

Best films and television of the year and the devastation of cultural life

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As the year ends, it is not possible to discuss any aspect of artistic life, or life in general, in 2020 without central reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, which the various ruling elites have permitted to ravage the world's population.

In late March, we noted that “the global health and economic calamity” was without precedent. “Whatever the outcome in the short term,” we wrote, “social life and consciousness will never return to their previous states. A Rubicon has been crossed. The existing order, in the eyes of tens of millions, will be seen from now on as illegitimate and an immediate threat to their continued existence.”

It hardly seems necessary at this point to retract any of these words. On the contrary, the intervening nine months have witnessed death and official indifference on a massive scale, global protests against police violence and social conditions, fascist conspiracies and the wholesale looting of the economy by the corporate-financial oligarchy. The state of the pandemic is now more dire than ever. Amid growing poverty and hunger, against a backdrop of intense political instability, thousands continue to die needlessly on a daily basis.

In October, Anna DeForest, a neurologist at the Yale–New Haven Hospital in New Haven, Connecticut, published a moving essay in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in which she addressed a fatally ill, female coronavirus patient:

Who were you before the virus, before you were this—this list of failing organs run in despair by a repurposed trainee neurologist? Do you have children who smile at the sound of your voice? What was the last thing you were allowed to tell them, before you came alone into the hospital, before the breathing tube, the drug-induced coma? ...

This is the day you start to turn. What we suck up from your lungs turns frothy pink and then the frank red of blood. We don't know if your heart is finally failing or if the virus has destroyed so much tissue that this is necrosis, hemorrhaged in your lungs. There are tests, but no one willing to run them—you are too sick, and you have never cleared the virus. No one would ever want to be what you are now: a hazard, a threat, a frightening object on the edge of death. We try not to touch you. We construct our plans for saving you around staying as far away from you as possible.

Nearly 2 million people so far have perished in this painful manner because big business interests and their political agents in government everywhere determined *without hesitation* that their profits and wealth took priority over human life. Meanwhile, the swine who write for the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* cold-bloodedly and unashamedly explained to their readers that the cure, the systematic eradication of the disease by decisive means, which might result in a

falling stock market, could not be worse than the disease.

Such a system, as Leon Trotsky once asserted, “is condemned by history to rot and become worm-eaten while it is still alive.”

The coronavirus pandemic has demolished global cultural life and the conditions of artists like few events in modern history.

Last week, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted the crisis was continuing “to devastate the cultural and creative sector. By March 2020, the global film industry had already lost US\$7 billion in income and was forecast to lose an estimated US\$160 billion over the next five years.” The study indicated that, compared to 2019, “the world book publishing market is expected to shrink by 7.5 percent in 2020 as a result of COVID-19.”

UNESCO commented that the pandemic and lockdown measures had “already had a very significant impact on employment in the cultural and creative sectors. Many artistic institutions and organizations have been forced to close or cut back on staff because of the pandemic. One third of the art galleries questioned by Art Basel had reduced their staffing by half due to the impact of COVID-19. In the film industry, it is estimated that 10 million jobs will be lost in 2020 if the indirect and collateral effects are taken into account.”

In September, researchers Richard Florida and Michael Seman observed in *USA Today* that the “COVID-19 pandemic has decimated arts and culture in America, wiping out as many as half of all jobs for performing artists and musicians, and nearly a third of jobs for all those who work in the creative economy broadly spanning arts, music, theater, design, entertainment and media.”

“From April through July,” they continued, “about 2.7 million jobs and \$150 billion in revenue were lost. As the crisis took hold this spring, the average income of American artists and creatives plummeted to just about \$14,000 a year.”

In November, on the basis of a survey, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) published a set of alarming statistics about the perilous condition of their member institutions. The Alliance found that nearly 30 percent of museums in the US remained closed; nearly a third of museum directors either indicated the risk of permanent closure or “didn't know” if they would survive; 82 percent of the institutions had 12 months or less of operating reserves; and more than half had furloughed or laid off staff. On average, each responding institution had lost \$850,000 in revenue. “Museums,” the AAM wrote, “are operating at, on average, 35 percent of their capacity—an attendance reduction that is unsustainable long-term.”

Orchestras and opera companies have been effectively shut down since March or April, thousands of musicians, singers and crew members dispersed and, in most cases, left to fend for themselves. Large salary cuts have been imposed on certain orchestras, even while the multimillionaires and billionaires who sit on the boards of the larger ensembles continue to see their health care and technology investments soar.

Agence France-Presse pointed out in mid-October that “fewer shows and reduced rehearsals have been tough on musicians themselves, who are

grappling with salary cuts and limited modes to cultivate their art,” and cited the comment of Simon Woods, who heads the League of American Orchestras, “I have a lot of concern about musicians leaving the field because the situation is so difficult.” Violinist Maxim Moston told the news agency, “People can’t afford to pay New York City rents while sitting around and waiting for it to be safe for them to practice their professions and their passions.”

The live popular music industry has been brought low by the pandemic. As of this past summer, Live Nation, the largest presenter of live music and entertainment events in the US, expected to lose more than 20,000 shows in 2020 alone. According to *Rolling Stone*, “The company was responsible for more than 28,000 North American shows in 2019, but their 2020 count—as of March 31st—was below 5,000.” The second largest such presenter, AEG, anticipated canceling 10,000 North American shows in 2020, or 75 percent of its business (a loss of \$2 to \$3 billion), plus at least half that number in 2021. Save Our Stages, an industry group, estimates “that 77 percent of live-event workers have lost 100 percent of their income.”

