



## Film, Marxism: Tanner, Berger, Jonas

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If now largely ignored, Alain Tanner and John Berger's 1976 film *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* (For Jonas Who Will Be 25 In The Year 2000), remains warm, charming, lovable.<sup>1</sup> And the movie is particularly hard not to like now when the hopes and “Marxist humanist” analysis underlying it have come to seem a Romantic pipe dream. “[A]lles Heilige wird entweiht, und die Menschen sind endlich gezwungen, ihre Lebensstellung,” Marx and Engels wrote in the not-Marxist-humanist *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* (The Communist Manifesto). All that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face, with sober

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<sup>1</sup> I first tried to buy a copy of *Jonas* in a large Paris movie store. The young movie aficionado at the information desk had never even heard of the film. It has, however, been available via Amazon and perhaps in libraries. And I did come across a podcast of an interview with the filmmaker John Sayles in which he very briefly cited *Jonas* as a precursor of a particular subgenre of American movies: reunion movies, of which his *Return of the Secaucus 7* was an early example.

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senses, his real conditions of life. OK, and—perhaps like an alcoholic finally getting herself into treatment—we can appreciate the advantages, perhaps even the necessity, of a sober, realist view (of capitalism in this case). But, since we are committing ourselves to the straight and narrow, can we not dwell briefly on the fun that we once had and that we imagined turning into a way of life—not only escaping the capitalist machine but undermining it?

This will not be a review of a 40-year-old movie, but rather use this film to ground politico-economic ruminations. Getting down to this work, I note that *Jonas*—while presenting communal, counter-cultural, artsy, sex-love-home-grown-food-and-barefoot-children-based life as an ideal—also shows the forces of law and economics that oppose such an alternative. And, by the end of the film, these forces have proved the more resilient and relentless, themselves undermining most everything but the protagonists’ dreams and hopes for a better future—for Jonas, the next generation. (An idea being that, thanks to films like *Jonas* and many other things, later generations may be able to begin life more aware and better grounded than some current generation.)

Of the four couples the movie portrays, one consists of a high-school history teacher, Marco, and a supermarket cashier, Marie. Among other unconventional methods, Marco proposes to grade his students not on the basis of an exam, but rather of whatever questions they choose to ask Marie, who he has brought in to talk to these well-to-do kids about real, working-class life. The first question is addressed to the teacher: “Do you love Marie?” This may be read not only as indeed the first question a class of adolescents would ask, but also as the most important of all the questions that might be asked. Marco answers yes and is fired, presumably not for this answer, but rather for the nature of the test, among other improprieties.

Meanwhile, at her supermarket Marie has been not charging elderly customers for all of their groceries. (E.g. groceries that might cost 40 Swiss francs end up costing 20.) She ends up with a prison sentence, which, when out again, she recounts as a nightmare.

In the same phase of life under capitalism, the Beatles (a conservative force? or a vehicle of capitalist forces?) were singing—

Nothing you can know that isn’t known  
Nothing you can see that isn’t shown  
Nowhere you can be that isn’t where you’re meant to be  
It’s easy  
  
All you need is love  
All you need is love

This is not quite *Jonas*’s conclusion. All we may have to hold on to may be love, children, and some fun in bed, but also, to again borrow a half-mocking phrase from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Masculin/Feminin*, “à force d’être dans la lutte on finit par apprendre.”<sup>2</sup> Through resisting the

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<sup>2</sup> Also quoted in my “[Distancing / Awareness](#).” Perhaps the phrase “all we may have to hold on to may be love” will give me the courage to again watch the Chinese movie distributed to English-speaking audiences under the title “Farewell My Concubine.” A great, but terrible movie, terrible perhaps above all for its

system, we end up learning, understanding. *Jonas* is set in and around Geneva, the original home of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and it not only pays homage to him, it also relies on what may now seem an old-fashioned, Enlightenment belief: learning is not only its own (wonderful!) reward; it can lead to some kind of social progress. (Or at least we might glimpse, or get new ideas about, what true social progress might be?<sup>3</sup>)

