

Writing Book and Film Reviews

Phil Butland

Left Journalism Day School. 31 May 2025

Who am I?



What is the point of German Memory Culture when it has no universal application?

by Phil Butland

Holding a sign saying "Haven't we learned from the Holocaust?" will now get you prosecuted and fined €1,500 in Germany



The Left Berlin Events in May and June 2025

by Phil Butland

Left Journalism Day School, Summer Camp, Jihadi Music, The Return of Palivision and much more



Should We Boycott No Other Land?

by Phil Butland

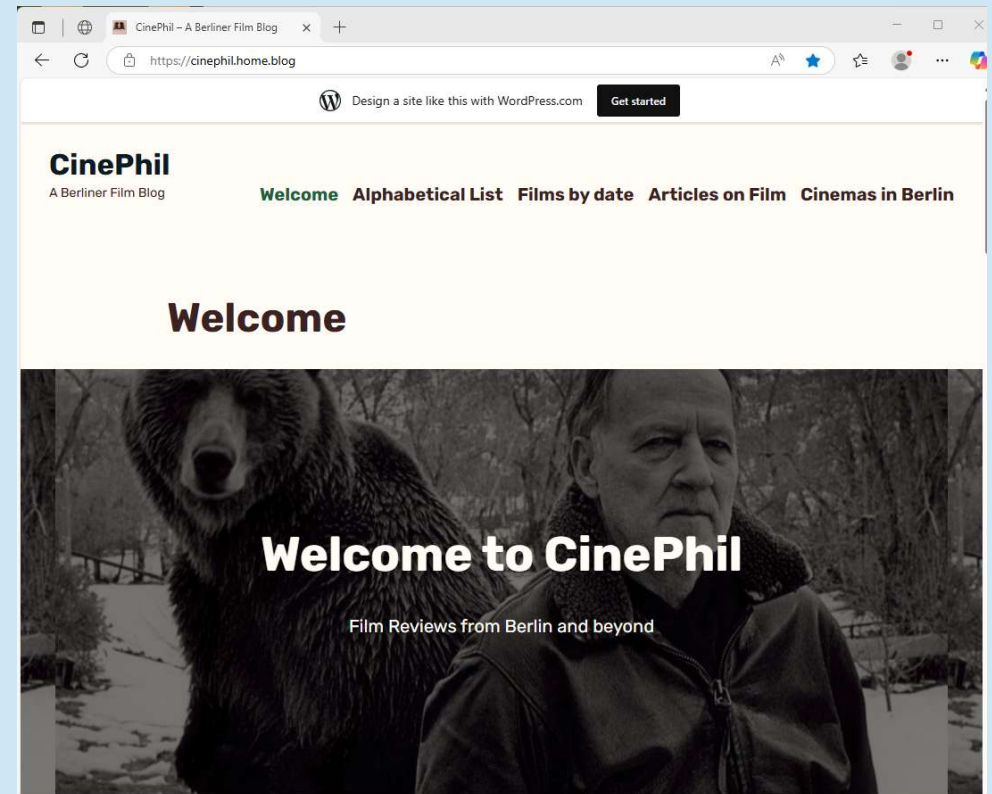
We must continue to support the BDS Campaign—but are they mistaken this time?

About Phil Butland



Phil Butland is a socialist from Bradford, Northern England. He founded the Berlin LINKE Internationals and is now active with The Left Berlin and Sozialismus von Unten (SvU). Alongside his political activities, Phil is the curator of the CinePhil Berliner Film Blog

Writer and editor for theleftberlin.com



Write the film blog cinephil.home.blog

Two rules of thumb

- 1) **Enjoying Art is subjective** – you can like something and I can dislike it, and we can both be right
- 2) **Good Art can have bad politics.** And bad art can have good politics

The role of criticism is to look at the social context of Art and justify the critic's reaction

Socialist criticism can also assess the Art's politics

Film AND Book Reviews?

- Both are about telling stories
- Better Fact vs Fiction
- **Fact** – Political texts, Reportage, Documentary films
- **Fiction** – novels, dramas
- There are some areas of difference but many similarities – all are telling a story

“Factual” Art

Documentaries and Non-Fiction

Questions to ask of documentaries

- Who has made this?
- What are they trying to say?
- What are their arguments?
- Are their arguments convincing?
- Do I agree with them? (Not the same thing)

It is not just what we see on screen

- What do we NOT see on screen?