The recent “stimulus” package passed by Congress includes \$15 billion for “struggling live venues, movie theaters, and museums.” This belated effort, too late for many venues, will no doubt help some to survive. However, if experience counts for anything, very little of that money will ever make its way to those who need it most, the estimated 12 million workers in the live event industry.

All in all, the global capitalist system has revealed itself during the pandemic to be the implacable, deadly enemy of cultural life. There is a blunt financial aspect to this—the oligarchy increasingly views *any* activity not resulting in immediately higher share prices to be an obstacle—and an ideological one. What Trotsky observed in 1938 holds even more universally true today, that “a declining capitalism...finds itself completely incapable of offering the minimum conditions for the development of tendencies in art which correspond, however little, to our epoch. It fears superstitiously every new word, for it is no longer a matter of corrections and reforms for capitalism but of life and death.”

If the existing social order regards the artists with such utter contempt, doesn’t blink at their devastation and even disappearance, isn’t it high time the artists return the favor?

In March, we argued it seemed safe to predict “that the attention of the best artists will swing in the direction of more critically examining the social and economic contradictions of the system in which they live, and which now endangers them and everyone else. The artists, along with the rest of the population, will want to know: How was this possible? Who is responsible? What can be done?”

We continued: “A renewed interest in realism as an aesthetic approach, a more serious, committed engagement with life and with the life and fate of masses of people in particular, linked to more and more open political opposition to the status quo, must be an outcome.”

Of course, as we understand, moods and sentiments always outlive the social conditions that produce them. Instincts and habits associated with earlier circumstances die hard. Nonetheless, in the end, die they must—and social thinking catches up all the more explosively, when harsh reality finally sets in, to the new facts of life.

“Everything will not change overnight,” we wrote earlier this year, “but the destruction of existing prejudices, including anticommunism and illusions in the Democratic Party, will take place nonetheless. Artists and others will find their way through orienting themselves to the complete and radical reconstruction of society.” This remains our view more confidently than ever.

We saw very few films in theaters in 2020, for obvious reasons. We attended the Toronto film festival online for the first time. Many of the interesting works we viewed were released in 2019 and even 2018, and only became available this past year.

These are some of the most interesting fiction and non-fiction films and television series that WWSW reviewers commented on in 2020 (none of them flawless), including a number screened at the Berlin and Cottbus film festivals.

Fiction films:

Andið eðlilega (And Breathe Normally), Isold Uggadottir, (2018)
Amin (Philippe Faucon, 2018)
The Nightingale (Jennifer Kent, 2018)
Bankier van het verzet (The Resistance Banker), Joram Lürsen, (2018)
Waiting for the Barbarians (Ciro Guerra, 2019)
Martin Eden (Pietro Marcello, 2019)
First Cow (Kelly Reichardt, 2019)
Greed (Michael Winterbottom, 2019)
La trinchera infinita (The Endless Trench), Aitor Arregi, Jon Garao, Jose Mari Goenaga, (2019)
La vérité (The Truth), Hirokazu Kore-eda, (2019)
Il traditore (The Traitor), Marco Bellocchio, (2019)
Sorry We Missed You (Ken Loach, 2019)
Als Hitler das rosa Kaninchen stahl (When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit), Caroline Link, (2019)
Just Mercy (Destin Daniel Cretton, 2019)
Radioactive (Marjane Satrapi, 2019)
Colewell (Tom Quinn, 2019)
The Last Vermeer (Dan Friedkin, 2019)
A Rainy Day in New York (Woody Allen, 2019)
Adú (Adu), Salvador Calvo, (2020)
Lost Girls (Liz Garbus, 2020)
Curveball (Johannes Naber, 2020)
Persian Lessons (Vadim Perelman, 2020)
Da 5 Bloods (Spike Lee, 2020)
Kids Run (Barbara Ott, 2020)
Adventures of a Mathematician (Thor Klein, 2020)
Jak najdalej stad (I Never Cry), Piotr Domalewski, (2020)
La vita davanti a sé (The Life Ahead), Edoardo Ponti, (2020)
Gaza Mon Amour (Arab Nasser, Tarzan Nasser, 2020)
The Disciple (Chaitanya Tamhane, 2020)
Sitting in Limbo (Stella Corradi, 2020)
Resistance (Jonathan Jakubowicz, 2020)
Druk (Another Round), Thomas Vinterberg, (2020)

Television or web series/mini-series:

The Queen’s Gambit
Homecoming
The Plot Against America
The Accident
Trial 4
Immigration Nation
Unorthodox
World on Fire
After Life
The Innocence Files
Challenger: The Final flight
Five Came Back
The Politician

Documentary films:

Belly of the Beast (Erika Cohn, 2019)
Coup 53 (Taghi Amirani, 2019)
#Anne Frank Parallel Stories (Sabina Fedeli, Anna Migotto, 2019)
Shusenjo: The Main Battleground of the Comfort Women Issue (Miki Dezaki, 2019)
Once Were Brothers: Robbie Robertson & The Band (Daniel Roher, 2019)
Push (Fredrik Gertten, 2019)
63 Up (Michael Apted, 2019)

Advocate (Philippe Bellaïche, Rachel Leah Jones, 2019)

76 Days (Weixi Chen, Hao Wu, Anonymous, 2020)

Grève ou crève (Strike or Die, Jonathan Rescigno, 2020)

Speer Goes to Hollywood (Vanessa Lapa, 2020)

David Byrne's American Utopia (Spike Lee, 2020)

Jetzt oder morgen (Running on Empty, Lisa Weber, 2020)



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