Film, history and socialism

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This is the text of a talk given by David Walsh, arts editor of the World Socialist Web Site*, to a meeting organized by graduate film students January 17 at York University in Toronto, Ontario. Also see "*Questions and answers at David Walsh's talk at York University in Toronto*."*

My purpose this evening is to address certain problems in cinema from the point of view of Marxism, that is to say, an outlook that considers art as an element of human social development. The contradictions and difficulties in filmmaking are necessarily bound up, in such a view, with the broad social and historical process.

Film is little more than a century old. It is an art form whose entire history is contained, for all intents and purposes, in the twentieth century, a century of convulsive and often tragic events, of global civil war, of gigantic and as yet unresolved social struggles.

If art in general is "the most complex...the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected" part of culture, as Trotsky suggested, then how could it have avoided receiving some very serious, even devastating blows in the course of the past hundred years?

And when one considers cinema in particular, which from the technological point of view is associated with the growth of modern industry, which mobilizes vast physical and human resources for its accomplishment, which created and depends upon a mass audience and which has been regarded as the most powerful medium of communication by regimes of every political stripe—I think one is safe in saying that the vicissitudes of cinema are inseparable from the political and social vicissitudes of the twentieth century. On that basis, I would argue that to have a theory of film history in its most general outlines, first of all, one must have a theory of the twentieth century.

We will return to that. In fact, it's a central theme of this talk.

The state of art in general and the state of the cinema in particular are of great concern to us. The socialist movement has great and noble goals: the elimination of exploitation and poverty, the establishment of genuine democracy and social equality, the creation of a classless culture and society, truly human for the first time.

How are such goals realized? In the first place, out of the objective contradictions of capitalism. We are not voluntarists, we base ourselves firmly on the logic of world economic development. The pre-conditions for a new society exist within the old, in this globalized, complex, highly developed system of production, which today is colliding so explosively against the boundaries of the nation-state system and the private ownership of humanity's vast industrial and technical resources. This is the source of the ever more tense and volatile international political situation, in which the American ruling elite has undertaken the mad and doomed project of bringing the entire world under its sway. As I say, for a Marxist, these objective facts and processes are decisive.

Nor, however, are we fatalists. A social revolution in the modern era depends upon the conscious democratic choice and activity of the overwhelming majority. No profound social transformation will occur accidentally or spontaneously.

A higher cultural and moral level of the population, a greater degree of self-awareness, solidarity, self-sacrifice—all of this is vital to the future progressive development of human society. We understand that the man and woman of the future will be created by transformed material conditions, we are not utopians, but the willingness to undertake such a transformation itself requires an expansion of consciousness.

We are very much concerned with the cultural development of the working population, that overwhelming proportion of humanity that earns a wage, including wide layers of what used to be considered the middle classes. A progressive social change on the order called for by the contradictions of contemporary society demands that a far greater proportion of the population be able to think clearly and independently about a variety of issues, to reject the lies and manipulations and pressure of the media and manufactured "public opinion," to exercise political and moral judgment in difficult circumstances—all of which involves a deepening of the understanding of the human condition in its manifold dimensions.

One of art's roles is to hold a mirror up so that the population can see itself without illusions, particularly so that it can see its weaknesses, its backwardness, even its crimes and inhumanity. What is a theme common to all significant literary and cinema works in the modern era? That indifference to human suffering is one of the greatest failings. A culture worth its name, first of all, strives to create a climate in which such indifference is considered odious and ignoble, reserved for the people at the top of society, government leaders and cabinet ministers, corporate directors, bankers, generals and police officials.

Art ought to tell even the most painful truths about people, about their social and personal relationships. The Russian revolutionary thinkers and writers, before 1917, often referred to Russia's awful poverty, "our backwardness," they would say. In North America, we have our own vexing problems to expose and overcome.

Culture is vital to the revolutionary process. The transformation of society is not the result simply of a political program or slogan, much less clever tactics; it comes about as the result of a massive cultural and moral awakening as well, which has its objective roots in the irreconcilable internal conflicts of the old society.

It is difficult to conceive of the October Revolution of 1917 without taking into account the role of Russian literature and democratic sentiment in the nineteenth century. The more advanced layers of the society were saturated with humane conceptions.

Consider Tolstoy. Not a socialist revolutionary, a pacifist, a believer that all would be right if society lived according to the principles of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. But an enemy of cruelty and oppression. In his late, powerful novel *Resurrection*, his protagonist has bitter experiences with the judicial system. Considering the various prisoners he has come across, Tolstoy writes, he "clearly saw that all these people were arrested, locked up, exiled, not really because they transgressed against justice or behaved unlawfully, but only because they were an obstacle hindering the officials and the rich from enjoying the property they had taken away from the people.... This explanation seemed very simple and clear...but its very simplicity and clearness made him hesitate to accept it. Was it possible that so complicated a phenomenon could have so simple and terrible an explanation? Was it possible that all these words about justice, law, religion, and God, and so on, were mere words, hiding the coarsest

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cupidity and cruelty?"

Do we have at present a culture, including a film culture, that champions such sentiments? Everyone here knows the answer to that. Our film and popular culture generally tends, on the contrary, to revel in violence, to boast of its callousness and indifference to others. To paint human beings in the blackest colors, and to wallow in the process, is considered the "radical" viewpoint. This is getting to the "dark heart of things." Brutality and four-letter words represent the unadorned truth. The overall message is: this is what people are like, we're not going to kid ourselves any more. The violence in Tarantino, Scorsese, Gibson has reached the level of the pathological. Something is terribly wrong with this social layer.

Our attitude toward contemporary film work is very critical. We write about this a great deal on the *World Socialist Web Site*, I don't intend to go into detail here. Much of today's filmmaking is very poor—bombastic, trivial or narcissistic, sometimes all three at once. For the most part, it neither enlightens, moves nor delights. And not only commercial filmmaking. American (and Canadian) "independent" cinema is very weak, by and large, amorphous, self-indulgent. European art cinema is in the doldrums. There are honest and well-meaning individuals in Europe whose work I think is overvalued and undercriticized at present, precisely because they work in such a vacuum. Italian and Japanese cinema, two of the pillars of postwar culture, are in very sad shape. There are indications of a global change, but they remain fitful.

