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THE WARRIORS

An Interview with Sol Yurick

by Al Auster and Dan Georgakas

“The movie is an evisceration and distortion of my book. The contents are changed enormously. I wanted to show a dream of uniting, and the real conditions people live under. I also wanted to depict these kids as they really were. Life has become almost hopeless for them. The return home is a downer. There’s no walk along the beach, no hope. It’s home to a welfare setup and the worst that that can mean.”

—Sol Yurick,
author of *The Warriors*

Since its release in early 1979, *THE WARRIORS* has surprised everyone connected with it. Focusing on gang violence in the streets and subways of New York, the film was heavily panned in the first wave of reviews but scored tremendously at the box-office, soon rivaling *GREASE* as the biggest money-maker of the year. A second wave of reviews began to find merit in its fast pacing and stylized form at about the same time the film was credited with inciting murder and violence in places as distant as Boston and California.

Faced with demands that the film be withdrawn, Paramount responded by toning down the advertising which had extolled “the armies of the night.” Smiling all the way to the bank, Paramount public relations people talked about artistic freedom and the First Amendment. One irony of this phenomenon is that the film is based on a serious novel of the same name by Marxist author Sol Yurick, better known for *The Bag and Fertig*. Although Yurick quickly points out that he had zero input into the film, Cineaste editors Al Auster and Dan Georgakas thought it would be interesting to get his views on the film and the social issues it has ignited. Part of this interview was first aired over WBAI-FM in February on our bi-weekly “Cineaste at the Movies” program.

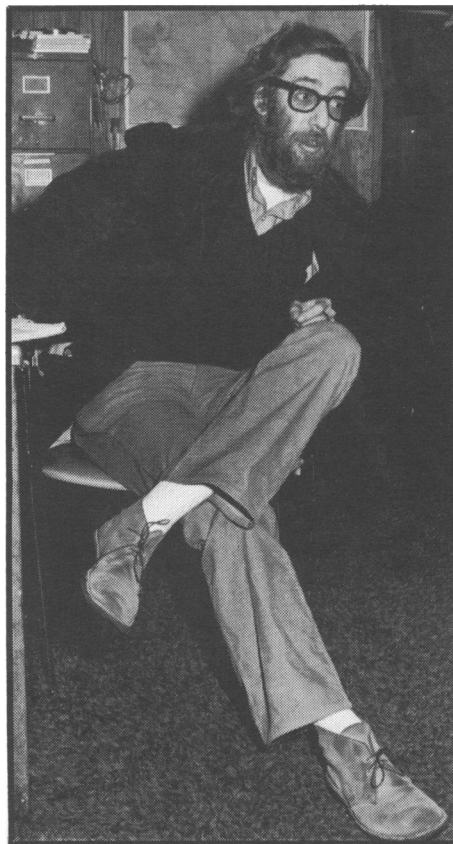
Q: How did you feel seeing *THE WARRIORS* on the screen?

A: The movie is an evisceration and distortion of the book. Although it formally follows the plot of the book, the contents are changed enormously. But emotionally I had no response because I had sold the rights to Hollywood. I know what Hollywood does, so I can’t play the role of a naive artist who

expected other things to happen. To sell the movie rights was an opportunity for me—I needed the money to live and write, and the book would be reissued after a long time, so more people would get a chance to read it.

Q: What was your original purpose in writing the novel?

A: I wanted to show a dream of uniting, and the real conditions people live under. I



Sol Yurick at WBAI (photo by Judy Janda)

wanted the book to be exciting and popular, but to parallel the Greek classic, *Anabasis*. I also wanted to depict these kids as they really were. On one hand, they could be absolutely horrifying and frightening. On the other, they were scared stiff because they were outside their own turf. There is a constant play between what they want to be and the world they really live in. The novel’s conclusion is quite different from that of the movie. We focus on one person who returns home after this long night. It’s the 4th of July, by the way, which plays a role because what in effect happens is that life has become almost hopeless for these kids. They can’t even join the criminal underworld. The return home is a downer. There’s no walk along the beach, no hope. It’s home to a welfare setup and the worst that that can mean.

You see, I wanted to get across the sense of what the social distribution of wealth really means. I also found out in my research that this isn’t just a contemporary phenomenon. It goes back to Greece and Rome. I wanted people to understand what will happen if you do not bring everyone into society. I was amused by the review Carey McWilliams gave my book in *The Nation*. He was a bit unhappy with the notion of making a connection between 10,000 Greek mercenaries and street gangs. But that’s how Athens solved its juvenile delinquency problem. It hired them out as mercenaries—those were 14 and 15 year-old kids wandering around Asia being led by their various generals.

