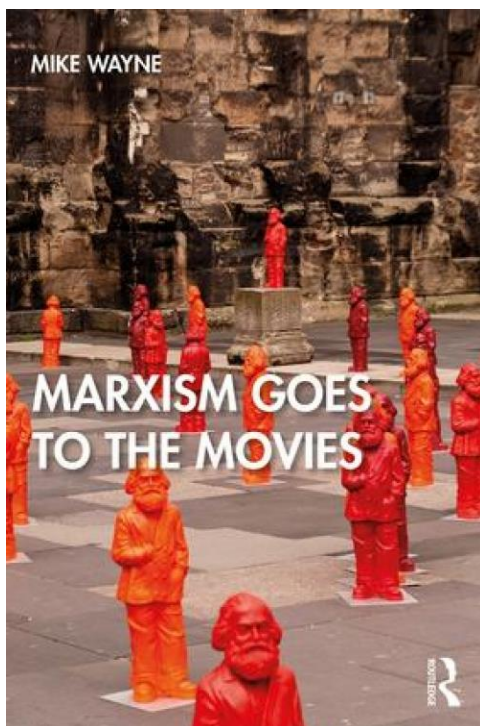


Cinema Transformed

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Wayne, Mike. 2020. *Marxism Goes to the Movies*. London: Routledge. 218 pp. ISBN: 978-1138-67787-6

Mike Wayne, Professor of Film and Media at Brunel University London, has been one of the most noteworthy researchers working around film and Marxism. His books include *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (Pluto Press, 2001), *Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends* (Pluto Press, 2003), *Understanding Film: Marxist Perspectives* (Pluto Press, 2005; editor), *Marx's Das Kapital For Beginners* (Steerforth Press, 2012), and *Considering Class: Theory, Culture and the Media in the 21st Century* (Brill, 2017; co-edited with Deirdre O'Neill). He has also co-edited an issue of *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image* with me, on "Marx's Philosophy", in 2016. Wayne's research has been

focused on the political dimensions of film practice, therefore it is no surprise that he became a filmmaker, as we shall see in detail. Marxism has provided him with the theoretical resources to study topics such as the Third Cinema, national cinema and pan-national cultures, institutions as sites of contestation, realist aesthetics, representation, relations between economic and cultural power, cultural imperialism, neoliberalism in England, class consciousness, and memory and history.

Theorising practice in film studies has been a focus of his research, both as a theorist and as a practitioner. His films have extended his scholarly work, which takes a revolutionary stand and espouses an emancipatory attitude without losing any of the necessary rigour as scholarship. This political perspective rooted in Marxist tradition has generated three films that he co-directed with Deirdre O'Neill: *Listen to Venezuela* (2009), *The Condition of the Working Class* (2014), and *The Acting Class* (2017). *Listen to Venezuela* is the product of a year spent in Venezuela recording a popular revolution first-hand. It counteracts the often distorted mainstream media coverage of the complex reality on the ground. *The Condition of the Working Class* is a feature length documentary shot in Manchester and Salford. Inspired by the influential study by Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), it follows a group of working class people who have created a theatrical show based on their life experiences. Finally, *The Acting Class* documents the lack of working class representation on the British stages and screens. It tackles social inequality and class barriers in the performing arts and the film industry.

The title of Wayne's new book, *Marxism Goes to the Movies*, seems self-explanatory. But we may ask: what exactly happens when Marxism goes to the movies? This is again a publication that bridges film theory and practice, the author's main research topics as I mentioned above. It articulates key concepts and thinkers within the Marxist tradition with a kind of filmmaking that may be aptly described as Marxist as well as with a critical perspective on cultural artefacts that reflect existing social contradictions. That is, the main argument of the book is that Marxism has radically changed the theoretical discussions and practical methods around the medium of film, stimulating revolutionary consciousness.

