



Cinema and Society in the Light of Emile Zola's Naturalism

Hossein Shahin Karbalacetaher, University of Fine Arts Hamburg

shahinfilms@gmail.com

Volume 8.1 (2020) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2020.244 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract

This study will seek to discuss the essential impact of Emile Zola's naturalism regarding the role of cinema in projecting social issues. To be clear on how cinema has got involved with social issues and has become an effective art form for distributing social messages and encouraging social changes, this study first will give a detailed historical background on the relationship between cinema itself and society. Then, it will elaborate on Emile Zola's naturalistic literature role as the first serious endeavors to raise social awareness through art and literature in the late nineteenth century. Finally, this study will focus on the first cinematic movement with an emphasis on the depiction of the working class' real life and revealing inequalities and injustices in a society based on Zola's naturalism.

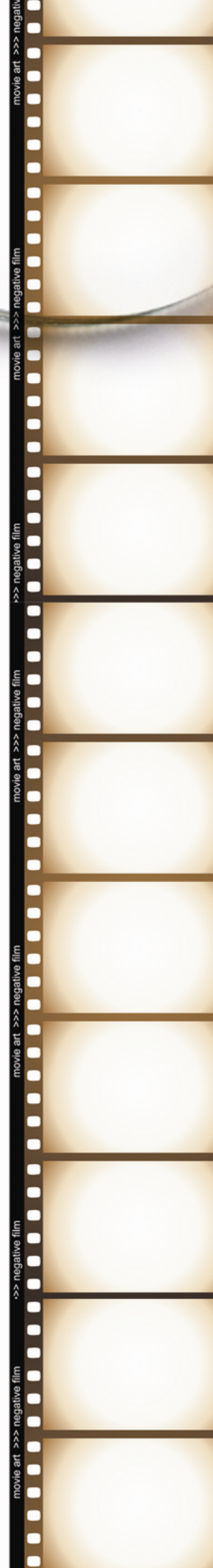
Keywords: Film, society, Emile Zola, naturalism, French cinema



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#)



Cinema and Society in the Light of Emile Zola's Naturalism

Hossein Shahin Karbalaeeetaher

Introduction

A review of recent literature on the relationship between public awareness and the art of filmmaking demonstrates that cinema has always had an essential role to express the social matters and attention is given to the capabilities of art in general and cinema in particular to further social movements goals. For instance, the relationship between culture and social changes in an immense and diverse society such as the United States of America have been discussed by T. V. Reed in his book *The Art of Protest*. According to Reed, there is a close connection between social movements, as he interprets, “the unauthorized, unofficial, anti-institutional, collective action of ordinary citizens trying to change their world” (Reed 2005:xiii) and various art forms, in that each American movement can be recognized with a specific form of art. As he notes, the African American civil rights movement with the song, feminism and women's rights with poetry, the Chicano movement with graffiti, the American Indian's rights movement with cinema, the anti-apartheid movement with rock music and so on. These art forms and cultural activities, according to Reed, are the chosen vehicles for conveying the protest against a vast range of injustices, discriminations and inequalities in a democratically based country in which minorities have been constantly treated unfairly by the authorities. As an example, regarding the relationship between song and the anti-

segregation movement he refers to activities of Freedom Singers in the 1960s. A group of singers who not only raised the social awareness against segregation, but also had a very crucial and effective role in sending the message to the northern states and connecting college students of the south and north together which finally shaped the massive campaign of the Freedom Summer of 64 (Reed 2005:23).

However, there is not much available on the question of how cinema got involved with social issues? How filmmakers passed by the Samuel Goldwyn's famous phrase that "Pictures are for entertainment, messages should be delivered by the Western Union" (Hillard 2009:3) and indeed tried to deliver the messages? Who were the pioneer filmmakers in this kind of filmmaking practice and what/who was their main influence?

One aspect which illustrates the capability of cinema for distributing social messages and encouraging social changes can be identified as the popularity of cinema which locates it at the center of attention. One could argue that the magical or glamorous aspect of cinema, amongst other things, has always played an essential role in its popularity. The relationship between people and film fan journals indicates that from the very beginning this glamorous and magical phenomenon was welcomed by the public and quickly saved its place among the various strata of the society. For instance, *Motion Picture Magazine* as the first film fan magazine reports this welcome in its first year of establishment in 1911 with a circulation of 50.000 copies which increased to a

circulation of 200,000 in 1914, just three years after its birth, and after attracting a large female subscriber in 1919 reached 400,000 copies (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1988: 9). *Motion Picture Magazine* was born in responding to a vast number of cinema enthusiasts in New York, and its publication continued until 1977 in monthly form. The massive welcome of the cinema by the people, and perhaps, the boom of this journal caused another similar journal called *Photoplay* to be published in the same year (1911) in Chicago. Then, film fan magazines were developed globally, and they found their role as the communicative bridge between the growing enthusiasts of cinema and the filmmaking world in which they continue this job to this day.

