

What's So Funny About CLASS STRUGGLE?

IDEOLOGY IN *THE TROTSKY*

By MATTHEW FLISFEDER

There are at least two ways in which a text may be inscribed with ideology. One is by raising a non-problem to the level of a true problem. Racism, for example, displaces discontent with the system of economic exploitation onto the figure of the 'intruder' (such as 'illegal immigrants') who is perceived as 'disrupting' the system. The other is the ahistorical presentation of a problem. Here, I am referring to History in the Marxian sense, i.e., historical materialism. Ironically, Jacob Tierney's *The Trotsky* (2009) is guilty of both kinds of ideological distortion: it raises a non-problem, or a false problem, to the level of a true problem, while at the same time ahistorically representing the latter. Although this film appears to side with the Left in its overt allegiance to Marxism (via Trotsky), it is, I claim, a most conservative rendering of Marxian politics, one that verges on parody.

The film tells the story of Leon Bronstein (Trotsky's given name at birth was Lev Bronstein), a seventeen-year-old Montreal high school student who believes that he is the reincarnation of the Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Red Army. Leon is determined to relive the life of Trotsky by battling against 'fascists'. In the opening scene of the film, Leon is shown leading a strike at his father's garment factory, where he has organized the workers into a 'union'. He has convinced the workers that they need to go on strike in order to assert their rights as a workers union against the warehouse owner, Leon's father, David. Frustrated with Leon, David takes it upon himself to learn about the life of Trotsky, his son's hero. He soon discovers that, unlike his son Leon, who attends a prestigious boarding school, Trotsky actually attended a public school. As punishment for his acts, David decides to send Leon to a west-end Montreal high school.

At his new high school, Leon quickly notices a lack of student organization in the face of the administrative 'fascist' controlling the school, i.e., the school principal. Leon is then determined to organize the students into a union, thus proving that the younger generation is not apathetic, but merely bored—a recurrent theme throughout the film.

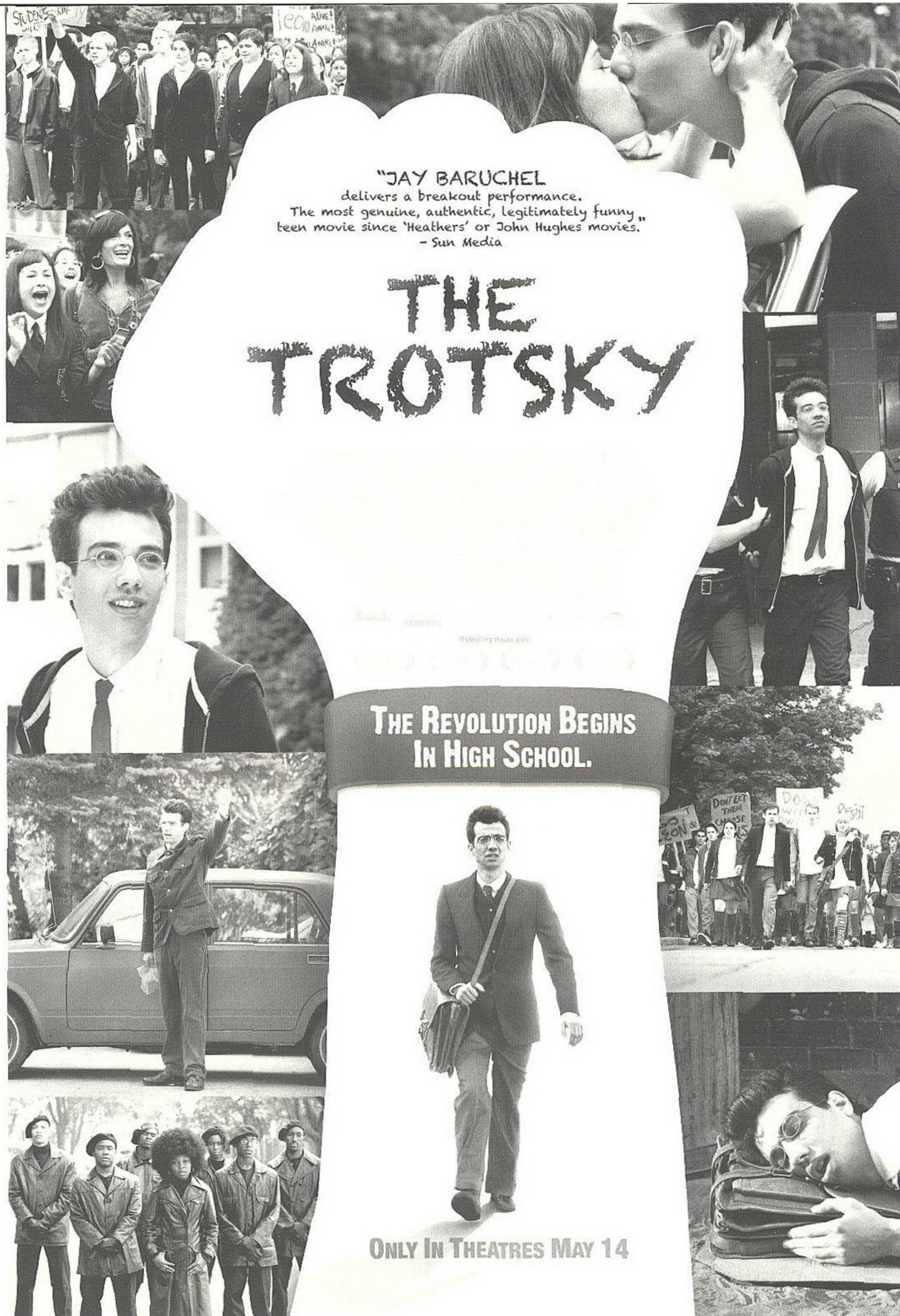
Although the film presents Leon as a noble hero, there are some questionable elements in the film, at least from a Marxian perspective. Most apparent is the aforementioned elevation of a non-problem into a real problem—that is, the organization of students into a union in order to battle against the 'fascist'

