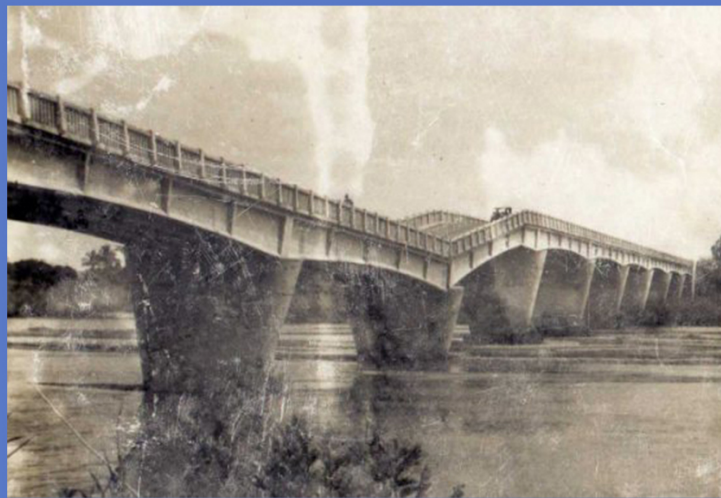


POLITICS AND IMAGE



Edited by Constantino Pereira Martins
and Pedro T. Magalhães



2019

7. The Class of Images: Sketch for a Research Project

Sérgio Dias Branco, Coimbra University

The concept of class has been progressively erased in contemporary discussions about art — and other topics. The explanatory power of this economic and social category, as articulated by Karl Marx, has been annulled precisely at a time when the contradictions of late capitalism are growing, composing an ideological background that creates conditions for the perpetuation of this system. From a Marxist point of view, class is not a product of Marx's mind, but reflects existing social relations and the dynamics of everyday life. By isolating art production from historical processes, by privileging the inner workings of art languages, by favoring an aestheticist approach to art, postmodernist cultural theory has relinquished critical knowledge about art as a phenomenon irremediably pertaining to the social fabric. If in this theoretical framework, cultural differences replaced class antagonisms as the driving force of society, then one must ask how these differences emerge and operate, what determines them and what do they produce, thus recognizing the fundamental importance of their material basis. To think critically about art to its foundations is to re-materialize it as a production process instead of analyzing works of art idealistically. The same may be said about religion. In order to tackle these matters, I will focus on film images understood as material, creative, and symbolic productions, and in the way they evoke class antinomies, expose class marks, and use Christian concepts and imagery in the portrait of working-class life in American cinema.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the articulation between issues around class, including progressive aspects of Christianity, and art. The second part briefly mentions an example from American cinema in which the representation of the working-class employs Christian elements.

Class Analysis and the Relative Autonomy of Culture

The erasure of class is but an effect of the dominant ideology in capitalist societies. Problems regarding race and gender, unless they are connected with class consciousness, are integrated into the class structure of capitalism and leave it unchallenged.

That is not to say that fighting racism and sexism is less important than the struggle against class society. Or even these are *distinct* combats. Racism and sexism are obstacles to democratic development in the same way that other kinds of social oppression are. Marxist tradition has always tried to articulate these differences associated with discriminatory practices with class antagonism. Historically, homophobia and the oppression of LGBTI people, like racism and sexism, has only served to divide the working class and block social change and economic fairness.

Marxist theorist Barbara Foley has recently pondered over the ways these categories correlate in the contemporary debate about intersectionality in critical theory. Intersectionality may be understood simply as a method of crossing different perspectives that is quite productive and not a novelty. But it is more and more presented as “a way of thinking about the nature and causes of social inequality,” which “proposes that the effects of multiple forms of oppression are cumulative and, as the term suggests, interwoven”¹²⁸. Foley’s argument is that intersectionality usefully describes “the *effects* of multiple oppressions,” but “it does not offer an adequate explanatory framework for addressing the root *causes* of social inequality in the capitalist socioeconomic system”¹²⁹. A crucial distinction in her argument is between oppression and exploitation: for example, Muslims may be oppressed in the United States in a way that Christians are not, yet they are both exploited as workers. Exploitation is the accumulation of capital from the extraction of the excess of value produced by the labor of workers over their wages; the *surplus value* that Marx describes.

