

CRITICISM AND IDEOLOGY: A NOTE ON CINEMA

Partisan cultural criticism does not originate in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, any more than does the idea that works of art must primarily serve purposes that are desirable, according to some canonic prescription. It is no surprise, then, that moralists — religious, educational, and political — are among the first to take seriously, pro and con, the “magic shadows” of the cinema, applying measures of intended meaning and potential consequence even prior to those of aesthetic value and merit as entertainment. Indeed, there are elements in the nature of cinema itself that from the outset compel such standards on the part of those so concerned. Here is something that seemed no more than a toy to its originators, that immediately developed such popular appeal, that society itself began to be transformed, from the secret depths of imagination of individuals to the innumerable complex structures of action wherein our lives are lived. There may be no clearer signal of awareness of what was happening than the response of the clergy, even before the turn of the century.

In the late 1890s, while some priests and ministers railed against the sinfulness, actual and possible, of what was beginning to go on in the movie theatres, on screen and off, others hailed the manifestly immense power of the new medium as a blessing, and carried films of Bible re-enactments, moral uplift and instruction on missionary forays into areas remote from the cultural advantages of cities. In the latter, it was even more apparent that motion pictures were particularly suited to the entertainment, and what social scientists would come to call the “socialization” of the urban population, which included ever growing numbers of people uprooted from their native institutions: migrants from the changing rural heartland of America, and immigrants from the towering Babel of nations and cultures of the world abroad.

While the intelligentsia — those worthies aware of their

advanced education and superior literacy — except for a few educators largely disdained the new medium and all its works, there were clergymen who showed prescient understanding of what was recreating the spirit of the people, even as it altered their habits and occasions of communal living. In an early broadside — ignored by film historians and to this day inexcusably unknown — one minister of a Congregational church in Connecticut, Herbert A. Jump, proselytized for the incorporation of films in the liturgy, in order to confront the challenges to religion of the godless cities, and to make a new, powerful “appeal to the unchurched.” Written in 1910, his language displays considerable sophistication about tactics of propaganda, shrewdly building on acceptance of the rhetorical and graphic arts by the faithful, won in recurring battles against the seductions of idolatry — and may be seen as authentically prophetic in other ways:

We men and women who have ever shown interest in pictures, hanging them on the walls of our homes, seeking them in illustrated books and now in picture-postcards, should turn naturally to the motion picture sermon which puts the gospel in a pictorial form. Some of you who attend church love the doctrinal phraseology of St Paul. There is many a hardheaded American working man, however, who confesses freely that to him St Paul is only a prosy old theologian. Paul, however, was not a prosy theologian to the men of his day. Why not? Because his illustrations for the gospel were taken from the life of his contemporaries — the racing habits of his day, for example, and the boxing matches. We ministers of today may not quite dare follow Paul in illustrating spiritual truth from the trotting park or a recent famous prize fight in a western city, but we have a right to use stories taken from life in the shop and factory and on the street as illustrations of the gospel to the men of today. Because the motion picture carefully selected will tell to the eye moral truths with vigor of illustration and an eloquence of impression which the most enthusiastic orator cannot command, it has a proper place in the equipment of any church which is trying to reach the

masses.<sup>1</sup>

Not only the sense of the cinema as the “people’s art,” but as the modern rhetoric whereby to convey *the* (i.e., any correct) gospel, would be echoed by devout audio-visualists of all persuasions, religious, educational, and political, for the following sixty years and more – with appropriate remendations to acknowledge and promote the variant, yet related powers of television. Especially remarkable here, however, are the over-tones of social and political awareness, hinting the ideological proselytization of the people, by the cinema, and for a new order, that was to come. With minimal alteration, the minister’s language could be taken for pure Communist *prolet-kult* of a decade later – or, with suitable *Völkisch* and Nazi coloration, for good cheerleading of the *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*, a few years later on.

The problems of critical thinking converging here are among the oldest, profoundest, and most persistently controversial in the history of ideas. In their educational phase, for only one, they involve the very definitions of intelligence, intellect, and their relationship to feelings and insight that divide teachers, and teachers of teachers, at least since Democritus and Socrates. For the latter, indeed, the persuasive powers of the arts in general and pictures in particular are so attuned to the emotions, and so implicated in what is later called “propaganda,” that they must be brought under control of only those committed to and trained for the search for truth and the life of moral and political justice.