school administrators. Leon's effort to organize the students into a union is not so troublesome. What is problematic is the Autotelic nature of this organization. Leon's political project is rather loosely based on an ideal of "union for union's sake," whereby 'union' seems to occupy the position of a transcendental signified, in Derridean terms, that informs *The Trotsky's* political ontology.

A close reading of this film indicates that Leon's entire problem with authority centres on an Oedipal conflict. His antagonistic approach to authority is a mere displacement of his disdain for paternal authority. At the same time, Leon maintains a certain perverse attachment to the paternal authority, which he displaces onto authority in general. Leon's struggle with authority generates a certain form of enjoyment (what the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, referred to as *jouissance*) that he is not ready to give up because it preserves a perverse pleasure.

Initially, the Oedipal narrative takes the classic form of the male child's contempt for his father. At the beginning of the film, Leon appears to be more interested in challenging his father's authority than in starting a revolution. This is confirmed by Leon's recurring nightmare, perhaps the most creative scene in the entire film. The nightmare sequence references the famous Odessa steps sequence from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), one of the most referenced scenes in the entire history of cinema (parodied, for example, in Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables* (1987)). In the dream sequence, Leon imagines himself as the baby in the carriage, rolling down the Odessa steps. During the first occurrence of the dream sequence, David Bronstein is presented in the guise of a tsarist soldier shooting at Leon's stepmother, Anne Bronstein, as the carriage rolls down the steps.... A Freudian could not ask for a better 'master text' with which to decipher this film.

