

Letters on art and culture

19 December 2006

The following is a selection of recent letters sent to the World Socialist Web Site on art and culture.

On "Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*: a painful experience"

Very well written article that sums it up beautifully. I totally agree that it was a "painful experience" to watch, being interested in the Maya myself. I would like to comment on the part of this article comparing the violence in *Apocalypto* to that of *The Departed* and *Kill Bill*. The difference, to me, is that in *Apocalypto* as viewers we have no reference point for the violence. We are not told or shown any aspects of the Maya civilization to be able to know *why* the violence exists and in what context it is happening. Whereas in *The Departed*, we know that it is about gangsters in Boston so we *know* there will be violence, and in *Kill Bill* we know that the main characters are trained killers. In *Apocalypto*, regardless of whether the viewer knows anything of the Maya civilization or not, we struggle to guess Mel Gibson's viewpoint to put the violence into context.

MD

15 December 2006

You write, "He [Mel Gibson] is obviously endowed with demonic energy." Oh please! David Walsh has now joined the ranks of the "self righteous" critics. The movie is excellent, although it's remarkable how contemporary obesity sneaks into cinematic period pieces (even the jaguar was chubby). As for the violence, if it's not repugnant, then it's not violence.

To me it seemed to be a restyled *Lord of the Flies*. Remember how the English boys who were chasing Ralph into the sea were "saved" by the crew of a naval destroyer, itself engaged in a relentless hunt for German subs? But here the "gone native" man rejects civilization in every form, and personally triumphs over evil. Classic Rousseau. Go see it.

LC

15 December 2006

On "Scorsese's *The Departed*: Stop and think"

Thanks for the review. After *Gangs of New York* I was hesitant to see anything more by Scorsese. It was repellant and a historical lie. I merely want to refer the author to Bertoldt Brecht, who wrote of the difference between bourgeois art and revolutionary art. In the former, the "heroes" may survive but the work, the "moral," itself is a downer. In the latter, the heroes, and others, may perish, but the work is uplifting. It is a useful distinction.

LO

5 December 2006

Thank you for the wonderful review! Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* was the last film I could bring myself to stomach, so poorly made and overwrought it was with cheap pathos and theatrics. That he can consistently get good actors to embarrass themselves

in his films is a testament to that devil called money if ever there were one! I've always found it curious how Scorsese (who we can say is at this point a few decades removed from the "neighborhood") constantly fixes his attention on the "lowlives" and "degenerates," with that bourgeois complacency which says, "We're better than they are, even if they amuse us." His condescension and thinly veiled contempt is all rather tired and obvious at this point.

Moreover, it is telling that Scorsese (like so many others in Hollywood) has so little to say about post-9/11 America. The gap between the haves and have-nots is approaching Depression-era levels, education costs make it unaffordable to all but those with wealth or a willingness to go into debt, the country sees the public paying closer attention to politics since the days of Vietnam (with Rumsfeld echoing McNamara), the US is engaged in a thoroughly illegal, imperialist war sending a nation (Iraq) back decades (to say nothing of the deaths on both sides which are close to 1 million in three years!), and we have a commander-in-chief who claims to have a direct line to God! Yet, none of this finds expression in Scorsese. Indeed.

He is the type of artist who through his own ignorance and silence keeps things just as they are! I don't care if the man never makes another film, so banal and vile are the things he has to say. Thanks for calling a spade a spade and keep up the great work!

JH

Kansas City, Missouri, US

6 December 2006

On "Obituary: Naquib Mahfouz, novelist of Egypt and humanity"

Naguib Mahfouz was a remarkable writer. The humanitarian and Westernized approach he started, if continued, would have changed the shape of Arab countries. In the past several years, many in those countries fell victim to fundamentalism. I believe the colonial powers and the neoconservatives of the USA are to a great extent responsible for it. Their record of supporting undemocratic and reactionary elements is for everybody to see.

SJ

India

15 December 2006

I was wondering why this site failed to mention the death of Naguib Mahfouz a few months ago. Better late than never, and a typically interesting analysis. I'd also like to get your take on this year's Nobel Literature Prize winner, Orhan Pamuk.

