

The arts, film and television during the second year of the pandemic

David Walsh, Joanne Laurier
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As the year closes, the COVID pandemic is inflicting new levels of entirely preventable misery on the global population, while the stock markets continue to soar. The pandemic is an indictment of capitalism—or, in the form of the pandemic, capitalism indicts itself.

The ongoing surge is inevitably bringing about a new wave of closures of theaters, museums, art fairs and galleries, in part simply from a shortage of healthy labor. The online *Observer* recently noted, “With Covid-19 once more ripping through the world with unfettered deadly force in a new surge, it stands to reason that many arts institutions and fairs are reconsidering whether they should implement new safety measures or even go forward at all.”

Hyperallergic reports that artist and curator Jenni Crain, only 30, died December 16 from “sudden complications related to COVID-19.” It is unclear, they write, “how she contracted the virus.” However, Crain had recently returned from the “blockbuster” Art Basel Miami Beach international art fair in Florida, attended by 60,000 people, “which did not mandate proof of vaccination, but allowed those who provided proof of a negative COVID-19 test to enter the fair. There have been mostly anecdotal reports of a surge in infections during Miami Art Week.”

Artsy.net remarks cheerfully about the Miami Beach event, “Many galleries reported gangbuster sales and collectors—both of the traditional and new variety—clearly came ready to buy.” Death and illness are a small price to pay for “gangbuster sales.”

One year ago, we wrote, “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.”

Now, officially, 5.5 million people have died, with no end in sight, and the arguments have become even more cynical and dishonest.

By “learning to live” with the virus, the billionaire oligarchs mean they have comfortably adjusted to watching masses of other people *die* from it.

The US film industry is recklessly pressing ahead, in the face of the disaster, with its efforts to lure wary audiences back to movie theaters. Film advertisements announce “only in theaters,” and various performers who should know better have been trotted out to promote the “uniqueness” of the theater experience. At what cost?

The success of the latest *Spider-Man* film is being hailed as a further sign of a box office resurgence in 2021, after the disaster of 2020, which saw a 40-year low in movie ticket sales. “This [*Spider-Man: No Way Home*] is such a good harbinger for the future of the theatrical business coming out of the pandemic,” John Fithian, chairman of the National Association of Theatre Owners, told *Variety*. “It’s fantastic news for the rest of the year and into 2022. We think this is a turning point for us.”

The Hollywood studios have little of interest in store in 2022, if

Variety’s list is anything to go by. With a straight face apparently, the publication reports on a “murderer’s row of big screen offerings,” including “*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, *Thor: Love and Thunder*, *Jurassic World: Dominion*, *Avatar 2* and *The Batman*, an update of the Dark Knight saga with Robert Pattinson donning the cape and cowl. It may be lacking in originality, but it’s the kind of lineup that seems tailor-made to pack auditoriums.” That remains to be seen. Audiences face the possibility of a two-pronged attack, from both the empty bombast on the screen and the coronavirus itself.

The list of actors, musicians, painters, dancers and others who have succumbed to COVID-19 or complications from the virus continues to grow. Among many others, that list includes jazz musicians Lee Konitz, Wallace Roney, Ellis Marsalis, Manu Dibango and Bucky Pizzarelli; pop musicians and singers Joe Diffie, John Prine, Charley Pride, Alan Merrill, Adam Schlesinger, Dave Greenfield, Anne Feeney, Carlos Marín, Chris Trousdale, Bruce Williamson, Tommy DeVito, Trini Lopez, Armando Manzanero, Jerry Demara, Frederick Thomas (Fred the Godson) and Ty Chijioke; actors Brandis Kemp, Cloris Leachman, Allen Garfield, Mark Blum, Nick Cordero, Tommy “Tiny” Lister, Carol Sutton, Dawn Wells and Linda Torres. This is just the cost of doing business.

By November 2021, prior to the most recent COVID surge, jobs in “arts, entertainment, and recreation,” according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, had rebounded to 2.23 million, still down 11 percent, or more than 200,000 from February 2020. Tens of thousands of positions are gone for good, with an uncertain future for the sector as a whole. Also, as of November 2021, Johns Hopkins University reports that the percentage of job losses at nonprofit arts organizations remained more than three times worse than the average of all nonprofits. Many music venues, galleries, opera companies, orchestras and smaller museums have staggered through thanks to government money, but for how long? And what will another shutdown, forced perhaps by a lack of willing and able workers, mean for them?

Americans for the Arts points out that during the pandemic, 37 percent of artists have been unable to access or afford food at some point and 58 percent have not visited a medical professional due to an inability to pay.

In “Stages of Grief—What the pandemic has done to the arts,” in *Harper’s*, June 2021, William Deresiewicz, who has done valuable research into the economic state of the arts, commented that that what “has been happening across the arts is not a recession. It is not even a depression. It is a catastrophe.” Artists have adapted, Deresiewicz wrote, “yes—the way you adapt to losing a limb.”

Deresiewicz has pointed to the “devastation of the arts economy ... rooted in the great besetting sin of contemporary American society: extreme and growing inequality.” In his 2020 book, *The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech*, he painted a shocking picture of the pre-pandemic arts and culture world. A handful of the facts will suffice here:

“Of the two million [recording] artists on Spotify, less than 4 percent

account for over 95 percent of streams. Of the roughly fifty million songs available, at last count, on the site, 20 percent have never been streamed, not even once. ...

“As of 2017, according to the economist Alan B. Krueger, the top 0.1 percent of artists were responsible for more than 50 percent of album sales, with similar numbers for downloads and streaming.

