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Neglected Masterpieces of Cinema

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Neglected Masterpieces of Cinema

Abstract

This article will acquaint you with ten of the more important leftwing films I have reviewed over the past sixteen years as a member of New York Film Critics Online. You will not see listed familiar works such as “The Battle of Algiers” but instead those that deserve wider attention, the proverbial neglected masterpieces. They originate from different countries and are available through Internet streaming, either freely from Youtube or through Netflix or Amazon rental. In several instances you will be referred to film club websites that like the films under discussion deserve wider attention since they are the counterparts to the small, independent theaters where such films get premiered. The country of origin, date and director will be identified next to the title, followed by a summary of the film, and finally by its availability.

Keywords

Film Review, Radical Film

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This article will acquaint you with ten of the more important leftwing films I have reviewed over the past sixteen years as a member of New York Film Critics Online. You will not see listed familiar works such as “The Battle of Algiers” but instead those that deserve wider attention, the proverbial neglected masterpieces. They originate from different countries and are available through Internet streaming, either freely from Youtube or through Netflix or Amazon rental. In several instances you will be referred to film club websites that like the films under discussion deserve wider attention since they are the counterparts to the small, independent theaters where such films get premiered. The country of origin, date and director will be identified next to the title, followed by a summary of the film, and finally by its availability.

1. Crimson Gold (Iran, 2003, Jafar Panahi)

Panahi is one of Iran’s most celebrated directors as well as the one most hounded by cops and censors. Presently he is under house arrest, the subject of his two most recent films. You can certainly understand why the authorities would want to suppress his films since they are trenchant critiques of both class inequality and religious authoritarianism, especially “Crimson Gold”.

“Crimson Gold” tells the story of Hussein (Hussein Emadeddin), a lumbering, overweight and impassive man in his 30s who delivers pizzas on a motorcycle in Tehran. He is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war and has a medical condition—presumably war-related—that requires him to take cortisone, which accounts for the weight gain. He lives in a grimy one-room flat and seems to take pleasure in nothing, not even in the prospective marriage to the attractive sister of his best friend Ali, a fellow pizza deliverer.

Hussein is a kind of periscope into Iranian society as we accompany him on his rounds. One customer lives in a mansion and is in the middle of a phone call as Hussein enters. He is trying to cajole a young woman to come spend the night with him. As the phone call continues, Hussein wanders from room to room astonished by the wealthy appointments.

On another delivery, he is forced to wait until the police finish arresting an apartment full of young men and women. Their crime was dancing.

In one of the more daring casting choices in the history of film, Panahi used a real-life pizza deliveryman who suffers from schizophrenia in the role of Hussein. This gives the character’s brooding inwardness a reality that might have been difficult for another actor to achieve. Panahi said, “We knew he was a schizophrenic in advance, so we knew he would be difficult to work with. But I had no idea that it was going to be that difficult. On several occasions I was tempted to stop shooting and simply abandon the entire project.”

As it turns out, it was instead Iran’s religious authorities that forced Panahi to stop making films—at least for the time being.

Source: MUBI.com (Launched as “The Auteurs” by a Turkish cinephile in 2007, this is an archive of foreign, classic and independent films that costs \$4.99 per month.)

2. Ceddo (Senegal, 1977, Ousmane Sembene)

Ousmane Sembene was a member of the French Communist Party while working as a longshoreman in Marseilles in the 1940s by day and launching a career as a novelist by night. He made the transition to filmmaking in 1966 with “Black Girl”, a fierce tale about the exploitation of a Senegalese maid employed by a French couple. Passing away at the age of 84 in 2007, he is widely regarded as Africa’s greatest directors as well as a critic of colonialism and the corruption of local elites.

Ceddo means commoners, a reference to the serfs in a small 19th century Senegalese village who are miserably oppressed by organized religion and by their feudal overlords. The clerical structures are much more modest than those found in any feudal society (Islamic services are held on the open ground bounded by pebbles), but the bonds enforced by custom are the same. The ceddo must pay tribute to their King in the form of firewood bundles. An Islamic caste also takes tribute in the form of slaves, who are exchanged for guns or cloth in a general store run by a white man. To round out the microcosm of feudal society, there is a single white Catholic priest who is barely tolerated by the Moslems.

Weary of oppression, a ceddo youth kidnaps the daughter of the King and takes her to an isolated wooded glen near the ocean. She will only be returned after the ruling classes forsake slavery and forced conversion to Islam. Played by amateurs, as is the case in nearly all of Sembene’s films, the villagers, have a simple desire to live as they have always lived.

