

Marxism Re-imaged

Review: Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen (eds.)
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and Practice*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. 293 pp.

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If the cinema has lost its privileged position as the most important art, and if communism has almost ubiquitously given way to neoliberal capitalism, then wherein lies the relevance of a Marxist approach to cinema studies? This is the main question answered by the authors and editors of this timely and enlightening volume. In their Introduction, Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen remind us that the moving image, which now embraces such a wide range of vehicles as cellphone films and computer games, has consolidated its grip on culture and the human mind (1-26). Even though ‘practically everyone can be a filmmaker these days, the road to a mass audience is more difficult than ever, with fewer, and mostly Hollywood films occupying the privileged sites of mass exhibition’ (12). For Mazierska and Kristensen, these transformations in the moving image coupled with the hegemonic role of neoliberal capitalism invite a Marxist analysis. The essays in this volume draw upon not only Karl Marx and Immanuel Kant, but also Walter Benjamin, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, and a host of other theoreticians to explore this question at length.

Anecdotally, I recall a meeting of a special interest caucus at a Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in the early 1990s when, in the wake of the demise of the pre-eminence of psychoanalysis as a theoretical mediation in US cinema studies, the question was raised, ‘from what framework do we read films now?’ Christine Holmlund of the University of Tennessee suggested Marxism, and there ensued a moment of silence not unlike that featured in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Bande à part/Band of Outsiders* (France, 1964). Marxism had indeed become synonymous with a world that had crumbled. The Cold War was a thing of the past, and statues of Marx and self-proclaimed Marxist leaders had toppled throughout the Eastern Bloc. Yet, as *Marx at the Movies* clearly demonstrates, Marxism as a critical mediation is a highly relevant and elucidative tool for studying film and broader aspects of culture.

The book had its origins at an eponymous conference held in Preston, UK, at the University of Central Lancashire in 2012. The chapters published

constitute thoroughly lengthened and developed versions of selected papers presented, and provide dynamic and well-theorised contributions to the burgeoning reconceptualisation of Marxist debates on cinema and the moving image at large. While several essays deal with highly theoretical issues that appeal to scholars with a thorough grounding in Marxism, others are more introductory in nature, and can serve as tools whereby the neophyte can develop her knowledge of Marxist philosophy and its application to film. For those not yet specialised in Marxism, a shifting around of the essays may well prove helpful inasmuch as the chapters do not progress in order of difficulty. However approached, though, *Marx at the Movies* proves to us that Marxism, regardless of the specious conflation of its ideas with twentieth-century communism, provides an ever-evolving lens for imagining alternative worlds. It is no irony that the title of the second volume to emerge from the Marx at the Movies Conference is *Marxism and Film Activism: Imagining Alternative Worlds* (see Mazierska and Kristensen 2015).

The first essay in the book, Mike Wayne's 'The Dialectical Image: Marx, Kant, and Adorno,' is one of the most theoretically challenging (27-45). Nonetheless, it provides a solid examination of the trajectory of the notion of the dialectical image in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Arguing that the *image* has traditionally held a lower status than the *word*, and hence become the domain of the less-educated masses, Wayne explores the cross-fertilisation between word and image that characterises German philosophy. Drawing upon George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* (Canada/France/USA, 2005), he discusses the ramifications of the dialectical images of our contemporary media 'whose spectacles distract and manipulate the masses' (41). Wayne foregrounds a sequence in which a group of humans raid a zombie village in search of food, and distract the monsters with a beautiful display of fireworks, which provides for the zombies 'a trace of the human feeling for what they once were' (41). In contrast, the humans, who launch the display from militarised vehicles, can, by and large, no longer appreciate the beauty due to their brutal conditions. For Wayne, the 'skyflowers' constitute a dialectical image that obscures the firm division between the humans and the monstrous, the civilised and the bestial (43). Part of the beauty of the dialectical image lies in its combination of stasis and transcendence, recalling Adorno's argument that '[n]atural beauty is suspended history, a moment of becoming at a standstill' (Adorno 1997: 93) Wayne further 'sees the duty of the Marxist film historian as that of somebody who collects and elucidates Dialectical images in all sorts of films, including those which seem to be made purely for entertainment' (15).

