

MARXISM AND FILM ACTIVISM

Marxism and Film Activism

Screening Alternative Worlds

Edited by

Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen



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Introduction

Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen

It is widely assumed that one of the main differences between Marxism and other types of philosophy is its practical orientation, most clearly revealed in Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach' and *The Communist Manifesto*. Thesis 8 of 'Theses on Feuerbach' states: 'All social life is essentially *practical*. All the mysteries which urge theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice' (Marx and Engels 1947: 199). This thesis suggests that practice tests the usefulness of theories, but equally theories reflect on practice. Theories and practices are thus dependent on each other, although the precise character of their connection is difficult to assess. Thesis 11, the best known of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach', states: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world differently, the point is to change it' (ibid.: 199). This thesis represents Marx as diverting from a Hegelian version of history as a sequence of events, emerging as if on its own accord, or shaped solely by material forces. Instead, it evokes the idea of history as an arena, in which objective and subjective factors come together, producing results that cannot be predicted on the basis of what happened previously. This means that people striving for a specific state of affairs should not wait in a comfortable armchair for this state to occur, or resign in the conviction that it would not happen during their lifetime, but work towards its fulfilment. Among these people a privileged place is occupied by those, who thanks to their intellectual resources, are able to better understand the world in which they operate than the bulk of the population. As Marx writes in *The German Ideology*: 'Consciousness can sometimes appear further advanced than the contemporary empirical relationships, so that in the struggles of a later epoch one can refer to earlier theoreticians as authorities' (ibid.: 72). The moral duty of those with advanced consciousness is to work towards the change, bringing about the Communist revolution by means such as education, political activism and, when necessary, armed struggle. In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx labels this section of society 'Communists', saying that:

The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only:

- 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality.*
- 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole. (Marx and Engels 2008: 52)*

In the twentieth century, when communism appeared to be winning in some parts of the world, the term ‘Communists’ was replaced by expressions such as ‘revolutionary avant-garde’ or ‘engineers of human souls’, the last term being applied specifically to artists. Terms like these gained negative connotations due to equating their referents with the cadres of the Communist parties in the Soviet Union and other countries of state socialism, so-called *nomenklatura*, which rather than leading the masses to achieve democratic socialism, used their power to advance their social position at the expense of the disadvantaged. However, the fact that this happened does not undermine a need for activism and political leadership to achieve or even approximate the Marxist ideal of a just and egalitarian society. On the contrary, against the background of the subsequent fall of state socialism and the successes of neoliberal capitalism, Marxist activism is needed more than ever. As Stuart Hall put it in the 1980s, we ‘need a party’ (Hall 1988: 180), namely a mass and well-organized left-wing movement able to overthrow the current capitalist regime. This movement would not happen, if not, initially, for a tiny minority, able to point out to the majority that the world needs a dramatic change and suggest how to accomplish it. The character and the role of this party and its leaders, however, keep changing in step with changing historical circumstances. In particular, the current speed of communication, the diminished role of direct censorship and with that the rise of a global flow of ideas, unimaginable just decades ago, requires a different strategy from the activists than in the past. One goal of this book is to find out what was required of those with ‘advanced consciousness’ in the past and what is expected from them now, in order to approximate the ideal of creating an egalitarian and just society.

Marxist Theory, Marxist Practice

Let us begin with recollecting the past of Marx and Engels. The authors of *The Communist Manifesto* were, at the beginning of their careers, associated with the group of disciples of Hegel known as the Young Hegelians, which also included Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner and Ludwig Feuerbach. As R. Pascal notes, they had learnt from Hegel that the state is the embodiment of the absolute mind, of the ideas of freedom, justice etc., and they demanded that it should really be so. They therefore subjected the dominant conceptions of their times to a detailed criticism, and maintained that if true notions were substituted for the prevailing ones, society would be reformed. But, while going to all lengths in criticizing existing conceptions and conventions, the characteristic of the group was that it refused to take part in movements of reform, believing that ideas lose their purity in the hands of the masses. This antithesis between intellect and masses soon led to an antithesis between support of existing conditions and the movements of social reform, and many of this group ended up as ardent reactionaries. Only Marx and Engels accepted the challenge of the times. In 1842 Marx undertook the editorship of a newly funded progressive liberal radical newspaper, the *Rheinische Zeitung*, 'yet within a year Marx had turned his back on the entire movement of democratic and forward-looking burgers and had joined the sparser ranks of those opposed in principle to market economy, its system of money and its culture of economics' (Meikle 2009: 56). Forced by state censors to relinquish his post, he emigrated to Paris in 1848 and thus began his nomadic life. Engels had been wrenched out of the abstract world of the Young Hegelians by a business trip to Manchester, where he entered into relations with the working-class movement of Chartism (Pascal 1947: ix-xii). For the rest of their lives the two 'fathers of Marxism' fulfilled their own criterion of a Communist by engaging in political journalism, as opposed to devoting themselves merely to 'proper' philosophy, which was accessible only to an intellectual elite and leading political organizations: the Communist League and the First International. For his political activism Marx especially paid a heavy price, by entering into conflict with the political authorities and being continuously expelled from the countries where he engaged in such activities; Germany, France and Belgium, before dying on foreign soil in England. The multiple expulsions and continuous uprooting immensely affected his working schedule. One can speculate that if he had had a more

stable life, he would have written more, including finishing his magnum opus, *Das Kapital*. Yet, it is political activism that provided Marx's writings with their deepest insights and furnished them with a specific aura. Many readers trust Marx's work because they know that there is no gap between the man and his teaching – he was the living embodiment of socialist praxis. For other, more conservative commentators, Marxist involvement in active politics renders him as a 'pseudo-philosopher', not fit for the pantheon of Western thought (Scruton 1995: 203).

Virtually all well known Marxist philosophers of the two generations following Marx were involved in active politics, to name just Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch and VI Lenin. However, the closer we come to contemporary times, the smaller is the proportion of Marxists thinkers involved in frontline politics. This situation can be attributed, among other factors, to the absorption of Marxists thinkers after the Second World War into (mostly) Western academia, especially in France and the United States. On the one hand, this situation allows Marxists a secure existence, which includes making their living from teaching and writing academic books, which their predecessors could not take for granted. On the other, however, it leads to a perception that theorizing Marxism is an art for art's sake. As Macdonald Daly observes in a book devoted to Marxist aesthetics, mentioning authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Lucian Goldmann, Louis Althusser, Pierre Macherey, Roland Barthes, Etienne Balibar and Pierre Bourdieu, the price paid for such academization and theoretical advancement of Marxist theory was not only neutralization of political activity, but also 'intensifying rebarbateness and obfuscation in the discourse many of these scholars employed. The experience of reading any of the critics named above can hardly be said to be easy or straightforward. The level of education and degree of wider philosophical and theoretical knowledge required for their understanding are taxing' (Daly 2006: xxii–xxiii). No doubt the difficulty of some forms of Marxist discourse puts off prospective Marxist activists, or makes them think that their activism has little in common with Marx's and Engels's teaching.

The question of how 'practical' or 'praxis-oriented' a Marxist thinker, and by extension artist and critic, should be, became itself an issue widely debated in Marxist circles. Predictably, on this occasion, base strongly affects superstructure – a dividing line is between the 'armchair Marxists' and those who

themselves are involved in active politics or at least in popularizing Marxism outside academia. We would like to draw attention to the arguments used by some of the most prominent Marxists of the twentieth century. One of them is a co-creator of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno. The starting point of his short essay poignantly titled 'Resignation' is that a reproach of resignation was levelled against the members of this school for political passivity:

The objection raised against us can be stated approximately in these words: a person who in the present hour doubts the possibility of radical change in society and who for that reason neither takes part in nor recommends spectacular, violent action is guilty of resignation. He does not consider the vision of change which he once held capable of realization; indeed, he actually had no true desire to see it realized in the first place. In leaving conditions as they are, he offers his tacit approval of them. (Adorno 1991: 171)

In response to the criticism of inactivity, Adorno claims that the request to act, as opposed to only talk (or write), hides a hostility towards theory or at least does not attribute to theory the importance it deserves. 'The often-evoked unity of theory and praxis has a tendency to give way to the predominance of praxis. Numerous views define theory itself as a form of repression – as though praxis did not stand in a far more direct relationship to repression' (ibid.: 172). Secondly, he condemns much of praxis as 'psuedo-activity',¹ which is in fact worse than a lack of activity. Thirdly, he argues that thinking is itself a form of action and even of revolutionary action:

In contrast [to psuedo-practitioner], the uncompromisingly critical thinker, who neither superscribes his conscience nor permits himself to be terrorized into action, is in truth the one who does not give up. Furthermore, thinking is not the spiritual reproduction of that which exists. As long as thinking is not interrupted, it has a firm grasp upon possibility. Its insatiable quality, the resistance against petty satiety, rejects the foolish wisdom of resignation. Open thinking points beyond itself. For its part, such thinking takes a position as a figuration of praxis which is more closely related to a praxis truly involved in change than in a position of mere obedience for the sake of praxis. (ibid.: 174–5)

Slavoj Žižek, albeit in the context of the way U.S. politicians dealt with recent economic crises, echoes Adorno's argument, mocking those who engage in pseudo-activity, rather than thinking. 'The old saying "Don't just talk, do something!" is one of the most stupid things one can say, even measured by the low standards of common sense' (Žižek 2009: 11). Implicitly such comments privilege theory over praxis, both as preceding praxis chronologically and logically. Yet, despite Adorno's immense rhetorical skill, one can see that the author avoids rather than tackles head on the problem of Marxism as a form of activism.

On the other side of the barricade, so to speak, we find those who argue that a reliable theory (and not only a Marxist theory) is that which is created in conjunction with praxis. This requirement was recently proposed in an eloquent way by French philosopher Alain Badiou, who wrote:

I have suggested that a philosopher (and this neutral noun naturally encompasses both male and female varieties) must be an accomplished scientist, an amateur poet and a political activist, but also has to accept that the realm of thought is never sealed off from the violent onslaughts of love. Philosophy requires its practitioners of either gender to assume the roles of savant, artist, activist and lover. I have called them the four conditions of philosophy. (Badiou 2012: 2)

Badiou's requirement that philosophers should be both political activists and lovers can be read metaphorically as a demand to be all-rounded individuals, whose identities are united rather than divided into separate functions. Such a demand, however, is not universally accepted, to a large extent due to great specialization of knowledge and a growing distance (physical and temporal) between work processes and their effects.

It is also worth mentioning in this context Michel Foucault, who in his talks with Duccio Trombadori, published as *Remarks on Marx*, draws connection between one's attitude to Marxism and one's living experience of political struggle. Foucault mentions that in Communist Poland Marxism meant something different than in the France of the 1960s, and this was still a different thing in Tunisia, where Foucault found himself in 1968. In Poland, for the majority of the population it was an object of total disgust; in France a matter of subtle theoretical discussions, which led to the fragmentation of Marxism

into small bodies of doctrine that pronounced excommunication upon one another; in Tunisia a call to action, ‘a kind of moral force, an existential act that left one stupefied’ (Foucault 1991: 135). Foucault does not hide that it was a Tunisian version of Marxism that appealed to him most. Indeed, the national liberation of postcolonial countries seems to be a perfect example of Marxist theory merging with direct political action and cultural resistance, especially through cinema (Wayne 2001); a fact that this book attempts to reflect.

Post-May ’68 Activism

Foucault and many philosophers of his generation, in one way or another at certain periods of their lives, became active in politics. Badiou is a founding member of the militant French political organization *L’Organisation Politique*, which was active from 1985 till 2007 and was concerned with direct intervention in issues such as immigration, labour and housing. Foucault was involved in the movement striving for prison reform in France. Antonio Negri was accused of supporting the Red Brigades, a Marxist paramilitary organization, which was responsible for the kidnap and murder of the Italian president Aldo Moro. As a result, he was sentenced to a long prison sentence and forced to flee to France. Although Foucault, Badiou and Negri’s life trajectories are in many ways different, they are connected by the fact that their youth coincided with the political fervour of the late 1960s and 1970s, when the postwar consensus in Europe started to crumble and there was an expectation that around the corner awaited a new political order. Especially significant in this context is the year 1968, when there was a great political turmoil in many parts of the world, most importantly in France. This turmoil did not lead to the introduction of a worldwide or even pan-European socialism but, paradoxically, paved the way to a more ruthless version of capitalism, known as neoliberalism or late capitalism (Debray 1979),² and to a crisis in Marxist theory and praxis. This crisis resulted from the perception that Marxism, as practised before 1968, did not respond properly either to the changing composition of Western societies, such as the decline of the industrial working class, increase of migratory workers and the emancipatory ambitions of various marginalized groups, most importantly women (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Harvey 2006). Con-

sequently, the year 1968 marks a shift to a different model of politics than traditional Marxist politics – postmodern politics. To understand this, it is worth again evoking Badiou, who argues that there were four different ‘Mays’. One was marked by a revolt on the part of young university and school students. The second was the biggest general strike in the French history, whose point of reference was the Popular Front. This strike proved very heterogeneous, with workers showing insubordination to trade unions and the Communist Party. The effect of this May, as observed by Stuart Hall, is that since then being radical no longer meant identifying with radical party politics but being ‘radically against all parties, party lines and party bureaucracies’ (Hall 1988: 181). The third, no less complex, was the libertarian May, which concerned the question of changing moral climate, sexual relations and individual freedom. It gave rise to the women’s and gay rights movements and had a significant impact on the cultural sphere.

The last May, which lasted from 1968 to 1978 and which is of special interest to us, was to do with the end of the old concept of politics and, consequently, redefinition of the political field. From the 1970s in the West, any social cause and struggle, any cultural activity, could be viewed as political. This had an effect of giving voice to the sections of society that were overlooked by politicians in the earlier periods, such as women and ethnic minorities, and causes that were previously deemed relatively unimportant within Marxist discourse, such as ecology. This development can be viewed positively, as leading to creating an egalitarian and just society, in which the interest of every disadvantaged group is properly looked after. However, as Badiou observes, with the widening spectrum of political voices came the loss of hierarchy of political agents and causes; they had all drowned in the cacophony of ‘postmodern politics’. Badiou thus concludes that May resulted in the end of the idea that there is such a thing as an historical agent offering the possibility of emancipation: a notion at the heart of Marxism. It was variously known as the working class, the proletariat and sometimes the people, and though there were debates as to its position and its size, everyone agreed that it existed. The shared conviction that there is an ‘objective’ agent inscribed in social reality, and that it offers the possibility of emancipation, is probably the biggest difference between then and now (Badiou 2010: 43–100). Elsewhere, echoing Jean-François Lyotard’s idea of postmodernism as the end of ‘grand narratives’ (1984), Badiou describes the 1970s as a watershed, which divides

‘the final years of revolutionary fervour’ from ‘the triumph of minuscule ideas’ (Badiou 2007: 3).

Iain Hamilton-Grant describes this situation in such terms: ‘Where the political will of a people, a nation or a culture used to be harnessed to long-term general goals, now fragmented groups engage in short-term struggles. The spread of identity politics over the last twenty years is testimony to this, with its emphasis on ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality replacing political credo’ (Hamilton-Grant 2001: 30). He further observes that the consequence of engaging in identity and micropolitics is leaving macro decisions to the enemy: ‘By concentrating all the attention on “micro-political” issues, or on short-term single-issue politics, the very real large-scale political structures that govern our everyday lives are disregarded and left uncontested to the enemy, which simply translates into covert support for, or actual complicity with, the status quo’ (ibid.: 31). If we accept this argument, then left-wing micro-activism (often undertaken by numerous NGOs) is open to the criticism of being in fact an obstacle to universal emancipation by acting as a means of diverting people’s attention from the larger picture of politics or as a vent to their political frustration.

The overall lack of effectiveness of postmodern politics can also be seen in the context of the development of Western capitalism, as theorized by Herbert Marcuse, a member of the Frankfurt School, whose influence on the political ferment of the 1960s was probably greater than that of any other philosopher (Jameson 1990: 5). In his works, and most importantly in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse pictures a flattened, ‘one-dimensional world’, populated by ‘one-dimensional people’, where there is no place for truly radical ideas. In such a world consensus reality is the only reality, dissent is commodified and absorbed by capitalism and radical ideas are rejected because they are rendered too difficult for the general population. Marcuse draws attention to the link between an advancement of technology and increased difficulty of breaking free of the capitalist shackles (Marcuse 1964) – a fact to which we return shortly.

The year 1968 is also an important date in the history of cinema, especially French and European cinema, because during this moment filmmakers became as politically active as never before, perhaps with the exception of the period following the October Revolution. However, the overall effect of May ’68 on cinema is a subject of competing opinions, with some authors, such

as Catherine Breillat, claiming that it was ‘a micro-event of no importance’, while others, such as Jean-Michel Frodon, argue that ‘the direct effects of ’68 were negligible but the underground effects were gigantic and mostly good’ (quoted in Foucault 2008: 30). We lean towards the second opinion, believing that May ’68 brought several ideas that till now have informed our thinking about left-wing cinema and even pertain more to contemporary times than to the late 1960s and 1970s. One concerns transcending or rather extending the idea of film authorship, resulting from a belief in collaboration, based on partnership between different people engaged in filmmaking, such as directors, actors and film technicians, as well as among filmmakers working in different countries and in different types of films. The cinema of ’68 was to a large extent cinema of film collectives, of which the most famous is the Dziga Vertov Group, led by Godard (see the chapter by Jeremy Spencer in this collection) and of international and inter-continental solidarity, most importantly solidarity between filmmakers from the developed and developing world, as discussed in the chapter by Bruce Williams (see also Emmelhainz 2009: 650). Another important May idea concerned tearing down the division between the producers and consumers of films, in this way making cinema more democratic. Filmmakers of this movement wanted to make films for people who could see themselves on screen, often literally, by filming strikes and employing nonprofessional actors. Furthermore, May ’68 demonstrated that great films can be made on a very low budget. Lastly and most importantly, however, during May ’68, more than at any earlier moment of history, cinema became intermingled with political activism. Since then, it is difficult to imagine political activism shunning cinema or the moving image in a wider sense and, conversely, political cinema staying aloof from extracinematic political action.

Marxist Filmmakers between Irrelevance and Betrayal

And yet, the overall impression is that post-’68 Marxist or even more broadly understood left-wing cinematic activism is more on the periphery of cinema than ever before. Already the films made by Marker and Godard have a small audience in comparison with Hollywood blockbusters. Moreover, the gap between the success of films such as *The Matrix* (Andy and Lana Wachowski, 1999) in reaching an audience, in comparison with those made by British left-

wing videoactivists, is growing rather than shrinking. Why is this the case and how to halt and reverse this process? How to be a successful Marxist film activist in the twenty-first century, one who manages to unite people for the common goal of a socialist revolution? To help answer this question, let's look at some theoretical positions regarding Marxist activism and political cinema at large.

Historically, we can identify several positions regarding Marxist film activism. Firstly, one can argue that making films containing Marxist ideas and motifs is itself a form of activism, because it requires more activity, including collaborating with other human beings, than producing other types of Marxist texts. Accordingly, all filmmakers are activists – and all filmmakers of Marxist persuasion are political activists. However, for many Marxist filmmakers, making films including Marxist motifs is not enough. This requirement was presented most famously by Jean-Luc Godard during his militant (post-'68) period, when he announced that he does not just want to make 'political films', but to make them 'politically' (see the chapter by Jeremy Spencer in this collection). Early Marxist filmmakers working in the Soviet Russia, such as Dziga Vertov and Aleksandr Medvedkin (the latter being the subject of the chapter by Gal Kirn), fulfilled this condition by making films not only about specific political problems, but together with those affected by these problems and showing them the fruit of their common work. They also put themselves into the task of reforming the film industry, so that it could serve Marxist purposes. Although technically and logistically it was an enormous task, it was made easier due to them having an ally in the country's political leader, Lenin, who proclaimed cinema as the best language to reach the masses. Lenin exalted cinema because, due to being silent and visual, it spoke even to the illiterate, an advantage particularly appreciated in a country with a high proportion of people unable to read or write. Even though Soviet Russia is nowadays regarded as falling short of the Marxist ideal of communism, everybody agrees that Marxist cinema had its heyday during the early Soviet period (Kleinhans 1998: 106–7).

According to Godard, making films politically in the Western context means using independent financial sources, rather than being backed by large companies, which are profit-oriented, in a self-reflexive way, revealing the means of their production, and directly engaging with the audience, for example by showing them in factories and during rallies, for the purpose of

politicizing the viewers. By trying to fulfil these conditions Godard followed in the footsteps of earlier Marxist filmmakers, such as the previously mentioned Dziga Vertov and Aleksandr Medvedkin, as conveyed by naming his collective after the former. The requirement of producing political films politically results from the conviction that every film made within a capitalist framework ultimately serves capitalism, even if it encourages us to attack the very system that produced it, an idea shared by Godard with Marcuse, as already indicated. However, under the capitalist system, following this recipe brings a risk of reaching a very small audience because films of this sort are shunned by large television stations and multiplexes. To put it bluntly, it most likely leads to irrelevance. This was the case of Godard, whose ‘militant films’ are hardly known outside the circle of committed academics and such principled directors as Peter Watkins, who after leaving the BBC on the grounds of being a vehicle of the political establishment, practically lost contact with mass audiences and sentenced himself to working on the peripheries of cinema.

It is difficult to say whether a view that Marxist films should be made politically is concurrent with Marx’s opinion. Marx, of course, did not comment on different ways of making films as there were no films in his time, but he praised such authors as Honoré de Balzac, who despite being conservative and royalist, was able to reveal the immortality of capitalism and hence, potentially, help to fight it (Praver 1976: 318). Jacques Rancière develops Marx’s line of thinking by pointing to the political significance of *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. Despite Flaubert’s aristocratic situation and political conformism (and, of course, using capitalist channels of communications with the readers, namely profit-oriented publishing houses), he regards *Madame Bovary* as a progressive work of art of great significance, helping in the emancipation of women (Rancière 2004: 12–19).