In a conflict between the King and the Islamic clergy over how to divide up ceddo tribute, the clergy seize power. Now that they are the new ruling class, they force the village to undergo conversion. One by one, the men’s heads are shaved as they are given new names. The arrogant Imam tells the disconsolate villagers: “You are now Ishmaila”, “You are now Ibraima”, etc. , Whether in Africa or in the New World, cultural assimilation always precedes economic assimilation. Implicit in Sembene’s films is the notion that cultural renewal must precede social and economic transformation.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ipcync79CI>

3. Kabei: Our Mother (Japan, 2008, Yoji Yamada)

Now 84, Yamada is best known for his Samurai Trilogy that depicts the warrior caste as oppressed by feudal overlords. “Kabei: Our Mother” is based on the memoir of a woman whose husband was imprisoned during WWII for his Communist and antiwar beliefs.

Like “Ceddo”, and his Samurai trilogy for that matter, the film is an attack on feudal backwardness. Unlike Western Europe, Japanese capitalism preserved many precapitalist social institutions that were suited for authoritarian class rule.

At the beginning of the film we meet Shigeru Nogami, a one-time philosophy professor fallen on hard times. He is three months behind on his rent and has just learned that a publisher has turned down his latest book. Unlike most of his countrymen swept up by the ultranationalist fervor of the ruling party, he opposes the invasion of China and has the courage of his convictions to say so publicly. He has the misfortune to take philosophy's teachings seriously, a flaw not shared by fellow academics who learn to get along with the system, just as they were doing in Nazi Germany.

After he is imprisoned, his wife Kayo is forced to raise their two young daughters on her own under difficult circumstances of economic hardship and political repression. Apolitical herself, her only hope is that Shigeru will be released from jail and returned to the happy if impoverished household that they share with the twelve year old Hatsuko and her six year old sister Teruyo who provides the narrative and point of view throughout the film. As such, "Kabei: Our Mother" evokes Fellini's "Amarcord", another film about life under fascism seen through the eyes of a child. Unlike "Amarcord", the emphasis is less on lyrical youthful evocations (although there is much of that) than it is about injustice and the struggle for dignity and freedom.

In a 2008 interview, Yamada stated that the themes of the film are relevant to contemporary Japan where nationalistic forces were gathering strength. He said, "Japan should have remained the one country in the world with no military and a prohibition against war (in the Constitution). Now Japan is going along with America and the Bush administration. I have doubts about whether that's right."

Source: Amazon.com

4. Blind Shaft (China, 2003, Li Yang)

Li Yang is a member of the "Sixth Generation" of filmmakers in China, a group that emerged in the 1990s united around the need to expose social inequality. Largely depending on inexpensive technology such as digital cameras and eschewing the historical costume dramas that often functioned to legitimize Communist rule, they amount to an important fraction of an evolving radical movement in China. "Blind Shaft" is considered to be the quintessential "Sixth Generation" film.

Tang and Song are products of the new China. Adrift in the merciless world of day labor at coolie wages, they have discovered latent entrepreneurial skills as murdering scam artists. In the opening scene of the film, set in the gloomy depths of an actual coal mine in China, they beat a fellow worker to death who is understood to be a relative from their village. Upon ascending from the pits, they claim that the dead man was killed in a cave-in and demand compensation from the boss who is all too anxious to provide hush money.

After they are presented with 30,000 yuan in compensation (about \$4,000) for their just cremated "relative", they dump the ashes on the side of the road the minute they are out of sight from the mine. Upon arriving in a nearby provincial city, they wire most of the money back home and spend the rest partying with prostitutes. In a scene that conveys

the caustic sensibility of director Li Yang, who made the film in secret and is an exile in Germany now, the two men begin singing the words "Long Live Socialism" to a Karaoke tune in a brothel bedroom. A whore tells them that they are singing out-of-date lyrics. When they ask what the new words are, she replies that the song is now about triumphant Americans taking over China with the dollar.

Source: Fandor.com (Fandor is similar to MUBI. Launched in 2011, it costs \$10.00 per month or \$7.50 if you sign up for a yearly subscription. While I am not a subscriber to either service, my impression is that the Fandor archives are indexed in a much more useful manner. For example, I was able to locate Turkish films with ease but not so with MUBI. Since both services have trial subscriptions, my recommendation is to try both in order to gauge which one suits your needs. I can assure you that either one allows you to see films that are generally not available on Netflix.)