In 'The Utopian Function of Film Music', Johan Siebers draws upon Ernst Bloch to explore the utopian nature of film (46-61). Although Bloch was

critical of the commercial nature of film, he acknowledged its revolutionary and utopian potential (46). Siebers stresses that for Bloch, music was the most utopian of all of the arts. ‘It comes the closest to expressing the deepest strivings and hopes... [music is] the art form which makes the life-will itself accessible to experience’ (54). Bloch argued that in silent film, ‘music, which runs like a tapestry underneath the moving image, has the task of compensating for all the other senses, establishing the connection between the image on the screen and lived reality’ (54). The mere fact that film privileges the optical, thereby rendering the rest of the senses peripheral, ‘heightens the utopian potential even more, because the utopian, the absolute, is given to us in the indirect experience, at the periphery of our field of experience and in the gaps in the field of experience, in the irreducible gap between foreground and background’ (54). Siebers cites such films as *The Pink Panther* (Blake Edwards, USA, 1963), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1975), *Star Wars* (George Lucas, USA, 1977) and *The Lord of the Rings* (Peter Jackson, USA/New Zealand, 2001-2003) as evidence that music pulls the viewer forward to open possibility. For Siebers, cinema, in its coordination of the ‘not-yet’ of imagination, sensory perception and the ideational space, opens up for the viewer radical futurity.

In ‘Bloch on Film as Utopia: Terrence Davies’ *Distant Voices, Still Lives*’, Ian Fraser examines a 1988 British film that, at first glance, seems inimical to Marxist analysis (62-81). In his study, Fraser foregrounds those filmic elements that are often ignored in Marxist analysis and which define Davies’ film, among them pantomime, the technical work of the camera, character gestures, and the close relationship between film and painting. Fraser stresses that the affective power of the film, which debunks patriarchy, responds to Bloch’s call for a kindling of the imagination and consciousness of the masses, allowing them to overcome oppression and ‘achieve the “hope-content of the world”’ (76). For Fraser, Davies’ film is replete with ‘pictorial moments of subjective... hope’ (80), which depict working-class life and suggest what it may become once we shatter the bonds of capitalism. Indeed, the viewers of the film can become ‘humanity actively comprehending itself’ (80).

Fritz Lang’s third Hollywood film, *You and Me* (USA, 1938), was a failure both critically and commercially. Although it is one of Lang’s films that most overtly attests to his great admiration for Bertolt Brecht, its political ideologies do not at first appear to be leftist in nature. As Robin Wood has stressed, it explicitly employs Brechtian devices ‘in the service of a safe capitalist moral’, and if such a choice is made ironically, it is only accessible to the most intellectually sophisticated viewer (Wood 2000: 4). Nonetheless, in ‘But Joe, It’s “Hour of Ecstasy”’: A Materialist Re-evaluation of Fritz Lang’s *You and Me*’, Iris Luppá reveals that a thoughtful analysis of the film’s narrative strategies complicates the superficial disjuncture between

the film's apparently reactionary stance and its Brechtian devices (82-101). She stresses that Lang, like Brecht, had an affinity for addressing audiences in unfamiliar ways. Nonetheless, the film's Marxist dimension merely serves to render viewers cognizant of capitalist exploitation. Luppá concludes that although Lang did not share Brecht's politics, he did 'help to create a vigilant audience nonetheless, without offering any political solutions beyond the ability to start noticing (ideological) contradiction' (100).

Marxists can indeed laugh, as demonstrated by the next two essays, both of which focus on comedy. In 'Laughing Matters: Four Marxist Takes on Film Comedy' (102-122), Jakob Ladegaard distils two opposing views of the politics of comedy, namely 'the false, affirmative spectacle of distracting entertainment (or, comedy *as* ideology) and the ridiculous laughter of materialist critique' (103). In short, Marxist approaches to comedy assume two principal directions: 'the denunciation of comedy as ideology, or comedy as a form of ideology critique that reconnects ideas to the material world through humour' (17). Regarding comedy as ideology, Ladegaard explores Adorno's denouncement of laughter and ridicule as key components of the culture industry. He then examines comedy as ideological critique through the Bakhtinian devices of Grigori Aleksandrov and Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Staroye i novoye/The Old and the New/The General Line* (USSR, 1929) and Dušan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* (Canada/France/West Germany, 1974). Recalling the critical stances of Rancière, Benjamin and Brecht, Ladegaard then explores how Godard's politics are developed through a montage of incongruent elements. Finally, he draws upon Slavoj Žižek and Alenka Zupančič to foreground the relationship between comedic characters and a critique of power in Ernst Lubitsch's *To Be or Not to Be* (USA, 1942). Ladegaard eloquently asserts that '[t]rue comedy is always moving, ever on the lookout for the overlooked perspective. In the spirit of comic couples from Don Quijote and Sancho Panza to Laurel and Hardy and beyond, it invites the Marxist critic to come along' (120).