“In 1982, according to Krueger, the top 1 percent of artists garnered 26 percent of total concert revenue; by 2017, the number was 60 percent. At a mega-festival of two hundred acts, [one expert] has remarked, 80 percent of the money will go to the three or four headliners. ...

“From 2009 to 2015, according to a survey by the Authors Guild, full-time writers saw their writing-related income decline by an average of 30 percent. From 2001 to 2018, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of people employed as musicians dropped by 24 percent. ...

“Studies [by an activist group] revealed that only 10 percent of the two million arts graduates in the United States make their primary living as artists, that 85 percent of artists in New York City have day jobs unrelated to the arts, and that the other 15 percent have median incomes of \$25,000. Like everything else, the market for art is a winner-takes-all. In 2018, just twenty individuals accounted for 64 percent of total sales by living artists.”

“In the arts ... tech does not eliminate existing producers—creation can’t be automated—it exploits and immiserates them. Jonathan Taplin [in *Move Fast and Break Things*] estimates that between 2004 and 2015, about \$50 billion in annual revenue ‘moved from the creators of content to the owners of monopoly platforms’.”

The COVID crisis has only sharply exacerbated and deepened this social polarization and economic inequality in the arts world. To have a future, artists will need to turn to the working class and to conscious opposition to capitalism.

In any event, the pandemic prevented the regular viewing of films in 2021, except at the cost of risking one’s health. These are lists of films and television series that we managed to see. And WSWS writer Richard Phillips in Australia reminds us of *Minamata* (Andrew Levitas, 2020), about corporate malfeasance and an artist’s struggle to expose it.

Shown in North American movie theaters in 2021:

The Mauritanian (Kevin Macdonald, 2021). A drama about an entirely innocent man abused and tortured by the CIA and US military for over a decade.

Eyimofe (This Is My Desire) (Arie and Chuko Esiri, 2020). A valuable social realistic account of life in Lagos, Nigeria.

Minari (Lee Isaac Chung, 2020). A South Korean family attempts to make its way in the US South.

Martin Eden (Pietro Marcello, 2019). The Jack London novel adapted and brought to the screen.

Judas and the Black Messiah (Shaka King, 2021). An account of the joint FBI and Chicago police plot to murder Black Panther leader Fred Hampton in 1969.

Screened at festivals in 2021:

Ha'berech /Ahed's Knee (Nadav Lapid).

A Leave (Lee Ran-hee)

La caja /The Box (Lorenzo Vigas)

Radiograph of a Family (Firouzeh Khosrovani)

Câmp de maci /Poppy Field (Eugen Jebeleanu)

Captains of Zaatari (Ali El Arabi)

Other films shown in movie theaters worth mentioning:

Attica (Stanley Nelson & Traci Curry)

The Viewing Booth (Ra'anan Alexandrowicz)

Ascension (Jessica Kingdon)

The Electrical Life of Louis Wain (Will Sharpe)

The Truth (Kore-eda Hirokazu)

The White Tiger (Ramin Bahrani)

Georgetown (Christoph Waltz)

The Disciple (Chaitanya Tamhane)

A Crime on the Bayou (Nancy Buirski)

Stillwater (Tom McCarthy)

Television or web series/mini-series

Dopesick

Succession

The Barrier (Spain)

Colonia Dignidad

Maid

Squid Game

Impeachment (American Crime Story)

Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror

Stefan Steinberg

The First 54 Years: An Abbreviated Manual for Military Occupation (Avi Mograbi, 2021)

Herr Bachmann und seine Klasse (Mr Bachmann and His Class, Maria Speth, 2021)

The Mauritanian (Kevin Macdonald, 2021)

Die Saat (The Seed, Mia Meyer, 2021, review in German)

Azor (Andreas Fontana, 2021, review in German)

Je suis Karl (Christian Schwochow, 2021)

I Care a Lot (J Blakeson, 2020)

Waiting for the Barbarians (Ciro Guerra, 2019)

I include one more film and three series...

The Auschwitz Report (Peter Bebjak, 2021). The film is based on the true story of two Slovak Jews who escaped from Auschwitz in 1944 and provided one of the first direct reports on the extermination policies being carried out in the death camp.

The Chair (Amanda Peet and Annie Julia Wyman, 2021). An entertaining and at times penetrating series on Netflix exploring the huge influence of the identity politics lobby on US university campuses. The weakness of the series is its failure to identify the social roots of such politics.

O Mecanismo (The Mechanism, José Padilha, 2018-19). A two-part series (available on Netflix) centering on the Operation Car Wash corruption scandal and the thoroughgoing rottenness of the Brazilian ruling elite.

Westwall (Written by Benedikt Gollhardt, 2021). A six-part series shown on the German ZDF channel. Neo-Nazis plan a violent takeover of the state based on a series of bombings planned for a Day X. They have the backing of an extreme-right conspiratorial group with links inside the German police and intelligence service. Gollhardt writes that the inspiration for *Westwall* were revelations of the activities of the NSU terror group, which carried out a series of racist murders with the involvement of police and intelligence service undercover agents.

Verena Nees

Charité intensiv–Station 43 (Charité intensive–Station 43, Carl Gierstorfer, 2021)

Természetes fény (Natural Light, Dénes Nagy, 2021)

Azor (Andreas Fontana, 2021, review in German)

Fabian oder Der Gang vor die Hunde (Fabian: Going to the Dogs, Dominik Graf, 2021)

The Mauritanian (Kevin Macdonald, 2021)

Those interesting films were shown at the Berlinale 2021 and we reviewed them together with several others:

Herr Bachmann und seine Klasse (Mr Bachmann and His Class, Maria Speth, 2021)

Ich bin Dein Mensch (I'm Your Man, Maria Schrader, 2021)



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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