KK

16 December 2006

On "Borat: Whose pie and whose face?"

Nice review, thanks. Two things that might be interesting to you:

(1) There was heavy “stage managing” in the scene with the driving instructor. The camera keeps popping back and forth from the driver’s to passenger’s seat—impossible in a “live/direct” take. We would have seen the second camera. I think the original “live” take was probably when the camera is on the car’s hood. Then they reenacted embellished versions based on the (seemingly scant) usable material provoked in the first run. I think this method was used in much of the film and couldn’t trust that what I saw wasn’t manipulated to be more sensational.

(2) Here in France, the critics (following in fear their Anglophone counterparts I think) also praised and praised the film—but the public finds it pretty ordinary. See http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=109678.html

P.S., I don’t really find the speaking in tongues part funny. Pentacostal folks are usually very poor and these services are their only form of catharsis. That’s too bad, but for a Brit star to mock it is just the same old snobby past time of smirking at the naïve kitschy habits of the American poor.

TB

14 December 2006

On “What bebop meant to jazz history”

Greetings,

I just wanted to thank John Andrews (perhaps belatedly) for his excellent 1998 piece “What bebop meant to jazz history.” As a young jazz bassist studying in New York City, there is nothing that bothers me more than the notion that jazz is solely a “black” music. This is not to downplay the immense contribution and significance of black musicians, as well as the influence of then-predominantly black music like the blues on jazz music, only to argue that the music has so many different factors that make it what it is.

For example if one goes back and studies the “2nd line” style of march drumming from New Orleans that is generally acknowledged to be the backbone of modern jazz drumming, one will find that it holds the same clave (underlying rhythmic foundation) as Cuban music, which is a 3-2 clave. This in itself demonstrates that not only African polyrhythms, but also Caribbean ideas were at play at the inception of the music.

Historians commonly ignore white musicians like Lennie Tristano (who was good friends with Charlie Parker) or Lee Konitz who were developing and pushing the envelope of the music at that time as well. This is not to say that their contributions were “white” ones, which is a hideous and bogus claim—simply that musicians of many colors made contributions, and it wasn’t their race that defined them, but that layer of creative force that wanted, not to break from the tradition, but to expand on it to include modern classical harmony and open the rhythm up even wider. After all, Charlie Parker knew tons of Lester Young solos, and openly acknowledged his influence.

IJ

12 December 2006

On “Pianist Jay McShann, last of Kansas City’s jazz giants, dies at 90”

Great article about “Hootie.” We lived in Kansas City for 23 years and were (nearly) charter members of the Kansas City Jazz Ambassadors as well as the Kansas City Blues Society. We heard

Jay several times over those years, most recently about three years ago. We have the Haddix and Driggs book and just reread their chapter about Jay this morning.

AP

14 December 2006

On “Terry Zwigoff’s *Crumb*: Chronicle of a postwar American family”

I really like your article about *Crumb*, which I recently rewatched. I always struggled with R. Crumb as an artist and you really clarified that issue for me. I never wanted to condemn him because of his proclivity to write about sex or be honest about himself, but I was always bothered by his work. I think you’re right that he is self-indulgent and for that reason it’s hard to keep accepting his need to repeat the same themes over and over. I think if he had something more vital to say, I would have more patience for his themes of brutality and hostility.

Crumb himself said that Zwigoff was more interested in filming his brother Charles. Like Mark’s friend Mike in *American Movie*, the quiet sub-subject becomes the interesting person.

If you haven’t seen it, Zwigoff’s *Louie Bluie* is actually probably a more worthy and historically important film. His subject, Howard Armstrong, was full of joy and life—a very positive person!

AD

3 December 2006

On “Dave Van Ronk, folk and blues artist, dead at 65”

Thank you for your review of Dave Van Ronk’s life and musical ability. I was a fan of Dave and only was able see him perform live once in 1987. I also shared some of his political views.

LC

Apple Valley, California, US

11 December 2006



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