

Letters on recent films

20 February 2006

The following letters were sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to reviews of two recent US films, *Brokeback Mountain* and *The New World*.

On “*Brokeback Mountain*”

In reply to the recent letter on *Brokeback Mountain* (See, “Letters from our readers”), I fear that the letter writer’s suggestion that the movie ignored the solution to the protagonists’ dilemma—“get thee to San Francisco”—misses or misrepresents the whole significance of this film.

The WSWs reader quotes one sentence from the WSWs review which is somewhat ambiguous, that “the years between 1963 and 1983 saw many changes that would inevitably have worked upon the protagonists with consequences not envisioned by the filmmakers.”

I find it highly improbable that the filmmakers didn’t consider the social changes that took place between 1963 and 1983. They could not have been unaware of them, but the film is saying, even if implicitly, that these changes had little or no effect on the Ennises and Jacks of this world. This is one of the film’s strengths—that it sees the problem within a broader framework, and doesn’t simply remain on the level of stereotypes and conventional wisdom about the lives of gay men.

Ennis and Jack could not simply pick themselves up and start life anew in San Francisco. Even if there were no other obstacles, perhaps they didn’t want to! Moreover, there were countless others, in San Francisco itself as well as other urban centers, who either were unable to deal with the stigma that remained associated with their sexual orientation, or who didn’t see identity politics and the ghettoization of “gay life” as the answer to their problems.

The writer says that the “sexual liberation movement of the 1970s” (I assume including feminism) came about “as a result of the earlier gains of the working class.” The gay liberation movement and the middle class protest of which it was part certainly did follow the earlier struggles, but that doesn’t explain very much. These protest movements emerged in a period of the decay of the labor movement, growing disillusionment with the fight for fundamental social change, and a consequent turn inward, toward a kind of separatism and group identity, towards the cultivation of “individual” goals.

The middle class protest movements did achieve certain modest reforms, and socialists have an obligation to champion all demands for full democratic rights. At the same time, the protest movements took the blind alley of identity politics. Gay liberation became the vehicle through which certain relatively privileged layers of the middle class expressed themselves. Meanwhile, outside the “gay ghettos,” life continued very much as before.

Brokeback Mountain is certainly not a great film, and its campaign for the Academy Award perhaps inevitably stresses its weaker sides. It is a film of some importance, however, as the recent WSWs article on the current crop of Oscar nominees indicates. The furor over gay marriage, the continuing use of homophobia in political campaigns in many sections of the country, not to speak of the situation in the world at large—all of this shows that *Brokeback Mountain* is not some kind of period piece.

If the film makes some viewers consider the source of entrenched ignorance and prejudice, which takes many forms, it will have served a useful purpose. All the more so if it encourages serious thought about how

to eliminate the oppression and backwardness that is breeding homophobia and all forms of bigotry every single day—how to fight for a world in which the full liberation of humanity will bring with it the end of the age-old prejudices that are used as instruments of oppression.

PD

13 February 2006

On “*The New World’s terrible paradox*”

I viewed this film two weeks ago, and was severely disappointed. I found it to be visually very gratifying. The cinematography was, as expected, breathtakingly beautiful. However, the story itself left a bad taste in my mouth. Trying to come up with what the director was trying to convey, the things I could come up with were not very meaningful.

First of all, it seemed to me that Malick was fleshing out his philosophy that there is something inherently ‘good’, about nature, and primitive man in nature. And that is counterposed to the ‘white man’ or civilization, which is inherently ‘evil’ or corrupting. Other than that, however, he did not seem to me to be saying very much more than be grateful for what you have—or as the old rock ‘n roll song goes: “if you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.”

Yes, he paints John Smith as an adventurer, torn between idealism and careerism. But, in the first half of the film, Smith is an idealist, who cares very little if not at all for his career. When the film opens, he is in the bowels of the ship, waiting to be hanged as soon as they hit the shore. He falls in love, not only with the Indian princess, but also with their way of life and communing with nature. And, when he is returned to ‘civilization,’ we only find further reasons for him to abandon it. Yet, he not only stays, but he renounces his love, her way of life, and his avenue of escape. Why? His answer, as you mention, “where will we live...” seems to me to be very shallow. And, at the end, when he states that he may have “sailed past...” further complicates the reasons for his abandonment of his love for his career. When he returns to the Jamestown settlement, he is confronted with nothing but reasons for leaving the settlement and returning to the ‘naturals’. Why does he stay? Why does he renounce his love? Why is the King more dear to him? Why aren’t these questions explored?

More importantly, what questions does Malick explore? What does he reveal? A little about life in the 1600s perhaps. A little about the clash of civilizations. Perhaps something about the evils of colonialism, (though not very much). He seems to be interested in the ‘love story’, but, that is just the thread that weaves the story together. What is the story?

Personally (and I was not alone. When I saw the film, there were eight others in the theatre—two were snoring, two left, and I was yawning) I feel he wanted to make something visually enchanting—which he did—but, at the same time convey something meaningful without offending anyone. This, he failed to do. Characters who mouth platitudes of one sort or another and then proceed to act in a completely contrary manner convey nothing to the audience except perhaps some sort of existentialistic belief in the irrationality of humanity’s existence, which is banal, to say the least.

