

Letters on the WSWs Arts Review

8 December 2001

The following is a selection of letters from readers on the Arts Review section of the World Socialist Web Site.

Dear editors,

I read you mostly because of the American decline in everything and the Bush administration in particular and my hatred of all things conservative. I had just seen *Dancer in the Dark* on video and hated it so much I never saw the ending. So I decided to look at your reviews. My reaction to past film matched exactly your reviewers'. So happy to see why I hated *Life is Beautiful* and loved *Where is My Friend's House?*, plus a list of must-see films. Thanks, thanks, thanks.

HW

28 November 2001

On the review of *Memento*, directed by Christopher Nolan:

The other day, a friend asked me, "Did you see *Memento*?" And before I could answer, he added, "Wasn't it great? One of the most unusual films I've ever seen!"

I said, "Really? Why?"

"Well, it's really cool. It's about a guy with no short-term memory. The film puts you inside his mind, so that you feel the things he feels. The story is told backward. An intellectual challenge."

"Sounds interesting," I said. "I guess I'll see it."

I did the following week. And aside from falling asleep halfway through it, after trying to figure out the puzzle, I gave up. It had no connection to the outside world. It was a hermetically sealed world devoid of humanity and feeling. Contrary to what my friend said, I did not feel anything—anything! The whole movie—and this was most irritating—was nothing more than an "aren't-I-oh-so-clever?"—"look-at-me-showing-off?"—"what-a-nihilist-I-am" exercise! Like so many other films put out not just by Hollywood, but by the so-called independents, *Memento* has nothing—absolutely nothing to say—about anything except the smugness and cynicism of its makers.

In the end, when the last scene played, all I could say was, "So what?"

Kudos to David Walsh for calling a spade a spade regarding this film. I think he's the only critic who hasn't been taken by it. Which says a great deal about the state of film criticism as well!

RR

Los Angeles

5 December 2001

On the intelligentsia:

Dear Mr. Walsh:

At the end of a recent film review, you said:

"Precisely that section of the population which considers itself the cleverest and brightest spot in the known universe. People, in other words, who understand nothing about their society or themselves. The truth is that it simply doesn't matter for the most part what they do. Their ideas are not interesting, their psychology is not interesting, their sexuality is not interesting, and their art is not interesting."

Yes, yes, yes. The situation is entirely similar among a layer of professional painters in New York City. After September 11 I spoke with a number of them. They are tedious fools. I walked into a dinner party of painters—the sort who have one-person shows in blue-chip galleries. They were discussing what actors would play them in a film. I asked about September 11 and was told that it had had no effect whatsoever on painters. They mocked the anguish of a fellow painter, not present, who had come up from the WTC subway to be greeted by an airplane engine on the morning of September 11. One painter began to tell me earnestly that there were 10,000 people in the art world and almost 300 million Americans ... I listened hopefully, and he said that the 300 million don't count as far as art goes. One person at the table was sad about this.

You wrote that artistic film was in danger of speaking only to itself. This is an accomplished fact now in the highly commercialized "Art World" of lower Manhattan. Worse yet, some painters are even proud of this. Sincerely,

SE

Boston

25 November 2001

On the review of *From Hell*, directed by the Hughes Brothers:

In addition to the points related to the flawed class analysis that your reviewer found in the Hughes Brothers film *From Hell*, it should be pointed out that the film is a shallow send-up of the very fine graphic work by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell. I got through maybe the first 20 minutes of the cinematic effort, and was able to endure no more due to the cheesy characterizations created by the cast, the usual gratuitous Hollywood sex and violence and the completely needless decision of the Hughes Brothers to make the detective Fred Abberline an opium addict. Surely the actor Johnny Depp

deserves the opportunity to create a characterization as complex as that of Abberline in Moore and Campbell's story.

It is a very telling comment on the state of the film industry in the United States that a film based upon what is *allegedly* a one-dimensional medium—the comic book—is unable to rise to the occasion when a damn storyboard and script comes ready-made to a group of filmmakers. The power of *From Hell* comes from the candor of Moore and Campbell, their willingness to admit that their story is their own interpretation of the bits and pieces of evidence surrounding the Ripper case. Beyond this, the ability of Moore and Campbell to imaginatively enter the world of the five women who were massacred by the Ripper was yards ahead of anything I saw on film that evening.

The work *From Hell* is far less pretentious than the film, and a worthwhile read for anyone who wishes to see a class analysis well integrated into an intriguing story. The cost of the bound collection of the separate comic units is \$35, a bit pricey for a comic book, but if you saw *From Hell* in a theatre with friends—and you actually sat through all of it—you've already been clipped. So you owe it to yourself to take a look at a work that is a worthy heir to the caricatures of William Hogarth.

MHP

New York City

21 November 2001

On "Federal agents visit 'anti-American' art exhibition in Houston":

This article is very disturbing if true. Can you give a source other than the WSWS for this information? If it's really true, I would like to know. I have a friend who disbelieves everything on this site, so I'd like to get another "reliable" source to prove it.

Thanks

KJ

Richmond, Virginia

28 November 2001

On "French academic slanders surrealism":

To the editor:

One has to suppose that if surrealism is still capable of inspiring the kind of hysterical attack which M. Jean Clair, the director of the Musee Picasso, chose to level against it last month in *Le Monde* ("Surrealism and the Demoralization of the West," November 21), then there still must be something alive and kicking in the legacy of this movement, something that won't settle quietly into the gray oblivion of academic art history. The director of the Musée Picasso—of all people! The fact that Picasso was closely associated with surrealism for two of the most important decades of his career doesn't seem to have any bearing on the views of this official guardian of the art work, who considers surrealism to be no better than intellectual terrorism of the left. This is about as appropriate as entrusting Courbet's paintings to a Jesuit or Rimbaud's poetry to a member of the National Front.

The substance of Clair's accusations against surrealism has

already been dealt with, but it is worth underscoring the tone of hysteria that pervades them. The fact that skyscrapers and airplanes figure in surrealist imagery—this somehow prefigures the terrorist attack of September 11! This is literalism well past the point of absurdity—not, let it be said, the poetic absurdity celebrated by the surrealists, but the cynical distortions that inquisitions typically resort to. It is hard to imagine anyone taking this nonsense seriously—before September 11, that is. Now, as the current mantra goes, "everything has changed," which is to say that people like Clair feel free to publicly promote prejudices that they've probably harbored privately for a long time.

And what is it about surrealism that provokes this animosity? Obviously its commitment to revolution. Never before or since has an artistic movement been more powerfully defined by its engagement in the struggle to change the world. Central to this was surrealism's adherence to Marxism, which Clair predictably distorts by equating it with Stalinism.

But what he finds even more distressing is the "strange indulgence" which the surrealists continue to enjoy, the fact that "even today they pass for paragons of an ideal liberty," associated as they are with sexual liberation, a spontaneous approach to art and the reconciling of dreams and reality, all of which only elicits the derision of this cultural bureaucrat. What is really under attack here is utopian vision, that the creation of images that evoke a better world, a fully human existence, is something that goes to the very heart of what art is about. Oscar Wilde once famously said that a map of the world without utopia in it is not worth looking at. But all M. Clair can see in the imaginary maps of surrealism is a blueprint for terrorism. He is right about one thing, though: surrealist art is still dangerous stuff, but not at all in the way he supposes.

FB

Toronto

6 December 2001



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