If we accept such a position, then mainstream, big budgeted, narrative films, produced in Hollywood as commodities by and for ‘consumer society’ and screened in multiplexes, should not be regarded by Marxists with hostility as being a product of political conformism, but as work that merely promotes and normalizes the capitalist status quo, or serves as proof of the great skill with which capitalist rulers are able to absorb and neutralize all possible dissent. A more productive approach is to assume that the relationship of them to the represented reality and to potential viewers is more ambiguous and complex, as argued by some chapters included in this collection. In particular,

some films, sponsored by capitalists, might encourage viewers to think seriously about the injustice of the capitalist class system and in this way make a contribution to the struggle for human emancipation. This approach is reflected in recent scholarship focusing on Marxist motifs in the films of James Cameron (Kendrik 1999) and the Wachowski siblings (Burns 2015).

By and large, Marxist film activists face a dilemma: either shun the capitalist mode of production and distribution and risk becoming irrelevant, or try to address the global audience by preaching their sermon from pulpits controlled by the capitalist devil and risk that their sermon will serve furthering capitalist causes. Of course, between these two extreme positions there are many more moderate, which are explored in this volume.

Active Filmmaking, Active Viewing

Activist filmmaking is as much a matter of the behaviour of filmmakers as that of the audiences. Perhaps for our purpose the best starting point is to assume, as did Jacques Rancière, that the spectator is not passive, but already active and creative thanks to selecting, comparing and interpreting images, sounds and ideas (Rancière 2009: 11). The task of the Marxist filmmaker is thus not to ‘wake up’ the sleepy spectator, but to mobilize him or her in a way that would be most conducive to achieving Marxist ideals in specific historical circumstances. However, this is not a straightforward task – audience studies is still one of the most undeveloped branches of film studies.

What is, however, safe to assume is that the section of the potential audience who would most likely benefit from the transition to socialism is nowadays very heterogeneous and fragmented, both in terms of its external circumstances and consciousness, as Stuart Hall observed. For example, those who largely replaced the industrial working class, the proletariat, who constituted the core of the Communist movement in Marx’s times and many decades after his death, are often unemployed or work in several part-time positions, isolated from each other and unaware of the existence of many in similar circumstances. The traditional Marxist hubs associated with the working class movement, such as political parties and trade unions, under the neo-liberal regime became politically marginalized. In the West (or global North), showing films in factories is no longer a viable option, because very few facto-

ries are left. Moreover, potential recipients of Marxist films wear many ‘hats’, and have many conflicting identities. For example, a white female worker might be engaged in the feminist struggle, but equally be hostile to granting more rights to immigrant workers, irrespective of their gender.

The successful strategy appears to be to respond to the heterogeneity, to the plethora of seemingly different grievances of different groups by recognizing both their uniqueness and their common core, and trying to unite them by showing their common interest. This requires (re)creating a sense of historical agency, which was lost on the campus streets of Paris, London and Stockholm. For that we need theorizing and engaging the new subjects of socialist struggle, confirming the opinion of Gilles Deleuze, quoted by Manuel Ramos-Martinez in his chapter, that the task of modern political filmmaking is not to address itself to a predetermined people but to recognize its absence and contribute to its invention. Such attempts already exist; examples are concepts such as ‘multitude’ and ‘precariat’, which largely replaced the old term of ‘working class’. It could be argued that a large proportion of contemporary political cinema addresses these new subjects rather than the proletariat in the old sense.

Marxist film activists shall also be aware that the reaction of the audience is time and culture specific. A given political film can activate the audience shortly after it was made, but usually not twenty or fifty years later, as demonstrated by Bruce Williams in his discussion of the reception of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino’s *The Hours of Furnaces* (1968). Although the appreciation of its aesthetic value has increased greatly, its activist potentials have demised almost at the same rate. One even senses that the film’s subversive nature is somehow tamed through the audience’s heightened awareness of its beauty. Overtly political filmmakers therefore try to react to political events promptly, acting as journalists rather than auteurs who patiently wait for inspiration and take time to polish their works. This is one reason why documentary films are a privileged type of political or activist film (Waugh 1984; Torchin 2012: 2). The apparent roughness of Dziga Vertov’s films, or those of Jean-Luc Godard from his militant period (although often concealing a meticulous attitude to structure behind the roughness), results from their understanding of this requirement. Another reason that documentaries occupy a privileged place among activist films is that, as Michael Chanan maintains in his chapter, documentary was born and remains relatively free, being filmed away from the studio by small crews on low budgets.

However, we believe the committed Marxist filmmakers should not be dogmatic about the formal qualities of Marxist films. A narrative and fiction film can make as much impact on the audience, if not more, as documentary and non-narrative; to use Deleuzian terms, films employing movement-image might be as effective as those adhering to time-image formula. This depends on the specific viewing habits of the given audience, which in turn depends on its level of film education and, in a wider sense, on what Pierre Bourdieu describes as 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990), confirming Nelson Goodman and EH Gombrich's claim that every aesthetic experience is an epistemological experience. The more we know about a specific type of art, and the better we understand it, the more likely we are to like it (Goodman 1968: 258–65; Gombrich 2006: 22).

