

Veteran French filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier (1941–2021): In genuine appreciation

Richard Phillips
14 April 2021

The death late last month of French director-screenwriter, producer and film historian Bertrand Tavernier, a few weeks before his 80th birthday, saw an outpouring of tributes from throughout France and internationally.

A tweet by former Cannes Film Festival president Gilles Jacob captured something of the wider sentiment. “French cinema is mourning,” Jacob wrote. “The filmmaker, the cinephile, the memory, all contributed to the exercise of an art to which he dedicated his life. He will no longer tell us his stories with that powerful force of conviction that made him such a precious auteur.” The Institut Lumière, the museum complex dedicated to cinema pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière, located in Tavernier’s native city, Lyon, and where he served as a virtual lifetime president, received thousands of condolence messages.

Born in 1941, Tavernier was a leading member of the generation of European filmmakers that emerged in the early 1970s and directed over 30 movies and feature-length documentaries during his more than four-decade career.

Tavernier’s films covered a broad range of subjects and genres—from historical dramas, anti-war movies, dark comedies, contemporary crime stories, even a science fiction work set in Glasgow (*Death Watch*, 1980), as well as perceptive, complex portraits of artists, musicians, teachers and other workers.

Tavernier’s documentaries included *Philippe Soupault* (1982), a three-hour work on the French surrealist writer and poet; *Mississippi Blues* (1983), a survey of the music of the American South; and the four-hour *La guerre sans nom* (1992, *The Undeclared War*), about the Algerian war. Outraged over French government attacks on immigrant families, Tavernier and his son Nils made *The Other Side of the Tracks* (1997) and *Stories of Broken Lives: Lyon’s “double punishment”* (2001) powerfully documenting their plight.

The veteran director, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of all things cinematic, authored two important books: *50 Years of American Cinema*, a 1,247-page work, and *Amis Américains [American Friends]*, a 998-page collection of interviews with and comments on major Hollywood filmmakers, including many of those victimized during the anti-communist witch-hunts.

Tavernier also championed forgotten, neglected or currently “unfashionable” filmmakers, urging all those who cared to listen that they needed to study John Ford, William Wellman, Michael Powell and many other pioneering directors.

“It’s easy to dismiss John Ford by saying that he’s not a Marxist—you don’t have to write another line,” he told one journalist in the mid-1970s. “They used to say that Dickens was a less class-conscious writer than some contemporary Marxists—so what! It is interesting and necessary to see how progressive Dickens was for his own time.”

While it would be impossible in one obituary to fully review

Tavernier’s prodigious output, we will make an effort to point to, and appreciate, his best work. This is especially important for audiences in the US, Australia and other countries where his films received only limited distribution.

Tavernier spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* three times—in July 1999, January 2009 and in July 2019. Each of the conversations was interesting and informative. During the final interview, the French director passionately denounced the vindictive decision of Bowling Green State University in Ohio to remove the name of legendary actress Lillian Gish from its film theatre because of her participation—more than a century earlier—in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), D.W. Griffith’s notoriously racist film. In that telephone interview, Tavernier deplored *The Birth of a Nation* as having a “terrible” viewpoint but added “it’s not by removing the names of actors who played in it that you will understand or get closer to the period and the film in a useful way.”

Tavernier was born during the 1940–1944 German occupation of substantial portions of France. Lyon was a centre for the Nazi forces, including Klaus Barbie, the notorious “Butcher of Lyon.” Tavernier’s parents came from well-to-do Lyonnais families—his father René, a poet and philosopher, his mother Geneviève, from a family of long-established silk manufacturers.

René Tavernier helped establish the *Montchat Confluences*, a literary and arts journal “in the service of humanism,” and published the poetry of Pierre Emmanuel, Henri Michaux, Paul Éluard and Stalinist Communist Party writer Louis Aragon. As members of the politically disparate anti-Nazi Resistance, Tavernier’s parents provided sanctuary to Aragon, his wife Elsa Triolet and used their home to hold meetings with other opponents of the fascist authorities.

Tavernier caught tuberculosis at an early age and was sent to a sanatorium where some of the staff took it upon themselves to screen movies to amuse the patients. “It saved my life,” he told National Public Radio in the US in 2017, “the cinema was something—it gave me dreams; it gave me passion. I think I survive because of the cinema. It gave me hope.”

