

Film, television and politics in 2024

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It was an eventful year, with an even more eventful one to come. Imperialism obliterated “red lines” in 2024 with its ongoing mass murder in Gaza and the Middle East generally, its relentless provocations aimed at creating conditions for war with Russia, a nuclear-armed power. In the US, Donald Trump is about to return to power, promising “dictatorship.”

The turn to authoritarianism and militarism severely endangers the world’s population, but it also reflects the weakness and fear of the bourgeoisie, which feels itself isolated and besieged, and rightly so. Intense social reaction, the encouragement of the most sinister, fascistic forces, is a desperate means of self-defense by a dying system.

Political life in the US now consists largely of one shock after another, which would have been unimaginable a few decades ago. The COVID-19 pandemic itself has contributed, encouraging the rise of the most selfish, vicious, anti-democratic elements, those profiting economically and otherwise from the mass death and tragedy. The ruling class acts in the most reckless manner, as if its actions had no consequences.

But they have consequences, including on mass public opinion. The reaction to the killing of United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson provided a glimpse of that. The incident evoked a mass outpouring of anger toward the for-profit healthcare system and large corporations generally.

One anxious comment is especially noteworthy because of its prestigious and authoritative source, the *Harvard Business Review*, one of the principal organs of the American corporate elite over the past century. Its article on the response to the Thompson killing notes that

Consumer, employee, and community frustration at corporations seems to have escalated to outrage. We have slowly moved from a world of ‘I don’t trust you’ to ‘I hate you,’ and wide swaths of the American public now feel a great antipathy toward capitalism and capitalists. Recent statistics are testimony to these festering frustrations bubbling over into anger. The percentage of Americans who view capitalism negatively increased from 33% in May 2019 to 39% in August 2022, according to Pew Research, while surveys from Just Capital show that younger, poorer, and non-white people take an even dimmer view of our current economic system. According to a 2024 Gallup poll, only 16% of Americans now say they have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in major companies, down from 28% in 2001. And there is an alarming disconnect between what corporate leaders (executives, directors, and shareholders) and their customers and workers believe.

Remarkably, the most prestigious business journal in the US acknowledges that “wide swaths of the American public now feel a great antipathy toward capitalism and capitalists.”

Changing what must be changed, Leon Trotsky’s comments about the impact of World War I on working class thinking are worth considering.

He argued that even though the vanguard of the working class had

previously known “in theory” that “might was the mother of right,” still its political thinking was completely permeated by “the spirit of opportunism, of adaptation to bourgeois legalism.”

Trotsky went on:

Now [the workers] are learning from the teachings of facts to despise this legalism and tear it down. Now dynamic forces are replacing the static forces in their psychology. The great guns are hammering into their heads the idea that if it is impossible to get around an obstacle, it is possible to destroy it. ... Iron necessity is now shaking its fist at all the rules of bourgeois society, at its laws, its morality, its religion. ‘Necessity knows no law,’ said the German Chancellor on August 4th [1914]. Monarchs walk about in public places calling each other liars in the language of market-women; governments repudiate their solemnly acknowledged obligations.

He continued:

Is it not clear that all these circumstances must bring about a profound change in the mental attitude of the working class, curing them radically of the hypnosis of legality in which a period of political stagnation expresses itself?

The possessing classes, to their consternation, will soon have to recognize this change. A working class that has been through the school of war will feel the need of using the language of force as soon as the first serious obstacle faces them within their own country. ‘Necessity knows no law,’ the workers will cry when the attempt is made to hold them back at the command of bourgeois law.

Now, into an already explosive situation in the US, where hostility toward the rich, the banks and large corporations is rife, we have thrust an incoming national government that proclaims itself proudly and brazenly to be the government of the billionaires, oligarchs, those same elements so widely distrusted and hated.

Films and television series have spoken very weakly, very poorly so far to these complex, convulsive processes. The artists have a great deal of catching up to do.

The American film and television industry is experiencing an immense crisis. On the one hand, it wants to hide its head in the sand from the socio-political turmoil and draw its audience in with it; on the other, economic and technological shifts are driving it to consolidate and place greater and greater emphasis on mega-projects, which require hundreds of millions, even billions, in worldwide revenue to turn a profit. Tens of thousands of jobs have been lost and many more are threatened by the introduction of extraordinary scientific advances such as Artificial Intelligence (AI),

which under capitalism spell ruin for entire fields.

One commentator recently observed:

Hollywood studios spent \$11.3 billion on productions in the second quarter of 2024, a 20% drop from the same period in 2022, reflecting a downturn in industry activity. Globally, film and television production levels declined by 20%, while the US saw a sharper 40% decline from pre-strike levels. The Greater Los Angeles Area experienced a 36.4% decrease in shoot days compared to its five-year average, underscoring the widespread impact of production slowdowns across key sectors. (*Entertainment Partners*)

Variety reports that total film revenues this year

are expected to reach \$30.5 billion globally, down more than 10% from 2023, which was itself nearly 20% off pre-pandemic levels. Domestic admissions, an even better gauge of the movie theater industry's hold on the culture at large, are expected to hit approximately 800 million. In contrast, before COVID upended the movie business, cinemas were averaging roughly 1.3 billion admissions annually.

A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* summed up the situation of below-the-line television and film workers struggling in the ongoing slowdown:

Streaming platforms, squeezed by shrinking subscriber numbers, had already pulled back on original programming, while studios slashed budgets and cut jobs. The [2023 writers and actors] strikes only deepened the slowdown: Film and TV production in L.A. remained 5% lower in the third quarter of 2024 than during the same period the previous year, according to the nonprofit FilmLA.

The *Times* suggests that an “emotional toll has rippled across the industry. Suicide among below-the-line workers is difficult to quantify, and many believe it’s under-reported.” Furthermore, as noted above,

Advancements in AI and virtual production are magnifying those anxieties. On projects like Disney’s 2019 CG-animated *The Lion King* and the studio’s upcoming *Snow White* remake...digital environments [have] replaced traditional sets, eliminating the need for entire crew departments.

Artistically—the last concern of the studio executives—the results are poor at the moment. The movie theaters are filled with superhero and animated films, which would have been considered largely children’s fare a number of decades ago.

It is not to be expected that filmmakers would recognize the concrete character and implications of the present crisis, but we have the right to ask that artists, by whatever means they choose, think more seriously about events and draw closer to the nature of their epoch.

Various comments have appeared referring to the end of “Peak TV” and the rise and fall of the “Golden Age” of scripted television series.

Production is down, and so is the quality, at least temporarily. Netflix and the other streaming services have made profitability a top priority, under pressure from Wall Street, and the economic desperation and short-sightedness of the executives oozes out of the second- and third-rate “products” they turn out presently.

Not a single major production from the US or British film industry made any of our lists this year. (Verena Nees and Paul Bond contributed to the 2024 lists.)

Films that played in movie theaters (very briefly in the case of *No Other Land*) in the US in 2024:

No Other Land (Basel Adra & Rachel Szor & Hamdan Ballal & Yuval Abraham)

Disco Boy (Giacomo Abbruzzese)

The Mother of All Lies (Asmae El Moudir)

Green Border (Agnieszka Holland)

The Goat Life (Blessy Ipe Thomas)

The Apprentice (Ali Abassi)

Art College 1994 (Liu Jian)

Wicked Little Letters (Thea Sharrock)

Films seen in 2024 (seen at festivals, undistributed, on televisions, etc.):

Paradise (Prasanna Vithanage)

To a Land Unknown (Mahdi Fleifel)

Riefenstahl (Andres Veiel)

Where Olive Trees Weep (Zaya and Maurizio Benazzo)

H2: The Occupation Lab (Idit Avrahami and Noam Sheizaf)

Julian Assange and the Dark Secrets of War (Sarah Mabrouk, Can Dündar)

Guardians of the Formula (Dragan Bjelogri?)

Bheed (Anubhav Sinha)

From Hilde, with Love (Andreas Dresen)

Johnny & Me—A Journey Through Time with John Heartfield (Katrin Rothe)

Leonardo (Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon)

Brother (Clement Virgo)

Television

Ripley (Steven Zaillian)

Leonardo (Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon)

Mr Bates vs The Post Office (directed by James Strong, written by Gwyneth Hughes)

Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light (directed by Peter Kosminsky, written by Peter Straughan)

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A quarter (or so) of the new century has passed. It would not be possible to characterize any of the films below as great works, but there certainly have been some very good and striking ones, including:

A World Not Ours (Mahdi Fleifel)

Omar (Hany Abu-Assad)

Peterloo (Mike Leigh)

Platform (Jia Zhang-ke)

