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Marx at the Movies / Cartographies of the Absolute

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It is difficult to separate the history of cinema, a form of art so embedded within the twentieth century, from the history of Communism. Perhaps it is not only because of the coincidence of the two dates of birth but, rather, there is something more profound and more structural in regards to their common heritage – the idea of transforming reality. This was, indeed, the underlying argument of Chris Marker's *The Last Bolshevik* (1992), where the life of the Soviet filmmaker Aleksandr Medvedkin became the allegory for the lifespan of communism, cinema, and the twentieth century, all of which were dying at the beginning of the 1990s under the attack of neoliberalism, digital images, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Marker identified his own life with cinema and communism and the beautifully melancholic elegy he constructed with *The Last Bolshevik* gave the idea that an epoch, as much as his own life, was about to end. The identification of communism and cinema was doomed to belong to the past.

Cinema, in fact, survived the turn of the century, but Marker's prophecy was not exactly misplaced. In the last two decades we have witnessed a tremendous transformation in the way movement-images are produced, consumed, and distributed; a process which has paved the way for a more individualised and commodified mediatic universe where the utopian project of using the cinematographic art for the purpose of a collective transformation of the capitalist society sounds rather anachronistic. Ironically enough, though neoliberalism and capitalism itself turned out to be in crisis as well, at least after 2008 when one of the biggest economic crisis in history showed that Fukuyama's idea of the end of history – so fashionable during the anti-communist fever of the fall of the Berlin Wall – was nothing more than science-fiction. It is a fact that popularity for Karl Marx's theory returned, and

not just in the field of Leftist politics or social movements (where it naturally belongs) but also on the pages of *The Economist* and the *Financial Times*. If capitalism was in such a severe crisis, it was natural to turn to one of the most famous and consistent critiques and analysis of it.

Given that Marx has now been at least partially disassociated with the fate of the Soviet bloc, it is natural to interrogate his figure under a new light. This is what happened in different ways in the latest decades, and this is what is attempted in the collective volume *Marx at the Movies: Revisiting History, Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014), edited by Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen, in which the relation between Marxism and cinema is investigated through different perspectives. It would be difficult to reduce such a polyphonic volume to a coherent synthesis. In the following review I will therefore limit myself to underlining the arguments of the essays that I found more compelling.

It might seem odd to pair a man who died long before the birth of the cinematographe in combination with a form of art which he never spoke about. However, the volume, much more than on the twentieth century, is focused on the twenty-first century, where a new encounter between cinema and Marxism might become possible under a new light finally freed from the implication of the Soviet era. The question whether there is a direct connection between the study of an economic mode of production, such as Marxism, and the field of aesthetics is an open one, and the two editors of the volume decide to not take a clear-cut position. The volume aims at offering, more simply and more generally, 'a re-evaluation of cinema from a Marxist perspective by looking at its theory and practice' (p. 13). This means applying it to a variety of aesthetic objects through markedly different theoretical frameworks. Marxism in fact is far from being a coherent field; between Adorno and Brecht, Lukács and Bakhtin, Sartre and Gramsci, there are significantly more differences than commonalities. As frequently happens, the field of 'leftist' (whatever that means) aesthetics is dominated by a few names, for example reference to Jacques Rancière is almost unavoidable and thus, expectantly, omnipresent in the volume. His idea of art as a tool in order to produce a 'dissensus' from below gives a much more complicated account of an aesthetic revolutionary process than what the digital revolution might have foreseen. Rancière's referencing in this essay is thus used in order to propose a microphysical revolution of amateur cinema, a process that would embrace a qualitatively different form of filmmaking finally freed from Hollywood's industrial division of the sensible.

The volume gives room to a much more 'classical' Marxian perspective as well. Mike Wayne develops a very interesting reflection around the notion of the 'dialectical image'. According to the author, while images have been traditionally used as a power instrument for the ruling class (one of the examples is the religious iconography of Catholic Churches in Southern Europe that have often been named 'the Bible of the poor' for its didactic purpose) there are examples in German philosophy where the image is traversed by complex political and aesthetic negotiations. For example, in the work of Walter Benjamin the concept of the dialectic image shows that the visual universe is a conflicting terrain where the conceptual and the perceptual, the universal and the particular, the cognitive and the affective co-exist in an antagonistic manner. Johan Siebers and Ian Fraser rely on Ernst Bloch for their two essays. The former focuses on the utopian potential of montage in classical cinema; the juxtaposition of images allows a film to connect the misery of present-day capitalism to what is not yet there, like a world of future equality. Even though Bloch always had a skeptical attitude toward moving-images because of their commercial exploitation, and favored music as a utopian form of art, Siebers underlines how music is able to inscribe a future-to-come even between the lines of the most trivial commercial production. The latter develops an analysis of Terence Davies' *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988), which portrays a patriarchal father in a working-class family in Liverpool during the 1940s and 1950s. While at the level of content we witness all the possible vexations that this man inflicts on his family, at the level of form we have a much more subtle pictorial text where we can glimpse an alternative story and a possible utopian escape.