Q: Do you think modern gangs are explicitly political?

A: They don’t talk politics as such. I see a situation similar to what happened when Rome crumbled. They were as crude and vicious as people today. They also tried to



Ad art for THE WARRIORS

divorce themselves from the culture of the rulers. They created their own customs, their own variations, their own ways of operating. There's a certain inventiveness to it.

Q: *Do you think the film has any of that political content? There's one scene in which the gang on the subway has eye contact with some middle class prom couples and there's a flicker of class hostility.*

A: I think they tried to get some of it in. There's a scene at the end when they look at their homes from the elevated train station and say, "Is this what we fought all night to come back to?" But that kind of stuff isn't well defined and doesn't stand out. I've talked to people who say they saw it very clearly and others who didn't see it at all. It's hard to know what any particular group sees.

Q: *How do you feel about the film becoming such a cause celebre?*

A: I'm still trying to figure out what the phenomenon is all about. All the reports aren't in yet and, being a media event, it's going to be discussed and re-discussed. I do think Paramount was taken completely by surprise. One of the things that drew people in was the advertising which was brilliant. Once they were in there, a note of response was struck. Somehow it hit on collective fantasies. Some kids react to it outside the context we've been talking about, but I've been told that some black kids have seen it more politically, particularly the role of Cyrus.

They see the vision of the leader trying to bring us all together. Before he's shot, he tells the gangs, "Look, we are all sitting here tonight and no one is wasting anyone." There is that kind of thing in the movie. I just don't know enough to say any more.

Q: *How do you feel about the charge that the film is an incitement to violence? It seems ironic that there might be some danger of the Marxist author getting tagged for what the capitalist exploitation of his work has caused?*

A: One thing I should make clear is that I had nothing to do with the making of the film. I was not consulted on anything whatsoever. The effect of visual violence, of course, is much different than that of the written word. But I'll tell you this: from a corporate point of view it's nice to cry freedom of speech when all you want to do is protect your profits. What kids are responding to is not what I would have put in the film had I done it myself. It's strange because I'm detached from it, yet in some way hooked because however much they've distorted it, it grew out of an idea I had.

I wonder how much of the violence is really connected to the movie. You see violence at football games, baseball games, rock concerts. You see a growing resentment against hero figures, about the huge amounts of money they get, the disparity between fan and star. This dissatisfaction is growing all the time. People are angry about how their

imagination has been enslaved by media images. They can't articulate it, but they respond physically. They're disenchanted with authority because it's perceived as corrupt. This film happened to open all that up.

Q: *The violence is not very realistic. This is no BLACKBOARD JUNGLE. In fact, it's so stylized that it's like a ritual. The gangs wear costumes and even appear on skates like they were doing plays within the play.*

A: That may have a lot to do with its popularity. The violence is like TV violence, unreal, not like the violence in THE DEER HUNTER, a despicable movie, by the way. People get smashed across the face and body with a baseball bat and still get up afterwards. That's not reality.

Q: *Is THE WARRIORS a lumpen tragic drama?*

A: Perhaps. You've got to remember that the ancient tragedies were played to a relatively illiterate audience. They had to use grand gestures, masks, and the like. The whole modern educational system is now making this country more and more illiterate. So what begins to happen is that you get grosser and grosser images, very stylized images, instead of the natural detail which is more common in literature. What I tried to do as an author was to arrange the real violence in patterns which had a compelling rhythm and to give natural talk a song/dance effect. I wanted the best of both of these worlds—not one or the other. What

happens with stylized violence of the kind in the movie is that you don't really understand or feel or relate to the effects. You can't see that there are horrifying payoffs. You go back to that child's world where you got 'shot' and took a long and beautiful time to die. You fell gracefully. Real life is a lot more abrupt and not very aesthetic.

Q: There are four gang films in the Hollywood pipeline now. What's the reason for this new and contrived genre?

A: That's hard to figure out. Four years back when they were looking for some angle they thought of gangs. You'd have to talk to a lot of these producers and directors individually to get a better idea of what was going on.

Q: A strong feature of the book is that the gang is a family unit with leaders called father and uncle. The reasons for this become quite clear when they get home.

A: Sure, they all refer to their homes as The Prison. None of that is in the film. But it would be a big mistake to think the film is an attack on authority. The gangs love authority, but it is not "duly constituted" authority. When a society is falling apart and leaders betray, one response is to set up an authoritarian structure to keep yourself together.

Q: In the novel, the authoritarian system is transferred through various rituals.