5. Cairo Station (Egypt, 1958, Youssef Chahine)

Chahine was an Egyptian nationalist who like novelist and countryman Naguib Mahfouz chose to dramatize the lives of ordinary people, especially so in this film. Indeed, the two men collaborated in 1963 to make "Saladin", a movie that implicitly likened the 12th century defender of Arab sovereignty to President Nasser, a hero to the two progressive-minded nationalists and defenders of Egyptian culture.

Set on location in Cairo's main railway station, the movie tells the story of the lower depths of Egyptian society: the soft-drink vendors, luggage porters and newsboys who are in a struggle for survival. One of the newsboys, a grown man actually, is Qinawi, played by the director. When sleeping on the street as a young arrival from the countryside, he is discovered by an older man who runs a refreshment stand in the station and who then sets him up in a shack and with a job selling papers. The older man, not religious by any means, is shocked to discover one day that Qinawi has covered the walls of the shack with pictures of scantily-clad women—what we used to call cheesecake in the 1950s.

Qinawi walks with a limp and is generally shunned by the other denizens of the station who sense that he is off, particularly Hanuma (Hind Rostom), a soft drink seller who resists his sweaty advances. In general, she treats him as the butt of her cruel jokes even as she enjoys his flattery. She is engaged to Abou Seri (Farid Shawqi), a brawny porter with a striking resemblance not only to Anthony Quinn but to the blustering macho figure that Quinn often played. The love triangle of these three figures not only evokes "Pagliacci" but Todd Browning's "Freaks".

If the primary focus of the movie is on the tortured psyche of Qinawi, who is eventually driven to homicidal actions, it is also a remarkable study of Egypt at a particular time and place. In one scene that evokes Fellini, Hanuma has run into a group of musicians playing rock and roll with a guitar and an accordion in a railway car where she is peddling lemonade. As she proceeds to dance with open sexual energy, you immediately understand why Chahine rubbed Egypt's clerical bosses the wrong way. The entire

movie, in fact, is a study in hormone energy—you almost expect a young Elvis to come swaggering through the station.

Source: Fandor.com

6. La Commune (France, 2000, Peter Watkins)

Peter Watkins is British by birth but has made films in various countries over the years. Deeply radical and antiwar, he usually works in the documentary mode but even when he makes a narrative film such as “La Commune”, it is presented in a documentary-like form. In addition to dealing with issues of war and peace, he is equally concerned with media—hence his commitment to expanding upon conventional filmmaking techniques, if not subverting them altogether.

As indicated by its title, the film is a faux news report on the Paris Commune as if the crew of a leftwing television station took a time machine ride back to 1871. At 375 minutes and utterly lacking in the “entertainment” values of conventional films, it is strictly for a leftist audience. If that includes you, be prepared for one of the most amazing experiences you will ever encounter from a film.

The cast of “La Commune” consists entirely of 200 non-professionals drawn from Paris and its suburbs, including a number of undocumented workers from North Africa. Before filming started, they read background material on the Paris Commune and thought about its relevance to their lives and to contemporary society. A number of them are interviewed in the excellent documentary on the film, including an Algerian who lives in the suburbs that exploded in anger last year over joblessness and neglect. “La Commune” is filled with truly revelatory historical details, including the way in which the reactionary Versailles government dispatched the same army against a revolt in Algeria immediately after it had vanquished the Commune. Although the jailed Communards (those who did not face the firing squad) received amnesty in 1880, the Berbers remained imprisoned on New Caledonia.

“La Commune” has a distinct look and feel that is much different from what you might be accustomed to. All of the action takes place indoors in an abandoned factory leased for the occasion. Although the sets give a reasonable approximation of the 11th arrondissement, a working class bastion, they serve more as they would in a theater than in a film. Most of the verisimilitude stems from the remarkable ability of the nonprofessional actors to appear like the Communards through remarkable wardrobe choices. With their ordinary-looking if not rough-hewn faces filmed in black-and-white by hand-held cameras, they have the same vividness as 19th century photographs.

In contrast to more the recent period when the left has tried to reconcile itself to religion, usually through the medium of “liberation theology”, “La Commune” gives no quarter to the Catholic Church, which is depicted as a source of blind reaction, just as it was in the Spanish Civil War and other landmark struggles. Women, who play a decisive role and in the historical Commune, give the nuns and priests frequent tongue-lashings.

Source: part one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKLmW5LtAaM>, part two: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paZz8Q06fvI>

7. Lonely are the Brave (USA, 1962, David Miller)

Of interest here is not the director but the screenwriter: Dalton Trumbo. Trumbo was one of the Hollywood Ten and this film was the third in a row in which he was openly credited, the net effect of which was to help drive the final nail into the Hollywood blacklist. He adapted the script from a novel by anarchist and deep ecologist Edward Abbey.

