

Orwell: 2+2=5—Raoul Peck’s film about George Orwell and contemporary events

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Raoul Peck’s new film *Orwell: 2+2=5* combines material on English writer and journalist George Orwell’s life and opinions with clips from screen adaptations of the latter’s *1984* (from which the film’s title phrase comes) and scenes of (or moments from) various political events. The film is intended as a warning against the danger of authoritarianism and official propaganda distortion of reality.

Orwell (the pen name of Eric Blair, 1903-1950) first became known for his socially critical and valuable works rising from the conditions of the Depression, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).

At a time when many intellectuals turned uncritically toward the Communist Party, Orwell, to his credit, opposed Stalinism from the left. *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) is an honest account of his experience in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the Stalinists’ betrayal of the Spanish and international working class. Orwell later wrote *Animal Farm* (1945), a fable about the Russian Revolution and the emergence of Stalinism (“a satirical tale against Stalin,” he called it), and *1984* (1949), a dystopian work about a violently totalitarian society ruled as a one-party dictatorship under a leader known as Big Brother.

Peck’s *2+2=5* is framed by Orwell’s last years on the Isle of Jura in Scotland, where he was writing *1984*, while his tubercular condition continued to worsen, leading to his death in early 1950. Narrator Damian Lewis, as Orwell, asserts early on, “When I sit down to write a book, I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose.” This sets the generally uncritical tone toward the author. Orwell is a paragon of honesty and objectivity, cutting through the falsehoods advanced by the authorities. Orwell’s example, the film implies, is the answer to Putin and Trump, to Le Pen and Xi.

Interspersed with sequences representing Orwell’s bleak existence on Jura and images and sequences from contemporary life and 20th century history (more about that later) supposedly illustrating his arguments and themes, the new film sketchily follows Blair-Orwell’s life from childhood in India, to education at Eton and a job as an imperial police officer in Burma, where his political education about colonialism and oppression began.

Orwell’s important experience in the Spanish Civil War, as a volunteer fighting with the centrist POUM (Workers Party of Marxist Unification) in Catalonia, is only briefly touched upon. None of the political issues involved in the struggle between Trotskyism and Stalinism receive treatment. The film then refers to Orwell’s work for the BBC during World War II, his wife’s death in 1945 and the final period of his own life in Scotland (when he was mainly writing for the left Labourite *Tribune*, the *Observer* and the *Manchester Evening News*), while endeavoring to complete *1984*.

The presentation of critical political events in *Orwell: 2+2=5* is disorganized and very difficult to follow. Other than the desire to point to episodes the filmmakers consider significant, no discernible method for organizing the material emerges. The film is a welter of fleeting,

sensationalized images. (For those who can remember it or have seen the film, the 1962 Italian “documentary” *Mondo Cane* comes to mind, only a political version of the same.)

Peck and co-producer Alex Gibney throw everything that apparently occurs to them into the work, without coherent thought or analysis. The plight of the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Colin Powell’s lies at the UN in 2003, the bombing of Berlin in World War II, Nazi atrocities and political rallies, mass death in Gaza, images of Augusto Pinochet, Ferdinand Marcos, Stalin, Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán and Netanyahu, the January 6, 2021 attempted coup, the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Edward Snowden’s comments on NSA spying, Black Lives Matter protests, the funeral of Alexei Navalny and much more flash before the spectator’s eyes.

The different figures and incidents take up from a few seconds to a few minutes of screen time, and their disconnected, quasi-arbitrary quality renders *Orwell: 2+2=5* both irritating and extraordinarily tedious. One feels that one has crawled in the mind of a discontented, overwhelmed semi-left artist or intellectual, one without an informed perspective on *any* of the events he introduces, and the results are not happy, to say the least. Peck made a valuable film in *The Young Karl Marx* (2017), and he has exposed certain of the crimes of colonialism and international finance in other works, but here, attempting to generalize about the evolution of modern society using George Orwell as his guide, he comes up fatally short.

