Film text and context: gender, ideology, and identities

Marxism and film

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Although Marx never went to the movies, Marxism has significantly affected filmmaking by politically committed directors such as Sergei Eisenstein and Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, as well as shaped the critical and historical analysis of film in aesthetic, institutional, social, and political terms. Fundamental Marxist concepts such as ideology profoundly inform contemporary theories of and approaches to the analysis of individual films as well as to cinema as a social institution. Marxism fuses several different sources and types of concern. From English political economy, Marx developed his understanding of the economic foundation as fundamentally shaping (though not immutably determining) the social superstructure. From German philosophy, by inverting Hegelian idealism into a materialism that saw the world as historical and dynamically changing, Marx studied capitalism and capitalist societies as always in process. From French socialism, Marx drew his analysis of class-divided society with an active working class struggling for economic and social justice against the ruling capitalist class. Although internally divided by different movements, schools, and tendencies, and sometimes deformed into dogmatism in theory and dictatorship in practice, in its comprehensiveness, and at its best, Marxism provides a remarkably supple method for analysis. It combines practical progressive and democratic political goals with a social examination that centres on historical development and the dialectical potential for change. For this reason, Marxist analysis is an essential part of much contemporary gender, race, ethnicity, and post-colonial thinking in film studies, even when not explicitly underlined.

Marx and Engels did not write a full-fledged aesthetic, but their comments on art (almost exclusively on literature) can be synthesized into a view which validates the Western classics and upholds a broadly constructed realism in representation and narration (Motawi 1973; Solomon 1973). Marx recognized Balzac as personally a royalist in politics, but viewed his novels as narratives that accurately portrayed the complex social fabric of their time. Similarly, Lenin saw Tolstoy as a political reactionary but the author of novels which mirrored the social-political tensions of Russia. Such was the orthodoxy until the Bolshevist revolution, when Marxism shaped cinema and the other arts. With Marxism holding state power, questions of entertainment versus instruction, traditional versus radical form, drama versus documentary, literary versus visual communication, foreign versus foreign (especially Hollywood) models, ethnic nationalism versus national culture, religious versus secular culture, urban versus rural, and popular audience versus intellectual creators, were raised as practical as well as theoretical matters. Intellectuals experienced and vigorously argued over both the economics of constructing a socialist film industry relying on box-office receipts and the relation of creative output to party doctrines and priorities. Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Lev Kulishov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and others were as filmmakers while intellectuals from different tendencies participated in the highly political and polemical debates (Taylor and Christie 1988).

The crucible of the Soviet Union of the 1920s first played out issues still important in later times and other places. In the USSR a national mass culture emerged, itself industrialized in production and partly responsive to market conditions in consumption. The state-party took control of information and journalism, as radio, the newsreel, and educational film developed. And, given limited print literacy, print journalism was complemented and, in many cases, superseded by audio and visual journalism. A comprehensive understanding of Soviet film demands an understanding of this larger context. Within the narrower realm of film aesthetics, the period dramatized several key issues. Because many artistic innovators joined the early years of the revolution, film experimentalism appeared in radical forms ranging from Alexander Dovzhenko’s lyrical poeticism to Vertov’s rigorous montage of images (and later sound–image) and Eisenstein’s epic and operatic work. The intellectual studies of the Russian Formalists contributed to the question of innovative forms matching a revolutionary content (see Christie, Part 1, Chapter 7). Traditional forms were viewed as compromised, and the possibility of developing intellectual content through the means of film form and expressive stylistics was asserted.

At the same time in the West, particularly Germany, a heightened awareness of capitalism’s encroachment on the fields of culture and leisure developed with the rise of an urban mass culture audience and new means of mass-produced and disseminated culture and journalism: cinema, recorded music, the radio, the picture newspaper, and so on. Krauss (1995), Brecht (1964), and Benjamin (1936) witnessed the expansion of the mass audience, fearing for its passivity but also identifying the liberating potential of the new media. As with the Russians, these thinkers saw cinema as changing perception and cognition as society moved from a written literacy to a visual dominance. New understandings of space and time, heralded in Cubist painting, seemed inherent to film. Informed by Freudian psychology, left-wing intellectuals hoped that new art forms could stimulate new forms of politicalized thinking. Bertolt Brecht argued against the narcotic effects of dominant dramatic forms, seeing the realist–naturalist tradition since Ibsen as conforming to the Aristotelian model of catharsis: raising political issues only to send the audience away purged of any fervour for change. He championed disruptive forms which provoked viewers to new thought.

