

A letter in response to “A discussion with film historian Joseph McBride about Steven Spielberg: A Biography”

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The following is a letter by a reader in response to “A discussion with film historian Joseph McBride about *Steven Spielberg: A Biography*,” published in two parts May 4-5 2011. [Click here for Part 1 and Part 2.]

Dear WSWs:

I found David Walsh’s interview with Joseph McBride insightful and engaging; it got me to thinking.

The key questions, it seems to me, are: first, has Steven Spielberg managed to both develop his creative talents and, in the process, address the “problems of ordinary Americans,” and second, can his work be regarded as an exception to the general decline in American filmmaking in the past 40 years? I haven’t any completely satisfying answers, but I’ll suggest a few.

The topic reminded of certain passages from art critic John Berger’s 1965 biography *The Success and Failure of Picasso*. I’d like to share them with you.

In the year 1917—the year of the Bolshevik Revolution—and in the midst of the carnage of World War I, the impresario Sergei Diaghilev staged the avant-garde ballet “Parade.” Pablo Picasso designed the costumes and the scenery for the production. An early surrealist work, it was meant to shock the sensibilities of the upper-middle class audience and make them look ridiculous, which it did.

Berger remarked upon the “grotesque absurdity” of the ballet that, for all its “outrageousness,” failed to make any connection whatsoever with the horrific realities that were taking place in Europe. The Second Battle of the Aisne was underway, in which 120,000 Frenchmen and 40,000 Germans would be killed; at the opening of the ballet, whole sections of the French army were mutinying (encouraged, in part, by the Russian Revolution). All this was taking place just a few hours’ drive north of Paris. [1]

However successful the ballet appeared to the artists who created it, Berger exposes the reactionary social effects of the production:

“The objective social function which ‘Parade’ performed was to console the bourgeoisie whom it shocked...In this respect ‘Parade’ set the precedent for a good deal of so-called ‘outrageous’ art that was to follow. Its shock-value was the result of its particular spirit—its disjointedness, its frenzy, its mechanization, its puppetry. This spirit was a reflection, however pale, of what was happening. And what was happening was

infinitely more shocking on an infinitely more serious level. Why ‘Parade’—however beautifully Massine danced—can be criticized and finally dismissed as frivolous is not because it ignored the war, but because it pretended to be realistic. As a result of this pretence it shocked in such a way as to distract people from the truth. It substituted an ounce for a ton. The madness of the world, they could say, was the invention of artists! The audience who shouted ‘filthy krauts!’ felt, at the end of their evening, more patriotic than ever, more certain than ever that the war was noble, reasonable, etc. A performance of ‘Les Sylphides’ would not have had the same effect.” [2]

Why does the movie *Saving Private Ryan* come to mind? Is it because of Spielberg’s lavish use of, what one critic called computer-generated “pyrotechnics” and “technical wizardry”—puppetry, if you will—which purports to convey the realities of war? The shock effect was brief. That this blockbuster—with leading man Tom Hanks—were instantly enlisted to promote fundraising for WWII memorials belies its claims to “realism.” Director Terrance Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998) could not have been put to such reactionary purposes so seamlessly.

“Parade” and *Saving Private Ryan*, in one way or the other, ignore or trivialize working class sacrifices. The difference (perhaps a trivial one) is that Diaghilev and Picasso had the temerity to insult their well-to-do patrons, while Spielberg made his film “with an eye to currying favor with the establishment and, with any luck, obtaining an invitation to the White House.” (See here for further reading.)

Berger observed: “The ballet ‘Parade’ is one of the first examples in which we can see the difficulties facing art in the present situation. For the first time we see the modern artist serving, despite his own intentions, the bourgeois world and therefore sharing a position of doubtful privilege.” [3]

What, if anything, can, or should we, expect Spielberg, and other artists to do in our own era? In considering this, it’s worth keeping in mind that this question is a historical and not a moral one, as Berger emphasized. [4]

David Walsh pointed out that “a vast social chasm that has opened up” between the rich and poor, but that Spielberg has not “treated the problems of ordinary Americans in a serious fashion...” adding, “I don’t make [this analysis] as a criticism of Spielberg, it’s a criticism of the entire film industry and culture”...an industry that delivers “a sharply misleading view of contemporary life.”

Joseph McBride addressed the issue this way: “The media are a major enemy of the people at this point, because they lie systematically and

mislead people.” He pointed out that this is “beyond the control of Spielberg and filmmaking,” with the caveat “Spielberg could do more” in the way of socially conscious cinema.