That pictures (and carvings) can falsify and mislead would probably have only corroborated the palaeolithic hunter-shamans of the Dordogne and Altamira, tens of thousands of years ago, in insisting on fidelity to the ritualized images and usages, which, it is a good guess, were held essential to the prosperity and even existence of the groups they served. To recognize that images can lie, and if wrong or evil, actually harm the mind and spirit of man, is one way to acknowledge their potency, in moral and educational terms – an act of discrimination the more necessary whenever, as typically happens in periods of “enlightenment” and cultural change, there has been extravagation of the rhetoric of advocates of the

image arts as persuasive force. It is with much wisdom, responsibility to the enterprise of teaching, and not inconsiderable wit, for example, that so famous a creator and theoretician of the art of film for education as Jean Benoit-Levy recalls an earlier epoch of romantic claims for the graphic arts in furthering enlightenment, turning to one of Goethe's "domestic (table-talk?) epigrams" from *Zahme Xenien*:

Many stupid things are often said,  
As well as written,  
They do not kill the flesh or soul,  
Nor any change effect.  
But something stupid offered to the eye  
Exerts a magic force:  
Because it chains the senses  
The mind remains a slave.<sup>2</sup>

For one who would think freely, enabled to give considered, arguable reasons for judgment, and who would encourage and inform the freedom of thought of others, here is the fundamental issue regarding the appeal and effects of the arts, particularly those of created images. Concern for purposes and outcomes haunts all discourse about the arts, since men first distinguished them, in thinking, from their actual pervasion of all human doing and making. Even to proclaim, as does Paul Valery, that "the most evident characteristic of a *work of art* may be termed *uselessness*. . .,"<sup>3</sup> becomes less an apology for Art-for-Art's-Sake extremism than a plea for validity of a notion of human sensibility beyond the demands of survival, of immediate utility carried to its ultimate requirement. The new media of industrial society, themselves expressing and furthering the immense social and political convulsions of the modern epoch, impose new meanings on critical terminology, however, restating purposive considerations of the arts in ways that intensify the difficulties for freedom of judgment.

So much and so deeply does cinema, for the sovereign example, involve individuals in collective imagining, so fully are the prepared and projected visions of motion pictures interiorized and assimilated into the mind and spirit, that it is no wonder that religionists take them seriously at once. And it is no wonder, too, that the criticism of the cinema, in the years

of political, social, and economic cataclysm and depression, following the World War of 1914-18, should turn so fervently ideological, appropriating the language of earlier religious concern and converting it to new dogmatic purposes. Indeed, it is essential to ideologues – of the “Left” as of the “Right” – claiming any legitimacy as spokesmen for the forever rising “masses” of the modern world, to establish critical authority, at the very least, over the cinema, as the most glamorous exemplar of mass-oriented, technologically-produced media.

Not only is there conscious effort, in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, to transmute traditional religious institutions and practices via the communal experience of cinema – a process occurring in other countries without deliberate manoeuvre, in the dynamic development of cultural popularization. The new totalitarianisms demand complete indoctrination, and the role of all the arts, and especially of those so fully involved in and expressive of the transformations of modern society, is ideologically defined and institutionalized. Ideology is made the measure of art, and artist and audience are seen as integrated in an organism, the total state, in such ways as to define the former as no less than the articulated spirit of the latter – and nothing more, all contrary and manifestly decadent notions of individuality being suppressed or safely sublimated.

If one may speak at all of cultural *criticism* in the totalitarian state, its role is necessarily defined as inflexibly as is that of the arts, the critic primarily performing a recognizably sacerdotal function as guide to doctrinal orthodoxy and official approval. Only in *their* decadence, or in carefully managed deviations from established policy, do totalitarian societies allow open difference of judgment and creation, when, for example, the “one hundred flowers” (and no more?), encouraged briefly by Mao Tse-Tung in the 1960s, may bloom, before being cut down or uprooted by the omnipresent gardeners. Significantly (and hinting what promise, or what despair?), it is that most hopeful Marxist, Ernst Fischer, discussing “The Spirit of Criticism” in the context of a fundamental opposition of art and ideology, who writes:

Every ruling system desires stability and hates criticism, unless it is ‘constructive,’ i.e. not criticism

at all but affirmation. Criticism of any single point is often interpreted as denial of the entire system, because dogmatic creeds will only tolerate an unconditional Yea or Nay. Yet the spirit of criticism inherent in marxism [*sic*] demands that marxism, too, should incessantly criticize itself. 'I am not a marxist,' said Marx -- meaning that marxism denies itself when it ceases to question itself. The spirit of marxism must, in constant contradiction to the system, continue to be dynamic and encourage freedom of criticism, doubt, renewal.<sup>4</sup>