In a second take on comedy, Dennis Rothermel's 'Workerist Film Humour' presents an analysis of John Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (USA, 1948), and argues that the gold diggers who laugh at the loss of their California gold rush fortune reveal that they understand that there is no real value in the exchange value of gold, and thus are in agreement with Marx (123-146). Working through such other films as Ugo Gregoretti's *Omicron* (Italy, 1964), Ermanno Olmi's *Il Posto/The Job* (Italy, 1961), Ken Loach's *The Navigators* (UK/Germany/Spain, 2001), and Želimir Žilnik's *Stara škola kapitalizma/The Old School of Capitalism* (Serbia, 2009), Rothermel's analysis leads to a critique of structural dialectics, which stifles Marxist film analysis. Nonetheless, by watching films through the lens of Marxist labour

value, a viewer can be liberated even through mainstream film. Rothermel argues that '[i]t is in how workerist humour is situated in the context of the immediacy of the conditions of labour that it shows its exuberant glee' (144).

One of the most interesting aspects of *Marx at the Movies* is that, of the twelve essays included, only two deal with cinemas from the former Eastern Bloc. In 'Alienated Heroes: Marxism and the Czechoslovak New Wave', Peter Hames explores the extent to which Czechoslovak films of the 1960s reflect socialist beliefs (147-170). The Czechoslovak New Wave was arguably a critique of Stalinism in all of its dimensions, and Hames draws upon the work of Marxist philosophers Karel Kosík and Ivan Sviták to explore the responsibility of the cinema in what concerns humanistic socialism. Hames' analysis is historicised, drawing attention to a 1963 conference on Franz Kafka held in Liblice, which foregrounded the importance of alienation in the author's work. For Hames, what can be termed communist alienation characterises such Czech New Wave films as Evald Schorm's *Kazdy den odvahu/Everyday Courage* (Czechoslovakia, 1964), Věra Chytilová's *Sedmikrásky/Daisies* (Czechoslovakia, 1966), Jiří Menzel's *Ostre sledované vlaky/Closely Observed Trains* (Czechoslovakia, 1966), and numerous others. Hames argues that, although the Czechoslovak cinema has never been able to recapture the role it played in the 1960s, Chytilová's films of the 1970s and 1980s are imbued with political force. He also stresses that it is in the realm of the documentary that the critical legacy of the New Wave can be found. Hames argues: '[a]bove all, documentary seems to have provided the framework for the reflection, authenticity, tragedy, humour, and sense of the absurd that once characterised the films of the 1960s. The "crisis of modernity" and the problems of alienation have hardly been transcended' (168-169).

Marx at the Movies then segues smoothly into an examination of documentary. In 'The Work and Rights of the Documentary Protagonist', Silke Panse explores immaterial labour through a discussion of the relationship between documentary protagonists and the images taken of them by others (171-197). Since these protagonists are not actors, they are not paid for their images, and hence cannot make the claim that they work immaterially. For Panse, the filmmaker becomes owner of the images and, in line with true capitalism, they appropriate the value generated by the documentary protagonist. Panse argues that '[t]he generative work and the affective labour of the documentary protagonist slip through the gaps of Marx's conception of living labour as working with external materials, of post-Marxist thought that only sees the material of the image, and of human rights which assign the freedom of expression of the worker only to the image-taker' (193).

The editors' claim that, despite the changing role of the cinema, the moving image is still a vital discourse through other media is brought home in William Brown's 'Amateur Digital Filmmaking and Capitalism', an essay that further explores the discourse on immaterial labour (198-217). Denouncing the exploitative nature of such sites as YouTube, Brown argues that the revolution that would place the power of the moving image in the hands of the people is simply not happening. And were such a revolution to take place in a spectacular manner, it would be immediately capitalised. Brown thus advocates for slow transformation. He stresses that '[e]ven within the context of a society in which immaterial labour is increasingly common – and even in a world where access to digital media may well be the preserve predominantly of Westerners and the rest of the world's bourgeoisie – both would-be professional and deliberately amateur films take us slowly in the direction of our socialist future' (215).