A: That's right, and that's something else the movie only toyed with. Gangs tend to take on individual tribal features like wearing a uniform of one kind or another to denote them from other gangs. Maybe as a Marxist I shouldn't say this, but it may be that this phenomenon is inherent in the human personality. Even tribes living in the same territory with the same material base will adopt totally different customs. The model that both Marxist and bourgeois experts make is an efficiency model but life doesn't always work out that way. I did research on Japanese samurai and Chinese family structures. A great emphasis on ritual and degrees of hierarchy is found everywhere and it attaches to the gangs, too. But not all gangs. Some are very loose. Some are organized in a military fashion. Some have war chiefs and peace chiefs. Wars are fought with the terrain and allies taken into consideration just like in a real war. There are even rules of diplomacy.

Q: In the novel, the gang members are in their early teens and you make the point that there are no older guys. The film loses all that because the actors are obviously at least in their twenties. What might be an acceptable response for a 13 year-old seems ludicrous in the film.

A: What I found was that if you hadn't been killed or gotten hooked, you started to ease out of gang life around the age of 18 or 19. Frequently, the woman you were attached to was the one who helped you. Of course, the gangs of an earlier period grew up to be criminal syndicates. You could see the Mafia as an international conglomerate.



THE WARRIORS

The Mafia is another example where ritual is extremely important.

Q: How about the criticism that this film and even the book is a glorification of the lumpen?

A: You'd have to take all my works as an ensemble to deal with that. No one book will have everything in it. My feeling is that art must have a life of its own. If you have room in the book for a character with Marxist thoughts, then you put the character in. Otherwise the reality you present has got to do the job. I happen to believe that reality is often as Marxists perceive it, and so just to portray it is sufficient. Some Marxists, however, don't really see reality and they get offended when it's shown. As for the lumpen, as we get more and more automated, there will be more and more people thrown outside the system. This is a worldwide experience. Many questions are being raised by this. Put it this way: the mode of production is changing and the worldwide lumpen has become a factor to deal with. One has to revise Marx all the time, but the revision is not on the theoretical level but an accommodation of new facts. If you do not do that, then you are not reflecting the material world which is what a Marxist has to do.

Q: I'm sure that some learned review will appear to describe THE WARRIORS as a "male bonding" film and come on with the usual mystifications. But there are very few women in the film or the book. Don't women play a role in gang life?

A: Women have a very specific part in gang life, but it is a very sexist role in which they are dominated. Their input is limited to influencing the individual they are attached to and so reflects the modern male sexist society. Gangs reflect the dominant mores of society and, in this milieu in particular, physical strength is extremely important. As for the male bonding, I can't raise that to a biological principle. I think it's a social form. Inherent in ever single event we see

around us is 20,000 years of history and we reflect it whether we know it or not.

Q: There is a quasi-lesbian gang in the film. Do these really exist?

A: I've been told that they do. I only wrote about them in passing, just giving their name. I understand they're a mirror of the male gangs, duplicating the roles and habits as much as possible.

Q: You're not talking about female auxiliaries?

A: No, these are real gangs. I've heard that male and female gangs have had rumble, but I couldn't believe it. It could be apocrypha. But I've seen women engaged in combat in my own neighborhood, sometimes with men, and I'm not saying just lesbians. It happens. There's a lot that isn't written about. For instance, people think the gangs went away during the Lindsay years in New York. What really happened was that newspapers stopped writing about them for a while. They were there all the time.

Q: What would you do if Hollywood wanted to film another of your novels? Do you think you could get more control of the material?

A: No, I don't think so. No matter how big the author is, no writer has ever gotten successful control. One accusation that we hurl at other socialists is that they want to make art by committee, but that's exactly how a commercial film is made and, ultimately, the deciding voice belongs to the people with the money. So I would rather make a clean break. If I got involved a little bit, then I'd get emotionally sucked in. I remember when Holt, Rinehart and Winston accepted the original manuscript of *The Warriors*. The editor said there'd have to be a few changes. Then I looked and there were changes on every page. The editor and I had to fight tooth and nail over every one of them. That was an emotionally draining process. I don't see the sense of getting involved in a battle over a film when I know I will lose. Ultimately, capitalist media will decide what happens. I remember how Elaine May wanted her name removed from A NEW LEAF. It was written into her contract and she sued, but they kept her name on it anyway. Frankly, unless I had the whole production company and distribution network assured, I wouldn't touch it.

Q: Do you think you will win new readers because of the film?

A: Yeah, I think so. The book will get newsstand play and people can see what I'm really about. I'm not saying one medium is better than another. I grew up with the movies and I think it's a first-rate medium. But before I would go into it, I would want to have control.

Q: If what has happened hadn't happened, and Paramount or one of the other studios came to you and said they wanted to make a movie out of The Warriors, how would you respond?

A: Depends on how much money I need. □