"[I]n constant contradiction to the system"! "Marx" as distinguished from "Marxism" is not a new notion. But what kind of "Marxism" is Fischer claiming to be in the true spirit of Marx? Whether the ideas of Marx (and Engels) must necessarily be organized as ideology, *Marxism*, and must when put into practice require a totalitarian government, may be the most controversial question of modern political science. Historically, however, there is no question, since Lenin, Stalin, and the incarnation of the idea of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in the Soviet state -- and in all its epigones, imitators, and rivals in ideological purity. Fisher's "marxist" [*sic*] call for art versus ideology, and its explicit argument for freedom of criticism, cannot itself be taken out of its context of events, their interrelations and consequences. As another critic, the Canadian George Woodcock, who has written sympathetically of George Orwell as "the critic within the movement towards a libertarian socialist world,"<sup>5</sup> puts it:

We come back . . . to the dilemma of the Marxist critics, who cannot face the fact that Marxist regimes have always in practice suppressed both the spirit of revolt and the creativity born of social discontent about which they write. It is not only capitalism that has -- as Marx taught -- its inherent contradictions, and until such critics have faced honestly the contradiction that Communism displays in actuality, its presence will flaw their writing and impair their credibility.<sup>6</sup>

In the totalitarian states we have come to know so well, the ideological limitations imposed on the enterprise of critic-

ism are the essential complement to the circumscriptions of behaviour that enforce authority, at the same time as they afford communal identity, political and social belonging, to all under their *kadaverdisziplin*. To approach critically the ideas of ideology, or those judgments imposed ideologically on works of art, requires suspension of the coercions, intellectual, physical and social, which are the very nature of ideology as ideology, and of ideology in power. This is so, *a fortiori*, in considering the cultural manifestations of ideology, and especially those arts, again best exemplified by cinema, that are themselves factors of mass communication and social change.

In fine, it is how disagreement is regarded and treated that distinguishes reasoning, the endless seeking of philosophy for wisdom rather than any fixation of "truth," from ideology — just as what is done with dissidence measures the free society and the authoritarian. An art open to untrammelled criticism, implying all the indeterminacies of man's reasoning for himself, is no longer invulnerable as ideologically orthodox and therefore sacrosanct. An ideology open to criticism, to disagreement, is no longer ideology; an ideologue who is "in constant contradiction to the system" is no longer an ideologue — or is an anomaly, in a way recalling the "monster" we are asked to "imagine" by Armand in Gide's *The Counterfeiters*: "an imbecile intelligent enough to know that he is stupid."<sup>7</sup>

Thus it is of the very nature of critical reasoning that there is acknowledgment of and provision for disagreement<sup>8</sup> — an essentiality that actually empowers and even requires the reasoner to contend with the most dogmatic positions, with which, of course, he would disagree — or, if he did agree, it would be for *reasons*, and not only in accordance with dogmatic authority. And thus, it is without fear (if there is any) of subverting criticism — albeit with all requisite caution — that we may read, consider, and even enjoy and benefit from the most ideological critics, writing about the most deeply and broadly persuasive of the arts of modern mass society, the cinema, during the terrible years of the 1920s and '30s (or thereafter).

To do so calls for understanding of the times, but without

the automatic exculpation sometimes argued on behalf of those who were driven, then, to go one way or another. Many intellectuals, shaken by the immense, sustained horror of the war of 1914-18, and in aggravated anger and despair over what were seen in the Depression as final failures of modern industrial society, and its economic and political institutions, were attracted to the doctrinal security of ideological systems – of the Right, it needs to be remembered, as well as of the Left – and their promise of revolutionary action and ultimate utopia. But many were not, often enough at the risk of social, economic, and other persecutions by the ideologues, self-righteous in their causes, and self-corroborated in their commitment to what they were certain was true religion.

This latter attitude, we are well to be warned, does not ease the encounter with many of the critics of those times, which Harold Clurman has aptly called the “Fervent Years.” There is much sanctimoniousness, out of conviction of their vocation as prophets for all humanity. And there frequently is an overweening confidence – one in accord with the characteristic pretension of ideologies to being exact, true “science” – that only *they* were truly reasoning, in applying the interior consistencies of their systems to judgment of the world, and all the films therein. Dogmatic assurance is hardly conducive to humility, nor (usually) is consciousness of one’s own brilliance – as is nicely revealed in a letter, written in 1927, by perhaps the best, but unquestionably the most influential of American ideologue film critics, Harry Alan Potamkin.