The next two essays draw upon filmic interpretations of *Das Kapital/Capital* (1867) in highly-distinct manners. In the realm of the classical cinema, John Hutnyk's 'Citizen Marx/Kane' draws a parallel between *Citizen Kane* and Marx's book (218-243). When read together, these two seemingly disparate works symbiotically enrich the viewer's understanding of both. Through an exploration of such notions as the allegory of property, philosophic biography, and the fetishisation of objects, Hutnyk asserts that a Hollywood classic like *Kane* can render *Capital* relevant to the present day. He illustrates that what we see in the film that is not in Marx's book 'is the personification of a class system' (240). For Hutnyk, a Marxist reading of Welles' film serves to debunk the obscuring of the oppressive regime of capital and the alibis in the name of philanthropy that capitalists deploy 'for their acquisitive plunder' (240).

Ewa Mazierska's 'The Meaning of History and the Uses of Translation in *News from Ideological Antiquity—Marx/Eisenstein/The Capital* (Video 2008) by Alexander Kluge' once again draws a parallel between Marx's book and the moving image, but this time in the domain of radical filmmaking (244-266). Deeming Kluge's film one of the 'most heterogeneous and complex films ever made' and 'one of the most complex political works' (244), Mazierska argues that it 'falls into a no-man's land between politics and cinema, as well as between different media' (244). She explores how the film, as an adaptation of Marx's work, incorporates such discourses as history and translation. In essence, it constitutes a translation of an unadaptable book. Mazierska emphasises Kluge's claim that today's neoliberalism reflects the context of *Capital* even more than did the very period in which Marx wrote. Of particular interest is Mazierska's discussion of the contrasting ways in which Eisenstein and Kluge confront Marx's work. While Eisenstein advocates for maximum abstraction, which would destroy the cinema as we know it and create a truly abstract and intellectual

form, Kluge views the work as a story of real people, and not only ideas. Mazierska affirms that in order to understand and change our reality, we need both the ‘Marx who analyses the *status quo* and the Marx who is outraged by it and projects the future’ (265). She concludes that ‘[o]ur duty... is to put Marx into motion, keep presenting his work in new forms and adapting it to new generations of readers, including those whose visual literacy greatly exceeds their reading skills’ (265).

The final essay of this fine collection, unlike the others, discusses films in which we see moving images portraying Marx himself. Martin Brady’s ‘Marx for Children: *Moor and the Ravens of London* and *Hans Röckle and the Devil*’ examines two East German children’s films, highlighting the production, reception, historical content, context, and distribution of these works (267-286). According to Brady, these films, one an historical costume drama and the other a fairy tale, depict the dreams of a utopia. ‘[Both] portray the philosopher as a benevolent, paternalistic inventor and visionary. Both also present his utopia as a dream yet-to-be realised, viewing education, technological progress, and therefore by analogy the medium of cinema itself... as means of reaching Hans Röckle’s Promised Land’ (284). It is most appropriate that *Marx at the Movies* concludes with a discussion of children’s films. After all, these, by nature, are future-oriented. Brady’s essay, moreover, is most timely in light of the growing international attention drawn in the last few years to other Eastern European children’s films, including those of the sole woman director of communist Albania, Khanfise Keko, whose work advocated for social justice despite the repressiveness of the regime.

Marxism at the Movies provides an excellent road map to the philosophy of Marx, but not always in the most expected way. It eschews hackneyed discussion in favour of rich critical prisms that reveal the fertility of Marxism as a critical mediation of the moving image. The diverse perspectives it presents render Marxist ideology vivid, tangible, and most relevant. We grasp how it can open interpretative windows to works as diverse as the zombie films of George A. Romero and the complex intellectual meditations of Alexander Kluge. Geographically, it travels from the Sierra Madre to the streets of Prague, stopping in places like London and Berlin along the way. We tremble, we laugh, we intellectualise, and we nurture future generations. Yet, at the same time, Marxist critics are charged with an imperative task. Mazierska and Kristensen argue that films indeed have the potential to foster political and social transformation. Yet they need to avoid both the service of capital and the sterile avant-garde. ‘The role of a Marxist film historian is to discover and rediscover such art, encourage filmmakers to create it and viewers to seek it’ (22).

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