at their throats. They did not reject the idea of some kind of action, of some reaction to the social situation. They did not avoid the problems of the age but transformed them into something else; they transformed history into nature. As Roland Barthes has put it, 'By moving from history to nature, myth gets rid of something. It does away with the

complexity of human actions and bestows upon them the simplicity of essences'" (p. 113).

(There is an entire school of Stalinist or semi-Stalinist commentators who like to blame Trotsky and Trotskyism for the evolution of the New York intellectuals, including that tedious snob, Clement Greenberg. Guilbault in his book at times succumbed to this tendency. This is nonsense. Trotsky opposed Stalinism, reactionary theories of "proletarian culture" and the monstrosity of "Socialist Realism" by insisting (along with André Breton) that true art, which "insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time ... is unable *not* to be revolutionary, *not* to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society." Trotsky argued that the highest task of art was to take part in the preparation of the social revolution, but that the artist could only advance that goal when he or she had assimilated its essence into his or her bones and marrow.)

Despair and technical maturation

It is worth repeating that in the case of the American abstract painters despair and a *considerable degree of technical maturation* arrived simultaneously. Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Rothko and others produced certain magnificent paintings. They appear as a rather heroic group, standing up for certain spiritual truths in the midst of conformist, McCarthyite, Cold War America. Although they were not entirely innocents. The State Department and various agencies of the US government began to make use of the New York painters' work, as a sign of the sort of work produced under "democratic" conditions versus the deadly efforts sanctioned by the "totalitarian" USSR, and none of them apparently objected.

In any event, the abstract expressionist effort was a doomed one. This found expression in the personal fates of a number of the painters. Pollock was not the only suicide or semi-suicide. Arshile Gorky had already hanged himself (1948) by the time of Pollock's death. Kline drank himself to death in 1962, David Smith, the sculptor, also died in an automobile accident, in 1965, and Rothko slashed his arms and bled to death in 1970.

Pollock always insisted, as did a number of the New York painters, that his work was not a product of accident, although it came from the unconscious, and that it was not about nothing. He commented in 1950:

"Modern art to me is nothing more than the expression of contemporary aims of the age that we're living in...

"My opinion is that new needs need new techniques. And the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making their statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture. Each age finds its own technique."

Can one speak of a subject in Pollock's paintings? The reference to the atom bomb is surely not accidental. Deep anxiety is clearly traceable in every work, as is the impossibility of representing in traditional (rational, articulate, legible) forms the state of things. Something has come to pass that goes beyond the painter's ability to reproduce it; this unreproducibility is itself a subject. Was this legitimate, or a surrender in the face of a difficult, but not incomprehensible and artistically ungraspable reality? Pollock, one senses, struggled with this issue. It seems doubtful that he was ever satisfied with the results he achieved.

Peter Fuller, in his essay "Jackson Pollock" in *Beyond the Crisis in Art* (1980), was perhaps too categorical as to Pollock's failure, but he made some valuable points: "Despite his considerable abilities, however, Pollock *never* developed a convincing historical vision in his own paintings. What prevented him from doing so was, at least in part, history itself: the hopes for a better world and for socialism which, albeit confusedly, he had held since adolescence, were shattered by World War Two. In 1940, he wrote to his brother. 'I have been going thru violent changes the past couple of years. God knows what will come of it all—it's pretty negative stuff so far.' Whatever else it may also have been, it was to

remain 'negative' stuff...

"I am certainly not trying to deny the psychological roots of Pollock's malaise; but I am insisting that ... it had a historical component. Pollock had recognized the inadequacies of Benton's conservative, regionalist world view, and also of the traditional socialist [or Stalinist] vision (epitomized for him by Siqueiros). But he was unable to find any new way of looking at, or imaginatively grasping, his world or himself" (p. 101).

The historical dimension of Pollock's tragedy, which has such rich artistic possibility, is entirely absent in Ed Harris's film. His Pollock is drawn largely from the psychoanalyst's notebook and perhaps the police blotter. Did the painter's ultimate fate have nothing to do with the larger issues of his day? It is unlikely that the filmmakers consciously concealed Pollock's political history and social aspirations. (Although the decision to begin the film in 1941, with the Krasner encounter, safely gets them beyond the hurdle of having to deal with his radical past.) It probably would not occur to them that such concerns might be the substance of a film. This is one of the difficulties, which needs to be addressed, that still weakens so much of our contemporary art work.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact