

## ABSTRACTS

### CINEMA VIOLENCE AND THE ONTOLOGY OF CAPITALISM

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Cinema, in its most massively produced and widely disseminated format in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is violent. In dialogue with both the public discourse and scholarship regarding the cinematic representation of violence, this paper approaches film violence through a Marxist framework. It does so to propose that the philosophy of Karl Marx reveals critical insight regarding the relationship between cinema, violence, and capital. In particular, this essay scrutinizes commercial narrative cinema and thus approaches cinema as hegemony. The violence of cinema is considered to have a role in reproducing the social organization of capitalism, namely the hierarchical relationship between the ruling and ruled classes. Cinema has historically used violence in narrative and spectacle to propagate these relations of production, the ontology of capitalism that consists of Cartesian subjectivity and its vertical orientation towards the Other. In other words, violent cinema is crucial for the subject in capitalism, for it shares the pivotal function of perpetuating class antagonism. But because cinema must constantly mediate the violence of capital, simultaneously obfuscating it while also maintaining it, violent cinema — like the proletariat — also holds the emancipatory potential of its own critique and eventual dismantling.

*Keywords:* Marxist film theory; Marxist philosophy; Cinematic violence; Media violence; Capitalist ideology; Class antagonism.

### FROM BINARY TO RICH DIALECTICS: *THE REVOLT OF THE FISHERMEN* AND *MAUSER*

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Dialectics constitutes one of Marx's key theoretical formulations. For Marx, the dialectic stands for a method of negation that reveals the mediated aspect of what appears to be evident and immediate. While Marx's view of the dialectic goes beyond Hegelian binaries, the prototype of dialectical cinema as typified in the films of Eisenstein relies on the employment of binaries, whose collision produces a synthesis that offers a concrete hermeneutical schemata. Although such a paradigm offers an elementary introduction to the Marxist approach to history, it ignores the richness of Marxist dialectics and offers a somehow mechanistic understanding both of the historical process as well as of cinema's ability to employ the dialectical method productively. This article explores the shift from a binary to a rich dialectic by focusing on two case studies: Erwin Piscator's *The Revolt of the Fishermen* (1934) and Philippe Vincent's adaptation of Heiner Müller's *Mauser* (1999). Though both films are grounded in a dialectical staging reliant on fragmented sequences that generate associations in place of diegetic linearity, they differ in their employment of the dialectical method. In offering a comparative reading of these two films, the article intends to open up different ways of thinking about cinema and dialectics so as to redeem the dialectical method as a valid means of addressing political questions in the present.

*Keywords:* Dialectics; Political Cinema; Erwin Piscator; Heiner Müller; Karl Marx.

#### FROM *BARTON FINK* TO *HAIL, CAESAR!*: HOLLYWOOD'S GHOSTS OF MARXIST PAST

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*Barton Fink* and *Hail, Caesar!* take place in the distant past, the former in 1942 and the latter in 1951. In both films, Hollywood is portrayed not as a breezy dream factory, but as a toxic environment where filmmakers are locked into a perpetual battle with studio tycoons — and capitalism itself. It is a space where art is molded and even censored by the interests of marketization and profiteering. In short, these films depict the tumultuous marriage between art and business. They are cautionary tales about ghosts — or nightmares rather — of Hollywood's Marxist past. To discuss Marxist dimensions of this unique pair of films in the Coen brothers' oeuvre we explore four questions, including: (1)

What is the social condition (depicted in these films)? (2) What is an alternative (to this condition)? (3) How do people struggle to challenge this system? And (4) What is the outcome (of their actions)?

*Keywords:* Capitalism; Hollywood; Marxism; Coen Brothers; *Barton Fink*; *Hail, Caesar!*

#### MAKING FILMS NEGATIVELY: GODARD'S POLITICAL AESTHETICS

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This essay seeks to reconstruct conflicting positions within materialist theories of art and culture as they relate to and help explain the “counter-cinema” of Jean-Luc Godard. The essay discusses a number of the films Godard made collaboratively in the late 1960s and early 1970s which were informed by Maoism. The focus is on the critique of Clark and Rancière made of political modernism that the Dziga-Vertov Group’s documentary films embodied. The essay reconsiders Wollen’s and Clark’s theories of modern art and culture as kinds of semiotic dislocation or negativity to situate Godard’s techniques aesthetically and historically. The discussion of Marxist aesthetics aims to clarify the nature of Godard’s practice but the essay leaves the contrasting positions of Rancière and Brechtian political modernism and those of Clark and Wollen in tension.