But we might also want, in dialogue with Marx, to ask what the drivers of social change are, to include asking what roles political theory and education (and movies) play, and in what dialogue with economic forces? Returning again to *Jonas*, we may ask the significance of small children, as in the film, being played tapes of sounds made by whales. To what extent will this lead them, and the society of which they are a part, to treat whales and other animals in some more respectful fashion? And this not only when they protest at the gates of Sea World or give to their favorite charity, but in their—our—food industries and other uses of the Earth’s land and seas. Our sentiments may lie where and as they will while the global human population keeps rising, and with it the demand for calories, minerals, fossil fuels, etc.—and at as low a cost as possible. (And this so that “I,” say, will have the disposable income and the free time necessary to go on a whale-watching trip or to compose symphonies that mix whale sounds and violins, or to protest at Sea World’s gates.)

In another essay on film, I proposed that we begin our evaluations of movies by reflecting on our society’s food production and distribution methods and its home-building and heating techniques, which provide the necessities of life at a low enough cost to allow, not only for the flourishing of entertainment industries, but also for a raft of paid commentators on entertainment products (and on capitalism).<sup>4</sup> In his 1984 essay “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” the Marxist culture critic Frederic Jameson sets as a goal “grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment.”<sup>5</sup>

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challenging such a view of love—for showing that, in the face of great, murderous force, even love turns to dust, or worse. In her famous essay, “L’Iliade ou le poème de la force,” written in 1940 after France was overtaken by fascism, the French philosopher and activist Simone Weil writes about how force can reduce us to things for the rest of our lives. We may not realize this fact, but, confronted by large forces, we may no longer have any impulses that we can call our own. [Mary McCarthy’s translation](#) of the essay has been available on-line.

<sup>3</sup> N.B.: The continual progress of human civilization may be guaranteed by our ability to keep changing the terms of reference—what we consider of value. Military might, cultural achievements, regularly held voting rituals, stability, change. If our supreme values evolve to reflect particular characteristics of the times at hand, the present civilization may ever seem a great advance on its predecessors. A question then becomes: would the species be seen as progressing if this change-ability were ignored and we held ourselves to a fixed standard?

<sup>4</sup> “[Going Nowhere \(A fresh look at the movies\)](#),” Montaignbakhtinian.com, September 2013.

<sup>5</sup> As of October 2015, a [copy of Jameson’s essay](#) was available via a University of Virginia website. It is also reprinted as the first chapter of Jameson’s book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991). Note that Jameson cites *The Communist Manifesto* as the source of the goal mentioned here.

We will now retrace some of our steps, and not with the boots of the capitalist, which can continue to be produced only insofar as they can be sold at a profit, but with boots that enjoy muddy theorizing.<sup>6</sup> Decades ago debates raged between Marxist humanists and more traditional Marxists who believed, as I do, that you can only get to such “humanism” via a quixotic misreading of Marx, or via a reading too partial, in both senses of the word, of Marx’s and Engels’s writings. Marxist humanism offered a seductive view of how human beings might get out from under capitalism, but . . . Seductive often means misleading.

Briefly here, and keeping *Jonas* in mind, one thing that Marxist humanists focused on was an idea from the young Marx’s writings that one of the great problems for those of us living under capitalism is alienation and alienated labor in particular. A Wikipedia article has summarized this idea nicely, while also capturing the rhetoric:

under capitalism individuals are alienated from their productive activity insofar as they are compelled to sell their labor-power as a commodity to a capitalist.

And, I would add, from a Marxist perspective, even the capitalist is compelled to labor for capital, to increase sales and profits, drive down wages and other costs, etc.<sup>7</sup> The Wikipedia text continues: individuals’ labor

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<sup>6</sup> The reference here is to *Das Kapital*. See Volume I, Chapter 7, Section 2. (English translations of titles: *Capital*, “The Labour Process and the Process of Producing Surplus Value”; Section 2: “The Production of Surplus Value.”)