The case could be made that the decade of the 1990s as a whole was the weakest in cinema history, taking the 1910s as the first decade in which feature production took hold. In the US, that was the era of the first film stars, Hollywood's replacement of the East Coast as the center of the film industry, D.W. Griffith's remarkable works, Chaplin's first efforts, Mack Sennett's Keystone Cops and the establishment of studios. One of the first epics, Italy's *Cabiria*, a three-hour film, was made in 1914.

In the 1920s, of course, the silent film reached its high point, in American, Soviet, German and other films—we think of Eisenstein, Chaplin, Murnau, Lang, Buster Keaton, Dreyer, Erich von Stroheim and countless others. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Nanook of the North, Nosferatu, Greed, Battleship Potemkin, Napoleon, Metropolis, The General, The Passion of Joan of Arc, The Man With a Movie Camera* are a few of the notable works.

The 1930s brought the full-scale arrival of the sound film, the flowering of classic Hollywood cinema, the arrival of the German and Jewish refugees en masse in the US, the strong work of the French poetic realists, including Jean Vigo. A remarkable cast of characters inhabited Hollywood from the Marx Brothers, to James Cagney, Greta Garbo and Jean Harlow. *M, Scarface* and *Dracula* were released in the same year. Frank Capra's populist efforts arrived, Alfred Hitchcock became an internationally known name. Chaplin's *Modern Times*, Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* came out.

The next decade we identify with *Citizen Kane*, Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and the best of the wartime films; *The Maltese Falcon* and, later, *film noir*, as in *Double Indemnity*, Ulmer's *Detour*, Tourneur's*Out of the Past*; the first Technicolor films. In Italy, Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* and then the full blast of neo-realism, Roberto Rossellini's *Open City*, Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* and many others. *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *They Were Expendable* indicated a critical attitude toward the official patriotic versions of things. Also from John Ford, his great Westerns.

In the 1950s, despite McCarthyism, Hollywood is not exhausted—Hawks, Ford and Hitchcock had some of their best films still in them; also *Sunset Boulevard*, Brando in *On the Waterfront* and "adult Westerns" such as *Shane* and *High Noon*. Japanese cinema makes its mark, with a number of giants: Kurosawa's *Rashomon* is released in 1950. In India, the films of Satyajit Ray; in Sweden, Ingmar Bergman; in France, the birth of the New Wave. Toward the end of the 1950s, a series of darker American films, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1957) and *Imitation of Life* (1959), Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), Vincente Minnelli's *Some Came Running* (1959) and Otto Preminger's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958).

The 1960s brings Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Antonioni's *L'Avventura*. The best films of Godard and Pasolini. Kurosawa and Bergman continue to be prominent. There is certainly a definite decline in Hollywood. John Cassavetes' first films. Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The end of the restrictive codes in Hollywood. The British neo-realist films; Joseph Losey and Dirk Bogarde combine for some interesting efforts; Lindsay Anderson's *If* ... Also, the Brazilian new cinema and Luis Buñuel's sophisticated surrealist efforts.

In the 1970s, in the US: Coppola's *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*; *Chinatown* and *Five Easy Pieces*, a series of remarkable films by Robert Altman, *The Deer Hunter*, Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, Scorsese's *Mean Streets.* The Australian New Wave emerges. Above all, in the 1970s, the new German cinema, including Herzog, Wenders, Schlöndorff—and within that, above all, Fassbinder's films from 1971 to 1975, from *Beware of a Holy Whore* to *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*.

The disaster surrounding *Heaven's Gate* in 1980-1981 helped sound the death-knell for the American independent cinema of the time. Kubrick makes interesting films in the 1980s, but this is a bleak period overall for US filmmaking. In France, there is Tavernier, Pialat and Rohmer; Godard is barely alive artistically, and Fassbinder lives only a part of the decade. Bresson and Tarkovsky make their last films. In Taiwan in the 1980s, there is an eruption in cinema, after decades of anti-communist dictatorial rule; in Iran as well, after the fall of the Shah. China comes on to the scene also. These last three developments prove to be virtually the only ones that extend into the 1990s.

Of course, I'm speaking very generally, and there is an obvious element of subjective opinion in this, but I think a case could be made that the years 1995-2005 were the weakest in cinema history.

Let me make a few points about this. First, there is not a hint of nostalgia in this. Both the Hollywood and European art cinemas had serious limitations. I don't wish to idealize, either. Briefly, in my opinion, filmmaking's greatest days lie ahead. In any case, as long as cinema remains a business under capitalism, it will never reach its potential.

Here it is necessary, as elsewhere, to disagree with so much of film theory. This is not the fault of the individuals involved; rather, it's the result of historical traumas that knocked the confidence in an alternative to capitalism out of so much of the intelligentsia in the latter portions of the twentieth century. For example, Jean Mitry, in his interesting and monumental work, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema*, in the first section entitled "Preliminaries," writes: "The production of films entails such resources that no fortune would suffice were only the consideration of art to be taken into account. It is only the commercial aspect which can ensure the continuation of production and, as a consequence, any possible progress, whether it be technical or artistic...." And later, driving home the point, "To repeat: one does not make a film to make a film, one does it to *make money*."

He is not criticizing these facts—these are his starting-point. Such comments should not arouse indignation perhaps so much as a sorrowful shake of the head. As I say, behind them lie a great many political difficulties—in particular, the emergence of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, its historic crimes, which did so much to discredit socialism in the eyes of millions, the subsequent betrayals and defeats of the working class and the resulting decline in the influence of socialism and Marxism. Mitry's common-sense language represents an example of what Trotsky called "the worship of the accomplished fact." For cinema to be only conceivable as *profit-making* cinema, at the mercy today of hedge fund managers and global speculators, would be for me a profoundly dispiriting

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notion.

In any event, we should have no nostalgia for any type of "golden age"! That doesn't help anyone and it would be mistaken.