Moreover, the emergence of film schools in the early days of cinema also tells us about the popularity of this phenomenon in society. Although Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography which by the help of Lev Kuleshov was founded by the film director Vladimir Gardin in 1919, according to its website, claims to be the oldest film school in the world, it seems that the first cinematic educational environments came forth in the United States of America. In *Photoplay* magazine, November 1914 issue, there is an advertisement for *Authors' Motion Picture School*. This interesting advertisement that is covered by the photo of Francis X. Bushman, one of the biggest stars of the silent era, reads:

“Francis X. Bushman the world’s greatest motion picture star endorses Author’s Motion Picture School. He has reviewed our course and system of instruction in photoplay writing and recommends it to you.” (Photoplay Magazine)

Furthermore, the provocative visual power of film, as an accessible entertainment from its inception onward, in projecting social issues by relying on its popularity is one of the first subjects that caught the minds of pioneer film scholars. The American film reviewer, author of one of the first books about film production entitled *Screencraft*, published in 1916, and also a screenplay writer, Louis Reeves Harrison in one the first serious cinematic journals entitled *The Moving Picture World* in 1913 wrote:

“Let us go deep into the social problems that are deeply affecting us at this moment! Let us probe the ignominy of our political system! Let us search for truth even if it is as deep as a well! For truth is truth to the end of reckoning!” (Roberts 2010, 23).

Harrison in the chapter, *Present Day Issue or What to Do and What Not of Screencraft* after a rather long prelude in regard to the hottest subject of those days, World War I, and its subsequences suggests that it is better if screenplay writers instead of writing iterated and formulaic scenes, pay attention to the more serious and important issues around them and write about those issues. Issues like the effect of war on the social fabric, the importance of the wellbeing of children and youth, the taxation system, the labor wages and so on (Harrison 1916: 34-43).

It is evident that the publication of the first film fan magazines, cinematic books, and also the emergence of film schools in less than ten years from the official birth of cinema reveal the fact that there has been a close connection between this phenomenon and the society. On the other hand, film reviewers and writers like Louis Reeves Harrison, as the ancestor of today film scholars, from the early days of cinema have been aware of the significant status and capabilities of cinema in expressing contemporary social issues.

Another line of thought on the role of cinema in expressing and/or stimulating social matters demonstrates the crucial impact of Emile Zola and his naturalism on the relationship between cinema and presenting social issues. Although the Lumiere brothers as the first filmmakers in France, and the history, took the first moves towards the completion of the cinema by introducing cinematograph in contrast to Thomas Edison's kinoscope, but one could argue that in fact, the main figure behind the French cinema was no one but Emile Zola to such extent that he has been arguably considered to be "the father of the French cinema." (Andrew 1995: 26) Not only the Emile Zola's naturalistic literature played a crucial role as the kernel of the French cinema but also presented the first serious endeavors to raise the social awareness through art and literature in the late nineteenth century. This was Zola's scientific naturalism that after appearing in his novels, brought up to the stage by the theatre director Andre Antoine and after essentially

transforming the nineteenth-century drama, entered to the cinema and founded one of the first cinematic movements with emphasis on depiction of the working class' real life and revealing inequalities and injustices in the society.

This movement includes filmmakers such as, Ferdinand Zecca (1864-1947), Albert Capellani (1874-1931), Rene Hervil (1881-1960), Victorin Jasset (1862-1913), Henri Pouctal (1856-1922), and Andre Antoine (1858-1943) who were highly influenced by Zola's works, specially by his *Le Roman experimental* (1880) and *Le Naturalism au theatre* (1881) that contains Zola's criticisms of the nineteenth century French drama on which, according to Zola, was suffering from "artificiality, lack of authenticity, and limited social perspective." (Aitken 2001: 69-70). This group of filmmakers, as Aitken confirms:

"were associated with the political left, and the representation of the poor within these films was frequently combined with demands for social reform, as, for example, in Zacca and Nonguet's *The Strike* (1903)." (Aitken 2001: 70)

Therefore, "they took their cameras out of the studio and into the countryside, where they photographed local people within their domestic environments"(Aitken 2001: 70) and their domestic issues, for example, in Capellani's *Germinal* (1913) which is a cinematic attempt to bring Zola's words of protest against inequality and injustice in the society up to the silver screen.