What is one to make of the events referenced in *2+2=5*, many of them disturbing or even horrifying? And what is to be done about them? The presence of Sen. Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, filmmaker Michael Moore, Janine Johnson of the liberal media watchdog group FAIR, academic Shoshana Zuboff (*The Support Economy: Why Corporations Are Failing Individuals and the Next Episode of Capitalism* [2002]), the late media critic Robert McChesney and others provides clues to the filmmakers’ social reformist orientation.

(The absence of Julian Assange is perhaps not surprising. Gibney’s *We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks* (2013) was, the WSWS argued, “a political hatchet job against Julian Assange and dovetails with the media and US government campaign against the WikiLeaks web site.”)

The Peck-Gibney film concludes with a tribute to the “proles,” in Orwell’s expression, the common people, and a belief in their general decency and “moral code.” This is not especially convincing, as a good deal of the film is made up of imagery of “common people” doing terrible things.

In an interview with *Democracy Now!*, Peck commented, revealingly, that he recalled “when we started working” on *2+2=5*:

For me, Kamala Harris was going to be president, so—and despite that [!], I knew that this country and many other countries around the world needed Orwell to come back...because he had been one

of the incredibly analyzer of how a totalitarian regime [emerges], but also any type of abuse of power function.

This is Kamala Harris of the “Genocide Joe” Biden administration! In any event, Orwell “recognized the signs” of authoritarianism, Peck continued:

the attack on the press, the attack on justice, the attack on academia, the attack on any institution that can be a bulwark against totalitarian. And we are living again and again—not only in the United States, but in many other countries, including in Europe, in Latin America, in Africa—the same playbook playing again and again.

The director later pointed to the civil rights movement in the US as his model:

You know, it was a coalition of very different people, very different movements, and they succeeded in changing this country.

The drive to fascist dictatorship is a pressing and dangerous reality in the US, and not only the US. But as the WSWS has pointed out, to send Trump and his ilk around the world to the dustbin of history, it is first necessary to understand what these gangsters represent.

Trump is not a rogue individual, but the political representative of the American capitalist oligarchy. He is the personification of a ruling class that has spent decades enriching itself through financial speculation, parasitism and the relentless impoverishment of the working class.

Orwell: 2+2=5 is woefully lacking in concrete, insightful *class* analysis. For that, it largely substitutes, as noted, a collection of impressions and fragments of historical events removed from social and historical context. Trump is bad, but so is Putin. There was Hitler ... but then there was Stalin. People are easily fooled, demagogues are not questioned, entire populations are manipulated. “The unhappiness that rains on living men!”

The film is not enlightening or helpful, it only adds to the confusion that exists about critical social and historical problems.

Should George Orwell be held responsible for this, or are his name and reputation being abused and misused?

That's a complex question. *2+2=5* takes Orwell's weakest sides and amplifies them, but, yes, to a large extent he does bear responsibility. His trajectory in the last years of his life, although not untypical for his social class and milieu, was a bad one, toward anticommunism.

In his director's notes, Peck argues that Orwell was “vilified” by some, and “demonized” by others.

Yet, he stands alone, prickly and defiant. A visionary. An anarchist in disguise. A hard-headed reporter with a soft heart. A fiction-maker who reveals the world as it really is.

Orwell.

Is this true, that Orwell revealed the world as it really was? It is not possible to accept this, based on the historical record.

Orwell performed a valuable service to the international working class, one which endures, in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) in exposing the Stalinist calumnies that “Trotskyists” were undermining the Republican effort during the Spanish Civil War, allegedly acting as agents of capitalism and fascism. Meanwhile, the Stalinists were defending private property and colonialism and Spanish capitalism generally, sabotaging the struggle and making possible the fascist victory. Anyone, Orwell wrote in that work,

who criticizes Communist policy from a Left-wing standpoint is liable to be denounced as a Trotskyist. Is it then asserted that everyone professing revolutionary extremism is in Fascist pay?

He denounced the anti-Trotskyist slander campaign:

This charge was repeated over and over in the Communist Press, especially from the beginning of 1937 onwards. It was part of the world-wide drive of the official Communist Party against ‘Trotskyism,’ of which the P.O.U.M. was supposed to be representative in Spain. ‘Trotskyism,’ according to *Frente Rojo* (the Valencia Communist paper) ‘is not a political doctrine. Trotskyism is an official capitalist organization, a Fascist terrorist band occupied in crime and sabotage against the people.’ The P.O.U.M. was a ‘Trotskyist’ organization in league with the Fascists and part of ‘Franco’s Fifth Column.’ ...