The rise of German fascism offered a new challenge to Marxist theories, and produced a series of exchanges that marked important differences within Marxist analysis of mass culture. These differences continued in the debate after the Second World War, and in film studies after 1968. The philosopher Georg Lukács advocated what amounted to a continuation of nineteenth-century realism in literature, while Brecht argued for modernist artistic innovation. Walter Benjamin agreed with Brecht and optimistically projected an inherently radical nature to film, while Marxist-influenced Frankfurt School thinkers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer pessimistically concluded that fascist and US capitalism media were fundamentally alike in producing a passive public (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947).

While Soviet creative innovation and theoretical variety declined in the 1930s with Stalin’s prescriptive doctrine of socialist realism in all the arts, in the West some new activities expanded the field of issues for Marxist aesthetics: examples include the development of partisan documentary and grass-roots newsreel in the United States with the Film and Photo League (Alexander 1981; Campbell 1982) and propaganda films for the Spanish Civil War. In the mid-1930s the abrupt shift in international communist politics to build a broad anti-fascist Popular Front raised new
issues of producing films with and for sympathizers and liberals, such as Jean Renier’s La Vie est à nous ‘Life is Ours’, (1936) (see Buchsbaum 1988). Western communist parties encouraged working with and recruiting people in the dominant capitalist media industries, including Hollywood (which created a pretext for the notorious post-war Red scare and blacklist).

The post-Second World War era saw the development of new aspects of Marxism and film. Hollywood emerged stronger than ever, dominating more of the world market (see Miller, Part 2, Chapter 12). New socialist nations were established in Eastern Europe and China with attendant national cinemas, and Marxists were active in many national liberation movements in the developing world. Italian Neo-Realism provided a model of a humanistic socially committed film practice that eschewed the expensive entertainment and star system of Hollywood while validating matters of social justice, a sympathetic depiction of the lower classes, and vernacular expression in a thrifty mood (see Monticelli, Part 3, Chapter 8). Neo-Realism influenced independent efforts in the capitalist world, and inspired directors in the developing world, particularly in Latin America and India. Critics, too, validated Neo-Realism. André Bazin, as a liberal Catholic, could find moral seriousness, while Siegfried Kracauer, from a critique of mass culture and German Expressionist film, found an alternative to frivolity and hedonism and manipulation (Kracauer 1947, 1960). Both posited an ontological basis for film in the replication of the physical world (see Easthope, Part 1, Chapter 6). In general, in the post-war era, Marxists favoured an aesthetic of progressive realism which stood against the superficiality of entertainment and allowed for social critique. Autoncommunists with progressive credentials such as Luchino Visconti and Jean Renoir, Bimal Roy and Minnal Sen, Stanley Kubrick and Orson Welles, were esteemed. After Stalin, alternatives to Soviet models gained attention, and new militancy provoked new thinking. In Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Cuba, significant directors and films appeared veering away from socialist realist orthodoxy.

In the 1960s a complex set of changes brought about a new stage in Marxist film analysis. Most of the intellectuals involved in developing this stage of film studies were outside, or on the border of, academia, coming from journalism, publishing, and arts and education administration, or they were students and junior faculty in higher education, often in interdisciplinary or marginalized fields since academic film studies was still being established. Thus many were self-taught in the pertinent issues, and living through the process of discovering what a New Left could be, or learning Marxist concepts after beginning political activism. At the same time, local conditions and traditions heavily influenced the reception and diffusion of these ideas. What ‘Marxist’ meant in each place was distinctly different because of these contexts. And the local situation uniquely shaped the fusion of Marxism with other intellectual trends as well as the emergence of radical cultural analysis. This history played out in diverse radical film magazines. In France Positif, Cinéthique, and Cahiers du cinéma; in the UK Screen and Framework; in Canada Ciné-Tracts and CineAction; and in the United States Cineaste and Jump Cut.

By the early 1970s the centre of gravity of Marxist film analysis shifted. Concepts of ideology and realism were drastically reoriented. The analysis of the dominant Hollywood cinema and European art film as ‘illusionist’, and that illusion having an ideological effect, evolved from several developments. The optimism of nineteenth-century Marxism in assuming that revolution would take place in the most industrialized nations as trade union and electoral politics heightened workers’ consciousness and capacity for revolutionary change was severely damaged by the nationalist division during the First World War, the appearance of revolution in Russia (the most backward of the capitalist nations with an overwhelming peasant base), and the acceptance of fascism by many of the masses in Italy and Germany. As a result, Western Marxists sought deeper explanations. For some, insights from Freudian psychology showed the persistence of deep patterns in the conscious-unconscious mind. For others, the insights of Lenin’s contemporary, the Italian Antonio Gramsci were helpful, particularly in his emphasis that people were not simply coerced by the state’s police authority, but also manipulated by the hegemony or dominance of ruling-class cultural and social structures to stay in place, and to accept the existing order as ‘natural’.