Class analysis is, therefore, less about experience and more about structural explanation. Foley reminds us that, for Marx, class is basically a relationship, a social relation of property and production that splits capitalist society into two basic groups. Being the owner of a car or even a home does not mean you do not belong to the working class. Yet being the owner of the labor power of others in exchange for wages does. This class structure and its supporting ideology constitute a context for the production of art for which it cannot be abstracted from. Nevertheless, the mechanistic model that considers art, in particular popular art, as a mere ideological effect determined by the economic system, without real influence on historical events, is clearly a legacy of the Stalinist distortion of Marx’s thought. Friedrich Engels warned against such economic one-way determinism:

128 Barbara Foley, “Intersectionality: A Marxist Critique,” *MR Online*, 22 Oct. 2018, <https://mronline.org/2018/10/22/intersectionality-a-marxist-critique>.

129 Foley, “Intersectionality”.

“The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*”¹³⁰.

Indeed, it is for this reason that art and culture are *relatively autonomous* from the economic base, even when their production is controlled or censored. This explains the existence of films shaped by a political as well as an artistic commitment to portraying the struggling life of the working class using Christian references. Such movies have been produced inside and outside the American film industry.

The Church on the Waterfront

One of the most well-known examples of working class cinema in popular American cinema is *On the Waterfront* (1954). The film was directed by Elia Kazan two years after his testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities at the time of the Hollywood blacklist. Kazan named eight people who had been fellow members of the Communist Party USA in the 1930s. The director was strongly criticized by left-wing friends and colleagues. The polemic continues to this day. Despite the betrayal of his former comrades, which he later explained as damage inflicted on friends so as to save his own skin and continue working as a director, *On the Waterfront* is a film clearly focused on the working class. Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) is a member of a mob crew that controls the union of dockers. This is a corrupt union, a crime organization that has nothing to do with the advancement of dock workers' rights, but effectively controls the docking business on the waterfront. It has been involved in violent attacks and murders investigated by the Waterfront Crime Commission. Workers need to unite in a real union and they are helped by the parish priest, Father Barry (Karl Malden).

130 Friedrich Engels, “Engels to J. Bloch In Königsberg,” 21 Sept. 1890, *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm.

Readings of the film sometimes heavily rely on the context of the hearings of the investigative committee of the United States Congress and the persecution of Communists and their allies. In fact, as Gerald Horne recalls,

“when the movies dealt ostensibly with mob influence within the unions, the force of the message was often subverted. For instance, *On the Waterfront*, which concerned the gangster-dominated longshore union in the New York area, was interpreted widely as a parable depicting the role of Communists”¹³¹.

This reading is connected with the idea conveyed by the director himself that Terry, a member of the criminal organization who testifies against the mob boss, somehow represents Kazan — and hence that the mob represents the Communist Party. The action of testifying is the same, but its implications are quite different. This is the reason why Horne talks about subversion, because the real problem that the film addresses is omitted or otherwise replaced in this interpretation.

The hiring process in the docks after the Second World War was known as the “shape up” in which men fought desperately for a chance to work every morning. Arthur Miller describes such a scene in vivid detail:

“After distributing the checks to his favorites, who had quietly paid him off, the boss often found a couple left over and in his generosity tossed them into the air over the little crowd. In a frantic scramble, the men would tear at each other’s hands, sometimes getting into bad fights. Their cattle-like acceptance of this humiliating process struck me as an outrage, even more sinister than the procedure itself. It was though they had lost the mere awareness of hope”¹³².

In an article where Kathy M. Newman also quotes this passage from Miller’s autobiography, she concludes:

“As much as Terry Malloy might represent Kazan, ratting on his former friends, it is also true that Kazan and Schulberg [the screenwriter] were trying to rat

131 Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930-1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 100.