Moreover, I don't suggest that the 1990s or perhaps the 1995-2005 period represented a low point to discourage anyone or to paint a universally bleak picture. Not at all. Those who simply find modern life nightmarish and unbearable will never do anything but hide under the covers. If the present is uniformly detestable, where are we to find the possibilities for a future, alternative culture? As we've argued before, the light of human genius, including human artistic genius, has not suddenly dimmed. One only has to consider the strides that have been made in so many fields, particularly scientific, medical and technical.

Over the last half-century, humanity has been thrown back, in our view, in the areas of politics and art, especially film, drama and literature, where the issue of an understanding of historical laws and social organization plays so large a part. All serious art in the modern era, in our view, contains an element of protest against the conditions of life, whether that protest is lyrical or epic. All criticism of social life gravitates toward Marxism, the current that offers the most comprehensive and unrelenting critique of the existing social order. A decline in the influence of Marxism, as the result primarily of Stalinism and the endless official barrage of anti-communism, produces a decline in critical thought and art work.

The present problems are a historical product. It is not accidental that the 1990s also witnessed, in the US at least and probably worldwide, the lowest level of social protest and strike activity in a century or more. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 provided the ruling elites with a certain breathing space, exploited to the full, within which to roll back social programs and attack living standards, launch neo-colonial wars, stultify the population with propaganda about the "end of history," the ultimate triumph of free enterprise, the miracle of the market, and so forth.

Cultural life, too, paid a price for this ignorant chatter. We were promised an era of peace and prosperity. Instead, we see unending war, which threatens to engulf the globe, international instability and a chasm of immense proportions that has opened up between the handful of super-wealthy and the rest of the earth's inhabitants. This reality is sinking into the consciousness of great numbers of people. Reaction has its limits, and the present reaction is rapidly reaching its limit. A worldwide radicalization is in the offing.

So, our present cultural and cinema malaise is a product of definite historical and social circumstances. With the end of those circumstances, a new cultural atmosphere will emerge. But we are far from suggesting that anyone should wait around with folded arms. No, it's our responsibility to do whatever we can to prepare the groundwork for a different state of artistic affairs.

I would like to discuss somewhat more concretely that historical process, in particular as it relates to American filmmaking, to Hollywood, in short. I think this is reasonable because the American film industry has had at its disposal the greatest technical and financial resources, and represented, from its earliest days, essentially an international undertaking. Without flattering anyone's national sensibilities, it is worth noting that the first legitimate film star, the first performer to be identified on screen and in film advertising was Florence Lawrence, the "Biograph Girl," around 1910, born in Hamilton, Ontario; the first superstar, "America's Sweetheart," Mary Pickford, was born on University Avenue near Gerrard Street in downtown Toronto; and one of the first organizers of comic mayhem, Mack Sennett, was born in Quebec's Eastern Townships.

"Hollywood" is less a spot on the map than an ideological, cultural and commercial nexus. Thomas Jefferson, in the wake of the French Revolution, with its universal significance, declared that every man had two countries, "his own and France." One might say that filmgoers in every country have two film industries, for better or worse, their own and "Hollywood."

Another objection arises. Hasn't "Hollywood" been a swear word, an epithet for leftists since at least the 1930s, the epitome of manipulative, conformist kitsch, a relentless fount of middle class ideology, and so forth? Brecht wrote his famous poem, entitled "Hollywood," during his exile there: "Every day, to earn my daily bread / I go to the market where lies are bought / Hopefully / I take my place among the sellers."

Hollywood is, to say the least, a contradictory phenomenon. As Marxists, we have least of all any reason to idealize it. However, a little perspective is required. Large-scale narrative filmmaking emerged in the form of privately owned, competing enterprises. How could it have been otherwise? Filmmaking, which is itself dependent on a series of scientific and technical innovations, was born with modern industry. The stamp of capitalism, private property and bourgeois ideology is obviously there in cinema from the beginning, with all the falseness, dishonesty, sentimentality and cheap appeals that the defense of this system inevitably entails.

However, is the film industry now or has it ever been *merely* a giant black hole that sucks in and retains every ray of light? Has it been nothing but a machine for the propagation of falsehoods? I would say that that would be a very foolish, blockheaded conclusion. After all, filmmaking depends on an audience, not made up of fools. In a certain sense, to sell their product, to make a deep impression on an audience, the studios were obliged to call upon the integrity and conscientiousness and skill of a considerable number of talented human beings, in some cases probably, great artists.

Marxists argue that the evolution of art is determined by the evolution of the world. Did Hollywood cinema in its heyday tell us something about life in the US? Is there an objectively truthful element, disregarding for the moment the inevitably limited character of the representation, in *Little Caesar* or *Bringing Up Baby* or *High Sierra*? Do we learn something about human beings, about how they live together, about their psychology and behavior? Or is it mere propaganda? I think the answer is clear. The films endure because of their truthful elements, not their historically determined limitations.

Every cultural phenomenon has a dual character. It represents both an objective advance, a deepening of humanity's understanding of the external world and its own activities. A serious art work is not simply one individual's opinion or subjective "narrative"; it allows something essential about life to emerge. It has objective validity.

On the other hand, art is not created by free-floating atoms but by social creatures, the product of specific environments and historical conditions, which, in the end, are the conditions of class society. The artists themselves belong to certain social layers and inherit the prejudices and limitations of those social layers.

Hollywood, from this point of view, is an extreme example of the double character of culture. Its artistic life took shape within this hothouse atmosphere of capitalist competition and the drive for profit. To become indignant about that fact misses the point, in my opinion.

Hollywood filmmaking needs to be treated objectively. It generated extraordinary advances in story telling addressed to a mass audience, within very definite objective limitations, sometimes crippling limitations. We would argue that, in the end, the radical implications of filmmaking, its truth-telling abilities, proved to be incompatible with the profit system. American capitalism in the 1930s, despite its terrible economic condition, still had great reserves. In that sense, the New Deal and the flowering of Hollywood cinema exist on the same historic plane.