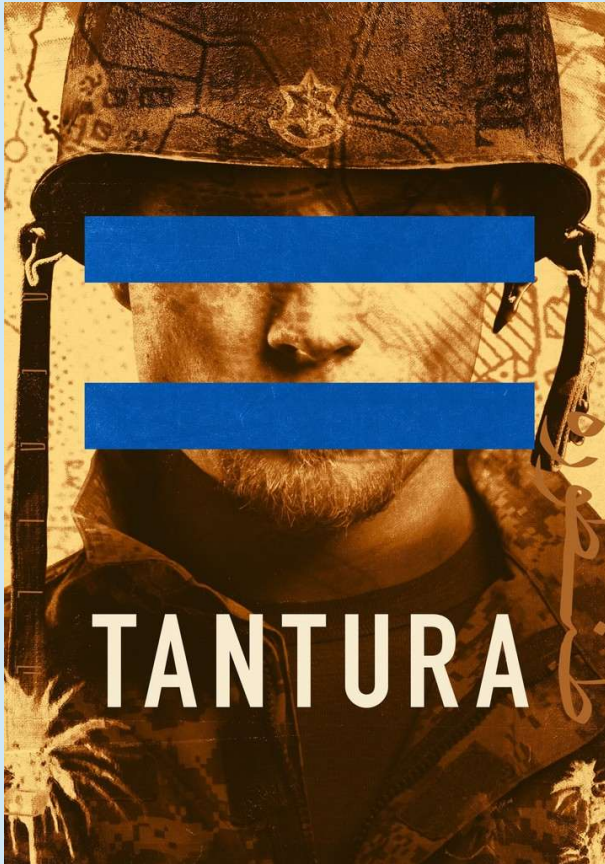
“Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer's way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject.”

John Berger, Ways of Seeing

What *might* we be seeing?

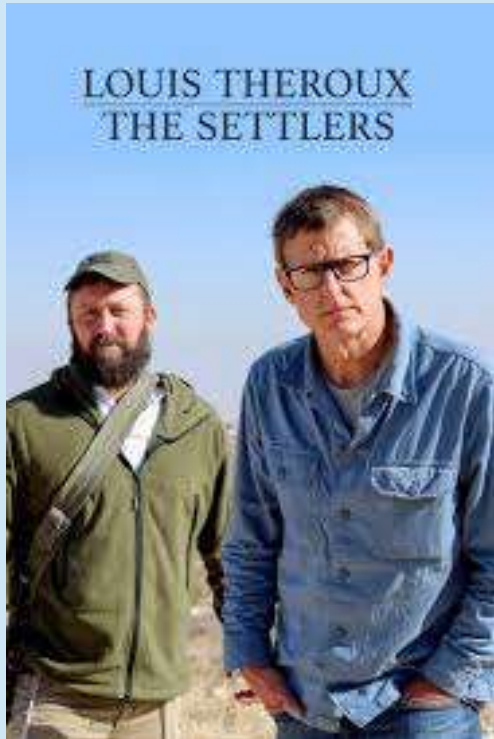
- All art requires a – conscious or unconscious – decision of what we see and what we don't.
- Consider a history of the British Empire which does not mention slavery, colonialism or imperial Conquest
- A history of the USA which forgets slavery
- Other omissions are more ambiguous. As an example, we'll take 2 recent films on Palestine

Example 1: Tantura (2022)



- Forensic history of the Nakba
- Based on research of Teddy Katz
- Katz interviewed an equal number of Israelis and Palestinians. In the film, almost all interviewees are Israeli
- The film implies that the solution is to be found within Israel

Example 2: The Settlers (2025)



- Critical examination of Israeli Settlers
- Concentrates on what is happening now
- *“that part of my story, the part about 1948, about the original sin that provided the foundation for what was being shown in the film, was left on the cutting room floor.”*

Mohammed Hureini, Mondoweiß

A film is not released in a vacuum

- Is there a public debate?
- Is there a right wing backlash? (eg *Kneecap*, *No Other Land*)
- If so, our review should start from the actual debate, not from any criticisms we have of the film

How should we review such films?