After a couple of years tending sheep, Jack Burns (played by Kirk Douglas, a stalwart of artistic freedom in Hollywood who revealed that Trumbo wrote the script for the 1960 “Spartacus” in which he played the leader of the slave revolt and that was based on CP’er Howard Fast’s novel) has come to town to break his old friend Paul out of jail. Paul is a scholar about to be transferred to a penitentiary to begin serving a two-year for running a modest underground railroad for undocumented workers from Mexico.

Since the only way he can free Paul is by becoming a prisoner himself, he goes to town to find a saloon where booze and trouble often go together. He is not disappointed. As soon as he takes a seat in one such establishment to begin enjoying a bottle of whiskey with a beer chaser, a one-armed man hurls an empty bottle at his head. In keeping with an innate sense of fair play, Burns uses one arm to fight the man in a lusty barroom brawl that honors the best traditions of the Western film.

After he is arrested, he finds himself in the holding pen with Paul where he lays out his escape plan. With the two hacksaws he has smuggled inside his boots, the two should be able to break out before morning arrives. Paul demurs. He has a wife and a young son. The sentence for jailbreak in New Mexico is 5 years. He would prefer to serve out his term and return to a normal life. While a jailbreak might deliver freedom in the short run, it also would sentence him and his family to a life on the run.

Although Jack cannot persuade him to break out, he himself has no qualms. With the assistance of Paul and other prisoners, he cuts through the bars to the street below. He then returns to Paul’s house where he has left his horse. From there, he heads toward the mountains, beyond which Mexico and freedom await.

From this point, the main action of the film takes place, pitting the lone resourceful cowboy against a posse made up of local lawmen and a helicopter deployed by the same air force base whose jets disturbed his peace in the opening scene of the movie. In charge of the whole operation is Sheriff Monty Johnson (Walter Matthau) who seems to harbor a secret desire to see the prisoner escape. This is understandable since Johnson, and most of the audience watching the film, probably felt trapped by American civilization in the early 1960s.

Source: Amazon.com

8. Peppermint Candy (Korea, 1999, Lee Chang-dong)

Lee Chang-dong can best be described as a principled liberal—no small thing in South Korea. Born in 1954, he served as Minister of Culture and Tourism in the South Korean Government from 2003 to 2004 under President Roh Moo-hyun who started out as a human rights lawyer.

As the film begins we see a group of people in their forties who are at a reunion picnic on the bank of a river beneath a railway bridge. Into their midst wanders a man in a business suit who is either drunk or demented, or both. Soon they remember that he is Yongho, a fellow worker from 20 years ago. After encouraging him to take part in their gaiety, he begins to shriek and howl during a Karaoke performance. He climaxes this act by jumping into the river with his business suit on, slapping at the water like a madman. Then he mounts the railroad bridge, where he stands in the middle of the tracks awaiting a train that might come barreling out of a tunnel at any moment. Ignoring their calls to come down to safety, he finally meets an oncoming train with the cry, "I'm going back."

In a series of flashbacks, we do go back with Yongho and discover what has driven him to suicide. His "Rosebud" is nothing less than the confining social roles imposed by South Korean society in its rise to "success" in the post 1980s. "Peppermint Candy" is mainly an attempt to rip the pleasant facade off this image.

Yongho has decided to kill himself for two reasons. As the president of a small company wrecked on the shoals of the recent economic crisis, he has no other options. We learn through the most immediate flashback that he is living in a shack and cannot afford the price of a cup of coffee. With the last little bit of his disposable income, he has bought a pistol. Before shooting himself, he ponders over whom he will take with him. The list appears endless. In reality, it is the system that is at fault. He is also ready to kill himself for the pain he has inflicted on others, both those close to him and those who have wandered into his murderous path as soldier and cop.

Each flashback is preceded by camera shots of a train speeding along the South Korean countryside played in reverse. As people and animals walk backward along the track, we travel back in time to find out how Yongho went wrong.

Before becoming a businessman, we learn that he was a cop. In 1987 the cops have apprehended a student leader who is taken back to the station house to be tortured. They want him to divulge the name of a leading pro-democracy activist. Yongho, the most sadistic and experienced cop, holds the student's head under water while wearing an impassive, almost bored, expression on his face.

It wasn't always this easy. In 1984 when he was a rookie cop, he was initiated into the art of torture. After a trade unionist prisoner shits on him during a session, he rushes into the bathroom to wash himself off. While peeing, another more seasoned cop casually mentions to him that he will not be able to forget the smell. That is what "Peppermint Candy" is about mostly, a man learning how, but never successfully so, to get over the smell.