In the postwar period, America became the dominant capitalist power, taking into itself all the contradictions of the world system, and proved unable to coexist with an honest and critical cinema. Thus, the McCarthyite witch-hunts, the blacklist, the illegalization of anti-capitalist

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views or serious criticism in the cinema. Criticism to the bone, criticism of private property and American global ambitions, and the criminality of the ruling elite, became impermissible. But even then, in the late 1940s and early to mid-1950s, films that obviously opposed McCarthyism appeared—*High Noon*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Johnny Guitar*, perhaps Allan Dwan's *Silver Lode* and others. It's an intensely complex process.

Why has there been such a terrible falling off in American cinema? I've suggested some elements of the explanation, but I would like to make that more specific, if only briefly. Again, the present cinema is not simply a nightmare, nor is television or popular music. We're not beginning from zero; the events of the past century have not occurred for nothing.

I don't believe, however, that any objective comparison of films from the period 1930-1955, let's say, and the past 15 years or so would work to the advantage of the latter, in terms of texture, depth, seriousness, even social insight.

This is clearly not a technical problem. Cinema has made great strides. No doubt the freshness of the medium made a difference in those earlier years, but color film, video, digital technologies, the Internet, are relatively recent innovations. Why has the content of films, that living complex of moods and ideas, deteriorated and become so unenlightening, so uninspiring, so generally trivial?

Goethe writes that "Literature deteriorates only to the extent that people deteriorate." How do we explain the deterioration in those making American cinema?

Jean Mitry says, "It is indisputable that the photographic image is always the consequence of a certain interpretation." If this is so, and undoubtedly it is, then the question becomes: why have the interpretations weakened? What has become of those doing the interpretations? Why are they seeing the world less deeply, less richly, less evocatively?

Another approach might be: under what historical and intellectual conditions do images become more dense, more complicated, more textured, more highly charged with meaning? Is this something that can happen by accident? Does the filmmaker simply stumble on important images and truths? Does the result of his or her efforts have something to do with the general social situation?

To examine this fully in the context of Hollywood would require a lengthy investigation of what gave rise to the film industry, which is far beyond this discussion.

I will argue for this: that what was best in the American film industry emerged in large measure out of world culture and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, culture and politics in which the socialist labor movement was a prominent element.

In an overview of the San Francisco film festival in 1996, I wrote the following: "The critical-minded culture built up from the last third of the nineteenth century...was the crucible in which were formed the artistic geniuses of the first decades of this century.

"The artists may not have agreed with the Marxists about the contradictions of capitalism, but there was a general, instinctive acknowledgment by the most insightful intellectuals in Paris, Berlin, London, Vienna, Budapest and, of course, Moscow, that the existing society was on its way out and thought had to be given to the cultural problems of the future human organization. Anyone who doubts that this has relevance to the American film industry need only consider the following list of filmmakers—all of whom worked in Hollywood—who were born or raised in Germany, Austria or Hungary between 1885 and 1907: Erich von Stroheim, Michael Curtiz, Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, William Dieterle, Josef von Sternberg, Douglas Sirk, Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer, Max Ophuls, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger and Fred Zinnemann." Not an insignificant group.

This is by no means simply a question of left-wing filmmakers or writers, but since that history has been so buried in the official version of Hollywood's history, it's probably best to make some reference to their existence. Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner in *Radical Hollywood* and Brian Neve in *Film and Politics in America*, among others, have documented some of this usefully.

The Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression had a shattering impact on the American population, as elsewhere, including artists and intellectuals. All the myths and claims about the free enterprise system were called into question virtually overnight. The mass suffering made "business" and "banking" and "Capitalism" itself into dirty words for millions. Under those conditions, the American Communist Party, founded in 1919 in the wake of the Russian Revolution, gained a great following, including within the film industry.

Tragically, by the mid-1930s this had become a thoroughly Stalinized outfit, run by scoundrels. The American CP, one of the most slavish in the world toward the Kremlin bureaucracy, had swung around to supporting Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, a betrayal with long-lasting consequences. The crimes of the American Stalinist leadership, including participation in the attempts to assassinate Trotsky, are legion. However, thousands of honest people joined the CP, mistakenly believing that it stood in the tradition of the Russian Revolution and fought for a socialist transformation of the US.

Its influence was widespread. Much of this history has been hushed up, in many cases by the repentant individuals themselves. How many Americans would be shocked to learn that many of their favorite film or television stars supported or belonged to a "communist" party, and that many of their favorite films were written or directed by "communists" or socialists?

For example, Buhle and Wagner write that, according to FBI reports, which probably exaggerated but did not make things up entirely, "Lucille Ball, Katharine Hepburn, Olivia de Havilland, Rita Hayworth, Humphrey Bogart, Danny Kaye, Fredric March, Bette Davis, Lloyd Bridges, John Garfield, Anne Revere, Larry Parks, some of Hollywood's highest-paid writers, and for that matter the wives of March and Gene Kelly along with Gregory Peck's fiancée [were] all in or close to the party." Buhle and Wagner later include Franchot Tone, then married to Joan Crawford, Jose Ferrer and apparently Ronald Reagan, as among those in or around the CP periphery. One could add Sterling Hayden, who turned informer later on, then regretted it, Sylvia Sidney, Shelley Winters, Lauren Bacall, and many, many others. Melvyn Douglas and Frank Sinatra were also named by an FBI informant, along with Paul Muni, born in Ukraine and a veteran of Yiddish theater in New York, whose career was wrecked by the blacklist.

Among the screenwriters, the names are too numerous to mention. They include the writers or co-writers of *Holiday*, *The Awful Truth*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *The Naked City*, *A Guy Named Joe*, *Casablanca*, *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, *High Noon*, *A Place in the Sun*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *The Public Enemy*, *She Done Him Wrong*, *The Philadelphia Story* and so on, along with literary figures and occasional screenwriters such as Dorothy Parker, Lillian Hellman, Dashiell Hammett, Clifford Odets.

Directors in and around the Communist Party included Abraham Polonsky, Nicholas Ray, Joseph Losey, Elia Kazan, Robert Rossen, Jules Dassin, John Berry, Martin Ritt, Edward Dmytryk. As I say, the list is extensive. One should not forget Chaplin himself, a prominent "friend of the Soviet Union," who traveled in left circles.