The Marxist activist needs not only to have important things to say, but to reach the adequate channels of communication. Not long ago there was a belief that the most important channel for this type of films was the internet. Indeed, the literature concerning online activism is large and fast growing. However, as Peter Dahlgren observes in his preface to the volume entitled *Cyberprotest*, published in 2004, 'after a few years of somewhat unfulfilled anticipation, the conventional wisdom has it that the internet, while certainly of political significance, is not about to engender major alterations in the overall way that democratic systems function. Even the results of ambitious experimentation where so-called edemocracy is inserted into the dynamics of the formal system have been modest' (Dahlgren 2004). Alexandra Juhasz, discussing documentaries posted on YouTube, argues that, although they 'could get a lot of hits, but will rarely be seen with the level of care and commitment that engenders connection. The viewing context of YouTube serves to quiet the radical potential of even the most repeatable and rousing of phrases' (Juhasz 2008: 303). Dahlgren's and Juhasz's diagnosis chimes with the views of Marcuse on the way the capitalist system operates, as already mentioned. This opinion is also largely corroborated by authors of several chapters included in this volume, such as Michael Chanan, Steve Presence and Lars Kristensen. However, although they agree that the internet is another capitalist instrument of commodification, including commodification of dissent, they argue that Marxist film activists cannot ignore this means, because there are few alternatives left.

Another channel of communication which recently attracted much attention is the space of film festivals (Iordanova and Torchin 2012). Unlike the

audience of YouTube, which is dispersed and typically lacks deeper engagement with the films it is watching, festivals provide the films with context and community. However, there are at least two reasons to be sceptical about festivals' effectiveness to achieve Marxist goals: an egalitarian and emancipated society. Firstly, festivals tend to address very specialized and usually well-informed audiences. In other words, they preach to the converted rather than those who need persuasion. That said, as Leshu Torchin argues in her essay on film festivals and activism, 'if one stops preaching to the choir', they may stop singing (Torchin 2012: 6). The second argument to be wary of festivals is their usual focus on single issues and micropolitics. Film festivals are thus model vehicles of postmodern politics, which, as we argued earlier, might be seen as being ultimately anti-Marxist.

Structure and Chapter Outline

The scope and organization of this book reflects the fact that Marxist film activism is a question of the production, textual characteristics and reception of the films. Consequently, practically all the chapters in this collection deal with all three of these aspects, although they differ in that they emphasize different moments in a film's life cycle. Equally, when choosing the chapters we wanted to account for the fact that there is no fixed recipe for a Marxist film, namely a film that would make the spectator act towards introducing or strengthening socialism, not least because films, in common with other cultural artefacts, as Marx knew very well, exist in history. When historical circumstances change, the meaning of the film and its power to influence the audience changes too. However, rather than taking this fact for granted, the authors of this collection analyse case studies, trying to account for how the specific time and place affected film production, distribution and reception. It was our ambition to present as wide a spectrum of cases as possible, using examples from different periods of cinema's history and different locations. We were especially interested in contemporary film activism for two principal reasons: firstly, to fill a gap in research as this form of activism is barely covered in existing publications, and secondly, because we believe that there is a qualitative difference between the older and newer forms of film activism, resulting from the almost hegemonic position of the neoliberal version of capitalism, and an increased

accessibility of digital technologies and growth of channels of distribution of films. One could expect that these two factors have a contrasting effect on Marxist film activism; the first reducing opportunities for independent production, distribution and exhibition of films, and the second increasing them. However, rather than assuming such a pattern, the authors try to find out if it can be detected in the specific cases they are investigating.

A need to account for the continuity and change in Marxist and left-wing activism in a wider sense affected the structure of this book. Its first part is devoted to accounts of past activism. It begins with a discussion of one of the first, and till now most radical, examples of cineactivism, Aleksandr Medvedkin's 'cine-train' (*kinopoezd*), operating in the years 1931–33. The author of this chapter, Gal Kirn, regards Medvedkin's experiment in activism as a particular form of novel political re-appropriation of technologies of motion (train) and vision (cinema), leading to the creation of a new space of art, which is literally and metaphorically dynamic and in which the boundaries between artistic creation and manual work, as well as between art production and consumption, are blurred. Cine-train is thus a perfect example of activist cinema in which the filmmaker is much more than a filmmaker, and the viewer much more than a viewer. By the same token, cine-train fulfils the Marxist ideal of 'amateurism', in which people perform different jobs for their own satisfaction and the benefit of the community. Kirn underscores that such a radical form of film activism was possible only because of the entirely new political situation in Russia following the October Revolution, and discusses in detail the conditions that have to be fulfilled for the cine-train to move at full speed, both literally and metaphorically.

The next three chapters look at the leading figures associated with the '68 movement: Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Jeremy Spencer, in the chapter 'Politics and Aesthetics within Godard's Cinema', discusses Godard's turn to political cinema or, as the director himself put it, to making political films politically, which happened around '68. Spencer observes that during this stage in his career Godard modelled himself on Dziga Vertov, as expressed in naming his project the 'Dziga Vertov group', as well as drawing on Bertolt Brecht's ideas of political art. Godard's main idea behind this decision was a desire to activate the viewer by eliciting in him a specific intellectual reaction, different to the reaction of watching an entertaining, mainstream Hollywood film. The key to creating such intellec-

tually stimulating films was editing, understood as the organizing of sounds and images with the intention of presenting a concrete political situation and transforming it. In practice, it meant using the language, as Peter Wollen put it, of ‘narrative intransitivity, estrangement, foregrounding, multiple diegesis, aperture, unpleasure, reality’. However, Spencer ultimately questions Godard’s strategy as impractical and theoretically weak. Testimony to the former is the director’s ‘ghettoization’ during the militant period, his loss of contact with the mass audience and rejection of his work by major distribution channels. Following Jacques Rancière and Fredric Jameson, Spencer also questions the political efficacy of the political art of the sort proposed by Godard. He argues that there is no guarantee that the typical juxtapositions of Godard’s films will be put back together by the spectator in the form of a message, let alone the right message. On the contrary, there is a big danger that Godard’s films would leave the viewer indifferent to the messages which they contain.