After the family moved to Paris in 1947, Tavernier regularly attended the movies and with a few high school friends, including Volker Schlöndorff, later a leading German filmmaker, established a film society. They watched scores of films, including the Hollywood classics and other movies that had been banned during the Nazi occupation, but flooded into French cinemas during Tavernier’s teenage years.

While Tavernier’s parents hoped their son would complete a law degree at the Sorbonne, the teenager decided to become a filmmaker and began writing movie reviews for local publications and eventually for *Positif*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Télérama*.

In 1960, Tavernier interviewed film director Jean-Pierre Melville, who

proceeded to hire him as an assistant director on *Léon Morin, Priest* (1961). While the temperamental Melville sacked Tavernier, he secured a job for the 19-year-old as a film publicist.

After making a couple of short films in the early 1960s Tavernier released his first feature, *The Clockmaker*, in 1974. The movie was based on a Georges Simenon novel, from a script developed by Jean Aurenche, Pierre Bost and Tavernier. Shot on location in Lyon, it was a self-assured and impressive debut.

The film explores the complex and changing relationship between Michel Descombes, a humble clockmaker and widower (brilliantly played by Philippe Noiret), and his son Bernard (Sylvain Rougerie), whom he barely knows. Bernard is captured after murdering a security guard at a factory where he worked and put on trial.

While the movie does not suggest there are any political motives for the killing, it carefully traces Michel's changing attitudes towards his son's trial, police methods and the prosecution. Tavernier conveys the pent-up tensions and frustrations amongst ordinary people in early 1970s France, only a few years after the betrayed mass general strike of 1968.

Tavernier's decision to work with Aurenche and Bost—who belonged to France's older generation of filmmakers—was significant and deliberately put him at odds with the edicts previously issued by figures such as New Wave filmmakers François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard.

In 1954, Truffaut argued in his well-known "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" polemic that it was necessary to reject the "literary" traditions of French cinema. Aurenche, Bost and other veteran French filmmakers and screenwriters, Truffaut asserted, were stuck in the "quality tradition" (*la tradition de qualité*) and producing "daddy's cinema." Young filmmakers had to break from this approach, he insisted.

The Clockmaker, in opposition to Truffaut's confused and one-sided suggestions, was a critical and commercial success for Tavernier, opening the way for more scripts with Aurenche and Bost, as well as many more award-winning collaborations with Philippe Noiret.

Tavernier tackled a diverse, almost eclectic, range of stories and themes in subsequent movies. Whilst not all were artistic or popular triumphs, his films always contained important social and psychological insights. Protagonists in Tavernier's films were complex individuals, often outsiders, and generally at odds with government authorities and official public opinion.

The Judge and the Assassin, set in late 19th century France, loosely based on real characters and events, remains an interesting and engaging work. Released in 1976, Tavernier's film is about Joseph Bouvier (Michel Galabru) a wounded former soldier, who, rejected by his fiancé, suffers a mental breakdown, and is committed to a mental asylum.

Bouvier is badly treated by asylum authorities, discharged and begins wandering across rural France committing a series of sexually violent murders of young farm workers. An ambitious judge and prosecutor (Noiret) attempts to use these horrible crimes, and the sensationalist media, to further his own career.

The drama, which takes place during the anti-Semitic witch-hunt and frame-up of Alfred Dreyfus and references the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, exposes the vicious character of the French state—the army, the church, the prisons and the asylums—and its anxiety about the rebellious working class.

One of Tavernier's most widely distributed and popular films, *Coup de Torchon* (1980, also known as *Clean Slate*), is a black comedy based on "hardboiled," left-wing US writer Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280* (1964) about a racist sheriff in the American South in the 1910s.

Tavernier read Thompson's novel in the 1960s and attempted, unsuccessfully, over several years to develop a script with the narrative relocated to France. However, after reading Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *The Journey to End of the Night* (1932), Tavernier decided to transfer the story to a small town in colonial French West Africa and set it in 1938, just

before the outbreak of World War II.

Lucien Cordier (Noiret again), the only policeman in the town, is treated with contempt by most of his compatriots. Everyone, including his wife Huguette (Stéphane Audran), who is busy cheating on him, regard him as a fool. Corrupt, lazy and riddled with self-doubt, Cordier is himself having an affair with Rose Marcaillou (Isabelle Huppert). She is unwittingly drawn into his petty scheming and what eventually becomes a deranged murder spree.