For his efforts at establishing elementary historical truth, Orwell came under furious attack from the worldwide Stalinist apparatus.

This was the high point of Orwell's political and intellectual contribution. His trajectory over the last decade of his life (1940-1950) can only be understood by tracing the evolution of a generation of left intellectuals during this period. As the WSWS commented in 1998:

After the conclusion of the Second World War, many former “lefts” rapidly became anticommunists. With the temporary restabilization of world capitalism and the Stalinist regime in the USSR and the division of the world into spheres of influence of the rival imperialist and Stalinist blocs, socialists and radical intellectuals like Orwell came under enormous pressure to line up with one side or the other in the Cold War.

Already in 1946, in an article, *Second Thoughts on James Burnham*, Orwell made politically damnable statements. He referred there to an article by the ex-Trotskyist, ex-socialist renegade Burnham, rapidly on his way to the extreme right, entitled “Lenin’s Heir,” in which the author argued that Stalin had not “betrayed” the Russian Revolution, “but has merely carried forward on lines that were implicit in it from the start.” Orwell expressed his general agreement with this ignorant and reactionary thesis, the basis of one of the great lies of the 20th century, that Stalinism was the inevitable product of the October Revolution of 1917.

The supposedly implacably honest Orwell falsified Trotsky's analysis, and he was fully aware he was doing so, reducing it to the claim

that Stalin is a mere crook who has perverted the Revolution to his own ends, and that things would somehow have been different if Lenin had lived or Trotsky had remained in power. Actually there is no strong reason for thinking that the main lines of development would have been very different. Well before 1923 the seeds of a totalitarian society were quite plainly there.

Orwell, also in predictable fashion, was now placing the Trotskyists among the “ultra Left sects.”

By the time of his writing *1984*, Orwell was explicit that the chief target of that book, about a society ruled by one dictatorial party and ideologically propped up by the party’s Thought Police, was

communism, because that is the dominant form of totalitarianism, but I was trying chiefly to imagine what communism would be like if it were firmly rooted in the English speaking countries.

The arguments in Orwell’s 1948 article, “*Marx and Russia*,” an approving review of a Cold War diatribe by a right-wing academic (*What is Communism?*, John Plamenatz, 1947), are again constructed in a dishonest and false manner.

After repeating the trite argument that “Marx had foretold that revolution would happen first in the highly industrialised countries,” Orwell observes that Marx was right in the sense that

the kind of revolution that he foresaw could not happen in a backward country like Russia, where the industrial workers were a minority. Marx had envisaged an overwhelmingly powerful proletariat sweeping aside a small group of opponents, and then governing democratically through elected representatives. What actually happened, in Russia, was the seizure of power by a small body of classless professional revolutionaries, who claimed to represent the common people but were not chosen by them nor genuinely answerable to them.

In fact, as honest historians have established, the October Revolution was a deeply popular undertaking, the most democratic mass uprising in history. Many of the difficulties ultimately facing the Bolshevik government arose from the isolation of the revolution, for which international social democracy, with which Orwell was associated, was fundamentally responsible.

Several decades ago it was revealed that in 1949 Orwell had turned over a list of names of individuals he considered to be sympathetic to the Moscow regime to the British government’s Information Research Department, an arm of the Foreign Office set up for the purpose of organizing anti-Soviet and anticommunist propaganda. The WSWS commented:

[Orwell] had become so embittered by Stalinist betrayals that he was prepared to make common political cause with British imperialism. He considered bourgeois democracy the “lesser evil” in relation to Stalinism. This was a political judgment which testified to his rejection of Marxism and of a genuinely revolutionary perspective.

And further, Orwell

dismissed the historic significance of the Russian Revolution, saw nothing left to defend of this revolution, and never concerned himself with the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

These are issues that need to be weighed and considered in connection with the release and promotion of Peck’s *Orwell: 2+2=5*.



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