

Letters on film and socialism

12 February 2007

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

On “Film, history and socialism”

Dear WSWs,

This letter is in response to David Walsh’s two-part lecture “Film, history and socialism” and the accompanying “Questions and answers at David Walsh’s talk at York University in Toronto.” These works are notable for their balance and lack of ultra-leftist adjudication, pseudo-radicalism, and nihilism.

While I am not a film specialist, film is studied as a “literary text” in my discipline (English Studies), and that obligates me to make a few brief remarks. Because the lectures, especially the second one and discussion, are so theoretically engaging, the focus of this letter will be generally confined to questions of theory.

Particularly appealing about the lectures as whole is that they are written in a comprehensible and intelligent, genuinely Marxist style. That is rare in theory. I was especially taken by the astuteness of Mr. Walsh’s observation that “to have a theory of film history ... one must have a theory of the twentieth century.” But to see this important point through, one should consider the state of film theory and the schools under which it operates at present, e.g., Bakhtinism, Deconstruction, Feminism, Multiculturalism, Postcolonialism or Postcolonial Theory, Poststructuralism or Postmodernism, post-Freudian Psychoanalysis, Queer Theory, Semiotics, and so forth.

My reading on film scholarship is very limited, but some randomly chosen publications, such as *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2000) and *Film and Theory: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2000), would certainly provide a few examples of the above schools and an opportunity to assess their views from a classical Marxist perspective.

Two other random works in this genre are *Film History: An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill, 2002) and *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (Oxford UP, 2004). I am sure Mr. Walsh would have something quite useful to say about the strangely titled essay “Towards a Non-Bourgeois Camera Style” in the Oxford University Press publication.

His lectures, in that respect, tend to limit themselves by focusing almost exclusively on Critical Theory, as represented by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Fredric Jameson. However, I do understand the need of the author to distinguish this influential school of middle-class left-criticism from classical Marxism. But even if such delimitations were necessary, in addition to summarizing the basic political-philosophical outlooks of the said figures, some criticism of their writings on film proper would also be helpful. Jameson, for one, has written a related book, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World*

System (Indiana UP, 1995). I regret to say that I have not read this work. But surely Mr. Walsh can tell us something about it. There is likely no shortage of “verbal exhibitionism” here either, and I suspect Jameson would maintain that he is not writing for the working-class man and woman on the street, but for other academicians like himself and university students.

Something else I observe is that these interesting lectures tend to be rather North America and Hollywood centric. I do not dispute the influence of either. But film history is broader than this. To take one example, Korean film may also have some noteworthy developments dating from its beginnings in the 1910s during Japanese colonial rule. There is also the matter of cinema in the African countries—a part of the world that has produced some of the most talented and enduring writers in twentieth-century world literature (Achebe, Ngugi, Nwapa, Soyinka, and many others)—yet not one mention of African cinema and any of its achievements can be found in the lectures. Why is that?

Considering that the lectures deal with *film, history, and socialism*, it would seem appropriate too to deal with these, or at least provide appraisals of these developments, in the Soviet Union (before, during, and after Stalinism) and in the *deformed workers’ states*, e.g., the Eastern Bloc countries, China, Cuba, North Korea, and Vietnam.

I do find it surprising that in the question-and-answer session after the lectures none of the faculty and students in attendance or the four questioners raised any of these particular issues. Therefore, I hope my letter can be published and that Mr. Walsh may provide the necessary response in addendum to his invited presentation at York University.

Sincerely yours,

ADW

30 January 2007

On “Dreamgirls: Mowtown mythologized, obscured”

Thanks for such a good and honest historical approach to this film. It is a real benchmark against identity politics and for a class standpoint. It is difficult to believe but today in France the Parti des Travailleurs supports the building of a black party to fight elections in the USA. Motown was the expression of a generation that put nationalist politics to bed. The fact that Berry Gordy at Motown had two music charts (black and white), which objectively dovetailed was the reflection of what was happening in society. Black and white youth bought and enjoyed this music because they believed in ‘democracy,’ and it brought them together. Those who stayed with ‘blackness’ and ‘positive discrimination’ have become apologists for a racist society.