Tavernier's dark film says much about French colonial life and "its corrupt functionaries brutalised by greed and failure," as Leon Trotsky noted in his 1933 comment on Céline's novel.

Life and Nothing But (1989), also with Noiret, and *Capitaine Conan* (1996), featuring Philippe Torreton, are powerful anti-war statements set in the aftermath of World War I. Each film explores, in different ways, how war psychologically damages or destroys its survivors. Both lead characters—one a relatively senior army officer and the other a military commando—are struggling to recover from the horrors of the war whilst attempting to fulfil their military duties during the so-called peace.

Life and Nothing But centres on Major Dellaplane (Noiret), who has been put in charge of locating the whereabouts of an estimated 350,000 missing soldiers, including the identification of thousands of bodies still buried in the battlefields.

Dellaplane becomes friends with two women—Irène de Courtil (Sabine Azéma), from a wealthy industrial family, and Alice (Pascale Vignal), a young unemployed teacher—who are desperately hoping to find long-missing lovers.

In one exchange, Dellaplane tells de Courtil: "You saw the war from afar. War is worse, so much worse. Acres and acres covered with rotting cadavers, no trees and fly-covered heads sticking out of waterholes... It stinks. Swarming with rats..."

De Courtil: "Shut up!"

Dellaplane: "We do nothing but shut up! Who'd listen to us anyway? Who'd print it? The newspapers want only lies and official idiocy."

De Courtil later falls in love with Dellaplane but he is unable to return her affections and she eventually moves to the US. The film ends with shots of the now-retired major in the countryside and reading, in voiceover, a poetic letter confessing his love and asking her to rejoin him in France.

His beautiful letter concludes with a chilling post-script: "In comparison to the three-hour Allied victory march down the Champs-Élysées, if using the same speed, step and military formations, the march of those who died in the war would have lasted 11 days and 11 nights. Forgive me for this crushing accuracy."

Captain Conan concerns the leader of a specialised French commando unit made up of tough characters—some recruited from military prison—and deployed in the Balkans as part of the imperialist intervention against the Russian Revolution. Conan is hailed as a hero during the conflict but treated with contempt by the military brass and unceremoniously discarded when the war is over.

Other sensitive and memorable Tavernier movies made during the 1980s and '90s include *A Sunday in the Country* (1984), a wistful film about an elderly, late-19th century artist and his family; *Round Midnight* (1986), a tribute to the African American jazz musicians who lived and performed in Paris in the 1950s; and *Daddy Nostalgie* (1990), dedicated to Michael Powell, about the relationship between a retired English businessman with heart problems (Dirk Bogarde, his last film) and his daughter (Jane Birkin).

Round Midnight is without doubt the most intelligent film drama about jazz musicians and focuses on ageing saxophonist Dale Turner (Dexter Gordon) and his relationship with a French illustrator, Francis (François Cluzet), a single parent, and his young daughter.

Turner, a fictional combination of Bud Powell and Lester Young among

others, wrestles with drug and alcohol problems, and doubts his ability to maintain his musical creativity. The enigmatic Gordon, personally familiar with these demons, was nominated for an Oscar and received several acting awards for his compelling performance.

In one memorable scene, Turner admits to a psychiatrist, following another, almost fatal, drinking binge: “I’m tired of everything except the music [but] my life is music, my love is music, it’s 24 hours a day. That’s a heavy sentence to face. It’s like something that will not turn off and will not let go of you.”

Round Midnight won both British and Academy Awards for Best Score by Herbie Hancock, who also appeared in the film along with musicians Wayne Shorter, Tony Williams, Ron Carter and John McLaughlin.

Despite the critical and box office success of *Round Midnight* and *Life and Nothing But*, American and Australian distributors shamefully ignored Tavernier’s last seven dramatic features. The best of these—*It All Starts Today* (1999), *Safe Conduct* (2002) and *In the Electric Mist* (2009)—were never released in any US cinemas.

It All Starts Today is one of Tavernier’s most passionate and class-conscious films. Released in 1999, it follows Daniel Lefebvre (Torrenton), a socially committed kindergarten school principal in a northern French coalmining town blighted by high unemployment and serious poverty.

