

## *Slave of Love: A Review*

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### Introduction

The crisis of Marxism is evidenced in every area of Marxist thought. Not only is Marxist theory at an insufficient level to analyze the current historical situation and guide communist practice, but the theory that does exist is beset with numerous weaknesses as well as serious political and philosophical errors. The specific field of culture and art criticism is no exception to this. Taking film criticism as an example, we can see many of the weaknesses and mistakes that exist in what is currently serving as a Marxist theory of art.

The main error that is often found in film critiques is instrumentalism. Instrumentalism is the view that there is a monolithic ruling class that voluntarily and willfully controls the content of art, politics, and ideology to suit their needs. This error is also sometimes called voluntarism, for it overemphasizes the individual's or class's ability to mold politics and ideology, instead of realizing how the class struggle at all levels of society, and particularly as expressed through existing ideological apparatus, gives rise to the content of ideology in a specific conjuncture. Instrumentalist film critiques are always quick to point out how the ruling class purposefully produces a film in order to mystify and divide the working class.

Another weakness in many film reviews is a variant of empiricism. This is characterized by an approach to a subject (of film in this case) without a scientific framework within which to analyze the subject in a rigorous fashion. That is, the facts and concepts may be present but they are not presented in a scientific relationship to one another (i.e., the relationship between ideology and the economic infrastructure). Marx referred to this as the necessary "order of exposition." The result is that generalizations and the political rhetoric of Marxism are substituted for a comprehensive analysis, and while they may be true as far as they go, they provide little basis for deepening our knowledge of the ideology or film under scrutiny.

Both empiricist and instrumentalist conceptions present one-sided generalities and do not allow for a concrete analysis of the actual contradictions arising from the class struggle. By class struggle we mean not only the economic class struggle, but the class struggle that also occurs in the realms of ideology, politics, art, and so on. For, as Michael Rosenthal stated in *JumpCut*, "we should not conceive of ideology as a thing, as a completed and coherent system of ideas which the bourgeoisie uses to brainwash the rest of society. Rather, we should approach ideological processes as social relationships, 'shot through with and constituted by' class contradictions." (1)

Film should be analyzed from this same class struggle point of view. That is, we can go beyond the view of film as a tool of the ruling class and

begin to analyze the class forces and contradictions represented in the film. To do this, we must begin to advance a Marxist-Leninist understanding of film with the same seriousness (although not with the same sense of priorities) as we must give to the analysis of other aspects of society.

This article is an initial attempt to offer a more serious and scientific approach to film analysis. First, I will critique a review of *Slave of Love*, which falls into some of the errors mentioned above, and next will be my own critique of the same film. This is, indeed, only a beginning, but hopefully it will stimulate further discussion and elaboration in this field.

#### An Example of a Mechanistic Review

*Slave of Love* is a Soviet film; therefore, it is revisionist through and through and must be exposed and condemned.

Does this sound like the CP(ML)? It's not. It's an example of the mechanistic, determinist approach that characterizes a great deal of "Marxist" film reviews seen today. When applied to U.S. films, just substitute American for Soviet, and capitalist for revisionist, and again we have the same simplistic approach.

An example of this approach can be found in Irwin Silber's review of *Slave of Love*, entitled "Revisionist Portrait of Revolution." (2) Silber suggests that the film could have been directed by Brezhnev himself, and that it shows how "the consolidation of revisionism manifests itself in every aspect of Soviet culture" (emphasis added). (3) But what does he mean by saying it is in every aspect of Soviet culture? While we generally agree that revisionism is presently dominant in the Soviet Union and perhaps in many, if not most, films, to merely assert this conclusion does not advance our understanding of the class struggle which is currently giving rise to the dominance of that revisionism.

The problem with Silber's instrumentalist view is that it is not dialectical; it only sees one aspect of an internally contradictory social phenomenon, whether it is the film, the state, or the entire social formation. Silber's approach shares the same philosophical foundation as that of the revisionists, by ignoring the existence of the class struggle at every level of the social formation.

To only see the dominant aspect of the state, or to only see the dominant aspect of Soviet culture, or of this particular film, is not enough. It is crucial to identify the secondary aspects, and show the relationship, or balance of forces, between the primary and secondary aspects.

Given that Silber has only addressed the revisionist aspects of this film, it is, thus, absolutely essential that he demonstrate how he arrived at this analysis. Particularly at a time when understanding revisionism is one of the key tasks of Marxist-Leninists, any contribution to that is extremely valuable. Unfortunately, Silber's analysis is short, insufficient, and, thus,

unconvincing. We are left with the conclusion that *Slave of Love* must be revisionist because it is a Soviet film. This is a determinist approach that could have been written without even seeing the film; all one needs to know is where the film is made.

A Marxist film review should do more than attach labels. At a minimum, it should attempt to draw out the different class forces represented in the film, both ideologically and politically.

In addition, we can begin to see how the artists' own conceptions, as expressed in the film, contain contradictory elements. A Marxist-Leninist film analysis, as a form of communist ideological practice, should be able to grasp those contradictions in order to expose the revisionist aspects more thoroughly and to elaborate on the progressive aspects. This, in turn, will help develop our (and Silber's) recognition of revisionism into a knowledge of revisionism.

#### Summary of Film

*Slave of Love* is a Soviet film directed by Nikita Mikhalkov, who is also a well-known actor, and whose family contains many artists. His great-grandfather, Surikov, was a nineteenth century painter; his grandfather, Konchalovsky, a Post-Impressionist; his father, Sergei Mikhalkov, is a poet; and his brother, Andrei Mikhalkov, is a film-maker. The film was introduced in the U.S. in 1977.

This film is the story of a silent-movie crew who leave Moscow in order to avoid the Bolshevik revolution. They attempt, in vain, to continue making movies in the south, where the White Army is still strong. However, the class struggle - personified by a Bolshevik cameraman, Victor, and a despicable White Guard officer, Fedotov - persists in disrupting their petit-bourgeois lives.

The producer of the film crew is cold and business-like, and is only concerned with making a film. The rather rotund director evokes feelings of both humor and sympathy as he struggles to direct a film that is doomed from beginning to end. The main character is Olga, who walks with a careless, almost lazy jaunt, portraying a woman who is unaware of any social reality other than the superficial life of a film star. There is also the serious, handsome cameraman, Victor, who is often mysteriously absent and reappears with dust on his face, evidencing that he has been traveling long distances while he claims to have only gone fishing.

Yet Victor is a Bolshevik who is obviously not fishing. Instead, he is shooting films of the political crimes and repression committed by the White Army, and dangerously smuggling them to the South to show his comrades, in order to educate and spur them on in the struggle.

As Olga grows frustrated with the banality of her life, she falls in love with Victor and is drawn into his political activity. She helps conceal one

of Victor's films from Fedotov and his forces, and then is invited to view the film at a Bolshevik meeting. Although her first concern was what to wear to the meeting, when she does see the film she appears quite shocked at the atrocities shown.

Victor again asks Olga to do him a favor. They meet at a cafe where he delivers another package of film. It is a dramatic moment when Olga tells Victor that she loves him, but that she needs time to get used to these new feelings and ideas, for her past is a part of her that is difficult to overcome. She asks him to wait for her and he replies that he will wait for her forever. But the forces of history are not in their favor, for as Olga watches him drive off, machine-gun fire bursts out and Victor is killed.

Back at the film studio, things have fallen apart completely. In search of Victor's film, Fedotov and his men invade the set only to be met by a struggle with Victor's comrades. The Bolsheviks kill Fedotov, and rescue Olga and Victor's film. They put Olga on an empty train and direct the conductor to take her to Moscow. The conductor bails out to join some counter-revolutionaries, who pursue Olga and the train on horseback. It seems as if the horses are catching up to the driverless train, but then they fall back and it is unclear if they will catch up or not. "You are traitors to your country," Olga cries out, symbolizing her awakening revolutionary consciousness, as the train and its pursuers fade into the distance.

#### Analysis of the Film

*Slave of Love* focuses on the contradictions that petit-bourgeois artists are faced with during a revolutionary crisis. Due to their contradictory class location and bourgeois, individualist ideology, these artists refuse to recognize their identity with either the reactionaries or the working class, and attempt to avoid the struggle completely. Yet, one of the most progressive aspects of this film is that it shows that neither an individual nor a social class can ever escape the class struggle, particularly during a revolutionary crisis.

The director of *Slave of Love*, Mikhalkov, portrays the characters' futile attempts to avoid reality with an excellent blend of humor and tragedy. The day-to-day concerns of the film crew and their associates continue to predominate over the realities of the class struggle and the ultimate consequences that lie in store for them, and the rest of their country. The film producer worries about the inaccessibility of film materials; the director is anxious about his being overweight; the film star, Olga, is concerned with what to wear to a communist meeting; and travelers fleeing Moscow speak not of the revolution, but of the difficulties they had to put up with when traveling. The significance of the revolution seems beyond their comprehension - it is only a great inconvenience to be avoided as much as possible.