To further understand the crucial role of Emile Zola and his naturalism in expressing social issues by means of cinema, one should take the time machine and travel back to

just one year after the end of the Second French Empire (1852 – 1870) and the totalitarian regime of Napoleon III; in the last decades of the nineteenth century in which France approaches the so-called ‘Beautiful Era’ (Belle Époque). Not only this new era brought regional peace and hopes to France, a wounded and tired country from the wretched wars of Napoleon III, but also delivered the scientific, economic, and cultural prosperity and as a result of this new blossom various artistic arenas, especially in Paris, flourished. The French society had passed two Empires and two Republics, and on the other hand, the industrial revolution and liberalism movement had essentially transformed society. Therefore, the new social developments emerged and many conventional artistic methods and traditions such as academic painting were transformed and innovated. Paris became the center of artistic activities and new phenomena including cinema emerged. In this era, Zola’s naturalism by presenting the first novel of his collection of twenty-novel series entitled, *Les Rougon-Macquart* came to the light.

In fact, these novels are social and historical documents based on two fictional families living during the Second French Empire. Zola, who had been observing the miserable lives of French men and women, social injustices and inhuman conditions of the labors during the Napoleon III regime, by using his magical scientific naturalism, gives us such a live and

straightaway picture of ordinary people's poor living condition in that depressed period of the France history.

It is found that Zola in *Les Rougon-Macquart* in order to register and report a purely realistic view of his time rejects the conventional and traditional symbolism, idealism, and sentimentalism; instead, by getting as close as possible to his characters and accurately studying and observing them, acts as a social researcher and illustrates a well-detailed description of his characters' lives in such a way that suggests a new function for novels. In Zola's standpoint, novels should not be just based on (or the product of) imaginations anymore, they rather should be based on precise observation and research on the actual living condition of the characters as it is, nothing more or less, albeit ugly and indecent. Zola in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, in one hand, expanded his naturalism theory in the field of literature and on the other hand, with publishing *Le Naturalisme au theatre* (1881), provided the necessary context for the essential changes in French theatre for addressing the contemporary social issues on the stage. Zola in his essay asserts that the play should be based on reality and the playwright in order to search for the truth must avoid imaginary characters and fantasy events. (Zola 2002) His attempt was to implement his observation method in the creation process of the novel and also in the field of playwriting.

To look at this another way, Zola demanded that the play moves from romantic emotionalism to naturalism, so that by blowing this new spirit into the theatre it would pave the

way for expressing the social issues and protest the inequalities and injustices. Zola was seeking to depict kind of characters who were not bigger than life, so that the audience would see themselves and their own ways of living, in full details, on the stage. By challenging the conventional and traditional values in the modern European society, not only he opened a new chapter in his own professional career, but also in the world of literature and drama.

In fact, under the influence of Darwin's theory, and with emphasizing on the precise observation of the life, Zola defines the behavior of his naturalistic character in an imposed force by the heredity and the environment. Characters in Zola's novels are the victims of nature whose behaviors and fates are rooted in the environmental and hereditary factors. For example, in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Zola precisely investigates the issue of the inheritance among the people of two families and shows how diseases spread among the generations and children of these two families; this is because Zola believed that the issue of inheritance and environment is a predestination matter and out of human's control.

Above all, the significant of Zola's groundbreaking method was the fact that in one hand, he made his upper class and bourgeois readers get familiar with the turbulent life of the working class by depicting a pure picture of their poor and inhuman living conditions, and on the other hand, since the working class found their own real lives in the lines of Zola's literature, as it was,

without Balzacian or Dickensian heroism, they faced the harsh reality of their own existence. In the world of Zola's literature, the characters are identical to real life, and unlike the characters of Balzac or Dickens, remain in the limit of their existence. They may grow in life (like the character of Nana), but they will never grow more than the limit of their lives.

Indeed, this method and process of creation a novel (or a play), i.e. the close connection to the characters and documentary-like impartial reports of their lives, so that nothing is hidden, without symbolism, idealism, and emotionalism, as well as selecting the marginal and marginalized people of the society as the central characters of the story, in addition to the existence of themes such as injustice, social inequalities, and class distances, associated with the righteous and defiant spirit of the author of the work is a kind of pattern which one could call "Zolaian Pattern". A pattern on which filmmakers like Ferdinand Zecca, Albert Capellani, Rene Hervil, Victorin Jasset, Henri Pouctal, and specially Andre Antoine were inspired by it and by their films, such as, *La Greve* (1903 - Ferdinand Zecca), *Germinal* (1913 - Albert Capellani), *Le coupable* (1917 - Andre Antoine), and *La Terre* (1921 - Andre Antoine) brought it to the cinema.