The product appropriated by the capitalist is a use-value, as yarn, for example, or boots. But, although boots are, in one sense, the basis of all social progress, and our capitalist is a decided “progressist,” yet he does not manufacture boots for their own sake. . . . Our capitalist has two objects in view: in the first place, he wants to produce a use-value that has a value in exchange, that is to say, an article destined to be sold, a commodity; and secondly, he desires to produce a commodity whose value shall be greater than the sum of the values of the commodities used in its production, that is, of the means of production and the labour-power, . . .

<sup>7</sup> *An illustrative example, from 2006*. Apparently, either despite or because of the relatively high wages and benefits then being received by its unionized workers, factories of the Caterpillar corporation were for many years among the most productive in the world and the company long thrived. (Making tractors, other machines, and related products.) Revenues were up more than 50 percent from 2003 to 2005, and net income tripled over the same period. In attempting to justify the major reductions in employee compensation that were made during this period, Caterpillar’s Director of Corporate Labor Relations told *New York Times* labor reporter Louis Uchitelle: “You could say that in good times you could afford a different kind of [compensation] package and in bad times you couldn’t. The real question is: What’s competitive? And our target is competitiveness.” What is striking about this comment is that while it accurately reproduces the rhetoric of the system, it flies in the face of the empirical evidence—the company *was* enjoying good times, it *was* extremely competitive. *Times* story: “[Two Tiers, Slipping Into One](#).”

Given that senior management’s aggressive efforts increased the level of labor-management conflict at Caterpillar, one might wonder if the logic of capitalism, of the exploitation of human labor, led the senior managers to take actions that went against their own interests. In fact, though, it was not in their interest to fail to take advantage of opportunities to increase their company’s short-term return on capital. Otherwise, the company would be vulnerable to the relentless rapaciousness of capital—here in the form of corporate raiders

thus appears to them as something objective, a commodity to be bought and sold like any other. To overcome alienation and allow man to realize his species-being, therefore, the wage-labor system itself must be transcended, and the separation of the laborer from the means of labor abolished.

From my perspective, this is but one of the tips of the capitalist iceberg, or one of the doors banging on the runaway capitalist train, but certainly such alienation is among the challenges of contemporary life.

In *Jonas*, Tanner, Berger, and an excellent team of actors bring this idea of alienated labor to warm, Romantic life through the characters. I have already touched on the dynamics that Marco and Marie unsuccessfully attempted to ignore or combat (though, again, they found love along the way). Other characters include a Sixties revolutionary who, now rather less hopeful, works as a proofreader and by himself engages in haphazard political interventions. He falls in with a middle-aged woman who works as a secretary for a soulless real-estate developer and in this way supports what we would like to call her “real life”: as a devotee of Tantric Buddhism, trying to make her sex life and meals a kind of religious practice. (This woman is a forerunner of the many people who now work in finance, the drug industry, advertising, marketing, etc., but live for their yoga classes, scuba dives, tango soirees, . . . )

Another clairvoyant aspect of the film: as is increasingly the case in the twenty-first century West, the leading men have a hard time holding paying jobs. They are fired, laid off, or unable to put up with the demands of contemporary employers. The women, much more practical and stoic, earn most of the money and do most of the work. Their jobs are hardly pleasant—in order to be able to keep her family farm, one woman turns tricks at a nearby army barracks; another supports her husband and family by working all day pushing metal parts, over and over again, into a machine that is assembling some piece of some unknown, seemingly irrelevant and yet fundamental-because-saleable thing. As a result of their hard work and its wages, and, more generally, because they are able to adapt to the current system, the women in the movie have a power, a solidity. Meanwhile one of the men, the factory-worker’s husband, not content with the meager employment opportunities available to him, is playing whale sounds as part of homeschooling a bunch of kids out at the farm. And even this volunteer job does not last.

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and investment bankers looking for “profit opportunities.” Profit opportunities that could easily include dispensing with senior managers drawing high salaries.

As regards agency (a capacity to make choices that advance our true interests, however impossible those may be to define), we can observe that in the workplace context of this Caterpillar anecdote, the members of the largest of the classes—the workers—were only able to enjoy some semblance of agency through large-scale social combination and collective action. The managers and capitalists for their part could, as individuals or small groups, enjoy a *feeling* of power over others, but their choices, as those of the workers, were equally determined by the logic of the system in which they found themselves.