- Do the films help the liberation struggle?
- If “yes”, that should be the starting point
- We can (and should) then add criticism and suggestions for how the film could be better from a position of solidarity
- We should also explain what is missing and why

“Dramatic” Art

Stories and Non-Fiction

Some questions to ask of dramas

- How are minorities represented?
- What is the historical setting?
- What is the author trying to say?
- Do different characters express different points of view?
- Do all the characters speak with the voice of the writer/director? (Tarantino, I'm looking at you)

Representation (1) Bechdel Test

Does a film or novel contain

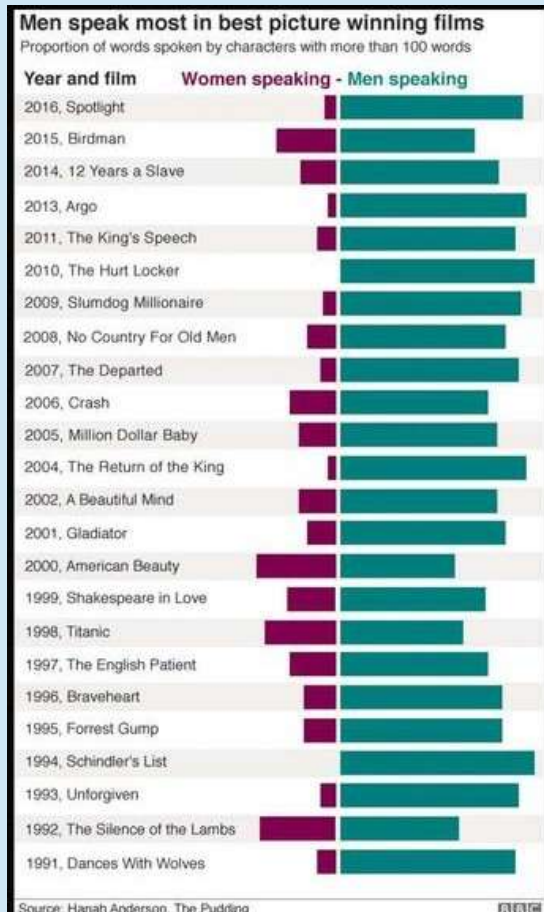
- Two women
- Both of whom have names
- Who have a conversation about anything other than a man?

How Useful is the Bechdel Test?

- Alison Bechdel: ***"The Bechdel test was a joke... I didn't intend for it to become a real gauge"***
- Films which "pass" the Bechdel test: *Goodfellas, Showgirls, Cocaine Bear, Texas Chainsaw Massacre*
- Films which "fail": *Star Wars, Lola Rennt, Fargo, Casablanca, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

Nonetheless the Bechdel test is a good rule of thumb when checking gender representation

Women Speaking in Oscar Winners



*“Researchers found that the percentage of women in speaking roles declined from 37% in 2022 to **35% in 2023** (0.1% of all speaking characters were transgender), while the percentage of films with (sole) female protagonists contracted from 33% to 28%.”*

Variety, February 7th 2024

Other representation

- Class (eg how big are the rooms?)
- Race
- Gender and sexuality
- Age

Representation is important, but films should also be realistic. You wouldn't expect a film set in a monastery to be full of women (but why set it in a monastery?)

Historical setting

- When is the story set?
- When was it written / filmed?
- What is happening at the moment?
- What parallels can we draw between these 3 different times?

Example 1: Spartacus



“I’m Spartacus”

- Spartacus film made in 1960
- About a slave revolt
- Written by 2 Communists – Dalton Trumbo and Howard Fast and produced by liberal Kirk Douglas
- First film to name blacklisted writers on end-credits

Example 2: On the Waterfront



“I could have been a contender”

- On the Waterfront made in 1954
- About an individual fighting the mob and trade unions
- End scene celebrates scabbing
- Director Elia Kazan's justification for naming names at the McCarthy hearings

So is Spartacus good and On the Waterfront bad?

“A work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art. But Marxism alone can explain why and how a given tendency in art has originated in a given period of history.”

Leon Trotsky, *The Social Roots and the Social Function of Literature*

What is the difference?

- Changes in the world / US politics

Between 1954 and 1960 we saw:

- 1955 Montgomery bus boycott
- 1957 Civil Rights Act
- 1960 End of segregation on buses

Art reflects the society from which it is produced

But there is also a subjective factor – Elia Kazan vs Kirk Douglas

Now it's your turn

- Land and Freedom Collectivisation Scene
- Film made by Ken Loach in 1995
- Set in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War

What should a socialist critic say about this scene?