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| The relationship between politics and the cinema is probably one of the most vexatious questions to have occupied the academic discipline of film studies, and thinking on the cinema more broadly. In their landmark 1969 text ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’, *Cahiers du cinéma* editors Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni declared that ‘every film is political’, but this entry will focus on those works which explicitly seek an engagement with political subject matter.  One of the earliest examples of such a film is D.W. Griffith’s 1909 one-reeler *A Corner in Wheat*, a dramatised diatribe against wheat speculation based on a Frank Norris novel, which was recognised at the time as ‘an argument, an editorial, an essay on a subject of deep interest to all’ by a reviewer for the *Dramatic Mirror*. |
| The relationship between politics and the cinema is probably one of the most vexatious questions to have occupied the academic discipline of film studies, and thinking on the cinema more broadly. In their landmark 1969 text ‘Cinema/Ideology/Criticism’, *Cahiers du cinéma* editors Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni declared that ‘every film is political’, but this entry will focus on those works which explicitly seek an engagement with political subject matter.  File: Corner.jpg  Figure 1.  Source: <http://adaptation.oxfordjournals.org/content/3/2/155/F4.large.jpg>  One of the earliest examples of such a film is D.W. Griffith’s 1909 one-reeler *A Corner in Wheat*, a dramatised diatribe against wheat speculation based on a Frank Norris novel, which was recognised at the time as ‘an argument, an editorial, an essay on a subject of deep interest to all’ by a reviewer for the *Dramatic Mirror*. In the political arena, however, Griffith is more well-known for *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which, in spite of its unprecedented popular success, drew controversy for its glorification of the Ku Klux Klan and its racist depiction of Southern blacks. Along with Leni Riefenstahl’s paeans to Nazi rule in *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935) and *Olympia* (1936), Griffith’s film has thus gone down in history as a key example of the cinema being used for the purposes of propagating a far-right political ideology.  These examples, however, are significantly outnumbered by those films whose authors are on the political left, whether Marxist, anarchist, social-democrat, or more eclectically radical, and who have sought to use the cinema for the purposes of transforming society in a progressive direction. Impetus to this tendency was undoubtedly provided by the 1917 Russian revolution, and Soviet filmmakers took encouragement from Lenin’s apocryphal proclamation that ‘The cinema is for us the most important of all the arts’, Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) is one of the landmark works to come out of this period, and its centrepiece sequence on the Odessa steps remains an iconic example of left-wing artistic modernism. Eisenstein was also central to developing a theory of ‘intellectual montage’ which, in alignment with Marxist dialectics, could, in his view, allow the cinema to achieve an expressive potential on par with theoretical writing. While his projected adaptation of Marx’s *Capital* foundered, many of his ideas on montage were adopted and repurposed by compatriots such as Dziga Vertov (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929), Vsevolod Pudovkin (*Storm Over Asia*, 1928) and Alexander Dovzhenko (*Earth*, 1930). In the 1930s, however, with the consolidation of Stalinist power and the advent of sound film, Soviet montage cinema was sidelined in favour of the official artistic doctrine of ‘socialist realism’.  CLIP BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN  During World War II, filmmakers were marshalled into making films for propagandistic purposes on all sides, including in the US. Hollywood had by this stage become something of an ideological battleground between left- and right-wing figures, with some, such as Nicholas Ray and Elia Kazan, having developed their craft in leftist theatrical troupes during the New Deal era. With the onset of the Cold War, however, many of these figures were persecuted by McCarthy’s anti-communist witch hunt: the highest profile among them, banned from working in the film industry, were collectively known as the ‘Hollywood 10’.  File: Paisa.jpg  Figure 2.  Source: <http://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/images/reviews/177/1264577595\_6.jpg>  In Europe, meanwhile, post-war Italy was the site of one of the most noteworthy movements in film history: neorealism. With works such as Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà* (1946), Luchino Visconti’s *La terra trema* (1948) and Vittorio De Sica’s *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948), the neorealists not only transformed received notions of film production (with on location shooting, use of non-professional actors, and an aesthetic featuring the frequent use of long-takes and shots in deep-focus), they also treated contemporary political themes with a frankness and liberty unrivalled in other countries at the time.  By contrast, the *nouvelle vague* in 1950s France was initially perceived as comparatively apolitical, or even rightwards-leaning. But this overlooked the fact that the so-called ‘left bank’ filmmakers (Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Agnès Varda) had been making politically engaged films since the early 1950s – albeit often in more marginalised practices such as short films or essayistic documentaries – while ‘right bank’ directors such as Jacques Rivette and Jean-Luc Godard became more explicitly radical in their own work over the course of the 1960s and 70s, a tendency that was intensified after the events of May ’68 had politically polarised the country. Godard, in particular, would embark on a frenetic bout of militant filmmaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and formed the ‘Groupe Dziga Vertov’ with the Maoist activist Jean-Pierre Gorin, a collaboration which would lead to the key film *Tout va bien* (1972).  File: ToutVaBien.jpg  Figure 3.  