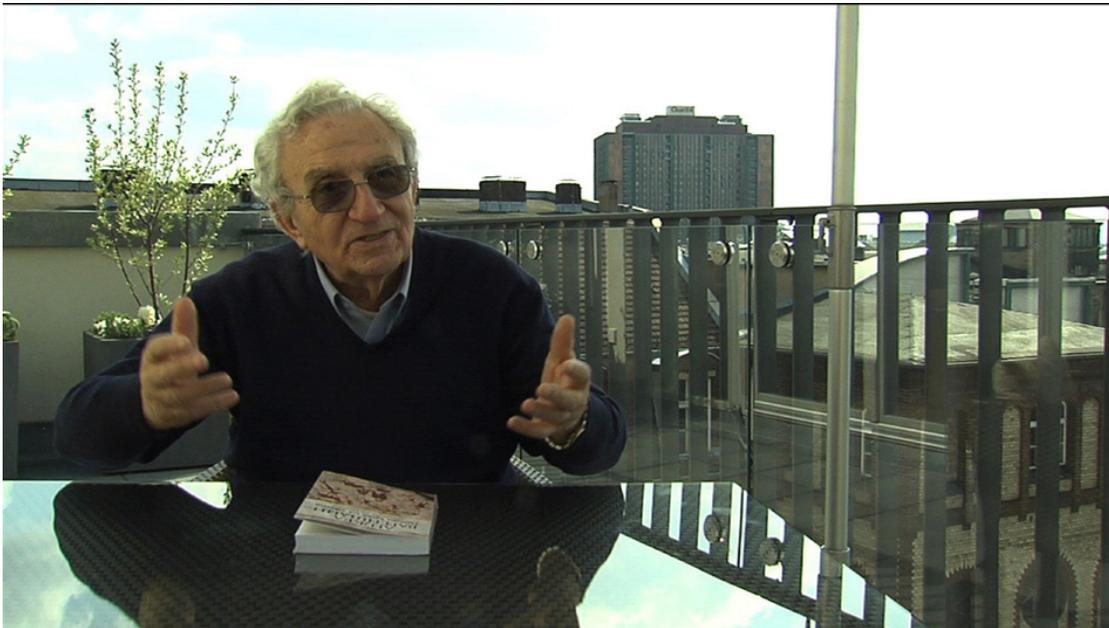


New Bulgarian documentary “Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon”

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The USSR had Sergei Eisenstein, while Bulgaria had Angel Wagenstein. The life and work of the 94-year-old screenwriter and novelist are wonderfully depicted in Andrea Simon’s top-notch 83-minute documentary, *Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon*, which had its West Coast premiere in Beverly Hills during the 12th annual South East European Film Festival (SEEFest).

This extremely well directed, enlightening nonfiction biopic paints a fascinating portrait of this leftwing Jewish writer who was born 1922 in Plovdiv. The son of a Bulgarian dedicated Communist—who, the son quips, naively “expected the world revolution to take place next Tuesday”—little Angel met his father on a

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visit to the prison where he was confined for his role in what *Weapon* contends was the first armed uprising against a fascist regime. Wagenstein (alternatively spelled as “Vagenshtain”) would recount this largely overlooked 1923 rebellion in one of his first scripts, 1954’s *The Heroes of September*.

Weapon is outstanding in depicting the impact of events on a filmmaker’s life. In fact, it arguably does the best job in doing so since the recently deceased writer/director Richard Schickel’s 1973 doc *The Men Who Made the Movies: Alfred Hitchcock*, wherein little Alfred is dispatched to the nearby police station with a note for the desk bobby. After reading it, the policeman led the child to a prison cell where he was briefly imprisoned, presumably to teach him a lesson about what happens to bad boys. As the adult Hitchcock relates the traumatizing childhood memory in the doc, scenes from Hitch films are shown, showing what he is describing, down to the ominous clanking of the jailhouse’s cell door. Thus the Master of Suspense’s obsession with falsely accused protagonists (Henry Fonda even starred in 1956’s aptly named *The Wrong Man*) and Hitch’s suspicion of the police, who are often portrayed as being completely, ineptly useless and clueless, as early as his original 1934 *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and rather notably in 1960’s *Psycho*.

I never forgot this passage in Schickel’s documentary and Simon’s film unfolds similarly. *Weapon* skillfully, cinematically interweaves interviews with Wagenstein, his friends, and those who worked with him or have expertise regarding his films, with events in Bulgarian history and how they shaped the writer, who went on to express them in his scenarios and novels. For example, Wagenstein rendered his World War II experiences in a series of films.

Trevoga (Alarm), from 1951, tells the story of Wagenstein’s exploits and sabotage in a band of anti-fascist partisans, and how he was sentenced to be executed by the Nazis occupying Bulgaria. *Stars* (1959) also deals with the German occupation and Bulgaria’s mixed role regarding deportation of the Jews (which viewers may find to be surprising). As in the 1958 Hollywood movie *The Young Lions*, a Nazi (played by Marlon Brando in *Lions*) is humanized, portrayed as being conflicted over the atrocities he’s ordered to carry out. Directed by the

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East German Konrad Wolf, *Stars* won the Cannes Film Festival's Special Jury Prize.