*Keywords:* Aesthetic; Avant-garde; Counter-cinema; Ideology; Modernism; Negation.

#### THE VIEW FROM BELOW: FILM AND CLASS REPRESENTATION IN BRECHT AND LOACH

Keith O’Regan (York University)

This article examines the depiction of unemployment in Brecht’s *Kuhle Wampe* and Loach’s *Raining Stones*. The paper argues that these films operate in a tradition of committed filmic representation of class that rejects a narrow definition of class as merely the exploitative practices of capitalism (extraction of surplus value at work), and includes those who are denied access to employment, in particular at moments of historical

capitalist crisis. My argument begins with a discussion of class from both cultural theorists and political philosophers in order to situate the films theoretically into a non-reductive class analysis. Drawing on the work of Mike Wayne, Teresa Ebert, Raymond Williams and Ellen Wood (inter alia) I argue that the representation and analysis of class must be understanding of longer term political economic structuring of capitalism, while attentive to the particular historical transitions within that structuring. We see this attentiveness in both films as Loach and Brecht develop technical strategies that forestall a judging perspective of the characters under view so as to highlight the world from their perspective. In this regard we are invited to see the working class worldviews as both determined by the world they inhabit, but also as agents in the struggles of their own lives. As such, issues of dignity, gender construction and relations are never outside the sphere of the domination of class. Ultimately, I argue that what these films do regarding class and the social perspectives of workers is to consider the subjectivity of working class people within an historical context.

*Keywords:* Historical materialism; Oppositional aesthetics; Working-class; Unemployment; Bertolt Brecht; Ken Loach.

#### FOR MARX: THE NEW LEFT RUSSIAN CINEMA

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What can politically engaged aesthetic productions from the former Soviet Union tell us about socialism? As recently as ten years ago, popular audiences and scholars alike might have answered this question by invoking the dissidents who fled the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. Throughout the twentieth century, dissidents provided popular and critical “Western” discourses with vivid tales of both the treachery of leftist utopianism and the courage of individual resistance. Today, the outdated imperialist ideologies that undergird this approach have become readily apparent, while a vital strand of post-socialist leftism has surfaced once more across the former Second World.

The emerging Russian filmmakers I discuss in this article offer visions of radical politics and aesthetics that learn and diverge from the state socialism that shaped their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. Russia offers a stage for intellectual and artistic

upheavals exceptional both for the political traditions they juxtapose, and for the foregrounded awareness of the ambivalent legacies of these traditions. Tackling a range of contentious subjects from sexuality to police brutality, these films met with controversy in Russia while securing the reputation of their directors on the international festival circuit. I examine three recent films — Svetlana Baskova's *For Marx...* (2012), Angelina Nikonova's *Twilight Portrait* (2011), and Lyubov Lvova and Sergei Taramayev's *Winter Journey* (2013) — all by female directors or co-directors, and all seeking to imagine and image social alterity after state socialism.

All three films were made between 2011 and 2013, barely missing the notorious legislation against homosexual propaganda passed in Russia in the summer of 2013. *For Marx...* offers an explicit engagement with Louis Althusser and lost legacies of Marxist thought, as well as with Sergei Eisenstein's cinema viewed from the other side of the twentieth century. The new Russian left announces its presence forcefully in this darkly comic parable of class struggle in post-Soviet Russia, rediscovering the thematic and formal markers of Soviet cinema as if from a position of (impossible) innocence. *Twilight Portrait* opens with an act of police brutality and sexual violence but defies genre at every turn, sampling the revenge fantasy, erotic thriller, and parable of political eros with equal conviction. In *Winter Journey*, a classical singer falls in love with a street thug in a tale that frames same-sex love as less complicated than class difference in post-Soviet Russia.

In unexpected ways, all three films interrogate the perils and possibilities of "going to the people" in the twenty-first century. Baskova spent months conducting field research with independent labor union organizers across provincial Russia and cast activists alongside professional actors recognized as People's Artists of the Soviet Union. The other two films use erotic/romantic fabulae to interrogate post-Soviet class struggle through lenses of gender and sexuality. An unspoken motto emerges through my comparison — lines that have appeared in Cyrillic and Latin graffiti alike across the former Second World: *If the revolution is not feminist, it will not be.*

*Keywords:* Class conflict; Contemporary Russia; Gender and sexuality; The New Left; Post-socialism; Political cinema.