Slavoj Zizek argues that the Oedipalization of politics in cinema is one way in which the political content of a film may be subverted by the reigning ideology, through a filtration of history in favour of the family or romantic narrative. Other examples include James Cameron's films *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009). In these films, the political problem is subordinated to the problem of the couple. *Titanic*, according to Zizek, is an example of a film that subordinates the political class struggle to the romantic love between the two protagonists. This,



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according to him, is why Jack must die at the end of the film: the romance is preserved, thus displacing the class struggle—one of the apparent themes in the film. Were Jack to survive, Zizek argues, the class antagonism between the two would surely tear them apart, thus ending the potential for romance.¹ *Avatar*, similarly, displaces the political problem of colonialism and imperialism onto the love narrative between the two protagonists. A true test of the ideological weight of a film such as this, according to Zizek, is to read it in relation to real life events. Around the same time as this film was released, areas of land in the Indian state of Orissa, which is inhabited by the Kondh tribe, were being sold to mining companies. Unlike the

film, however, Zizek notes that, "in Orissa there are no noble princesses waiting for the white [American] hero to seduce them and help save their people."² Zizek's examples, here, help to articulate the point I am trying to make regarding the ahistorical presentation of a problem. From a Marxian-psychoanalytic perspective, the Oedipal narrative is one way of filtering out history from a political problem. The historical specificity of the situation is replaced by the dilemma of reconstituting the family structure.... Back to the *Trotsky*.

The dream sequence is repeated later on in the film, only this time the figure of the guard and the mother are replaced by Frank, a law professor at McGill University whom Leon has



contacted to defend him against the myriad of fascists, and Alexandra, Leon's love interest and one of Frank's graduate students. Leon meets Alexandra when he follows Frank to his home, trying to convince him to be his lawyer. At a certain point in the film, Leon comes to blame Frank for undermining his attempts to woo Alexandra. Thus, in Leon's dream, Frank is transposed into the authority figure of the soldier, while Alexandra becomes the figure of desire, thus replacing the earlier reference to the (step-) mother.

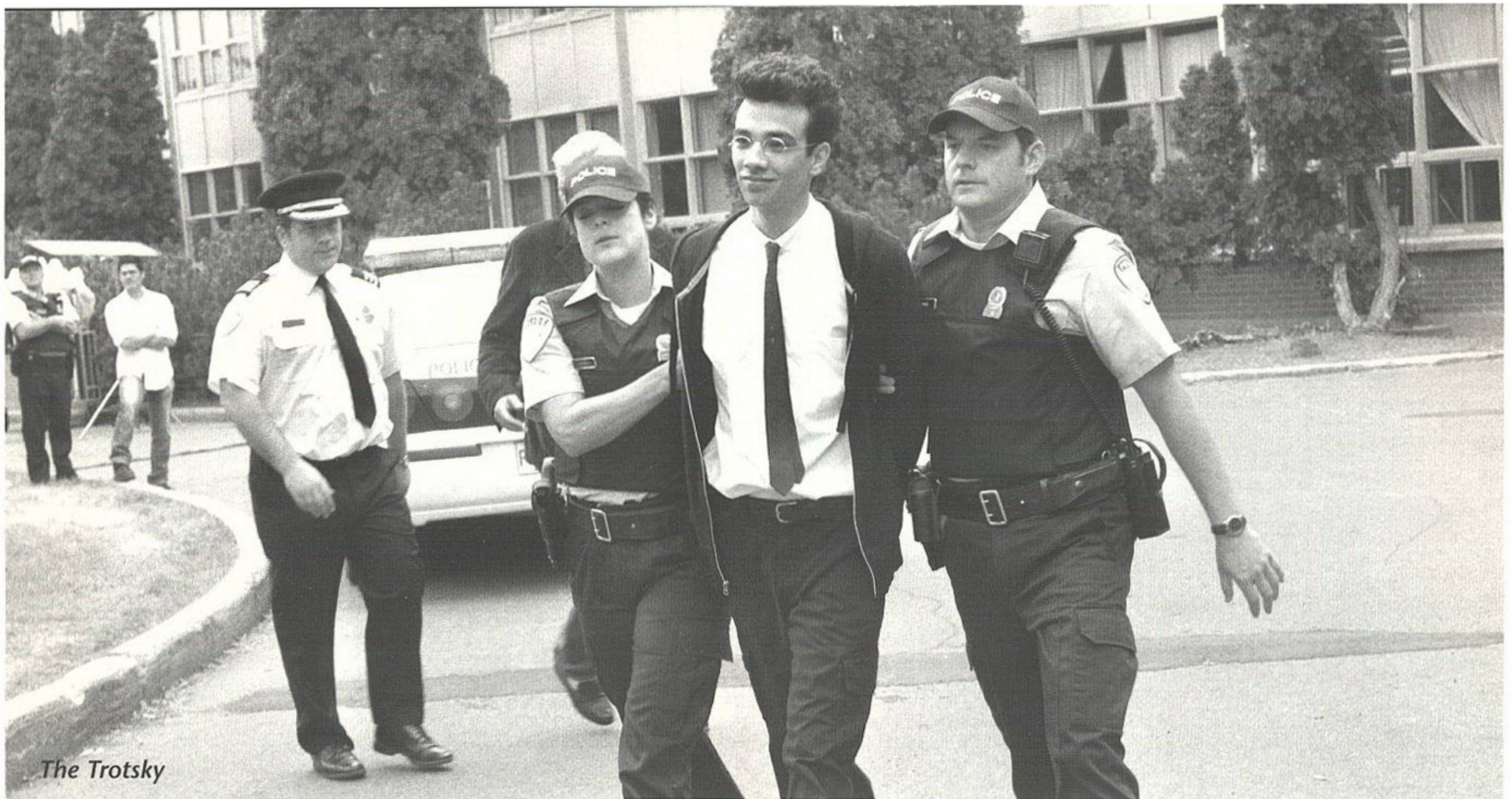
Leon clearly represses this Oedipal aspect of his identity and displaces his anger onto the 'fascist' administration at his new high school. During the first day at his new school, Leon inquisitively follows a miserly teacher, Mrs. Danvers, around the halls as she hands out detention slips to students for very minor infractions, such as having dirty shoes, or untucked shirts, or for having body piercings. After witnessing the parsimonious acts of Mrs. Danvers, there is a close-up on Leon who, with a grin, slowly, and excitedly proclaims: "Faaaassssccccciiiissssttt!" Leon's facial expression demonstrates perfectly the kind of perverse excitement he gets from finding 'fascists' with whom he can battle. The mere fact that Leon appears to take some kind of pleasure from his struggle with 'fascists' is a key indication that this film is, perhaps, not truly about politics—at least, not in the Marxian sense.