It should further be noted that among these filmmakers, Andre Antoine, who had been attracted to the magic of Zola's naturalism (and Ibsen's realism), after his successful experiences in performing Zolaian Pattern in the theater, plays a significant role in adapting and injecting this pattern to the cinema. The French actor, theatre director and manager, filmmaker and film critic,

Andre Antoine who because of his innovative methods in mise-en-scene, working with actors, and directing plays is considered to be the father of the modern mise-en-scene (Coward 2002: 259) was born in the Second French Empire era in a working-class family and moved to Paris in 1866. Four years after his resettlement in Paris, in 1870, Napoleon III was defeated by the Kingdom of Prussia and by the beginning of the Beautiful Era; the Paris theatre scene did not fall behind the concept of 'modernization' of the time. The plays formulated with a dry, luxurious and contractual style of the actors who were reciting on the scene instead of expressing the dialogues were no longer bought. People were looking for innovative and new voices on the theatre stages and Antoine in 1887, at the age of 29, by establishing Theatre Libre became that voice. The main mission of Theatre Libre was to show a fragment of everyday people's lives, as it was, based on the Zolaian Pattern. This was not an easy task to achieve for Antoine and his young, and mostly amateur actors. For instance, for performing Zola's *Therese Raquin* as their first official program, due to lack of budget, they took their rehearsals in a tavern; and for the same reason, Antoine borrowed his mother's furniture to build up the set (Styan 1981:31).

Nonetheless, Theater Libre in the first three years of its presence could bring up the works of 59 playwrights; including Zola, the Goncourt brothers, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Strindberg, and Turgenev to the stage light (Theatre Antoine). Antoine's insistence in executing Zolaian Pattern and

presenting the pure reality on the stage was intensified to such extent that in *La Terre* he brought the real grass and plants on the stage (Chothia 1991, 14-30). This kind of commitment to present the pure reality led Antoine towards cinema. Antoine who had become interested in the photography by the encouragement of his friend, Zola (Oscherwitz and Higgins 2009:21), entered into the world of filmmaking in 1915 at the age of 57 and made the total of nine films from 1915 to 1922, namely *Les Frères corses* (1916), *Le Coupable* (1917), *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1918), *Mademoiselle de la Seigliere* (1920), *93* (made in 1915 but presented in 1920), *La Terre* (1921), and *L'Arlésienne* (1922). Antoine and his fellow filmmakers brought two things into the world of cinema; first, performing Zolaian Pattern and expressing social issues by means of cinema and second, creating a visual language for presenting this pattern. The most important aspect of this language is its commitment to reality and presenting it as it is, albeit ugly and indecent. Antoine's innovative methods in regard to this language include the usage of non-actors, hand-held camera, camera movements (at the time that moving camera was not that much a common fashion) and filming outdoors in the real scenes instead of inside the studios (Gural-Migdal and Singer 2005:19).

The evidence presented in this study has shown the impact of the Emile Zola's naturalism, in the form of 'Zolaian Pattern', in expressing social issues which after being practiced by Andre Antoine at the Theatre Libre was introduced to the cinema by filmmakers

such as Ferdinand Zecca, Albert Capellani, Rene Hervil, Victorin Jasset, Henri Pouctal, and specially Andre Antoine in the movies, *La Greve* (1903 - Ferdinand Zecca), *Germinal* (1913 - Albert Capellani), *Le coupable* (1917 - Andre Antoine), and *La Terre* (1921 - Andre Antoine).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aitken, I. (2001) *European film theory and cinema: a critical introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Andrew, D. (1995) *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classical French Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bordwell, D., Staiger, J., & Thompson, K. (1985). *The classical Hollywood cinema: Film style & mode of production to 1960*. London: Routledge.

Braudy, L. (1969). Zola on film: the ambiguities of naturalism. *Yale French Studies*, (42), 68-88.

Chothia, J. (1991). *André Antoine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coward, D. (Ed.). (2002). *A history of French literature: from chanson de geste to cinema*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Gural-Migdal, A., & Singer, R. (Eds.). (2005). *Zola and film: essays in the art of adaptation*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Harrison, L. R. (1916). *Screencraft*. New York: Chalmers Publishing Company.

Hilliard, R. L. (2009). *Hollywood speaks out: pictures that dared to protest real world issues*.

Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Oscherwitz, D., & Higgins, M. (2009). *The A to Z of french cinema*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press.

Photoplay Magazine 4, no. 6 November (1914): 1. accessed April 8, 2019.

Reed, T. V. (2005). *The art of protest: Culture and activism from the civil rights movement to the streets of Seattle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Roberts, J. (2010). *The complete history of american film criticism*. Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Press.

Styan, J. L. (1981). *Modern drama in theory and practice: Volume 1, realism and naturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Theatre Antoine – Simone Berriau,” Theatreonline, accessed April 8,2019.

<https://www.theatreonline.com/Theatre/Theatre-Antoine-Simone-Berriau/347#infostheatre>

Zola, E. (2002). Naturalism in the Theatre, 1881. translated by Albert Bermel. in Innes, C. (Ed.).

(2002). *A sourcebook on naturalist theatre*. London Routledge. 47-52.