In classical Marxism, ideology was generally understood as the propagation of false ideas by the capitalist class, producing a ‘false consciousness’ in the masses which could then be countered by revolution, i.e. ‘correct ideas’. In the 1960s ideology was increasingly understood as a structural condition operating like myth in traditional societies described by Claude Lévi-Strauss: fairly complex patterns which embodied narratives and contradictions, which functioned to maintain order. In modern cultures the mass media could be seen as promulgating similar myths (Barthes 1957). French philosopher Louis Althusser drew from Mao, Gramsci, and Lacanian psychoanalysis to posit a concept of ideology which stressed that people were socially positioned in power relationships and internalize this in their unconscious: a concept given further elaboration by Foucault, who emphasized the social basis of ideology by considering institutions and history. Such an understanding of ideology meshed well with developments in semiotics and long-standing analogies between film and dreams, daydreams, and hypnotic and other liminal mental states, although it tended to produce a pessimistic, deterministic view of the potential for change. Althusser argued that revolutionary theory could move beyond ideology: a notion that (few noticed) reproduced the Leninist model with Marxist theorists occupying the position formerly held by vanguard party activists in relation to the proletariat (Althusser 1965, 1970).
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This view led in one direction to a position virtually identical with the Frankfurt School's pessimistic denunciation of mainstream film and not unlike the high modernist art Arnold Schoenberg, James Joyce as truly revolutionary. Althusser also inspired arguments that, by resisting the illusionary cinema of 'bourgeois' realism, a radical modernist form could be wedded to a politically radical content, leading some critics to validate directors such as Nagisa Oshima and Jean-Marie Straub. With translations and new critical attention, Benjamin's 'work of art' essay and other writings gained new attention, while the revived Brecht-Lukács debate became the theoretical ground for an endorsement of formal innovation and explicit politics over traditional realism. Simultaneously, Eisenstein's films and writings were recast as aesthetic experiments, and Vertov's self-reflexive Chelovek s kinoapparatom ('Man with the Movie Camera', USSR, 1929) was rediscovered as an avant-garde work which explored the epistemology of film. Meanwhile, in the developing world, Solanas and Getino (1969) called for a mili- tant Third Cinema posed apart from Hollywood and auteur art cinema and Garcia Espinoza (1969) argued for 'imperfect', compared to high production value Holly- wood, but to be valued for its political content. Complemented by a wave of militant and innova- tive films in Latin America (and later Africa and South Asia), such arguments strengthened the case for a militant aesthetics. It is a truism that around 1970 contemporary film studies came into being through the weaving together of Marxism, structuralism, Saussurean linguistics, psychoanalysis, and semiotics, and then was further elabo- rated in post-structuralist terms. In some cases, the changes amounted to complete reversals. The tradi- tion of social documentary was called into question because of its unrejective realism. A European auteur such as Ingmar Bergman, previously praised for his high moral seriousness, was critiqued for being too theoretical and increasingly cinematic and thus incomprehensible to a mass, sophisticated audience, while Persona (Sweden, 1966) was validated for its complex self-referentiality (see Darke, Part 3, Chapter 13b). But the biggest change came in a shift in the left analysis of commercial entertainment cinema, which by the late 1960s was increasingly cinematic in its own right, fund- mentally realist. Thus a normative realism, understood as identical with Hollywood's practice of illusionism, was seen as producing a coherent imaginary subject position. Audience pleasure was seen as originating in the cinematic apprehension of physical and social conventions that govern the cinema institution, including the subject's psychology and its illusionism, rather than contingent narrative practices, perfor- mance, and spectacle (see Creed, Part 1, Chapter 9). In contrast, a self-reflexive modernism and avant- garde practices can be read as themselves producing a dispersal of meaning and deconstructing the subject position, thus calling into question both illusionism and the dominant ideology. As a result, some interpreted an extreme formalism as sufficient to establish a world as politically radical, irrespective of content, as, for example, with Cahiers du cinéma's validation of Jerry Lewis's The Bellboy (USA, 1960), and in Gidij's advoca- cy of 'structural-materialist' films, while others criti- cized the idea that self-reflexivity alone was political (Gidij 1978; Polan 1983). While the overall change can be summed up as the 'politicizing of form', the precise working out varied from 'individual' to 'individual', by nation, and with uneven access to ideas and films in translation. It also produced logical inconsistencies. For example, in line with their then Maoist politics, Cahiers du cinéma in 1972 enthusiastically validated the Godard-Lelouch 'Groupe Dziga Vertov' films (1968–72)—intensely radical in form and content—as well as formally conven- tional Chinese documentaries. Given the investment in auteurist approaches to Hollywood prevalent in the 1960s, French and Anglophone critics who were pushed in the direction of Marxist thought and politics by the heated political climate of the times tended to justify the auteurist canon using the new insights of Marxist thought. Cahiers du cinéma put forth a broad agenda for criticism in 1969, Comolli and Narboni's 'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism', which granted consider- ably leeway for considering films which appeared to be under the dominant ideology, but which escaped through formal 'cracks and fissures'. The classic demonstration was their analysis of John Ford's Young Mr Lincoln (USA, 1939), which argued that the direc- tor's 'mediacy' of a utopian 'writing' opened gaps in the text which were evidence of an escape from ideol- ogy (Cahiers du cinéma 1976). Left authorship anal- ysis promoted various figures such as Charles Ray and Douglas Sirk who could be read as offering a fund- mentally critical view of the socially and politically fund- poor realist motivation can be understood as stemming both from a desire to validate popular film and from the persistence of an aesthetic centred on creators (see Crofts, Part 2, Chapter 7). Following Bazin's dictum that 'style creates meaning', and repeating the argument of conservative auteurist Andrew Sarris, left critics asserted that Sirk's formal manipulations called his ostensibly shallow and glossy melodramas into question. Paul Willemen, for example, concluded that, 'by altering the rhetoric of bourgeois melodrama, through stylization and parody, Sirk's films distanciate themselves from the bourgeois ideology' (Willemin 1971: 67). Essentially these pos- itions attributed class politics to cinema style. In the same vein, Jean Pierre Paulin in the French weekend (Francais, 1967) was interpreted by Henderson (1972, 1976) as having 'a non-bourgeois camera style' without further specifying whether that was then a working-class style. The problems of this type of analysis derived from two false assumptions: that ideology directly reflects class identity, and that the film was the sole source of meaning. As further consideration (including critiques of some lucidous case-studies) occurred, positions were modified and ideology was understood in a much more flexible way. While the colonialist conception of 'realism' in cinematography and as an aesthetic was maintained, and the ideological nature of the apparatus was understood, increasingly theory turned to examining the meaning of a film as produced by an interaction between a text and a spectator who was understood not as an ahistorical 'subject' but as a historical person with social attribu- tives of gender, race, class, age, nationality, and so on—all of which shaped the interpretive con- text. With history readmitted to the analytic frame, institutional analyses, including economic issues, were considered.