One of the most ambitious and thought-provoking essays of the volume, however, is Ewa Mazierska's, in which she reflects on the connections between Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* and Alexander Kluge's *News from Ideological Antiquity*. Marx's writing style and conceptual development is very distant from a visual work, and what Kluge tried to do with this film is precisely to think the visual 'inadaptability' of *Das Kapital*. This problem, in fact, had already been tackled a long time ago by none other than Sergei Eisenstein, when in 1928 he started to work on a possible cinematographic version of *Das Kapital*. While his project never saw the light of day, there have been countless speculations regarding how such a film would have looked. But what is interesting is not so much speculating on 'what Eisenstein would have done with this film' (though the few sketches he left on a notebook are not void of interest),

but the problem of what it means to create an image of the critique of capitalism? What does it mean to represent the capitalist mode of production in a visual space? Eisenstein wondered how it would have been possible to reduce to a single image a mode of production that – by definition – has to presuppose the entire world market and a very complicated coexistence of different forms of organisation of labor; or in other words, how a dispersed multiplicity of actions could be aesthetically comprehended and synthesised. How would it be possible to create a film where all the differences that are organised and managed by the capitalist law of surplus-value would appear on a single screen? The utopia of Eisenstein was that cinema would have been able to render *Das Kapital* legible by illiterate peasants and uneducated factory workers, simply through the power of montage.

Kluge with his masterpiece tried to think through all these very complicated aesthetic problems in an eight-hour essay film that is as extraordinary as it is challenging for the viewer. But the problem of the relation between cinema and Karl Marx's *oeuvre* seems to be much more compelling when it is addressed around these questions rather than through an application of a ready-made toolbox of Marxian aesthetic concepts to whatever filmic object one can think of. For example, another recent book attempts to give a systematic and thorough account of all the theoretical questions surrounding the problem of contemporary capitalism visual representation.

Cartographies of the Absolute (Zero Books, 2015) is co-written by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle. Despite not being a straightforward media theory book, this volume effectively develops some of the most important theoretical points essential in order to frame the relationship between Marxism and cinema. The problem is not so much one of rendering visible Marxist theory, but rather to address the possible imagining of capitalism. The authors in fact start from the question of the possible intelligibility of the network of social relations that inhabit our world, which, given that we live in a world regulated by the capitalist mode of production, means to wonder whether it is possible to have a visual representation of the sphere of political economy. The capitalist economy is in fact a very peculiar social formation; it is predicated on the disassociation between the producers and the means of production, and therefore it creates a separation between a community and the material means that a community necessitates in order to reproduce itself even at a basic level. Every community, in order to have the mere possibility of survival, needs to enter into the sphere of the world market. Aside from the very well-known economic and social unbalances, this process inevitably causes a

very immediate epistemological shift – the social relations that regulate the basic survival of a community are *outside* of the community itself. In other words, the producers are not only deprived of the means of their survival, they are also deprived of the intelligibility of the social relations that regulate their lives. The verdict is a very simple one: capitalism is an opaque social organisation.

In order to understand its intricate system of causes and entanglements it is necessary to adopt a complex and multilayered perspective, where every point is investigated in its relation of dependency (and not proximity) to the others. We might not see it immediately, but this network of causes and relations is there. This is something that Kluge tried to depict very effectively in his film – how is it possible that a single commodity can be bought and consumed here and now? If we look inside of it we would see the production process (most of time occurring on the other side of the planet), the stock market, and the financial system that enable that company to finance its production, the logistic system of distribution (the part of Toscano and Kinkle's book on logistics is impressively clear), the research team that designed the product, etc. In other words, inside of a commodity there is an entire world of social relations that cooperate together, even though most of the time they are far away from each other. Capitalism is a world system, and in order to understand its network of relations we need an enormous amount of intellectual mediation.

The problem is that visually, we tend to reduce this system of inter-relations to its most immediate form of visibility – i.e. what we have here and now in front of us. That is why cinema always had a hard time in representing the capitalist mode of production, and that is why Eisenstein ultimately failed to reduce such an intricate system of relations to an image that would have been widely understandable. Marx said that a commodity was 'abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties', which is because – as Kluge shows – inside of it there is the entire world. The problem is that once we *look* at it, we see only a mere object. What does cinema have to say about this?

We are at a historical moment when visual representations of the complexity of the world abound – satellite images, drones, maps, big data, etc. But are those really forms of representation of capitalist social relations? According to Fredric Jameson – extensively quoted in the book – a 'cognitive mapping', which is what he believes we should strive for, is something entirely different. The problem is not so much to gather the enormous amount

of data of the multiplicity of hubs that compose a world, but to penetrate in the nexus that regulates their relations, to try to understand their hierarchies and their composition, not their immediate manifestation.

A good example of this in moving images, according to Toscano and Kinkle, is the HBO series *The Wire*, where the vertical and the horizontal complexity of the city of Baltimore was investigated beyond its immediate visibility. David Simon, the creator of the series, understood a very basic Marxian point about the visibility of social relations – in order to *see* them you do not have to look at them in the way they are given to you, but rather you have to penetrate in the ‘hidden abode of production’, as Marx said, where what you see of the city, which is only a lure, is being ‘fabricated’. The visibility of capitalism is not what you have in front of your eyes, but what negotiates and organises the conditions of possibility of what appears. In a world where ‘the view from above’, as Hito Steyerl says, ‘is a perfect metonymy for a more general verticalization of class relations in the context of an intensified class war from above’, looking at things from *behind* might be the best advice that Marx could give – 150 years after the publication of his most famous book – to contemporary cinema.

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