I adored *The Thin Red Line*, even though I felt it was philosophically very idealistic. If I watch *The New World* again, it will be with the audio off.

HR
Las Vegas, Nevada
10 February 2006

Once again, an extraordinary review! Would that all film commentators held themselves to such a high level of criticism! On the whole, I agreed with the review but I actually read a contemporary allegory in the film. The English settlers are a mixed lot, some of them genuinely looking to start a new life, others pure opportunist, others ignorant, others sadists taking pleasure in war and violence. For me, this situation mirrors the war in Iraq, with some soldiers genuinely believing they're there for good, others disillusioned and hardened, others callously destroying a (world) culture they neither know nor understand. (And I'm quite sure the US military makes a point of not telling soldiers that they are spreading depleted uranium on the place where civilization began, a place with sites older than anything in the United States, where Alexander the Great once tread, the place where one of the oldest known recorded stories, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, was written). Along these lines, the current US foreign (mis)adventures are merely the evolution of an older narrative of westerners invading and decimating another land (in *The New World*, Virginia). Malick's point, while not especially complex, is to be applauded.

What doesn't work in the film, and here I agree with your review, is the simple treatment of the natives and the settlers. People are, universally, both "good" and "evil," and this too was true for the Native Americans. (As you alluded to, Spielberg's *Munich* does a much better job at realistically portraying moral/ethical/practical human paradox and ambiguity). I sensed that Malick is not an especially deep thinker, nor one really willing to get beneath the surface of his films—hence his simple treatment of native peoples, portraying them as "good" and "child-like" people prone to being gullible, ignorant, and inferior to Europeans (the cinematic treatment of Africans and Asians encounters the same problem). This treatment, actually, is something of an insult to natives who had (and I'm counting Latin/South American indigenous natives in this as well) a culture and civilization equal to and in some aspects superior to European civilization. (According to some scholarship, Native Americans and Africans traded goods back and forth many years before Columbus; pyramid design, while slightly modified, is the same in Africa as it is in Latin/South America, suggesting transatlantic communications.)

The actress playing Pocahontas/Rebecca is indeed extraordinary and she has to overcompensate, unfortunately, for her director/writer's rather simple approach. One senses here that Malick is not only unsure of what to do with the character, but, in general, what to do with a female character. A feminist reading of Malick's works would prove disheartening indeed!

Would that Malick had read Edward Said's *Orientalism* or even *Culture and Imperialism* before making his lyrical if simple-minded film! Keep us the good work my fellow socialists!

JH
13 February 2006

P.S. I meant to mention it, but the use of Wagner music in the film referenced (maybe unintentionally) Werner Herzog's own *Nosferatu*, which too used that same Wagner piece (albeit within the context of something much more ambiguous). Would that Malick were Herzog!

On "Woody Allen directs *Match Point: No Dreiser*"

I have not yet seen *Match Point*, but (coincidentally?), I am reading Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* for the first time at the moment. Although the character of Clyde Griffiths seems unnaturally green and naive, even for one brought up in a narrow, religious household, I take into account the fact that the story is set in the 1920s, in an era that is almost impossibly hard to imagine concretely today, what with the fact that young people of our time seemingly are much more worldly than Clyde and his associates. I say seemingly, because some of this worldliness is

second- or third-hand, but the instant communication around the world brings things into their purview faster than they can assimilate them, giving them a somewhat more jaded outlook than their predecessors.

That is not to say that the realities of our times cannot suddenly fall on modern young people like a ton of bricks. They can. They do. And some of the experience today's youth have in greater abundance than Clyde Griffith and his 1920s' counterparts is not necessarily worth having. But the class divide that Dreiser depicts is on the whole recognizable. In our own time, because of that same instant communication and dissemination of anything one can imagine (and a few that one might not have imagined, even in one's wildest dreams), the pressures to get ahead and grab the "American dream" are not to be escaped without great difficulty. The message is pumped out of televisions, iPods, and the advertising of everything from cars to antidepressants—all guaranteed to make your life a dream.

So perhaps Woody Allen has reason to be depressed. After all, he has attained, in many respects, all of the wealth, fame and accolades our society has to offer and yet is not happy with where he's ended up. The trouble he got into for having an affair with, and then marrying, his adopted daughter no doubt was a cold-water wakeup call that "anything goes" was not one of the privileges of his position that would pass without censure even from the Hollywood elite. But one would think, on that account, that he would have something more important to say about cause and effect than he appears to have done with this film.

CZ
8 February 2006

On "Peter Jackson's *King Kong: A colossal triviality*"

Ah, the perpetual problem of pointless remakes. One thing I love about *King Kong* (the original, of course) is the fascinating character of the real director, Cooper, mirrored in his fictional counterpart. Of course you won't get that here. I'm writing just to quarrel with one point: I don't think the depiction of the natives as "vicious, unhesitating killers" was an unintentional oversight. It was one of many character changes Jackson did, some for better and some for worse. That we think the natives in the original should have lived in fear of the monster is part of our attachment to the original—it doesn't have to be so, and can be anything, to some extent, the writer and filmmaker dictate. I think Jackson making the natives bloodthirsty zombies was a deliberate change designed to make the story, um, scarier. Also, the race of the natives seems to have changed—they now look like South Pacific aborigines, and in the original they were black.

MB
7 February 2006



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