After Godard, Chris Marker is considered in the chapter ‘Marker, Activism and Melancholy’, authored by Jon Kear. Kear presents Marker as a model ’68 intellectual, mentioning that after the war he was a writer and critic working on the journals *Travail et Culture*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the neo-catholic Marxist *Esprit*. These literary aspirations were to continue to guide Marker’s work, even though later filmmaking took precedence over other forms of intellectual activities. Although Marker aligned himself with Marxism, he never joined the French Communist Party (PCF) and was critical of the legacy of Stalinism and the then contemporary Soviet model of communism. Like many left-wing intellectuals of his generation, he was increasingly drawn to the struggles in Latin America, Asia and Africa as holding the possibility of a New Left coalition. In a fashion typical of ’68 movements, Marker became particularly interested in early Soviet filmmakers, especially Medvedkin, to whom he dedicated one of his most famous films, *The Last Bolshevik* (1993), and created a filmmaking collective, SLON, whose objective was to produce films and train industrial workers to establish filmmaking collectives of their own. Although the objective of Marker’s cinema was, as with all Marxist filmmakers, a worldwide revolution, his films, as the title of Kear’s chapter suggests, are imbued with melancholy, suggesting a missed chance of changing the world – an impression one also gets when watching Godard’s films made after 1968.

If activist cinema is a communal cinema, then the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet fit this bill well, as they made them together, shar-

ing their duties evenly. Their movies also belong to some of the most politically stimulating films ever made. Manuel Ramos-Martinez looks in detail at one of them, *Workers, Peasants* (2000). He argues that the film undermines Marx's assessment of peasants as being politically inferior to workers due to their inability to communicate and forge alliances. *Workers, Peasants* tries to represent these two groups as equal, and by the same token they try to create a new political subject, heterogeneous yet united in their shared struggle. Moreover, by using an elaborate visual and aural style, Straub and Huillet propose a new type of political speech, which bridges the gap between poetry and prose and, in cinema, documentary and fiction film. Ramos-Martinez also draws attention to the fact that the couple of directors invite nonprofessional actors to play in their films, which is another way of reaching a wider audience and learning from those who have a very different experience from them.

The historical part finishes with a chapter by Bruce Williams, who discusses the production and national and international reception of Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), widely regarded as one of the most politically engaging works ever made and a seminal example of Third Cinema. The film, based on 180 hours of clandestinely filmed interviews and found footage, documents Juan Perón's rise to power, his eventual overthrow and the lasting legacy of peronism in Argentina. One of its important motifs is the direct action of Argentine workers to take over the factories in which they were employed and in this way redress the balance of power in the capitalist world. The change of status of the worker is also reflected in the production of the film, in which the boundary between filmmakers and characters is blurred, as the workers were engaged in making the film. Drawing on the concept of 'functional mediating cultural translation', Williams discusses how the political character of the film was reinterpreted in its subsequent screenings in New York, Montréal, London and Paris. In some places the struggles in Argentina were regarded as similar to that which took place in their own countries or a matrix to be followed. In others, such as contemporary New York, the political 'heat' of the film was largely neglected by the viewers, who merely enjoyed the aesthetic dimension of the film. Williams also pays attention to the influence of Solanas and Getino's work on Jean-Luc Godard during his militant period, especially his production of his *Wind from the East*.

The second part is filled with chapters about contemporary left-wing cinematic activism and its relationship to Marxism. William Brown, in a chapter

provocatively entitled 'Contemporary Political Cinema', considers two recent films from around the world, *Elite Squad* (2007), directed by José Padilha, which is a coproduction between Brazil, Netherlands, the United States and Argentina, and *A Screaming Man* (2010), directed by Mahomet-Saleh Haroun, coproduced in France, Belgium and Chad. Brown argues that each of these films in their own way seems to reject a passive attitude towards the contemporary world, and instead encourages viewers to take a more active stance in response to political and economic issues. In doing so, these films also create space for Brown to use Marx's concept of value in order to critique Gilles Deleuze, and especially his work on cinema. Brown identifies how value judgement creeps into Deleuze's work, creating not just a taxonomy, but a hierarchy of image-types that both *Elite Squad* and *A Screaming Man* would seem to refute. By promoting activism, and by condemning passivism, these films also critique Deleuze's idea that time-image cinema, supposedly the superior of his two major image types (the movement-image and the time-image), is a cinema of passive seers.

Haim Bresheeth begins his chapter, entitled 'Cultural Resistance through Film: the Case of Palestinian Cinema', by contrasting the political and cultural identities adopted by Jews: socialist cosmopolitanism, epitomized by the stance of Isaac Deutscher, and Zionism. The author describes Zionism as a particularly regressive position, combining rabid nationalism with capitalism, as presented in the writings of Theodore Herzl. Bresheeth claims that Israel was a brainchild of the latter position; the consequence of the very existence and colonialist policies of Israeli authorities is the occupation of Palestine. This occupation is, inevitably, met with resistance, in which the use of cultural means is particularly important, given the fact that Israel, which is supported by the United States, is a very mighty opponent. Bresheeth sketches the history of Palestinian cinema as a vehicle of resistance, beginning in 1968, the year the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) set up their photographic department, which become the Palestine Films Unit two years later, through the period of the First Intifada and the Oslo Accords. He points to the paradoxical character of Palestinian cinema, consisting of the fact that, although it is greatly needed, it does not really receive any support from the state. The last part of his discussion is devoted to recent Palestinian films, such as *5 Broken Cameras* by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi, as works whose nationality is contested, and which address a European and even global audience, a fact im-

portant in light of the European Union's continuous support for Israel. While developments described and analysed in this chapter look back into history and cover recent decades in Palestine and at PLO centres elsewhere, the issues discussed are currently very much at stake, and have become of great importance in Palestinian cultural and political circles, hence the placement of this chapter in the section on current activism.