Source: <http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-O5VkFGnnaXo/UqB-KMGR55I/AAAAAAAAMk0/  ma74\_TNwRF4/s1600/godard%252Btoutvabien.jpg>  Furthermore, the *nouvelle vague* served as a point of inspiration for numerous ‘new cinemas’ around the world in the 1960s and 1970s, which featured a younger generation of filmmakers coming to terms with their political environments. This dispersed movement would take hold on both sides of the Iron Curtain, with the work of Alexander Kluge and Rainer Werner Fassbinder in Germany, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Bernardo Bertolucci in Italy, Miklos Jancsó in Hungary and Jerzy Skolimowski in Poland of particular note. Elsewhere, some of the most interesting work in this vein was carried out in Japan, notably in films such as Nagisa Oshima’s *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960), Yoshishige Yoshida’s *Eros + Massacre* (1968) or the more militant filmmaking of Koji Wakamatsu and Masao Adachi, whose ties to far-left terrorist groups would have a lasting impact on their œuvres.  A parallel process took place in the Third World, in a period which saw the rise of the Non-Aligned Movement, and a plethora of newly-independent nations struggling with the legacy of colonialism. Latin America, in particular, witnessed the rise of a strain of political cinema that blended an engagement in workers’ struggles and guerrilla movements with the promulgation of a radically anti-imperialist ideology. Dubbed ‘third cinema’ in a key text by the Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (1969), who rejected both Hollywood and European art-house cinema in equal measure, this tendency would come to be represented by their film *Hora de los Hornos* (1969), as well as the work of Glauber Rocha in Brazil, Patricio Guzman in Chile, Santiago Alvarez in Cuba, and numerous lesser-known filmmakers in Africa, south-east Asia and the Middle East.  Perhaps the most contentious issue concerning the relationship between politics and cinema – at least from the perspective of the radical left – has been the form/content debate. Briefly put, this debate pits adherents of a viewpoint privileging the importance of a comprehensive break with conventional norms in the formal structures of politically radical films (often following models proposed by Brecht for the theatre), against those who emphasise the primacy of communicating a progressive political message to the largest possible audience (an approach exemplified in the work of Gillo Pontecorvo and Constantin Costa-Gavras). Both perspectives have potential drawbacks: the former standpoint risks a nullification of the potential for intelligible political discourse, while the latter may lead to the reconstitution of the regressive formal techniques of the dominant ‘bourgeois’ cinema.  In the wake of the student revolts of 1968, this dissension was acutely intensified. In the world of filmmaking, the free experimentation of Straub/Huillet, Philippe Garrel, Carmelo Bene or the New York experimental scene was at odds with the agit-prop stance taken by more expressly militant filmmaking groups. In film criticism, too, the dispute was a palpable point of contention: journals such as *Positif*, *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Cinéthique* in France, *Screen* in the UK and *Filmkritik* in West Germany were embroiled in long-running theoretical feuds on the issue, an avatar of which was the lengthy comparison of the films *Coup pour coup* (Marin Karmitz, 1972) and *Tout va bien* in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* (Groupe Lou Sin, 1972). In the most extreme cases, such as Jean-Louis Baudry’s ‘Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,’ published in *Cinéthique* in 1969, interventions into these debates would come close to condemning the very functioning of the cinema as being inherently politically reactionary, but they would also prove to be fundamental in the entrenchment of film studies in the academic sphere, where the relationship between cinema and politics continues to be a fertile source for discourse and debate.  The strident polemics of the post-1968 period would markedly recede by the 1980s, and, in tandem with broader geopolitical tendencies, a more conservative, politically quiescent mood became prevalent in world cinema during this period. While the ‘auteurist’ model of political cinema dominant for much of the 20th century has not entirely subsided – and can still be seen in the work of directors such as Ulrich Seidl, Pedro Costa or Jia Zhang-ke – the most notable trend in politically engaged filmmaking in the 2000s has been the rise of documentary cinema. Undoubtedly the most high-profile figure in this respect is the American filmmaker Michael Moore. Fusing a populist left-liberal political outlook with a brand of humour honed in his earlier television series *TV Nation* and *The Awful Truth*, Moore’s films *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) attracted unprecedented box office returns for documentary films. Awarded at both Cannes and the Oscars, they were nonetheless critiqued on the left for unduly privileging entertainment value and mass-appeal over rigorous political analysis.  File: Farenheit911.jpg  Figure 4.  Source: <http://lionsgatepublicity-archive.com/epk/f911/images/02\_300dpi.jpg>  While a number of, mostly North American, documentary filmmakers have also gained access to widespread distribution in this period (with notable figures including Errol Morris and Alex Gibney), the early 21st century has also witnessed the explosion of the ‘grassroots’ political documentary. Aided by the greater accessibility of digital filmmaking equipment, these low-budget films are disseminated via a multitude of distribution channels – whether through niche theatrical runs, the global film festival circuit, political campaign groups, or, increasingly, on online video-sharing sites – and their intersection with contemporary political events such as the Arab Spring has seen this phenomenon gain a high level of media attention. In contrast to the debates that marked politically radical cinema in earlier decades, this filmmaking tendency has, with some exceptions (the work of Wang Bing, for instance), largely abandoned formal experimentation in favour of the rapid and uncomplicated communication of political messages. |
| Further reading:  (Baudry)  (Benjamin)  (Comolli and Narboni)  (Eisenstein)  (Groupe Lou Sin d’intervention idéologique)  (Jameson)  (Rodowick)  (Solanas and Getino)  (Vertov) |