

Cold War: Many unstated assumptions about politics and history

Also, *Capernaum* and *Stan and Ollie*...

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Cold War

Cold War, directed by Polish-born Pawel Pawlikowski, is a film about two artists caught up in Cold War culture and politics in the 1950s. Pawlikowski (*Last Resort*, *My Summer of Love*, *Ida*) co-wrote the screenplay with Janusz G?owacki and Piotr Borkowski.

The film has a certain visual and emotional allure, and it has received almost universal praise from the critics, but *Cold War's* attitude toward bigger historical and political issues needs to be scrutinized carefully.

In 1949 in rural Poland, musicologists Wiktor (Tomasz Kot) and Irena (Agata Kulesza), together with Communist Party official Lech Kaczmarek (Borys Szyk), criss-cross the countryside gathering folk songs and dances ("the music of your grandparents and their grandparents"). The postwar conditions in the devastated country are extremely difficult, but the project at first seems sincerely intentioned and even rewarding.

In a cold, rundown building, Wiktor and Irena launch the Masurek ensemble. A photo of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich hangs in the former's office. One of those auditioning for the ensemble is the fetching Zula (Joanna Kulig), who becomes Wiktor's paramour. Before too long, Zula lets Wiktor know she has been asked by the authorities to spy on him.

The Stalinist bureaucracy imposes itself in other ways. The folk ensemble is "requested" by a government cultural official to include propaganda for elements of the Polish regime's policies in its music and performances. A giant banner of Stalin is now regularly lowered behind the singers at shows. Irena leaves the troupe in disgust.

While on tour in East Berlin, Wiktor, whom Zula has by now teasingly labeled a "bourgeois wanker," sets in motion plans to make his way to the West, and eventually Paris. He expects Zula to accompany him, but—to his dismay—Zula is a no-show at the appointed time and place. He leaves anyway. Zula does eventually maneuver her way to Paris, where Wiktor has established himself as a jazz musician and composer. A sultry cabaret *chanteuse*, Zula becomes an instant hit, but not happy apparently with the self-indulgent Parisian scene, she goes back to her homeland.

During the mid-1950s, the lovers again meet in Yugoslavia, from which the local secret police dispatches Wiktor back to France. Unable to live without Zula, he returns to Poland, where he is considered a traitor. Zula makes a serious personal compromise, while her artistic performances largely turn into kitsch. Wiktor and Zula soon decide their own terrible fate.

Cold War is a striking film in a number of ways. The performances seem generally true to life. Certain aspects of Stalinist Poland are accurately portrayed: the use of nationalism as propaganda, the portrayal of opportunist bureaucratic types like Kaczmarek, who shows his flexible

spine early on. In an interview with *Slant*, Pawlikowski comments: "The folk ensemble gets kind of co-opted into some kind of ideological weapon."

The chief difficulty is that Pawlikowski, on the one hand, approaches certain matters with delicacy and generally seeks to saturate his *Cold War* in "artistic nuance." He would like the film to be seen in part at least as an ode to the "artistic personality" and to a "mad love" that "knows no boundaries"—and this of course wows all the shallow critics.

On the other hand, the filmmaker has a largely unstated, but not terribly subtle agenda or outlook. The movie's title is presumably meant to be interpreted a little sardonically and even skeptically, but, in fact, the sadder irony is how much *Cold War* conforms, in all its important aspects, to actual, crude Cold War anti-communism. In general, the film accommodates itself to official middle-class public opinion in Poland and elsewhere, down to the scenes in a half-ruined church, with all their attendant "spirituality," that serve as its book-ends.

This reviewer's comment is typical: "In the film, Poland's totalitarian government and the iron curtain that separates the country from the West is hardly the only thing that keeps doomed lovers Wiktor (Tomasz Kot) and Zula (Joanna Kulig) apart, but it's certainly the main one."

Pawlikowski may have decent artistic instincts, but those prove entirely inadequate in face of the complex questions bound up with the postwar conditions. To the extent that he has not worked through the political and historical landscape and chooses to rest on immediately given impressions, he passes on—as noted—a host of assumptions and prejudices. Embedded into *Cold War's* elegant structure are the gargantuan lies that Polish Stalinism equaled "socialism" or "communism" and that the West, however contradictorily, represented "freedom."

Again, Pawlikowski would like to have his cake and eat it too. He has his Zula return to Stalinist Poland. But *Cold War* never deigns to explain why she does so. The implication is that somehow she is more connected, peasant-like, to the Polish "soil," and, moreover, that she finds Parisian artistic life rather insipid and bloodless. In fact, there were many workers and intellectuals in Eastern Europe who thought that, despite the filthy, dictatorial bureaucracy, they could make their way toward socialism or at least that the postwar social gains represented something worth defending, especially in light of the vast atrocities committed by fascism and right-wing nationalism in the region. None of this is considered here.

Furthermore, Pawlikowski sets *Cold War* in France in the mid- to late-1950s, at a time when French imperialism was carrying out massive crimes, first, in Indochina, where an estimated half -million Vietnamese died in the anti-imperialist struggle between 1946 and 1954; and later in Algeria, where French forces tortured and murdered anti-colonial fighters by the tens of thousands. Officially, 300,000 Algerians died in the bloody conflict, which also provoked massive opposition in France itself.

Tellingly, the movie's Paris scenes are sandwiched between two general strikes—1953 and 1968—in which the mass of the French working class made clear its hatred of capitalism.

