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Film and television in 2023

2023 will go down in history as something of a turning point, politically and culturally. The year began and ended with wars initiated, financed or stoked by American imperialism raging in various parts of the globe. Hundreds of thousands have died in the US-provoked conflict in Ukraine, and the slaughter in Gaza, organized by the Netanyahu-Biden gang of war criminals, is currently horrifying world working class public opinion. A bloody, neo-colonial war against Iran looms on the horizon.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak terrible havoc, even as every official source pretends it no longer exists. Twenty-seven million people are dead, and counting, from an entirely preventable health disaster.

Extremely reactionary forces, with no mass base but expressing the lurch to the right by the entire political superstructure, have taken power in one country after another. The “left” parties and unions are utterly prostrate before them.



Oppenheimer

An offensive by the international working class is under way, in response to soaring inflation, job destruction, attacks on democratic rights and endless war, which will disrupt all the plans of the ruling classes. As the WSWS has pointed out, “The number of strikes ... does not fully express the state of opposition in the working class. A much broader struggle has been held back by the bureaucratic [union] apparatus, which has worked in close collaboration with the corporations and the government in a desperate attempt to contain social anger.”

An eruption of globally coordinated social struggle without precedent is in the offing.

Art, directly or indirectly, has to respond to the most pressing demands of its time, or it will not endure or leave a deep mark on human consciousness. “It is silly, absurd, stupid to the highest degree,” Trotsky wrote, “to pretend that art will remain indifferent to the convulsions of our epoch. The events are prepared by people, they are made by people, they fall upon people and change these people.”

Insofar as art “remains indifferent,” and there is a great deal of it at present that very deliberately does precisely that, it thereby reduces itself to unimportance, to mere trivia, even—under certain conditions—to an obstacle.

Social reality cut across the efforts of the “entertainment industry” this year to insulate its operations and products from the concerns of broad layers of the population. The vast social inequality in the film and television world, the open piracy of the large studios and streaming platforms and the relentlessly declining incomes of working writers and actors led to lengthy strikes this past summer. The striking artists were determined to address the “existential” questions: the elimination of residuals as a source of income, the reduction of the film and television workforce to the condition of “gig” workers and, implicitly at least, the domination of cultural life by a handful of corporate predators.

Through the good offices of the writers and actors unions, the efforts of the artists were suppressed. The unions in this field as in every other proved to be the faithful servants of the ruling elite and the Biden administration in particular.



Succession

The giant firms, under enormous pressure from Wall Street, are preparing a jobs massacre. Already, as a recent report revealed, employment is down 26 percent since May 2016 and not primarily because of the walkouts in 2023. Tens of thousands of jobs were destroyed this past year, and many more are threatened. The possible merger of Warner Bros. and Paramount is only one obvious indicator. Various sources insist that serious cuts, by as much as a third or a half, in the amount of “content” produced lie in store.

The struggles this summer were only a prologue.

But many political and historical questions will have to be addressed. No genuine progress will be made until the implications of the social and economic crisis are grasped by a significant layer of writers, actors, directors and other industry workers. Serious, authentic artistic and cultural life is incompatible with the continued existence of the terminally diseased profit system.

As we argued at the time of the actors’ walkout in July:

Not only does the present situation expose film and television production as a bad “business model,” as certain industry critics suggest, it reveals a growing awareness that American capitalism is a “bad,” in fact, untenable “social model.”

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The current neo-McCarthyite campaign against criticism of Israeli's mass murder is bound up with the unions' capitulations in this year's strikes. The refusal of the various guilds to raise any objections to the economic status quo, indeed their surrender all along the line on that front, only encouraged the studios and their toadies in the talent agencies and elsewhere to launch a reactionary drive against opposition to the bloodbath in Gaza. Under the cynical and fraudulent banner of combating "antisemitism," the Hollywood establishment has given its official blessing to the genocide carried out by the pack of fascists who make up the Netanyahu cabinet under the guidance of the White House. "All great Neptune's ocean" will never wash off the blood of this monstrous crime from their hands.

There is far too much silence in Hollywood on the Gaza question. No doubt there is widespread opposition there, as there is everywhere. But the campaign of intimidation has had its impact. John Cusack, Susan Sarandon and certain others have distinguished themselves by taking principled stands. Too many, however, are keeping their heads down, no doubt worried about their celebrity and careers. They need to understand there are more important things than keeping one's job.

In the future, we will all be asked: What were you doing when these Nazi-like crimes were being committed? To remain quiet is to accommodate oneself to the notion that art is a toy for one's personal diversion or that of the ruling classes. No artist oriented to the sufferings, hopes and struggles of the working class, in the US or anywhere else, can refrain from protesting, from crying out in outrage.

Between the strikes, the ongoing difficulties with attending film festivals because of the pandemic and the general unpreparedness of the artists for the unfolding explosive conditions, it was a weak year for seeing films and television. *Succession*, *Oppenheimer*, *El Conde* and certain other works are the honorable and highly significant exceptions, which speak to the future and powerful development of socially critical film and television.



El Conde

Typical of the artistic-critical problems at the moment is the celebration of *Maestro*, the Bradley Cooper biography of Leonard Bernstein. It is a film that manages to be accurate about every detail except *any* of the important ones: above all, the processes that produced Bernstein's genius. *Maestro* is a work without any significant heart or soul, any serious commitment. And it has been hailed as a "masterpiece."

In any event, here are a few films and television series that WSWS writers in the US and Europe recommend.

Films

Oppenheimer (Christopher Nolan)

El Conde (Pablo Larraín)

Israelism (Erin Axelman, Sam Eilertsen)

200 Meters (Ameen Nayfeh)

Disco Boy (Giacomo Abbruzzese)

Plan 75 (Chie Hayakawa)

A film that had very serious flaws still makes this year's "10 best":

Asteroid City (Wes Anderson)

Television

Succession

Painkiller

Transatlantic

A Small Light

Madoff: The Monster of Wall Street

From Germany:

Bonn—Alte Freunde, neue Feinde [*Bonn—Old Friends, New Enemies*: How under postwar Chancellor Konrad Adenauer the German secret services were built up with Wehrmacht, Gestapo and SS criminals and the course was set for rearmament.]

Deutsches Haus [English title—*The Interpreter of Silence*: A mini-series about the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials in 1963-65.]

Der vermessene Mensch [*Measures of Men*, Lars Kraume: About the massacre of the Herero people carried out by German imperialism in German South West Africa.]

Two short French films:

Nuits blanches [*White Nights*, Donatienne Berthereau]

Les Chenilles [*Caterpillars*, Michelle and Noel Keserwany]



200 Meters

Richard Phillips in Australia:

Features

Oppenheimer (Christopher Nolan)

The Boy and the Heron (Hayao Miyazaki)

El Conde (Pablo Larraín)

Plan 75 (Chie Hayakawa)

Green Border (Agnieszka Holland)

Kidnapped (Marco Bellocchio)

200 meters (Ameen Nayfeh [2020])

Television and mini-series

Transatlantic (Anna Winger and Daniel Hendler)

A Small Light (Joan Rater and Tony Phelan)

Madoff: The Monster of Wall Street (Joe Berlinger)

Succession (2023 final season)

Documentaries

Israelism (Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen)

Tantura (Alon Schwarz [2022])

1948: Creation and Catastrophe (Andy Trimlett and Ahlam Muhtaseb [2017]) —
Palestinian Film Festival Australia 2023

Gaza (Garry Keane and Andrew McConnell [2019])—Palestinian Film Festival Australia
2023

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