Wagenstein set his cinematic sights on other pressing social issues. In the 1958 movie *Rebro Adamovo* the screenwriter explored a subject that would be widely regarded as very contemporary today: The plight of Muslim women in Bulgaria, including the education they receive.

Although apparently an ardent Marxist, Wagenstein was no dogmatic "socialist realist." As early as 1956 he criticized Bulgarian bureaucracy and the leadership's bungling in attempting to implement socialism in *Dve Povbedi*. His 1970 film *Ezop*, released two years after the Soviets' invasion of Czechoslovakia to suppress "the Prague Spring" at the barrel of a gun, was widely perceived as a parable. Just as Bertolt Brecht's 1943 *Galileo* was seen as a critique of the House Un-American Activities Committee (which drove the playwright out of America) when it was staged Los Angeles in 1947 as the Hollywood Blacklist loomed, and later thought to be an attack on Stalinism, Wagenstein's movie about the Greek sage Aesop and his struggles against ancient Greece's thought police was likewise considered to be anti-Kremlin.

Indeed, Wagenstein championed the "socialism with a human face" trend during the period of Alexander Dubček, first secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, and then "*glasnost*" ("openness") and "*perestroika*" ("restructuring") when Mikhail Gorbachev rose to leadership in Moscow. *Weapon* makes the important, insightful point that this movement to reform socialism pitted the principled believers of what Erich Fromm and others have called "Marxist humanism" against the pragmatic apparatchiks (bureaucratic functionaries). In 2017 it is refreshing to see a film that takes seriously the theme of what it means to be a revolutionary artist.

In *Weapon* Westerners are likely to see Gorby as they never have before: Standing at a podium (perhaps at a party conference?) asserting that the ideals of Marx, Engels and Lenin are the most "noble" ever created by humanity. This is the form of socialism Wagenstein subscribes to and advocates in his

screenplays and novels and as a public intellectual and speaker. He often played the part of provocateur—and has paid the price for doing so, falling in and out of favor.

Weapon made me want to see Wagenstein's oeuvre and read his novels. I learned a lot from this stellar documentary about a screenwriter I'd never even heard of before (and my film school mentor at Hunter and Richmond Colleges was Czech director Jiri Weiss). I also learned a lot about Bulgaria.

This, of course, is part of the motion picture mission of SEEFest, which presents panels and screens features, shorts, animation and documentaries from countries such as Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Moldova, Montenegro, Turkey, Kosovo, Georgia, Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Belgium, Greece, Azerbaijan and Iran, providing them with a beachhead in L.A., which likes to think of itself as the world capital of moviedom, although international cinema is often woefully overlooked here. Festival director/founder Sarajevo-born Vera Mijojlić helps to redress this underrepresentation, providing Angelenos with a precious window to the East. SEEFest took place in L.A. April 27-May 4. For info see: <http://seefilmla.org/>.

I'm delighted to report that *Angel Wagenstein: Art is a Weapon* was "weaponized," winning SEEFest's Documentary Audience Award. Another motion picture I loved and reviewed, [The Constitution](#), earned SEEFest's Best Feature Film Grand Jury Prize, Bridging the Borders Award. For the Festival's other award winners, see [here](#).

*Film historian/reviewer Ed Rampell is co-presenting Sergei Eisenstein's first feature-length film **Strike!** on Fri., May 26 at 7:30 pm at The L.A. Workers Center, 1251 S. St. Andrews Place, Los Angeles 90019 as part of the ongoing "Ten Films That Shook the World" series celebrating the centennial of the Russian Revolution, taking place on the fourth Friday of each month through October. For info: laworkersedsoc@gmail.com.*

TAGS: communism Culture films history politics

CONTRIBUTOR



Ed Rampell

Film historian and critic Ed Rampell was named after CBS broadcaster Edward R. Murrow because of his TV exposes of Sen. Joe McCarthy. Rampell majored in cinema at New York's Hunter College. After graduating, he lived in Tahiti, Samoa, Hawaii, and Micronesia, where he reported on the nuclear-free and independent Pacific movement for "20/20," Reuters, AP, Radio Australia, Newsweek, etc. He went on to co-write "The Finger" column for New Times L.A. and has written for many other publications, including Variety, Mother Jones, The Nation, Islands, L.A. Times, L.A. Daily News, Written By, The Progressive, The Guardian, The Financial Times, and AlterNet.

Rampell appears in the 2005 Australian documentary "Hula Girls, Imagining Paradise." He co-authored two books on Pacific Island politics, as well as two film histories: "Made In Paradise, Hollywood's Films of Hawaii and the South Seas" and "Pearl Harbor in the Movies." Rampell is the author of "Progressive Hollywood, A People's Film History of the United States." He is a co-founder of the James Agee Cinema Circle and one of L.A.'s most prolific film/theatre/opera reviewers.

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