There were independent figures of the left, socialists like Romanian-born Edward G. Robinson, who was a friend of Diego Rivera, the revolutionary Mexican artist, and held a private conversation with Trotsky in Mexico in 1938; James Cagney, who was red-baited as early as 1934; directors John Huston and Orson Welles; two of the greatest cinematographers of all time, Gregg Toland and James Wong Howe, and many others. No serious treatment of the classic American cinema can avoid the fact that opposition to capitalism animated a considerable

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portion of those writing, directing, performing and filming some of its most interesting films.

I want to point to a few remarkable features of the 1930s' film industry in the US, which I hope are suggestive and will serve to illustrate more general trends.

The "hardboiled" social dramas produced at Warner Brothers in the 1930s are certainly a fascinating subject. A number of reasons are offered for the studio's penchant for social criticism, including the political views of Jack Warner in the early 1930s, when he was one of the few studio executives who championed Roosevelt, as well as the studio's relative independence from the banks. In any event, from *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* in 1931, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* in 1932 and *Wild Boys of the Road* in 1933 to Raoul Walsh's *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), *They Drive By Night* (1940) and *High Sierra* (1941) and Michael Curtiz's *The Sea Wolf* (also 1941), Warner Brothers presented a series of films, although often sensational and simplistic, that provided some picture of American society's difficulties, its seamy, disordered and sometimes poverty-stricken side.

Left-wing writers, directors and actors had a good deal to do with this. *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy*, for example, were two of the definitive gangster films of the decade. The screenplay for *Little Caesar* was written by Communist Party member Francis Faragoh and starred Edward G. Robinson; James Cagney starred in *The Public Enemy*, which was co-written by John Bright, another party member. Robert Rossen, also in the CP, wrote *The Roaring Twenties*, with Cagney and Bogart, and *The Sea Wolf*, which featured Robinson and John Garfield.

Black Fury, released in 1935, is a film worth noting. Directed by Michael Curtiz and featuring Paul Muni, it recounts the story of an immigrant coal miner caught in the crossfire between crooked union leaders, Machiavellian coal operators and brutal strike-breakers. Its ultimate message is confused to say the least, but the film's sympathy for the miners and hostility to the forces of law and order are clear.

A review from the *New York Times* in 1935 makes interesting reading. It begins: "Hollywood, with all its taboos and commercial inhibitions, makes a trenchant contribution to the sociological drama in 'Black Fury,' which arrived at the Strand Theatre yesterday. Magnificently performed by Paul Muni, it comes up taut against the censorial safety belts and tells a stirring tale of industrial war in the coal fields.... [W]hen we realize that 'Black Fury' was regarded by the State Censor Board as an inflammatory social document and that it has been banned in several sectors, we ought to understand that Warner Brothers exhibited almost a reckless air of courage in producing the picture at all."

Black Fury was proscribed in several states due to its depiction of the beating death of a miner by company thugs. The fictional murder was based on an actual incident in Imperial, Pennsylvania, in 1929, when a miner was beaten to death by the coal and iron police.

With all its peculiarities, the film, like many of those turned out at Warner Brothers, is forcefully done. And these things don't come out of the blue. The personalities, histories and thinking of those involved collectively generate the intensity of the work. Pick a favorite film from the 1930s or 1940s, check into the background of the director, writer, lead actors, cinematographer, composer, art director—in many cases, you will be astonished. A world of culture and often politics lies behind their efforts.

Take another film by Curtiz, *Casablanca*, not his finest, in my opinion, but certainly memorable. First of all, there is the director himself about whom I will say a few words in a moment. Then there's Bogart, a man of the left; Ingrid Bergman from Sweden, with her refinement and artistry; Paul Henreid, born in Trieste, then part of Austria-Hungary, and later blacklisted in the 1950s; Claude Rains, one of the greatest figures of the British stage in the 1920s, taught by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the founder of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, and who went on to teach John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier; Peter Lorre, a Hungarian Jew and refugee from Germany, a former member of Brecht's acting troupe, who played Gayly Gay in Brecht's *A Man's a Man* in Berlin; co-writer, Howard Koch, who was in the Communist Party; and composer Max Steiner, who had studied with Gustav Mahler, written for the theater and emigrated to the US along with Erich Wolfgang Korngold and numerous other composers.

A few years ago I conducted this experiment on *A Canterbury Tale*, "an odd and vaguely unsettling film directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, released in 1944. The film, whose title echoes Chaucer, is an exploration of 'Englishness,' made under wartime conditions and for patriotic purposes."

I discovered this about the filmmakers, aside from Powell: "The co-director of *A Canterbury Tale*, Emeric Pressburger, was born Imre József Pressburger in 1902 in Miskolc, Hungary (then Austria-Hungary). According to a biographer, 'Educated at the Universities of Prague and Stuttgart, he worked as a journalist in Hungary and Germany and an author and scriptwriter in Berlin and Paris. He was a Hungarian Jew, chased around Europe (he worked on films for UFA in Berlin and in Paris) before World War II, who finally found sanctuary in London.'

"Cinematographer Erwin Hillier, born in 1911 to a German-English family, studied art in Berlin in the late 1920s. The famous director F. W. Murnau was so impressed by Hillier's paintings that he asked him to work on *Tabu*. Instead Hillier ended up working for Fritz Lang on *M*.

"Born in 1886 in Germany, production designer Alfred Junge began working in silent films in 1923. By the time of *A Canterbury Tale* he had worked with Alexander Korda, Marcel Pagnol, King Vidor, Carol Reed and Alfred Hitchcock as production and art designer.

"The composer of the film's score, Allan Gray, was born Josef Zmigrod in Tarnów, Poland (then Austria-Hungary) in 1902. He studied under the pioneering modernist Arnold Schönberg. A biographer notes, 'To pay for his tuition he composed popular, jazz-influenced tunes for cabaret acts in Berlin. Josef took his pseudonym from Oscar Wilde's narcissistic hero, Dorian Gray.'