In the chapter entitled 'The Contemporary Landscape of Video-Activism in Britain', Steve Presence maps the field of video-activism over the last twenty years, paying special attention to the achievements and problems of two of the best-known producers of such material, Undercurrents and SchMOVIES. Although, as Presence maintains, neither of these organizations necessarily make 'Marxist' films, they produce films that resonate with a Marxist audience. Of particular value in Presence's analysis, therefore, is his discussion of the contradictions involved in what is, broadly speaking, 'anti-capitalist filmmaking in a capitalist context'. Pointing to a variety of political, technological, social and cultural factors pertaining to the period known as neoliberalism, he shows how the production of radical video-activism has, for these two organizations at least, involved a compromise between political filmmaking and economic survival, either by incorporating market models into their work or by developing parallel careers in which, as well as being a worker integrated into the capitalist regime, the activist-filmmaker can also operate more or less free from the constraints of the market.

Lars Kristensen, not unlike Steve Presence, discusses a certain type of activism and cinema associated with it, which cannot be described as strictly 'Marxist', but which might appeal to Marxist viewers: the Critical Mass movement. This movement, which started in the early 1990s, consists of groups of bicyclists riding through inner cities in numerous countries. The Critical Mass movement can be assessed in two basic ways: either as a means of combating capitalism by challenging the domination of a private car in the cities and advocating living in a more sustainable and greener way, or as a one-issue activism that diverts attention from the crucial problem of capitalism, which is that of class. Kristensen also discusses the films that represent and advocate bike activism and living according to the 'bike ethos' in terms of their production, textual characteristics and distribution. He draws attention to the fact that cinema is crucial for bike activism and the internet is indispensable for Mass Movement cinema.

Michael Chanan, in 'On the Immaterial Labour of the Video Blogger', draws on the concept of 'immaterial labour' as developed by Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Maurizio Lazzarato, the history of cinema and especially the documentary genre, and his own experience as a video blogger, posting blogs on *The New Statesman* from early 2011, to discuss the situation of the contemporary left-wing activist like himself. He mentions that this situation has certain advantages, most importantly allowing for creative freedom. The bulk of activists these days can shoot what they want and make their work available to potentially billions of users on YouTube, with practically zero cost beyond their own labour. Hence, this new situation seemingly creates a utopia, in which everybody can be an artist or an amateur in a wider sense, fishing in the morning and writing political treatises in the afternoon, as pronounced by Marx. This also means that activists are no longer excluded from reaching a wide public. But, as Chanan observes, echoing Steve Presence, this utopia hides a much less attractive reality. Firstly, the blurring of boundaries between video amateurs and professionals (similarly as between professional academics and those who share their knowledge with others for free) brings the risk of lowering the status and the salaries of the former, sentencing them to the fate of 'precarious workers'. Secondly, he points to the solitary character of the video blogger, which on the one hand affords him or her creative freedom, but on the other is a liability because it deprives the video-author of the creative feedback that goes with the teamwork of a crew. Finally, the web, where the products of the new form of political activism are uploaded, is an invention of neoliberal capitalism. By uploading their videos on YouTube, their makers effectively donate for free their work to corporate capital, which makes of it enormous profit.

This part and the book as a whole finishes with Martin Barker's chapter, entitled 'Recovering the Future: Marxism and Film Audiences'. Barker asks when a film is seen as Marxist, and when Marxist films encourage the viewers to behave in ways conducive to Marxist goals. He notes that the bulk of what passes as 'Marxist theory of film' has been restricted to considerations of the textual nature of films and that the prevailing view of film critics and theoreticians, following the formalist experiments in the Soviet cinema of the 1920s and post-May '68 film theory, is that a Marxist film is one which opposes 'mainstream' cinema, is regarded as subservient to the goals of capitalism and 'ideological', and by the same token false. However, he points out that this is

not necessarily the way that the ‘ordinary viewers’ see particular films. Drawing on his own empirical research, he points out that films dismissed by critics as reactionary or at least neutral in relation to Marxist goals due to being spectacular or escapist, such as *Alien* and the Tolkien trilogy, elicit in many viewers a kind of Marxist reaction, most likely to a much greater extent than those heralded by Marxist critics as truly Marxist, which are inaccessible to all but a tiny elite. Barker’s purpose, however, is not so much to redeem such popular films for Marxism, as to encourage a more empirical research into the behaviour of audiences and the link (or its lack) between watching a film and acting in its spirit. Barker’s conclusions are in fact close to those of Jacques Rancière, as evoked by Jeremy Spencer; we cannot assess the political potential of a given film on the basis of its being ‘intellectual’ or ‘emotional’, simple or complicated.

This collection is not only about left-wing film activism, but is also in a large part written by film and political activists: filmmakers, video bloggers, organizers of film festivals, trade union activists and, at least, academics trying to educate their students in the spirit of Marxism. This book is intended to help them and others of similar goals in this task.

Notes

1. In Adorno’s writing the difference between a ‘real thing’ and its pseudo-version plays an important part and he seems to be a sole arbiter of how to discern between the two.
2. Such an opinion was recently expressed by a French director, Nicolas Klotz, who said: ‘The events of May ’68 opened the door to global capitalism – therein lies their curse’ (quoted in Foucault 2008: 30).

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