Denying, in effect, that his was only another personal opinion (about films), that he was just one more of those “critics whose criticism is a rationalization of their prejudices,” Potamkin went on to assert his credentials as properly scientific, as well as artistic:

You see, I boast of an historical sense and a grasp of realities, and being something of a poet, I have a tendency to see things whole. I guess I am sounding conceited. This would be alien to my intention, but I’ll chance it.<sup>9</sup>

The “historical sense and grasp of realities” Potamkin credited fully to his acceptance of “Marxist philosophy” and

its practical manifestation in “Communist ideology.”<sup>10</sup> This estimate is corroborated in his work, especially of his last years, as may be observed in the definitive collection, *The Compound Cinema: The Film Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin*, presented by Lewis Jacobs. But what also comes across strongly – and may be more exasperating today than it was when he flourished – is a sense that there was much, much more to him than ideological exegesis and propaganda – enough to raise doubts, tentative and hopeful, that he would end as but one more of the “party men,” those – of the Right or Left – Ortega y Gasset called “walking suicides.”

Had he lived longer, through the ideological – and physical – wars that split the Left over the “realities” of Stalinist totalitarianism, would not so dedicated a *critic* have had to come away from the sentimental Bolshevism colouring so much of his writing? And beyond his critical vocation – or, perhaps, so deeply within as to inform everything he wrote – was there not simply too much ego? Would not his own “cult of personality,” that was so essential to his critical apparatus of sensitivity and passionate articulation, have brought him into final conflict with the ideological priests and hatchet-men, as the Party line twisted and frayed in the tergiversations of Soviet policy of the late 1930s and afterwards?

These are speculations, to be sure, out of feelings for what was admirable in Potamkin’s writing, and recognition of so much that was positive in his influence. Even what Potamkin waved as red flags in his film criticism were often also banners for serious, critical understanding of the arts in general and the cinema in particular – that is, given time sufficient for critical consideration, and the necessary condition of liberty. And this only points again to the fundamental issues of critical thinking as opposed to ideology.

For Potamkin to write the way he did, and for us to be able to read him, in agreement or not, in his own time as now, calls for an openness for argument and the publication of ideas that was, and is impossible – or accidental and very rare, apart from secret, *samizdat* efforts – in the kind of society and political system for which he thought he was working. What this has to do with his artistic judgments is a question we must

ponder, one that brings up many of the most difficult problems of philosophy, religion, and politics, concerning the nature of the arts and their function in the formation of consciousness, of thought itself. But that we are able to think and decide, applying criticism to the judgment of criticism, may itself be one kind of answer, and a considerable one.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Herbert A. Jump, *The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture*. New Britain, Connecticut: Printed for private distribution, December, 1910; p.8.
- <sup>2</sup>Quoted in Jean Benoit-Levy, *The Art of the Motion Picture*. Translated by Theodore R. Jaeckel. New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1946. Reprinted in *The Literature of Cinema* series, New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1970; pp.140-141.
- <sup>3</sup>"The Idea of Art," in Paul Valery, *Aesthetics*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. The Collected Works of Paul Valery Volume Thirteen. Bollingen Series XLV. New York: Patheon Books 1964; p.71.
- <sup>4</sup>"Coexistence and Ideology," in Ernst Fischer, *Art Against Ideology* (*Kunst und Koexistenz*, 1966). Translated by Anna Bostock. New York: George Braziller, 1969; p.71.
- <sup>5</sup>See his article, "Orwell: Imperial Socialist," *Mother Jones*, I (June 1976) 4; p.60.
- <sup>6</sup>George Woodcock, "Marxist Critics," *The Sewanee Review*, LXXXIII (April-June, 1975) 2: p.334.
- <sup>7</sup>André Gide, *The Counterfeiters*. Translated by Dorothy Bussy. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927). Modern Library edition, n.d.; p.271.
- <sup>8</sup>Implications of this argument for philosophy were suggested (all-too briefly!) by the writer in "Disagreement: The Situation of Reason," *The Scientific Monthly*, LXXV (August, 1952) 2; pp.117-119.
- <sup>9</sup>Unpublished letter (1927) to Herman G. Weinberg, who graciously made