Waltz With Bashir (Ari Folman)

Other films of note:

Land of Plenty (Wim Wenders)

House of Mirth (Terence Davies)

Court (Chaitanya Tamhane)

99 Homes (Ramin Bahrani)

Colonia (Florian Gallenberger)

Sami Blood (Amanda Kernell)

The Mauritanian (Kevin Macdonald)

Directions (Stephan Komandarev)

Parasite (Bong Joon Ho)

A Separation (Asghar Farhadi)

Isle of Dogs (Wes Anderson)

Waiting for the Barbarians (Ciro Guerra)
Ahed's Knee (Nadav Lapid)
Lost Illusions (Xavier Giannoli)
Tár (Todd Field)
Oppenheimer (Christopher Nolan)
Iraqi Odyssey (Samir)
J'accuse (Roman Polanski)
The Young Karl Marx (Raoul Peck)
Lincoln (Steven Spielberg)
Free State of Jones (Gary Ross)

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Richard Phillips: Best films and television of 2024

Films

All We Imagine as Light (Payal Kapadia) – India
Paradise (Prasanna Vithanage) – Sri Lanka
Bheed (Anubhav Sinha) – India
Poor Things (Yorgos Lanthimos) – United States
The Apprentice (Ali Abassi) United States
From Hilde, with Love (Andreas Dresen) – Germany
Perfect Days (Wim Wenders) – Germany
Guardians of the Formula (Dragan Bjelogri?) – Serbia
Coup de Chance (Woody Allen) – France
Leonora Addio (Paolo Taviani) – Italy
Io Capitano (Matteo Garrone) – Italy
The Children's Train (Cristina Comencini) – Italy

Television and mini-series

Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light (directed by Peter Kosminsky, written by Peter Straughan) – United Kingdom
Ripley (Steven Zaillian) – United States
Deadloch (Ben Chessell, Gracie Otto, Beck Cole) – Australia

Documentaries

Where Olive Trees Weep (Zaya Benazzo, Maurizio Benazzo) – United States
Leonardo (Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon) – United States

Stefan Steinberg: Notable Films in 2024...

2024 was dominated by the expansion of imperialist war and political reaction in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, alongside the stirrings of opposition on the part of the world working class.

In order to carry out their program, the leading imperialist powers have relied on a compliant, complacent corporate media, while intimidating and censoring those artists, film and cultural workers who dared to raise their voices against the atrocities committed in Gaza on a daily basis by the Western-backed fascist government of Israel.

Exemplary in this respect was the campaign led by the Social Democrats, Greens and fake lefts in Germany to first ignore and then denounce the collaboration between Israelis and Palestinians who made the film *No Other Land*, which graphically depicts years of suffering of Palestinians at the hands of their Zionist oppressors.

1. *No Other Land* and most of the other films on this list have been

reviewed on the WSWs website.

2. *The Apprentice*
3. *From Hilde, With Love*
4. *Riefenstahl*
5. *Julian Assange and the Dark Secrets of War*
6. *Paradise*
7. *Small Things Like These* – The film portrays the ruthless regime of Catholic nuns in Ireland who exploited and abused children born out of wedlock—directed by Tim Mielants, script by Enda Walsh and Claire Keegan (from the latter's novel).

Two valuable documentaries:

The outstanding two-part series on Renaissance artist *Leonardo da Vinci*, by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns and David McMahon (available on BBC iplayer) and *Undercover: Exposing the Far Right*, available on UK's Channel 4.

Finally, a special mention for an older film and a new theatre production that warn of the consequences of nuclear war and are of burning actuality.

Threads, the television film by director Mick Jackson and writer Barry Hines, was made in 1984 on a shoestring budget. It depicts the rapid escalation to world war and nuclear devastation following an American attack on Iran (available on BBC iplayer).

Currently on stage in London and more relevant than ever, the first theatre production of Stanley Kubrick's classic *Dr Strangelove*—nuclear annihilation following a provocative attack on the Soviet Union by a war-crazed American general, who regards the fluoridation of water to be the greatest risk to human health.

There is so much one could say about the crisis of modern cinema, but in my reviewing of movies in 2024 I was struck by the continual references to films as “products” and parts of valuable “franchises,” actors too declaring they were so proud to be part of the successful “franchise,” etc., etc., and many of these miserable “products” are financed by the banks and hedge funds.



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