"The individual in charge of visual effects, W. Percy Day, had worked on Abel Gance's celebrated *Napoleon* (1927)."

And I asked: "Is it any wonder that today's films often appear pale and weak by comparison?"

Curtiz, director of *Black Fury* and *Casablanca*, offers an instructive example. Born Mihály Kertesz, "in a well-to-do Jewish family in Budapest," according to a biographical account in the *New York Times*, "he ran away from home at age 17 to join a circus, then trained for an acting career at the Royal Academy for Theater and Art. He worked as a leading man at the Hungarian Theatre before directing stage plays and then films." In 1919, a socialist republic was declared in Hungary, which was drowned in blood by the forces of counterrevolution only a few months later. The *Times* account goes on, "When the Hungarian film industry was nationalized by the new communist government in 1919, Curtiz packed his bags and headed for Sweden, France, Germany, and Austria." Various other accounts make the same point.

This is fine, and would warm the heart of any red-blooded anti-communist, except it doesn't happen to be true. Far from packing his bags, Curtiz was a member of the revolutionary arts council that supervised the newly nationalized film industry in the Hungarian Soviet republic. Other leading participants included Alexander Korda, later prominent as a director and producer in the British film industry, and Bela Lugosi. Georg Lukacs, of course, was also a participant in the short-lived Hungarian socialist government, along with film theoretician Bela Balázs.

Thirty-one films were made during the four months of revolutionary rule in Hungary, only two of which have survived. One is a 12-minute film by Curtiz, entitled *My Brother is Coming*. Graham Petrie writes that the

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work, “is based on a revolutionary poem...whose words appear on the screen rhythmically inter-cut with the images of the hero returning from political exile and imprisonment, seen at first as an individual waving a huge red flag and finally being joined by an ever-growing crowd as he nears home and is reunited with his family before giving a speech to a procession assembled in the street outside.” This is the man who “packed his bags” at the approach of the revolution, according to the *Times* and others.

I’m not suggesting Curtiz was a Bolshevik in Hollywood. The evolution of his political views is unknown to me, but one can tell that he brought a certain Central European vivacity, energy and tension to every film he undertook, shaped by the cultural environment and his participation in a revolutionary social experiment. Fassbinder called Curtiz an “Anarchist in Hollywood,” and paid tribute to his work. I strongly recommend many of his films, including *Captain Blood, Kid Galahad, The Adventures of Robin Hood, Four Daughters, Angels with Dirty Faces, The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex, The Sea Hawk*, and in particular, *Mildred Pierce* and *Flamingo Road*.

Of course, the eventual and for the most part ignominious collapse of the leftists in Hollywood was far from admirable. To account for the relative ease with which a purge of many socialist artists and the intimidation of the rest were carried out would take us beyond our subject. The rotten politics of the Communist Party had something to do with it. The artists, lulled to sleep by the notion that postwar America would see some continuation or extension of the New Deal, or even an American “Popular Front,” were utterly unprepared for the monstrous imperialist predator that emerged in the late 1940s during the Cold War.

There is also the problem of celebrity in America. The horrifying execution of the Rosenbergs and the imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten—those CP members who were cited for contempt of Congress—notwithstanding, leftists in America did not face the prospect for the most part of outright repression in the postwar years. But the left-wing directors and writers faced the possibility of exclusion, of being out of the limelight. In America, conventionally, you are everything or nothing. An Elia Kazan could not bear the thought of losing his celebrity status. To withstand public opinion in America especially requires not only courage but a long-term historical perspective.

No fascist counterrevolution took place in America, but a period of profound political and cultural stagnation set in, dominated by opportunism, the strangulation of the labor movement and the emergence of anti-communism as virtually a state religion. Anti-capitalist criticism was outlawed and remains outlawed. For the film industry, the ultimate consequence, with the disappearance of the last great figures, by the 1960s, was a severe deterioration and dissolution of what was finest and most insightful in Hollywood cinema.

The artist needs to be inspired by great purposes. American Cold War liberalism proved far too narrow and uninspiring a base upon which to construct a great and lasting cinema. A new cinema will have to arise on a new, far more critical foundation. In our view, the emergence of a consciously socialist current in North American filmmaking, which sets itself up in irreconcilable opposition to the entire economic and political structure and its psychology and morality, is crucial to that development.

This is an important part of the explanation for the decline, I believe. But certain things need to be added. Sometimes we’re told that the problem today is “money,” the domination of giant conglomerates. The problem of money and art didn’t begin with Louis B. Mayer. The Dutch painters of the seventeenth century were at the mercy of the market, and suffered for it. That didn’t prevent them from doing some extraordinary work. Mitry is correct in this regard, as long as capitalism exists, filmmaking will involve commerce. No, there are plenty of people around with sufficient financing and artistic independence, and very few of them are saying anything important. The problem is one of perspective, artistic and social.

The politics and the experience of recent decades represent one element of the problem. What have people experienced, what have they seen? You would have to be 30-35 years old for the Soviet Union to be more than a fleeting memory. You would have to be older than that to remember when American liberalism had some substance. The last great successful strike in the US took place in the late 1970s. We speak of the filmmaker with the unfurrowed brow, with relatively few important life experiences, no experience of a socialist or communist movement or of great struggles. It’s not his or her fault of course. Some of this will only be overcome with a great mass movement, which will break up much that’s stagnant, skeptical, uncommitted in the present-day artist.

There is, however, a specifically aesthetic question, which is bound up with the broader problems. Something has largely been lost in recent decades. What do all great films, from any source, have in common? What Trotsky called a definite and important feeling for the world. They make a genuine engagement with reality, with the way people are, the ways in which they behave. I’m not speaking of realism as a style or a literary school. One can treat life seriously in a cartoon or a science fiction film, or a re-enactment of Greek myth or a musical set on the moon.