And what of Polish “democracy,” then and now? As a 2005 WSWs article by David North explained, the Western media attempts to leave the impression “that Soviet occupation of Eastern European countries cruelly trampled on flowering democracies.” In fact, the “regimes of Eastern Europe were cesspools of political reaction. Prior to the outbreak of World War II, Poland was ruled by a quasi-military dictatorship run by the successors of the late Marshal Pilsudski. Fanatically anti-Soviet, the Pilsudski regime was the first European government to conclude a treaty with Hitler, signing a non-aggression pact with the Nazi government in 1934 that was directed against the USSR.”

And today, the post-Stalinist Polish ruling elite is headed in the same foul, authoritarian direction. In an interview with *Slant*, Pawlikowski himself is obliged to acknowledge that “suddenly” in the present situation “the government pumps money into that kind of art—not that it's socialist any more, but nationalist—while cutting subsidies to theaters that aren't to their liking. Of course, it's not Stalinism. There's no censorship as such. But they took over the state TV, and the type of person like Kaczmarek, the impresario, that guy exists now and is very dominant. ... These patriots are on the make now. They're taking over the institutions and the businesses—state businesses. It's terrible. So, when a certain type of audience watches it, of course it feels familiar.”

To ignore or obscure all this in the supposed name of “love” and “art” is damaging and misleading.

Capernaum

Capernaum, from Lebanon, has received an Academy Award nomination as best foreign language film. It has opened in the US, and is currently playing at movie theaters around the country.

Depicting almost unimaginable levels of poverty and blight, filmmaker Nadine Labaki's film recounts the dramatic story of Zain (Zain Al Rafeea), a wily, aggressive, 12-year-old boy living with his family in Beirut.

When his hard-pressed parents actually sell his beloved 11-year-old sister, Sahar (Cedra Izam), in marriage to their landlord's son, Zain runs away. At an amusement park, the boy meets an Ethiopian refugee, Rahil (Yordanos Shiferaw)—undocumented and illegal in Lebanon—and her infant son, Yonas (Boluwatife Treasure Bankole—in real life, a baby girl). Rahil feeds a near-starving Zain in her squalid corrugated tin shack.

To prevent Rahil from losing her job because of absences due to her child, Zain agrees to look after Yonas. But when—unbeknownst to Zain—Rahil is picked up by the authorities, he must take desperate measures to keep himself and Yonas alive. Exhausting every other option, he eventually delivers the child to a human trafficker, Aspro (Alaa Chouchniye), who deceitfully promises Zain that Yonas will be adopted by a rich couple.

Zain ends up getting arrested. Encouraged by a television exposé on child poverty, he files a lawsuit against his parents for having given birth to him!

Capernaum is a difficult movie to watch. The levels of economic hardship, want and degradation are extreme. Labaki's camera is unflinching. Introducing the film at the Toronto film festival in September 2018, the director told the audience the situation in Lebanon was actually “far worse.”

During the festival screening's question-and-answer session, Labaki explained that in the four years it took to make the film, she went to many

refugee camps, poor neighborhoods and juvenile jail courts. She asked the children, “Are you happy to be alive?” Heartbreakingly, she added, most of the kids answered, “No.”

The filmmaker asserted that “Zain is suing a whole society, a whole system. Everybody in the film is playing themselves, their real-life circumstances. The film's title in French means ‘chaos.’ It was originally a village in Palestine signifying ‘hell.’ I wanted to speak about children's rights, immigrants' rights and the insanity of having [immigration] papers to exist.”

Stan & Ollie

Directed by Jon S. Baird and written by Jeff Pope, *Stan & Ollie* recounts the final years in the careers of the famous comic duo comprised of Englishman Stanley “Stan” Laurel (1890-1965) and American Oliver “Ollie” Hardy (1892-1957).

The pair worked for renowned producer Hal Roach from 1926 to 1940, and, according to the movie's production notes, appeared, between 1927 and 1950, in over 107 films (32 silent short films, 40 sound films, 23 features and 12 cameos). They were among the most popular film personalities in the world in the late 1930s.

Now, however, it is the early 1950s. Stan (Steve Coogan) and Ollie, or “Babe” (John C. Reilly), are nearly broke. They head for the UK to embark on a grueling tour of live theater performances organized by smarmy promoter Bernard Delfont (Rufus Jones). Sadly, they are being mothballed in favor of newer acts, such as Abbott and Costello. But to Delfont's surprise, their corny charm and abilities start filling seats.

Soon, they are joined by their supportive if eccentric spouses, Ida Kitaeva Laurel (Nina Arianda) and Lucille Hardy (Shirley Henderson), an odd couple that at times display more comedic traits than their husbands. The squeaky-voiced Lucille at one point introduces the aggressive Ida as someone who is “more of a dancer with a high threshold for pain.”

The British junket is intended to culminate in the making of a Laurel and Hardy movie about Robin Hood (“Steal from the poor to give to the poor, and cut out the middle man”), which never gets off the ground.

Coogan and Reilly are outstanding and perhaps more genial than their real-life counterparts, whose lives underwent many personal and professional vicissitudes. The film offers a mild rebuke to the entertainment industry, whose relentless machinery nearly grinds Stan and Ollie into oblivion. All in all, the movie is a sweet, benign but superficial dramatization of the immensely popular comedy team's life and times.



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