Although they do not understand the political events taking place, the external forces create internal contradictions within them. Despite the fact that they have always been successful artists, their work no longer appears meaningful to them and they become increasingly dissatisfied with their lives.

The director is a classic example of a disaffected petit-bourgeois intellectual. More so than the others, he possesses a perceptive awareness of the changes occurring in the country, and of the poor quality and meaninglessness of their art and their lives. Yet, like many intellectuals, he is also a cynic, and remains paralyzed in the old lifestyle, unable to lift a finger as their illusory world collapses.

Olga, who is much more naive and romantic, cannot accept the emptiness within her and strives to escape the boredom of her life. Her moralistic feelings of wanting to help the poor and be socially useful are the potential basis for her transformation into a political activist. Her love for Victor, and her participation in delivering and viewing the film of White Army atrocities on the Soviet people, act upon her morals and begin to give her some political awareness and direction.

As is frequently the case in reality, Olga's political development is not a smooth process, nor is it complete. Her conception of the world is quite bourgeois, and she often seems unable to grasp the political implications of the revolution. This creates contradictions in Victor's relationship with her, although I don't think that they are explored enough in the film. Victor distances himself from Olga, sometimes frustrated, other times amused at her political naiveté.

There is one very dramatic scene which attempts to symbolize some of the gaps in their relationship due to their different political backgrounds. There is eerie music in the background, and the wind is furiously blowing the trees as Victor urgently tries to explain to Olga that the world is changing and life is going to be different. Unfortunately, he speaks in vague, general terms, where this would have been a chance for Mikhalkov, through Victor, to bring in a more political perspective.

But, as Victor talks, Olga's long white scarf flies off into the woods. Is this a symbol of her innocence disappearing as she listens to Victor? Or does it stand for her distance from him, and her inability, or refusal, to grasp what he is saying? It seems to be a little of both, but mainly the latter, for she just stares at Victor while he talks. She does not respond to him at all and the music and wind fade away.

Thus, they cannot communicate politically, although Olga continues to care for Victor, and help him deliver his underground films. In this sense, she is a slave of love, and of the forces of history. She takes a part on the political stage out of her love for Victor and her desire to be useful to humanity, rather than out of a conscious political awareness.

Irwin Silber, in his review, called this portrait of Olga sexist because she is a woman motivated by emotions and not politics. Yet, another way of interpreting the fact that Olga became politicized through emotions and morals is not that it was due to her being a woman, but rather because she was a petit-bourgeois artist under the sway of bourgeois ideology. That is, it is often moralistic outrage and indignation that is the initial impetus for many people, especially those of Olga's background, towards revolutionary

awareness. These morals, found within bourgeois ideology, can thus provide a basis for developing communist consciousness, assuming that, at some point, a complete break is made with bourgeois moralism in favor of a scientific political awareness.

Thus, we see that, in *Slave of Love*, some of the effects of the struggle upon a group of artist-intellectuals is artistically done and politically realistic. The film exposes some of the true aspects of their lives: the boredom, the uselessness of their art, and the contradictions that arise when they are forced to relate to a changing society. It also shows how someone from that background can be drawn into politics. Part of the reason I say it is artistic is that it does not make these points explicitly, they are made through the actions of the characters in the film, particularly Olga and the cynical director.

Engels made a similar statement about avoiding being overly tendentious in a letter to Minna Kautsky: "But I think that the bias should flow by itself from the situation and the action, without particular indications, and that the writer is not obliged to obtrude on the reader the future historical solutions of the social conflicts pictured." (4)

However, one of the problems with *Slave of Love* is that it fails to make clear the need for the break with moralism once the initial awareness is achieved. While this did not have to be done through the character of Olga, the rest of the film shows that Mikhalkov, himself (the director), does not have a more scientific understanding of the revolution and class struggle, since the opportunities to do this in the film existed, but were not taken advantage of.

For example, while the film is strong in developing the dilemma of the film crew, it is weak in its presentation of the two representatives of the class struggle, Fedotov and Victor, and also of the Bolshevik revolution itself. Absent is Lenin, the Red Army, and the Bolshevik Party, except for Victor and a few (undeveloped) comrades. This would be excusable if the political struggle had been well presented through Fedotov and Victor, but they are cast in the simplified roles of the good communist and the evil reactionary. There is no attempt to uncover the ideology of either side whatsoever. Thus, we are left with a morality play portrait of class struggle.