Trotsky speaks beautifully of this quality, which, he says, “consists in a feeling for life as it is, in an artistic acceptance of reality, and not in a shrinking from it, in an active interest in the concrete stability and mobility of life. It is a striving either to picture life as it is or to idealize it, either to justify or to condemn it, either to photograph it or generalize and symbolize it. But it is always *a preoccupation with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art*.” (Emphasis added)

It’s difficult to add much to that. We need to revive an interest in the artistic concentration on character and human personality, on the plausibility and authenticity of the human situations that are dramatized, on psychological and social realism (not Stalinist “Socialist Realism,” which had nothing realistic, or “socialistic,” about it). It’s a matter of a certain approach to life. Nothing will come of a desire to show off or impress, to be the most coldhearted or frenzied or bloodiest or cynical among your contemporaries—this is a race to the bottom.

The individual starting out in cinema today can’t immediately surmount all the objective difficulties; one can’t invent what one hasn’t experienced. But this approach to life, this deep concern “with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art,” *that* it’s possible for *anyone* to assimilate and adopt.

A few points in conclusion. When we speak of our Marxist approach, we mean by that, if you like, a “classical Marxist” approach. We reject most of what passes for Marxism in academic circles. I would like to make a few comments in that regard.

First, a small example of what I mean, which may be instructive. In J. Dudley Andrew’s *The Major Film Theories*, published in the mid-1970s, the author is describing the views of certain “militant” French leftists at the time. Speaking for them, he says, in bourgeois art “a lie...destroys every possibility of meaning except for the neurotic repetition of the dominant ideology. This lie is the product of our culture’s insistence on the representation of the real. It insists first that reality is visible; second that the scientific instrument of the camera can capture it. The Marxist-Leninist critics,”—please, note, “Marxist-Leninist critics,”—“launch their attack even here, claiming that the supposedly scientific instrument of the camera is far from neutral, that, like all science, it serves the ruling class. It does this by propagating the visual codes of Renaissance humanism (perspective) which put the individual at the center of a kind of theater spectacle unrolling before him,” etc., etc.

Of course, everyone has the right to clown around at one time or another, but it’s bad form to do so in false colors. This is not “Marxism-Leninism,” but the leftism of clever French schoolboys and girls, some of

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which we still hear today. Genuine Marxism has always had the deepest commitment to the achievements of culture, which are humanity's property, not the property of the ruling elite. In 1920, precisely to counter the efforts of the Russian counterparts of these "militant critics," Lenin proposed a resolution explaining that "Marxism...far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch...has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture."

The notion that reality is invisible and the camera can't capture it is another bit of foolishness. First of all, any serious film work strives precisely to uncover what is not immediately visible. This is true for Howard Hawks as well as Eisenstein. If what's meant by this is that the filmmaker is always so imprisoned by his or her class position that no general truth can emerge from the work, this is simply false for the reasons we've already discussed. The honest artist is not merely a congealed expression of his social standing, he or she transcends that in penetrating reality, as the scientist does. Otherwise, every previous art work created within class society would have to be thrown on the scrap heap.

Of course, the artist never goes beyond his or her social limitations *absolutely*, but then he or she never goes beyond other sorts of limitations absolutely *either*—age, sex, nationality and so forth. The question is: is the artist capable of generating *relatively* truthful pictures? It's on this that the French and other "left" metaphysicians stumble. Because of the impossibility of a *single* work achieving absolute objective truth, they rule out partial, imperfect truths, which contain "grains" of absolute truth. We can't jump out of our skins entirely, but that doesn't prevent the human mind from reflecting and expressing reality truthfully. And those truly thoughtless and stereotyped views are presented as "Marxism."

A more serious trend, the Frankfurt School is certainly one of those often presented as a Marxist tendency in art and literary criticism. Its leading members were immensely educated, cultured and articulate individuals, but their thinking was greatly influenced by the defeats and tragedies suffered by the working class and socialism, in particular, the triumph of Hitlerism in Germany. Politically, they remained aloof. They also remained silent during Stalin's genocidal war against the Old Bolsheviks and Russian socialism generally in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s, finding that the "most loyal attitude" and not wishing "to publish anything that might damage Russia."

Theodor Adorno, whose comments about Stalinism those were, is one of this tendency's principal representatives. In his postwar writings on the "Culture Industry," he expressed dismay at the condition of art and culture. He abhorred the "industrial" standardization of art works; the narrowing of the gap between empirical reality and culture; the elimination of the distinction between image and reality that "has already advanced to the point of a collective sickness"; the transformation of culture into "baby-food"; the leveling down of art within itself so that there are "no longer any real conflicts to be seen"; the "iron grip of rigidity despite the ostentatious appearance of dynamism" in modern culture; and many other features of mid-twentieth century culture. Many of these criticisms and descriptions are accurate and just.

However, they are deeply one-sided and ultimately superficial. Adorno and his co-thinker Max Horkheimer viewed the growth of the productive forces itself as planting the seeds of destruction. They anticipated various contemporary forms of Green thinking by blaming the Enlightenment (with its emphasis on man's domination of nature), technology and industry for society's supposed regression.

As a German colleague, Peter Schwarz, explained in a recent lecture, "According to Marx and Engels, the productive forces developed by capitalism come into conflict with the capitalist property relations, initiating an era of social revolution and providing the basis for a higher, socialist form of society. Horkheimer and Adorno hold the opposite view. According to them, progress of the productive forces inevitably results in the stultification of the masses, in cultural decline, and finally in a new kind of barbarism."

This conception infuses Adorno's postwar writings on culture. He writes: "The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. Ever since these cultural forms first began to earn a living for their creators as commodities in the market-place they had already possessed something of this quality. But then they sought after profit only indirectly, over and above their autonomous essence. New on the part of the culture industry is the direct and undisguised primacy of a precisely and thoroughly calculated efficacy in its most typical products."

Adorno, to be frank, often writes like the petty bourgeois who is dismayed by the disappearance of the small corner store and the independently owned bookstore, who bemoans the building of a supermarket in a rural area. These are the inevitable cruelties of modern capitalist development. He laments, in one comment, that no homeland "can survive being processed by the films that celebrate it, and thereby turn the unique character on which it thrives into an interchangeable sameness." There is something of the nostalgic philistine in these comments.