Aside from references to Terry Eagleton and Ken Loach, and of course the references to Trotsky himself, there is nothing particularly Marxian about *The Trotsky*. The opening scene, where Leon tries to unionize the workers in his father's warehouse, is the first example of a missed opportunity in this film. Despite this representation of workers' struggle, the film makes no reference to the political class struggle at the core of the capitalist mode of production. What we get, instead, is a 'Coles Notes' version of Marxism for the most likely teenage audience, which posits the organization of a workers' union as the sole task of politics on the Left. The problem, again, is that there is an important historical element to the political that is missing in this incarnation of 'Trotsky'. Without any regards for the latter, Leon Bronstein seems to be nothing more than a rebellious upper-middle class boy struggling to 'find himself'. At a certain

level, the film seems to be the story of a teen boy mulling over his own identity politics. 'Trotsky' then becomes the persona assumed by Leon in his struggle with paternal authority.

Further evidence shows that this film has very little to do with politics in the Marxian, or even in the Trotskyist sense, and is based upon some *ad hoc* popular (mis-) conception of Leftist politics. When Leon decides that the students need to unionize, there is very little political motivation provided other than the fact that the administrators are 'fascists' and that 'school sucks'. I defy anyone to find me a teenager who does not think that 'school sucks'. Leon's 'revolution' is closer to resembling a brand of 'authoritarian populism' that organizes disparate groups of ineffectual youths by locating their common disdain for a particular 'enemy'—Principal Berkhoff. Is *this* not the very definition of *fascism*? In many ways, the same film could have been released under the title, *The Hitler*, with a few minor details amended to resemble the life of the 'führer'. One can imagine, though, what such a film would look like, today. It would not be a romantic comedy, but rather a thriller, perhaps similar to Bryan Singer's adaptation of Stephen King's *Apt Pupil* (1998), or perhaps a dramatic film like Tony Kaye's *American History X* (1998). There is something about the form of the comedy that displaces the contemporary relevance of Marxian theory and politics, what Fredric Jameson refers to as the 'ideology of form'—it is the form of comedy that carries a particular ideological message.³ It is almost as if the full presentation of Trotsky as a loveable, comedic character is a way of disavowing his importance today. This is keeping in line with other relatively recent films presenting a certain kind of nostalgia for pre-1990s Communism (after which we all, according to Francis Fukuyama, experienced the 'end of history'),⁴ such as Ulrich Beckers's *Goodbye Lenin* (2003). Communism, it would seem, is, after the 'end of history', apparently something to laugh about.