The clearness and conciseness of the book is one of its strengths. For those like myself who are interested in the interplay between Marxism and film, it is tempting to think that some of its topics could have been further fleshed out — e.g. the role and possibility of Marxist analysis in today's academy. Yet we have to understand the purpose of *Marxism Goes to the Movies* in

order to measure its success. It aims at being an introduction for students about the emancipatory potential of film. Marxism remains the most useful tool to understand and transform today's world, dominated by capitalism and imperialism and piling up unsolvable contradictions and cyclical crises. Still, arguing for the persistent relevance of Marxism is not the same as arguing for its relevance to theorising film and filmmaking. The book successfully connects the dots between political, economic, formal and cultural analyses that critically interrogate film as an historical cultural form. Marxist analysis, which responds to concrete conditions, is deeply linked with a type of filmmaking that takes part in the effort for human liberation in specific times and places. For this reason, filmmakers influenced by Marxism, such as the Senegalese Ousmane Sembène, have made some of the most significant contributions to the medium of film around the world. Film is a weapon of struggle.

Each chapter covers a broad theme and is divided into sections that are cross-referenced throughout, helping the reader to navigate and make sense of the material. It really functions as a textbook that can be used for teaching this subject in higher education. The fact that Wayne has been researching the encounter between Marxism and film and contributing to its development for years allows him to be brief but comprehensive, never superficial or simplistic. The first chapter focuses on major ideas developed by Marx: commodity fetishism, classes, ideology, and philosophical concepts like dialectics. The second chapter associates film history with human history since the end of the 19th century. It overviews the proletarian origins of cinema, the economy and society from which Hollywood cinema emerged, the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia and film modernism, Western Marxists' thoughts on the culture of modern industrial society, and the contributions of Structuralists to Marxism and film theory (Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser). The third chapter tackles the topic of methodologies, commenting on the place of Marxism in the academy, formal analysis in film studies, political economy and cultural studies. The fourth chapter centres on production and provides fundamental knowledge about the workings of the film industry, modes of production and social formation, organisation and ownership, and the domination of Hollywood cinema in Britain. The fifth chapter considers issues of form, paying attention to the Formalist debate, montage dialectics, the long shot, and self-reflexivity. The sixth chapter examines ideology and articulates it with film form, revealing ideological marks in popular business films and underlying the utopian feelings that popular cinema often conveys. The seventh chapter discusses realism based on

Raymond Williams and Georg Lukács's theoretical elaborations and investigates early and more recent examples of film realism. Finally, the eighth chapter dwells on culture, reviewing Williams's and Antonio Gramsci's comments on the topic, explaining the emergence of militant film movements that resist capitalist accumulation by dispossession, and taking a look at the circuit of cultural production.

In conclusion, *Marxism Goes to the Movies* is a book firmly supported by Marxist thought. It is particularly effective in using Williams's insights into the complexities of the base-superstructure relationships. Marx refused to turn his philosophy into a dogmatic system, thus avoiding renouncing the specificity of works of art. Wayne's latest book has the virtue of never losing interest in films as expressive and inventive human creations and not turning them into simple and automatic symptoms. At the same time, it demands that such works are not approached as things in a vacuum, without context, connections, or ramifications. The relative autonomy of culture from the economic base that we find articulated in Marx, and later in Marxists like Williams or Terry Eagleton, means that culture is the result of determinations that are not deterministic. It is particularly perceptive the author's effort to release culture from ideology, without completely disconnecting one from the other. This is quite different from a postmodern conceptualisation of culture and art as being independent of economic structures, social relations, historical situations, as if they were vaguely fluctuating or strictly singular elements. The last two chapters argue quite convincingly, on the one hand, that there is a clash of different meanings in entertainment cinema that situate it historically within the class struggle, and, on the other hand, that there are practices of resistance that are frequently combined with mainstream routines without losing none of its power of contestation. To sum it up, these arguments, supported by incisive observations on films, point towards the kind of complex cultural critique that is much needed today.