Marxism contributes to contemporary film studies in the form of historical, economic, and ideological anal- ysis, as well as media activism. Drawing on its foun- ders' own interests and methods, Marxism emphasizes historical analysis which aims at providing a broad con- text testing multiple interacting factors including social, economic, and political connections. The revi- val of historical analysis reminds us that in an earlier period many film historians were Marxists: Georges Sadoul, Siegfried Kracauer, Leyda, and Lewis Jacobs. Contemporary counterparts include Noel Burch, Michael Chanam, Thomas Elsaesser, David James, Klaus Kreimeier, and Janet Staiger. Studies of the class composition of cinema's past audiences, the representation of class in film, and the labour history of the cinema industry obviously interest Marxists. Wary of simple resurrectionism models of film and society, Marx- ism remains committed to understanding the relation of film art and social-political activity. Two persistent themes are the historical film (a staple of Marxism filmmaking) and the analysis of current history in terms of the collaboration and combination of new media tech- nologies. Because of its inherent interest in industrial and global economy, Marxism is the primary methodology of most economic analysis of film and mass communica- tions in general. Such studies involve not only questions of finance, production, and marketing, but also state policies (Pendakur 1990; Wasko 1982). In the past such analyses have often made sweeping generalizations about actual films and their reception, but a younger generation of researchers combines politi- cal economy with textual and reception analysis and avoids simplistic assertions of economic determina- tion of cultural production. Increasingly issues of transnational capital, globalization of the market, capitalist ownership and control of national film cul- tures, and intellectual property rights focus the ana- lysis (Mattei and Mattelart 1992; see also Miller, Part 2, Chapter 12).

Marxism has had a long-standing relation to ques- tions of political action and media. This has tended to be expressed in terms of films for propaganda and agitation, and especially in terms of a class or anti- imperialist analysis. The validation of new films and videos and the promotion of documentary has been at stake (Wauh 1984; Steven 1993). The development of a more sophisticated Marxist media theory has affected makers since the 1960s, especially with the postmodernist increase in self-conscious analytical- expository strategies combined with the social docu- mentary tradition. Such work often discusses social- political issues such as race, nationalism, and AIDS, and critiques the dominant media representation of those concerns.

Today Marxism seems most dynamic when it combines its analysis of class with an analysis of gender, race, national, post-colonial, and other issues raised by progressive social-political movements. Some claim that the fall of the Soviet Union made Marxism obso- lete. However, as a critical analysis of capitalist socie- ties, at a time when the gap between the rich and poor nations and between capitalist and working classes within those nations is growing, its relevance is assured.
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