The divergence between representations of 'fascism' and 'communism' in post-Communist era cinema is indicative of how the reigning ideology mediates between these two ('evil') alternatives to liberal democracy. Fascism, on the one hand, still counts as something horrible, and is therefore mostly represented



The Trotsky

through genres such as drama or thriller. On the other hand, what can we infer from the comic portrayal of 'communism'? It is as if taking 'communism' seriously begins to reveal too much, which the reigning ideology would rather not address. The only way to fully negate it is by presenting it as something ridiculous and nonsensical.

We should keep in mind that this film was released against the background of what many commentators have referred to as the worst financial crisis since the market crash of 1929. Instead of an historical-political analysis of capitalism, what we get in the popular media are the all too easy displacements of class struggle onto 'enemy figures', such as 'illegal immigrants', or the 'greedy' who wanted too much and caused a 'rupture' in the system (Oliver Stone's recent sequel to his 1987 hit, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), moves in the direction of putting blame upon the latter),⁵ or even so-called Socialists, such as Barack Obama, a favourite target of the growing Tea-Party movement in the United States, who is often blamed for causing the financial crisis because of initiatives such as healthcare reform.... The list goes on, *ad absurdum*, avoiding all investigations into the system of economic exploitation itself, displacing problems with the latter onto some external, contingent element, and up to, in *The Trotsky*, the very archetypal figure of the rival in high school melodrama: the school principal. Following in the footsteps of 80s classics, such as John Hughes' films *The Breakfast Club* (1986) and *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), the figure of the 'fascist'-enemy principal is, here, easily recognizable.

One could argue that the school and the principle are examples of what Louis Althusser referred to as 'Ideological State Apparatuses';⁶ however, in order to do so, one would need to make the connection between education and the ideology of the state, which rules in favour of the capitalist class. This is nowhere found in *The Trotsky*, and here we find a second example of a missed opportunity in this film.

In the end, would it not have been truly utopian if the students organized with the workers in David Bronstein's warehouse, making connections between the state apparatus, the educational apparatus, and the class struggle, thus not only

proving that they are *not* apathetic, but that they are cognizant of real-world politics—perhaps even taking on the form of the Leninist party (the union of intellectuals and workers)? This of course could never happen in this film, which is more of an Oedipal narrative than a Marxian one. Such a protest would not have allowed Leon to reconcile with his father at the end of the film. Politics, in other words, are evacuated in order to save the family relationship. *The Trotsky*, far from being a much-needed political film, one that actually could interpellate real life students towards the politics of our time, is much more of a family comedy. One should view this film not as a tribute to Marxism, or Trotsky, but rather as a family narrative that pathetically endeavours to present something apolitical as *the* political *par excellence*. In order to save the comic effect of the film the political is relegated to the position of the unconscious. There is, after all, nothing funny or entertaining about the class struggle.

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NOTES

- 1 Slavoj Zizek. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London and New York: Verso, 2008. 57-58.
- 2 Slavoj Zizek. *Living in the End Times*. London and New York: Verso, 2010. 394-395.
- 3 Fredric Jameson. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1981.
- 4 Francis Fukuyama. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, London, Toronto and Sydney: Free Press, 1992.
- 5 Stone's other recent film, the documentary, *South of the Border* (2010), is much more inspiring for the Left.
- 6 Louis Althusser. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.