MP

Amiens, France

7 February 2007

Thank you for the excellent review. As someone born well after the Civil Rights and Vietnam-era, I can appreciate the earthiness, maybe an economic modesty, in the music of the 1960s. While the R&B music of today celebrates its Motown and blues ancestry, it does not really carry on the spirit and life in songs. Songs about relationships in the 1960s were also songs about being broke, being dejected, working all the time, and other problems of daily life. It wasn't heavy-handed because it wasn't always conscious, but how refreshing it seems today.

EG

7 February 2007

I think an effort should be made to have contributors make their point more succinctly.

RLB

Bradenton, Florida, US

7 February 2007

On "Eastwood's Letters from Iwo Jima: Remarkable, in many ways"

Thank you very much for the fine review of the Eastwood film(s). It is good to hear from someone who does not discard American film as biased by default. I have always enjoyed your reviews of film. It is difficult to find a reviewer who does not have a thinly veiled motive in his or her writing. I very much enjoyed your contributions on Abraham Polonsky and Walter Bernstein. Artists such as these should *never* be forgotten.

RV

Athens, Georgia, US

7 February 2007

On "Freedom Writers: Truly no child left behind"

In her article, Joanne Laurier reviews this rare mainstream film that is able to capture the circumstances facing many of our young people in the urban areas of the United States. The film does indeed portray the way one dedicated teacher can make a difference in the lives of her students by her passion, commitment, and willingness to sacrifice to encourage her students to succeed. Confronted with a classroom of "unteachable" students, expected to teach in an environment where deadly violence could break out at any minute, the teacher, Erin Gruwell, is able through sheer perseverance and refusal to abandon them, to reach her students. She is able to show them how, through creative writing to describe their circumstances, and the development of empathy for other circumstances, they can make their mark in the world in a positive way.

That being said, it must not be overlooked that the movie can lead to profoundly reactionary conclusions. It promotes the cult of individualism, which, in American society, has gone to absurd lengths. It is this same "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality that has led to the United States becoming a society that blames the victims of poverty for their poverty, and that has led the United States to have one of the largest prison populations in the world.

Is the solution of the crisis in education really for teachers to take on additional jobs and sacrifice the needs of their own family when confronted with the needs of their students? That there are some "burned out" and indifferent teachers there can be no doubt, but

my experience in the Philadelphia public schools is that most teachers are dedicated and passionate about their students.

As the film skillfully portrays, the problems in the classroom are a microcosm of the problems in US society. It is the public school classroom where students get to know "the others." Ms. Gruwell was able to break through her students' anger so they could see "the others," but this is indeed rare. It is the under-funding of education that leads to overcrowded classes and a total lack of social supports that produces schools designed to fail.

Except for this one idealistic teacher, however, the rest of the teaching staff is portrayed as racist, indifferent to their students, and hostile to this teacher's idealism. This is the method of right-wing forces in US society who blame poor teaching for the crisis in US public education. These forces would like the privatization of education in the interests of private profit and the promotion of various religious views of the world.

And the situation is much worse today than the film portrays. The film takes place in the mid-'90s, after the LA riots. Today we have the Bush administration's so-called "No Child Left Behind" law. Because of this law, the top priority of top administrators is not the students, as portrayed in the film, but test scores and balancing shrinking budgets. A teacher such as Ms. Gruwell would not be allowed to teach in a public school today. Teachers are now required to follow a rigid curriculum and spend a significant amount of what had been instruction time giving standardized tests. As a result, students are being instructed with a narrow empirical method that stresses coming up with the right answer rather than creative thinking. Math and reading are taught in an abstract way and science and history are de-emphasized. This is a method that turns students off to learning and will only increase the dropout rates.

KD

30 January 2007



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