I would draw attention to McBride’s insight that, “the powers that be are trying to keep the people dumb, so they don’t understand their own dilemmas...” I would add this: How much more aware of “their own dilemmas” are Steven Spielberg and his artistic associates who manufacture these movies?

Berger declares that first, artists are compelled to ask themselves a question:

“Events in our century occur on global scale. And the area of our knowledge has widened in order to encompass these events. Every day we can be aware of life-and-death issues affecting millions of people. Most of us close our minds to such thoughts except in times of crisis or war. Artists, whose imaginations are less controllable than most, have been obsessed with the problem: How can I justify what I am doing at such a time? This has led some to renounce the world, others to become over-ambitious or pretentious, yet others to stifle their imaginations. But since 1914 there cannot have been a serious artist who has not asked himself the question.” [5]

How have filmmakers answered this question in the last two generations, say, since 1970? Spielberg, to his credit, has not become a renegade nor a recluse: he’s continued to work, in spite all the difficulties (filthiness, really) of producing movies largely for profits. But how do we know how he answered the question?

David Walsh provides a clue: Steven Spielberg has not, in all probability, invited the fame and success he has achieved. His “immense wealth and privilege” is not reprehensible in itself. (As Berger observed: “We must rid ourselves of the romantic idea that worldly failure is in itself a virtue”) [6].

But Spielberg’s social outlook is “necessarily filtered.” What is likely to be “filtered” out, and how does this affect his work?

Reading the works of novelist and social reformer Charles Dickens, one can discern what is not filtered out: the experiences of the urban population: middle and lower-middle classes, and some of the extremely poor. Dickens performed an exhaustive examination of these English social types and their daily life in the early Nineteenth Century. He, in a sense, championed them.

If Spielberg has not shown the same level of interest in identifying himself with “poverty and ordinary people,” as McBride acknowledges, then to what extent is he a “popular” filmmaker? I’d be inclined to examine this comparison between Spielberg and Dickens; perhaps a look at art historian and sociologist Arnold Hauser’s brief biography on Dickens would be useful.

Hauser called Dickens a “revolutionary” figure. In an industry where Quentin Tarantino and his imitators are ascendant, Spielberg can pass as a benign figure, but that doesn’t make him a revolutionary descendant of Charles Dickens.

Berger defines the relationship between artists and their publics:

[F]or a [film] to succeed it is essential that the [filmmaker] and his public can agree about what is significant...When a culture is secure and

certain of its values, it presents its artists with subjects. The general agreement about what is significant is so well established that the significance of a particular subject accrues and becomes traditional...When a culture is in a state of disintegration or transition the freedom of the artist increases—but the question of subject matter becomes problematic for him: he, himself, has to choose for society...[7]

In the year 2011, the working class appears to have outstripped American filmmakers; they are in advance of Spielberg and his associates.

Artists, including Spielberg, are not required to immolate themselves and spark a revolution, as the unemployed Mohamed Bouazizi did in Tunisia, nor are they required to clash with government provocateurs as Egyptian and Syrian workers and students are doing, nor is it necessary that artists spend a year in solitary confinement for releasing unclassified US government documents to the public, nor are they called upon to throw their shoes in the face of the President of the United States at his press conferences. The working class will do these things, and proudly so. That is how we take the first steps towards transforming our society.

But what artists are required do, it seems to me, is to regard these events with profound seriousness. The participants—working people and students—are placing themselves at immense personal risk to confront their oppressors. Millions are fighting the abuses of authority. Some artists—not all—will embrace these events at the heart of their work, if that is in their nature, and their understanding. But to at least see these things as they are, as world-historic events, and to draw conclusions from them: that is the responsibility of artists. And that is the responsibility of a Steven Spielberg.

Berger sums up his biography of Picasso this way:

“The gifts of an imaginative artist are often the outriders of the gifts of his period...What happens to an artist’s gifts may well reveal, in a coded or ciphered way, what is happening to his contemporaries...The waste of his genius, or the frustration of his gifts, should be a fact of great significance for us. Our debt to him and to his failures, if we understand them properly, should be enormous.” [8]

1. John Berger, *The Success and Failure of Picasso* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1965)

2. Ibid. P. 89

3. Ibid. P. 89

4. Ibid P. 204

5. Ibid P. 87

6. Ibid. P. 128

7. Ibid. P. 134-135

8. Ibid. P. 204

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