In the Sixties and early Seventies it was thought that the enlightened could see the alienation and other shortcomings of being part of the “system,” and they (or we) could find ways, however imperfect, of dropping out, living a different way, according to different values. Of course, in a certain sense, this remains possible (and to be encouraged!). However, we have come to find that dropping out is much more difficult and daunting than, in our youthfulness, we once imagined it to be. And the greatest hope we once had—that this dropping out could be significant, that it could lead to some kind of reorienting or transformation of capitalism—this hope has vanished (or lives on, perhaps happily, in silent cells). We might say that there is simply no place for such hopes on television, on the Internet, on an iPhone.

In his Postmodernism essay, Jameson wrote of a situation

in which we all, in one way or another, dimly feel that not only punctual and local counter-culture forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions . . . are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it.

Another culture critic, Mark Crispin Miller, writing in the late 1980s about television in particular, did not consider such impotence a particular feature of the current “postmodern” period. For him it has deeper roots, to include in the Sixties and its putative counter-culture. Marx would have made this point more general—art and entertainment and commentators about such things—are at the service of economic forces, but we’ll stick with Miller here.

[T]he Sixties were no absolute heroic deviation from our culture’s movement toward TV, but were in fact a moment in that process—for television had itself, in part, created the subculture that upset the decade. That “youth culture,” first of all, was an indirect derivative of the “youth market” encouraged in the Fifties, when the young acquired a nascent group identity from TV and its eager advertisers. Furthermore, the “counterculture” was dependent on the mass media—contrary to the Luddite and/or pastoral mythology of the era. The familiar symbols and catchphrases of the young gained currency through films, through radio and television, through albums and rock concerts deftly engineered. And television left its traces even on the high ground of counterculture ideology. The psychedelic fantasy of universal, instantaneous communication, of every head attuned to every other head, was, among other things, a metaphysical projection of the national TV audience [to say nothing of the Internet, then in the process of development by the Department of Defense].<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> From the introduction to Miller’s collection of essays, *Boxed In: The Culture of TV*, Northwestern University Press. Cf. this passage from Jameson’s essay on postmodernism:

My son, *born* in the year 2000, was named Jonah at least in some small part on account of Tanner and Berger's film (which his mother and I re-watched while he was in the womb). Though (or because he is?) attuned, perceptive, and already more engaged in politics than most Americans, our Jonah does not cherish the possibility of a revival of and improvement on some past counter-culture. He has not the least interest in living "off the grid." On account of some documentaries and other movies, such as *Jonas*, that his dad has made him watch, Jonah has an idea that back in "the Sixties" there was lots of resistance to the status quo. And he is willing to accept his dad's perspective that aspects of that resistance were quixotic or worse. (They were products of an unprecedented rise in the real incomes of working-class and professional people, whose children, I among them, did not wish to recognize how tied they—we—were to this economic base, nor how unsustainable the economic growth rates were.)

At least in his adolescence, Jonah also accepts another of his dad's perspectives: that there was, also and nonetheless, something wonderful about the old movements and attitudes. And this wonderfulness, I note, now appears to have less to do with any counter-cultural or anti-capitalist ideas about how the world and human life might be improved, or with any solid analysis of what the drivers of social change are. The wonderfulness lay in these Sixties folks' enthusiasm for and commitment to trying to live their pipe dreams.

Of course—zooming out, rolling the camera backward on its rails—we can observe how wishful thinking (e.g. religion) has for a very long time dogged and emboldened both humanity in general and the United States in particular. And we might get a sense, too, that, in this twenty-first century, we are running on fumes.<sup>9</sup>

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our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. . . . [C]onspiracy theory . . . must be seen as a degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.

<sup>9</sup> See "[Where are our dreams?](#)" which was first published in [Montaigbakhtinian.com](#) and subsequently collected in [Surviving the Twenty-First Century](#).