132 Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 147.

on capitalism, to call out American business practices as corrupt, and to argue that something drastic needed to be done to reform the docks”.¹³³

The fact is that the process of production began three years before. In 1951, Budd Schulberg was asked by a small film company, Monticello, to write a screenplay based on Malcolm Johnson’s Pulitzer Prize winning journalistic series, *Crime on the Waterfront*. Johnson introduced Schulberg to one of his main sources: Father “Pete” Corridan, the priest who sought to transform the port and the working conditions in it. He is the source for the ordained minister in the film. Father Barry sees the violence and the fear it instills, the death and the grief it sows, and at first retreats to the church and does not want to meddle. Urged to face the problems of his parishioners, he then becomes a kind of union organizer for the lack of one. He organizes a meeting in the church in order to foment action against the mob. Even in this place the group is violently attacked.

In this meeting, Father Barry promises unwavering support for the dockers. This encourages one of them, “Kayo” Dugan, to testify against the mob boss only to be crushed by a load in a staged accident. Father Barry is called and takes the opportunity to preach a sermon reminding the longshoremen that Christ walks among them when the “easy-money boys who do none of the work [...] take all of the gravy” and that every murder is a Calvary. When men loyal to the mob throw things at him and tell him to go back to his church, he tells them: “Boys, this is my church!” Terry finally reacts to his courage. The scene is staged as a resurrection: the priest raises his voice from the depths with the power of the Gospel and, in the end, is elevated with the deceased.

Concluding Thoughts

Much more can be said about how some American films construct a working-class perspective in conjunction with Christianity. These references may be indirect — as in the case of *Force of Evil* (1948), directed by blacklisted filmmaker Abraham Polonsky, that retells the story of Cain and Abel as a parable about the predatory relationships in capitalism — or they may be direct — as in the case of *On the Waterfront*. Films like these call attention to two aspects studied by philosophy of religion. First, the meaningfulness

133 Kathy M. Newman, “Revisiting *On the Waterfront*,” *Jacobin*, 15 Jul. 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/07/revisiting-on-the-waterfront>.

of religious language, in particular its political meaning as well as the turning of religious language into political language. Second, the connection between religion and material culture, which includes images and practices.

I close with an additional example from a film directed by Herbert J. Biberman and produced by Paul Jarrico, both members of the Communist Party, both blacklisted by the time the movie was made. *Salt of the Earth*, released in the same year as *On the Waterfront*, was independently produced outside of the film industry with the sponsorship of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. “Salt of the earth” is a phrase taken from the *Gospel of Matthew* 5:13 when Jesus talks about the “saltiness” of his disciples who are called to be living proof of God’s love on earth. The film portrays the 15-month-long miners’ strike in New Mexico against the Empire Zinc Company for the racial discrimination of Latino workers in pay, safety standards, and poor conditions of company housing. Catholic faith is an integral part of these Latino workers’ culture and their family’s everyday life. One of the first buildings that we see in the film is of a Catholic church. Esperanza Quintero (Rosaura Revueltas) is the main character and the story’s narrator, a miner’s wife who along other women want to demonstrate their solidarity with the striking miners and, therefore, has to challenge the prevalent sexism in their community. Christianity is a source of strength for the struggle of both miners and women.

In an early scene, Esperanza’s voice-over talks about a day that looks like any other of her life. She is ironing while she takes care of the children with tenderness. But it is also her birthday and, of course, her saint’s day. She is pregnant and has a wish that she considers so sinful that she prays to the Virgin Mary for forgiveness: that the child she is carrying is not born into a world so broken and so unjust. Mary is a receptacle of human longings and also an emancipatory religious figure. Jean Pfaelzer argues that the film “aligns Esperanza with the Black Virgin of Guadalupe, an enduring Chicana image of an indigenous, unsubmitive, mysterious, and sexualized goddess who encourages the survival and resistance of Mexicans and Mexican Americans”¹³⁴. In this sense, Esperanza (*hope* in Spanish) relates to the Virgin as to a mirror. She confronts her thoughts and weaknesses, and finds hope without detaching herself from the pressing matters of motherhood and the condition of working class women.

134 Jean Pfaelzer, “*Salt of the Earth*: Women, Class, and the Utopian Imagination”, *Legacy* 16, no. 1, “Discourses of Women and Class” (1999): 125.