Although the presentation of the characters, with the Bolshevik clearly the "good guy," is progressive, it does not offer an understanding of why he is more progressive; he is just obviously a better person than Fedotov, and is fighting on the winning side. Without being polemical, I think the film could have gone deeper into the nature of the struggle. The advice that Engels gives to Ferdinand Lassalle is relevant here:

Your Sickengen is entirely on the right road, the principal characters in fact are representatives of definite classes and tendencies and hence definite ideas of their time, and the motives of their actions are to be found not in trivial individual desires but in the historical stream upon which they are being carried. . . . It seems

to me . . . that the person is characterized not only by *what* he does but also by *how* he does it, and from this point of view the intellectual content of your drama could only gain by a sharper contrast and juxtaposition of the separate characters. (5)

Thus, in *Slave of Love*, the characters of Fedotov and Victor should have been developed more fully, through their own actions, through Victor's relationship with Olga, and so on. And while it is true that all the characters are shown as being carried by the "historical stream" of the Bolshevik revolution, that revolution is presented from a moralist, or humanist point of view.

What accounts for these weaknesses in the film? It appears that the director, Mikhalkov, as well as the screenwriters (his brother Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, and Friedrich Gorenstein) and others who contributed to making this film, have a far better understanding of the ideology and contradictions of the petit-bourgeois film crew than they do of the revolution and the political struggle which gave rise to it. Although the film pokes fun at the petty and humanistic way that Olga and the other artists view the world, it does not present the alternative, the way communists view the world. It seems that the film-makers share the same moralist/humanist problematic (6) that the fictional film crew has. Victor's underground films show the cruel behavior and the political oppression committed by the White Army. Thus, the humanist reaction is indignation at these unfair practices, and there is no choice but to fight back. There is no understanding of the historical class forces that give rise to the struggle.

We have examined the class struggle in this film at two levels: in the content of the film itself, and in the film-makers' presentation of that content. The two are really part of the same whole, but can be separated in order to understand the totality better.

The class struggle, in the content of the film, is between the White Army and the Bolsheviks, and also between the illusory bourgeois ideology of the film crew and the reality presented by the revolution. Here, the dominant aspect is the ultimate victory of the Bolsheviks, and exposing the false, backward nature of bourgeois ideology.

The class struggle in the presentation of the film, however, is between the progressive critique of petit-bourgeois life and its corresponding ideology, and the absence of a developed communist alternative. The inability of the film-makers to present the film from a proletarian viewpoint is the dominant aspect in this case.

Finally, we must ask what this analysis reveals about the class relations in the Soviet Union today. The understanding and identification of the film-makers with the crisis of the petit-bourgeois intellectual in a revolutionary conjuncture gives evidence of the present class location and corresponding ideology of artists in the Soviet Union today. Over 50 years after the revolution, can this moralistic/humanist ideology be explained away as only a vestige of pre-revolutionary or bourgeois consciousness? Rather, it must be seen as having an existing social basis (or, in other words, the historically

determined place of artists and intellectuals, their social function and social relations) within the current system of Soviet class relations. It is this moralist ideology exhibited in this film which is blind to the complexities of class struggle and the science of Marxism-Leninism, and thus provides an ideological prop to the dominance of revisionism.

Thus, we can see that, while Silber is correct in his ultimate conclusion regarding the revisionist nature of *Slave of Love*, lack of analysis obstructs our path toward a more advanced understanding of class struggle within ideology in general, and film in particular. In this present period when grasping the process of theoretical analysis is crucial, I hope that this beginning analysis has shown that we must attempt to give depth and scientific meaning to the political labels and rhetoric we so often invoke.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Rosenthal, Michael, "Ideology, Determinism, & Relative Autonomy," *JumpCut*, No. 17, p. 21. This article is highly recommended for its seminal discussion on this subject.
2. Silber, Irwin, "Revisionist Portrait of Revolution," *Guardian*, November 15, 1978.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Engels, Frederick, "Letter to Minna Kautsky," in *Marxism and Art*, Maynard Solomon, ed., Vintage Books, New York, 1974, p. 67.
5. Engels, "Letter to Ferdinand Lasalle," *Ibid.*, p. 64.
6. For more on humanism, see Graham Locke's introduction to Althusser's *Essays in Self Criticism*, New Left Books, 1976.



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8. This last is what fundamentally characterizes the real development of capitalism.
9. The specific character of Marxist contradiction and the difference with Hegelian contradiction will be developed more deeply in *Fundamental Problems of Dialectical Materialism* - M. H.
10. Marx, Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. II, p. 504.