

EDITORIAL:
FILM THROUGH MARX, OUR CONTEMPORARY

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The encounter in the 1960s and 70s between Marxism and film studies, as an institutionally recognised academic field, was a radically incomplete and perhaps even a rather superficial and unsatisfactory affair. The work of cross-fertilisation between Marxism and film and their critical sifting of concepts and perspectives had hardly begun when for the same reason that the encounter had started — the pressure of wider historical forces for social revolution — it ended. That first encounter risks being institutionalised in histories of the subject as a primitive stage that a linear history of progress has now irrevocably left behind. Yet that history productively ghosts much of the work in this volume, one which seeks to demonstrate that the dialogue between Marxist thought and film studies can only be assumed to have stopped to the detriment of film (and arguably to Marxism itself). That dialogue needs to be taken up again in a deeper and lasting form and in a more committed relationship.

At a time when the capitalist mode of production has never been as *extensively* present and interconnected in every nook and cranny of the globe, and has never been as *intensively* organised and operationalised as today, it seems bizarre that any discipline or body of thought could be relevant if it did not make this system a key part of its problematic. And yet the urgency of making *capitalism* the self-conscious object of enquiry seems to be recognised by only a small minority of actors in all walks of life. It is a paradox that itself needs to be explained, at a moment when the threat posed by private competitive accumulation to the ecosystem, is now a clear and present danger to the future of life on the planet. What are the political responsibilities of educators such as cultural workers and academics in such a context? Can they, can we, be satisfied to contract into the monadic subjectivity whose implicit and explicit violence Se Young Kim criticises in this issue of *Cinema*? The class struggle has not gone away. The problem is that it is largely being prosecuted by only one side, that of the exploiters. Capital (its structures, its imperatives, its institutions and agents across society) bestrides the globe

while its antithesis has exploded into so many fragmented forms as to make both agency and images of the subjects as collective agents complex and difficult to realise.

The financial crisis of 2007-8 has been embedded into a sickly system struggling to overcome the insurmountable contradictions that Karl Marx was the first to brilliantly synthesise. For example, capital expels labour power from the site of production and yet relies on it to measure its *rate* (but not mass) of profit. Capital depends on scarcity and yet its own gargantuan productivity abolishes scarcity. Marx probed such destructive dynamics in a variety of discursive registers, from the polemical agitational pamphlet (*The Communist Manifesto*, with Friedrich Engels), to the analysis of concrete historical conjunctures (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*) and to the foundation of critical political economy (*Capital*). There was usually a philosophical dimension to all this work, especially the imprint of his engagement with the German philosophical tradition, but also the influence of Greek philosophy on his thought. The concept of *potentiality* is an example. There is a divergence between how things are in their dominant empirical reality, and how things could be, not as a result of utopian scheming, but because buried within the deeper social relations on which the empirical “facts” depend, lie explosive negations of our historical situation, alternate lines of historical possibilities that those tasked with managing the capitalist system constantly work to close down. Philosophy in general, and Marx’s and Marxist philosophy in particular, is above all the source of all those conceptual resources that *denaturalise* the extensive and intensive totality that is this system. Here philosophy touches on the question of the imagination, on the essential ability to imagine other possibilities, other ways of engaging with and shaping the world. This in turn brings us to the art of film.

Evident in the following essays is the tension and debate between film as a form of critique and emancipation and film as a form of domination in a cultural mode. Both pertain to film’s relationship with historical and social reality. Both are in play in various ways and to varying degrees. Certainly Marxist filmmakers or filmmakers influenced by Marxism have made self-conscious contributions to developing the critical, we may say *pedagogic*, possibilities of film (see Koutsourakis, Spencer and O’Regan). But these potentialities are part of the medium itself and are realised in many films with less politically conscious motivations behind them. The Hollywood film is one of the few territories in American public life where the realities of corporate power can be readily acknowledged in a popular idiom (see Cobb and Greig) — although in some instances

whether this has become a narrative cliché, robbed of its political efficacy and social relevance, is a real question. Likewise, in post-Stalinist free-market capitalist Russia, it is film that has recently been able to speak what has been unsaid in the mainstream public sphere: that deep and savage socioeconomic cleavages have re-appeared with so-called freedom (see Bozovic). If the statues of Marx, Lenin and other classical revolutionaries that once populated the denominated Eastern Bloc as ironic witnesses to a system they would not have called socialism, now that all the statues have been abolished, their critique of capitalism is as relevant as ever. We certainly do not need idols in cultural theory, with their inevitable rigidifying of complex bodies of thought into state dogma. Marxism is no cure for human error. We need creative and critical developments in Marxism that have absorbed Marx's original insights and advance the understanding and explanation of the world we live in, including the contribution of film to that world. The point, of course, is to change it.