

Marxism and Film Activism: Screening Alternative Worlds

ed. by Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen

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This edited compendium, which comprises eleven essays split chronologically into two discrete parts, is a useful addition to what is a relatively small field in contemporary Film Studies: research into how Marxist practice informs types of film production. While there is ample research (which part one of this book adds to) into what Alain Badiou terms the ‘short...strongly unified century’¹ that begins with the First World War in 1914 and ends with the termination of the Cold War in 1989, with the majority of it centring upon the Soviet Cinema of the 1920s, the various post-war European New Waves and the Latin American cinema of the 1960s and ’70s, there is little on how Marxism has survived as a method in film praxis since neoliberalism gained its hegemonic position in the 1990s. Having said this, the title of this book does have the potential to mislead the reader: while the majority of the chapters do concern activism, they are not all concerned with Marxism nor informed by a historical materialist approach, be that of the classical or orthodox type, or indeed of the Gramscian or Althusserian turns that informed debates in Film and Cultural Studies in the final third of the last century. This is particularly true of the potentially most needed part of the book, its second half. In some ways, it would be surprising if they all did, due to the scarcity of Marxist approaches in the academy from post-structuralism onwards. That being said, the modes of film activism present here which have at best a tangential relationship to Marxism, do allow the reader to gain further understanding into the various directions that left oppositional film has taken in the last 30 years.

After an engaging introduction from Ewa Mazierska that presents the reader with an overview of the rise and part-fall of communism and the various occasions when it has functioned as a nodal point in both critical theory and film activism, along with of course a summary of the chapters to come, part one presents five historical case studies that range from the *Kinopoezd* (cinema-train) of Aleksandr Medvedkin to the Third Cinema of South America, with the middle chapters being devoted to various figures of the French New Wave and its post-’68

¹ Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 1.

incarnations: Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. As may be expected, the structure of the book, presenting as it does what is effectively the high point of the interaction of Marxism and film practice in its various guises (particularly the excellent chapter on revolutionary politics and Medvedkin), does rather give part two a lot to live up to, for the simple reason that the reader is not living in revolutionary Russia, the Paris of May '68, nor the tumult of Peronist Argentina. This does mean that the two halves read very differently, and the relative paucity of Marxist film activism in contemporary cinema cannot avoid being highlighted. One cannot help but think that the book would work better as two discrete volumes, with titles reflecting that.

To return specifically to the chapters concerned with the 1960s and '70s, the absence of any discussion of Maoism is of interest, considering the extent to which the post-'68 left, particularly in France and Germany, embraced it. For example, Jason Barker has gone so far as to refer to Mao as a 'master signifier in French theory of the 1960s and 1970s'² and it is certainly the case that the practice of Godard, Straub and Huillet is strongly inflected with Maoism; in particular the latter couple's 'peasant cinema', which is interrogated in chapter 4 by Manuel Ramos-Martinez, can be usefully seen in this light. His approach offers much insight into Marx's view that the peasantry could not represent itself, but this could be further illuminated via French Maoism's interest in the 'investigation', with its emphasis on resolving the dialectic of practice and theory.

The contemporary part of the volume is necessarily broad in range, with chapters concerned with the Marxist concept of value; oppositional cinema in Palestine; audiences; the Critical Mass movement and its modes of self-representation and two on video-activism in the UK: one a history; the other on labour process. Both William Brown's and Michael Chanan's contributions are notable for taking an aspect of Marxian thought and then using it as a method. They think about value in differing ways: the former to interrogate Deleuze's categories of cinema and as a referent in textual analysis; the latter to think about how his and others' video blogging practice can be understood within the framework of Marx's theory of surplus value. Haim Bresheeth's discussion of Palestinian cinema is of interest as it is the only chapter that bridges the two halves of the book, giving the reader as it does a global contextual history of cultural resistance in oppositional cinema in order to situate what is contiguous and what is specific to contemporary Palestinian cinema.

Steve Presence's chapter on contemporary video activism in the UK and Lars Kristensen's contribution regarding the Critical Mass movement, specifically the reclaiming of urban streets via mass bicycle rides, can be usefully considered together, as both concern movements which are not to any great degree Marxist, as both authors admit. Instead, what the reader is presented with is the myriad ways in which protest movements have responded to the defeats of the left in the

² Jason Barker, 'Master Signifier: a Brief Genealogy of Lacano-Maoism', *Filozofia*, 69.9 (2014), 752-764 (p. 752).

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1980s. We have eco-socialism, strands of anarchism and overall, the replacement of a class analysis via single issue politics; leisure and post-work; sustainability, and so on. Both chapters highlight the internet's role in the exhibition and distribution of oppositional film. Martin Barker's chapter on audiences and Marxism stands out in the volume as the only one not to be concerned with an oppositional cinema, but with the conditions of reception, and how audiences can respond to mainstream Hollywood cinema collectively in ways that suggest class-based agency, rather than as the individualised, passive spectator of Lacano-Althusserianism or the audience vulnerable to ideology common to other Marxian approaches, such as that of the Frankfurt School and its later proponents.

As an afterthought, it is worth commenting that this volume was published in 2015. Since then, the neoliberal consensus has started to unravel in a variety of ways: the election of Trump; the rise of the far right and differing populisms in various parts of Europe; the defeat of Syriza in Greece; the continued Pasokification of the European centre left, with the notable exception of the British Labour Party, which has seen a socialist left rise within it; Brexit and the success of Eurosceptic parties, of both left and right. With all that in mind, it is tempting to wonder what a second volume of this book might look like in a few years' time.

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