Source: Amazon.com

9. Goodbye Lenin (Germany, 2003, Wolfgang Becker)

Despite being educated at the Free University in Berlin, an anti-Communist bastion of the Cold War, Becker wrote and directed a film that explains in the most sympathetic and understanding fashion why so many East Germans felt disenfranchised by the reunification with the West.

It is 1989 and "communism" is crumbling everywhere except in the heart and mind of Christiane Kerner, an elderly Berlin resident who has a picture of Che Guevara on her bedroom wall and is fiercely loyal to East German party leader Erich Honecker.

Her son Alex is a typical young Berliner. They have little use for ideology and yearn for the material goods and personal liberty of the West. Despite their differences with their mother, he loves her deeply and would do anything to make her happy.

One night, as Christiane heads toward a party celebration, she happens upon a police crackdown on anti-communist protesters, including her son, who is thrown into the back of a truck in handcuffs. The sight causes her to collapse on the street with a heart attack. She is brought to a hospital in a coma.

When Alex visits the hospital, the doctor tells him that there is no guarantee that Christiane will ever awake. If she does, the important thing is to prevent any shocks to her psyche, since another heart attack would prove fatal. For the next eight months, as Christiane lays motionless in her hospital bed, everything changes around her. The Berlin Wall collapses, the two Germanys are reunited and Western companies flood the East.

Christiane regains consciousness, but in a weakened state. In a ploy that constitutes the dramatic tension of the film and its underlying political and social theme, Alex resolves to create an artificial environment back at home that is faithful to the Communist past. After elaborately preparing Christiane's bedroom with the clunky furniture and the Stalinoid photos they had discarded, they spirit her from the hospital making sure that the ambulance attendants stay mum about the political sea change.

Alex, who has befriended a co-worker and aspiring video artist at a Western satellite-dish company (his former employer has gone bankrupt, like almost all "Ostie" firms), relies on him to assemble archival news programs from the past, which they play for Christiane on a concealed VCR. The joke is that it really doesn't matter, since the "news" consists mainly of reports about dissatisfaction in the West with unemployment, drug addiction and other social problems.

After his mother dies, Alex ventures out into the brave new world of capitalism and begins to question the changes. For example, when he brings his mother's East German currency to a bank to be converted into Deutschmarks, he is told that the deadline was two days earlier and that they are worthless. When he raises his voice in protest, bank

guards throw him out. While the film is not exactly a call to return to the days of Stalinism, there is definitely a message that capitalism is not much of an improvement.

Source: Amazon.com

10. Omar (2013, West Bank, Hany Abu-Assad)

Abu-Assad's film represents the cutting edge of Palestinian militancy with a view of Israel that is completely devoid of false illusions.

The eponymous Omar (Adam Bakri) is a young man living in the West Bank who toils by day in a low-tech bakery making pita bread and by night plots armed resistance against the occupying IDF forces that make his life and those of his brethren miserable.

In order to visit the young woman he loves, he must each time scale the monstrous wall erected by the Israelis and risk being shot at or picked up by an IDF patrol. When he is at one point, the soldiers torment him in a way that dramatizes the brutality and the racism of the occupation better than a thousand articles. They order him to stand on top of a roadside boulder in the midday heat while they make small talk nearby. When exhaustion makes it impossible to balance himself on the top of the rock any longer, they smash a rifle butt against his face.

A few days later, Omar and two comrades draw close to an IDF outpost in the dead of night armed with a sniper's rifle and take down a guard. Before long, Omar is arrested and put in an Israel jail where he is tortured in order to provide the names of the men who were with him. He refuses to name names.

At lunch, an older man representing himself as a member of an Islamic resistance organization joins him. He warns Omar to not divulge any information about his activities since there are spies everywhere in jail who work with the Israelis. Don't worry, Omar tells him, I will never confess.

A day later, he is brought into the office of Rami, a top Israeli intelligence officer who turns out to be the Islamic radical he had lunch with—a guise aided by his fluency in the Arabic language. Omar is also dismayed to learn that in Israeli courts, the statement that "I will never confess" is tantamount to a confession that will result in a decades-long imprisonment. Rami tells him that the only way out is to become a snitch.

"Omar" is not only filmmaking of the highest order; it is by far the most frontal assault on Israeli savagery that I have ever seen in a movie theater. The Palestinians are caught in a spider's web that makes their fate almost inescapable. There is a sense of futility about the attempt to free the West Bank of the occupying forces but it would be impossible for a Palestinian filmmaker like Hany Abu-Assad to represent things otherwise.

Source: Netflix.com