No one is more scathing than our movement about present-day culture. The commodification and trivialization of art is a pressing problem. However, we view this problem historically and objectively. Culture is a contradictory phenomenon. The machine enslaves humanity, but it also holds the key to its liberation. Under capitalism, technology is turned against humanity in a destructive fashion. Socialism and opposition to technology have never had anything in common.

As Trotsky noted, "a voyage in a boat propelled by oars demands great personal creativity. A voyage in a steamboat is more 'monotonous' but more comfortable and more certain. Moreover, you can't cross the ocean in a row-boat anyway."

Adorno concluded that modern monopoly capitalism "abolishes art along with conflict." The film industry, he wrote, "strikes the hour of total domination." These morbidly pessimistic conclusions were false. Art and culture have certainly entered a deep crisis. Even today, several decades later, however, it would be wrong to speak of the abolition of conflict or total domination. Art cannot save itself. The crisis of the entire social order will generate opposition from the most farsighted artists. The great technologies created by capitalism will help to undermine its influence.

Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer and the others lived through great tragedies. They were deeply disoriented by the events and drew the direst conclusions. One cannot justify their thinking and action, but they lived under very difficult moral and political conditions.

Far less excusable are those postmodernists and left postmodernists who accommodate themselves to or even celebrate the debased culture that Adorno and the others decried. I would like to refer briefly to the work of Fredric Jameson, longtime professor at Duke University and the author of numerous books of criticism, another figure presented to students as a Marxist in the field of art and culture.

As a writer, Jameson is guilty of verbal exhibitionism, working in a dense and obscure manner, which makes portions of his work incomprehensible except to the elect. How someone can even refer to the Marxist tradition, which concerns itself with the political education of wide layers of the population, and hermetically seal himself off through his language remains a mystery. I would suggest that the linguistic obscurantism, consciously or not, serves to conceal the relative poverty of the ideas expressed.

In various essays and books published in the recent decades, Jameson makes clear his own morbid pessimism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the other Stalinist regimes, the universal triumph of global capitalism, the absence of any alternative to the present order, the absence even of a

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"new international proletariat," render the possibility of social convulsion, much less "the ultimate senescence, breakdown and death of the system as such," a virtual impossibility, at least for the foreseeable future.

Present-day society, in his view, is a nightmarish "multinational global corporate network" so complex that it is essentially ungraspable intellectually and unrepresentable artistically, except through allegory. He writes that the present system is "so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves."

This is a remarkable statement. Why should we take Jameson's word for it? The present state of global capitalism surpasses the "natural and historically developed categories of perception." How can this be so? We don't find this to be the case in our political or intellectual work. It is certainly beyond the capacities of any one individual to grasp the essence and operations of this world system, but that has always been the case. The task of the artist has never been to work out a full-fledged global perspective, but to discover and grapple in concentrated form with the greatest dilemmas of his or her age, to explore and ultimately concretize those dilemmas into imagery.

At any rate, in opposition to that undertaking, Jameson proposes his theory of the "political unconscious." According to this conception, which owes a good deal to Ernst Bloch, as well as Ernest Mandel, the mysteries of the "cultural past" and presumably the present can be solved "only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot," the history of the class struggle as it has unfolded through its various stages. He writes, "It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative...that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity."

On the one hand, this is a truism. Every work of art, no matter how flimsy, tells us something about the class struggle, that is, social reality. What else could it do? "However fantastic art may be," Trotsky said, "it cannot have at its disposal any other material except that which is given to it by the world of three dimensions and by the narrower world of class society." The most dimwitted television program provides some insight, for instance, into the mentality of the social layer that created it, its banality and indifference, and so forth.

Jameson suggests that literary works need to be treated as symbolic acts revealing contradictions that a society cannot solve and tries to conceal. The work is then read carefully, by the specialist, to uncover the contradiction.

This literary creation takes place unconsciously. And here, I believe, is the truly pernicious side to this theory, which can only work against the most pressing cultural issue of our day, the development of *conscious historical and social knowledge* by the artist.

Jameson argues that "self-consciousness about the social totality"—i.e., some grasp of the present world situation—is not arrived at by a conscious process. He writes, "My thesis, however, is not merely that we ought to strive for it, but that we do so all the time anyway without being aware of the process." He describes the "conspiratorial text," the work that best sums up our condition apparently, as "an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality." He goes on to speak about the "geopolitical unconscious," and, further, to assert that "it is only at that deeper level of our collective [unconscious] fantasy that we think about the social system all the time."

It's difficult for me to imagine anything more irresponsible at this moment in history, when art and culture suffer so severely, provide such weak and impoverished pictures of life, precisely due to the lack of conscious, rational cognition of reality in art, than this sort of appeal, which amounts to little more than a throwing up of one's hands and an accommodation to the present terribly backward cultural condition. Marxists look at the present culture and propose a struggle; Jameson argues that it will all work out because our unconscious is registering world reality in any event.

Our view runs in the opposite direction. The unconscious comes into play in art in a rich and meaningful manner only to the extent that there is conscious, purposeful intent, that the artist *knows* what he or she is about. Only under those conditions do intuition and the non-rational assist in the artistic creation. At present, we have loads of unconscious fantasy, mostly the self-involved, narcissistic fantasy life of middle class individuals with no experience of life and little to say.

Our conviction is that no one carries out enduring artistic work without knowing important things, without exhaustive study of his or her art form *and* the world. Hegel writes that the serious artist "has to call in aid (i) the watchful circumspection of the intellect, and (ii) the depth of the heart and its animating feelings." It is therefore an absurdity to suppose that poems like Homer's "came to the poet in sleep. Without circumspection, discrimination, and criticism the artist cannot master any subject-matter which he is to configurate, and it is silly to believe that the genuine artist does not know what he is doing."

As a final word, that will suffice. The genuine artist *knows* what he or she is doing. It's our conviction that progress in filmmaking lies along the line of knowledge, study and struggle, both artistic and social. We have great confidence that a new generation of film artists will choose that path.

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