Daniel is in daily conflict with education and local government authorities over the seriously under-resourced facility. Aside from a handful of professional actors, most of the cast, including the children, were drawn from the town.

Safe Conduct is drawn from the first-hand experiences of its two main characters employed in the French film industry under the Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. Set in Paris, the story follows assistant director and Resistance fighter Jean Devaivre (Jacques Gamblin) and screenwriter Jean Aurenche (Denis Podalydès), both trying to maintain their artistic and political integrity while working for the German-controlled Continental Film Studios.

In the Electric Mist is a strong and convincing effort. The film was shot on location in post-Hurricane Katrina Louisiana and based on a James Lee Burke murder mystery. Tommy Lee Jones stars as Dave Robicheaux, a fictional Sheriff Detective investigating a crime. Robicheaux is haunted by the Civil War and its consequences. Musicians Buddy Guy and Levon Helm have small roles in the film. Tavernier clashed with his producers, who insisted on cutting about 10 minutes and then released it straight to DVD. Tavernier put out his version in Europe, with the cuts restored.

Tavernier’s intelligent and socially progressive artistic outlook was animated by a general but acute hostility towards social injustice and the powers-that-be, underpinned by the aphorism of Terence, the ancient Roman playwright—“Nothing human is alien to me.” While Tavernier was able to maintain this humanist approach for much of his career, the first decade of the new century was difficult and politically disorienting for serious artists in every country, including Tavernier.

In 1978, Tavernier told a *Cineaste* journalist that he had been a Trotskyist “for some time” and praised Trotsky’s “beautiful writing about art in *Literature and Revolution*.” But Tavernier’s interest in Trotsky apparently never went beyond a loose association with the *Organisation Communiste Internationaliste* (OCI) in the early 1970s. Speaking with the WSW in 2009, Tavernier said he was persuaded to attend some of the OCI’s meetings by his then regular cinematographer, Pierre-William Glenn, and donated money, but never joined the organisation.

In any case, the OCI broke from the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and genuine Trotskyism in 1971 and moved to the right, focusing its efforts on trying to pressure Francois Mitterrand’s Socialist Party and others in the “left” establishment and the unions.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the weight of countless betrayals of the working class by the Stalinist Communist Party, the Socialist Party and “left” union bureaucrats in France and other countries

saw many lose their bearings and shift or drift to the right.

Tavernier was not immune to these pressures. In 2002, Nicolas Sarkozy—then French president Jacques Chirac’s interior minister—began marketing himself as an enlightened and “reasonable” politician.

When Sarkozy—the former riot policeman and future president—promised to address injustices facing individual immigrants that Tavernier documented in *Stories of broken lives: Lyon’s “double punishment,”* the veteran filmmaker, and a few other artists, swallowed the bait and publicly promoted the right-wing politician.

The French Minister (*Quai d’Orsay*), Tavernier’s 2013 comedy feature, was equally wrong-headed. Based on a popular comic strip, the movie consists of a few weeks in life of a hapless young speechwriter trying to craft the French foreign minister’s speech to the UN, in the days before the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Alexandre Taillard de Worms (Thierry Lhermitte), the film’s fictional Minister of Foreign Affairs, is obviously based on Dominique de Villepin, who served in that post in 2002-2004. The movie disingenuously presents France’s bogus opposition to the American onslaught as a well-intentioned but generally futile exercise and concludes with the film’s foreign minister echoing Villepin’s speech at the UN in February 2003. The speech is presented as a triumph and no mention made in the movie, let alone the end titles, that the French government endorsed the US invasion a few weeks after Villepin’s remarks.

Promoting the film in 2014, Tavernier told *Film Comment* that Villepin’s UN address was “the most brilliant speech in French diplomacy for two or three decades. It was vilified in this country at the time, but he was totally right. Everything which was in the speech is now timeless. It’s precise, intelligent, true, and wise.”

Notwithstanding these rather sad claims and other missteps, Tavernier was able to direct *My Journey Through French Cinema* (2016), a valuable and worthwhile documentary about the masters of French filmmaking and their artistic achievements. The more than three-and-a-quarter hour work, he said, was, “a thank you to all those filmmakers, writers and composers, for the way that they enlightened my life.”

It was a fitting last hurrah for the veteran director whose best films and life-long contribution to cinematic art should be studied and thought about by all young and newly emerging filmmakers, as well as the wider, movie-going public.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact