

# The Last Temptation of the Journalist

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There is a fine film now out on streaming on-demand video — *Mr. Jones*. Directed by the excellent filmmaker Agnieszka Holland, it was a joint production of the British, Polish, and Ukrainian film industries. It is a true story about the Holodomor — Stalin’s deliberate mass starvation of Ukrainians in 1932–1933 — and of a remarkable person named Gareth Jones. It is also a true story about journalists, their biases, and their commitment to reporting the truth. (The original title, in English translation, is “The Price of Truth.”) The film — at once a both disturbing and fascinating film to watch — has won numerous film honors.

Let’s review the film. (At the end of my review I offer some notes on characters with whom the reader may not be familiar.) The film opens on a farm, where we see pigs being fed, and then a man typing (and vocalizing what he is typing). We immediately realize that it is George Orwell (played by Joseph Mawle) explaining his aim in writing *Animal Farm*, his allegorical and satirical critique of the history of the Bolshevik Revolution and its culmination in Stalin’s rule. We hear him say that he wanted to write a story about animals that even a child will understand, but if you read between the lines, you will see that it is about “monsters invading the world.” We hear the opening of the book: “Mr. Jones, of the Manor Farm, had locked the hen-house for the night,” over a montage of animals. We then see the title “Mr. Jones,” and cut to the protagonist himself, Gareth Jones (played brilliantly by James Norton).

It is 1933. Jones is telling a group of British officials about his plane flight with Hitler and Goebbels. (Jones had managed to get an interview with Hitler just after Hitler’s rise to power.) He says that on the plane, Hitler was studying a map of Europe, obviously intending future aggression. As the men laugh skeptically, Jones suggests that had the plane crashed, the future of Europe would have changed. One of them laughs and says that the Germans

have their own troubles (internal strife), to which Jones replies that the burning of the Reichstag wasn't unrest, it was tactics. The Nazis now have the excuse to end all opposition. When an incredulous official asks how Jones can be so sure, he replies that Goebbels told him so. The men laugh as he says this. A frustrated Jones adds that war starts in the minds of men, and that the Nazis will soon expand into Poland. As the men laugh loudly, he prophetically tells them that a new world war has just begun. Lloyd George (played well by Kenneth Cranham) comes in, condescendingly puts his hand on Jones's shoulder, and asks the laughing men whether Jones has told them that UK is at war. At this point, a secretary comes in and tells Jones that he has a call from Moscow.

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This scene sets up the leitmotif: we see an honest, clear-eyed, intelligent journalist, who values the truth, reporting what he has personally observed, only to face ridicule by the so-called experts.

On the phone, Jones finds the line dead. We see him some time later listening to Stalin on the radio, who boasts, "Once we [the Soviets] had no automobile industry. Now we have one. Once we had no tank industry. Now we have one," and so on. Jones is still in the room when night falls, and the secretary brings him some tea. He tells her that he never got to tell the skeptical men his main point: that to defeat Hitler they [the British] will need to ally with Stalin — "a man who performs miracles!" Jones notes that while the Western countries wallow in economic depression, Russia has money to spend. He wonders how this can be.

But the secretary has come to give him bad news — because of the Depression, cuts had to be made, and his position has been cut. On his way out, he sees Lloyd George, who tells Jones that the depression is like a war — it has casualties. Jones responds that he has been a good advisor, and George needs him: "I'm the only man who tells you the truth" about world events. George gives him a letter of recommendation, and Jones gives George his unfinished report on the Soviet Union, which he can't complete because Stalin won't return his calls. He needs to get to Moscow.

So Jones applies at the Soviet Embassy for a press visa. He calls his friend Paul Kleb<sup>[1]</sup> (Marcin Czarnik) on the phone, who is staying at the Hotel Metropol. (We see as Jones calls that the Stalin Regime closely monitors all telephone calls). Jones tells Paul that he is coming to Moscow and asks Paul if he knows a way that Jones can get an interview with Stalin. Paul tells him to get into contact with *New York Times* reporter Walter Duranty<sup>[2]</sup> because Duranty has influence. Paul notes that he himself is *persona non grata* at the moment but wants to talk to Jones about something "really big that can crack the story wide open," at which point the line is cut by the Soviet monitors.

Jones returns to the Soviet Embassy, and gets his press visa. When he arrives in Moscow, he seeks out Duranty (played with appropriate unctuousness by Peter Sarsgaard). As they climb the stairs to his office, they talk about current affairs. Jones suggests that Hitler is serious, and that Britain and Russia are headed for war with Germany. He asks Duranty how the Soviets are buying all the new manufacturing equipment from abroad, to which the duplicitous Duranty cryptically replies, "With money, I suppose." He then points out how rich the country is in grain — "Stalin's gold" — which has nearly doubled under Stalin's rule.

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Jones says he would like to interview Stalin; he wants to know how the Soviet regime, which is broke, can afford all this new industrial technology? Who is funding the spending spree? Duranty asks how Jones managed to get an interview with Hitler, and Jones says it was with the help of Paul Kleb. In fact, says Jones, he has to go meet to Kleb at the Hotel Metropol, to which Duranty replies that Kleb is dead — the apparent victim of a robbery gone bad. The meeting ends with Duranty inviting Jones to a journalists' party at Duranty's home that evening.

When Jones reaches the Metropol, he is told that his reservation is only for two nights, not the seven which his visa permits. On his way to his room, he meets American journalist Eugene Lyons<sup>[3]</sup> (adroitly played by Edward Wolstenholme). Jones compliments Lyons on his articles on the Soviets developing their electrical grid, whereupon Lyons introduces Jones to some engineers from Metro-Vickers, a British company hired to help design and construct that grid. They all leave for Duranty's — site of "the best parties in Moscow."

There Jones sees a shocking display of opulence and decadence. As we listen to a live jazz band, we see a table covered in drugs, and naked young women and booze everywhere. Jones ignores all this and asks Lyons whether he knows why Kleb described himself as "persona non grata," and why journalists cannot leave Moscow to see any other part of the Soviet Union. Lyons is amused by the questioning, and his smirking face suggests that both he and Duranty know why. He shouts for Malcolm Muggeridge<sup>[4]</sup> to come over and talk to Jones.

As Jones starts to leave the party, Duranty — who is naked except for a strap holding on his artificial leg — asks Jones why he wants to leave so soon. With Duranty is a young man who comes on to Jones. Duranty observes that Jones doesn't drink, doesn't appreciate the young girls (or the drugs or pretty party boys), so Jones must be rather dull.

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On his way out, Jones meets Ada Brooks<sup>[5]</sup> (played with gravitas by Vanessa Kirby), another reporter for the *New York Times*, and tells her he enjoyed her article. They are followed as they walk together in the night. She tells him that Duranty is writing articles aimed at convincing American companies to invest in the Soviet Union. Jones expresses surprise that Duranty “has an agenda” and also has influence on the American president. He asks her what Paul Kleb was working on. She is obviously afraid of the secret police, and leaves him abruptly.

Jones meets Ada the next morning at her work — she tells him that she is working on an article on grain production. He wants to know her sources; he knows there’s a story here and he thinks Paul was on to it. Knowing that the office is bugged, she turns up the phonograph and tells him that Paul was afraid to discuss the article he was working on. Paul — “the Apostle” — was murdered while he was working on a story about Ukraine. He was on his way there the day that he was shot. At this, she pushes Jones out the door: “You’re not Paul. Go home, Gareth.”

Now convinced that he has to get to Ukraine and see for himself, Jones bribes his way into a cheap hotel, and starts pretending that he is a current advisor to Lloyd George, not just a past one. He gets to dine with Maxim Litvinov, Stalin’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs and a proponent of closer relations with the UK. He tells Litvinov that their two countries will need to work together to contain Hitler. Will the Soviets be able to handle any possible invasion? Litvinov falls for the ploy, and says he will arrange a trip to the Ukraine to see the factories in Kharkiv and elsewhere that are building tanks and other weapons.

Before he leaves, Ada gives him information that Paul had given her about where he planned to go in Ukraine. Jones studies the itinerary and map and then and then burns them. An interesting exchange takes place between them:

Ada: “Look who has the agenda now.”

Jones: “I don’t have an agenda, unless you call truth an agenda.”

Ada: “Yes, but whose truth?”

Jones: “The truth. There is only one kind.”

Ada: “That’s so naive!”

Jones: “Journalism is the noblest profession. You follow the facts, wherever it leads. You don’t take sides.”

Ada goes on to say that she is German and the Nazis are destroying everything. She’s a committed communist, and worries that the truth will hurt the cause, which is bigger than any one person, or what the Soviets are doing.

Jones and Leonid (played by Oleg Drach), a Soviet agent assigned to monitor him, are on a train, headed to Ukraine. After the agent has a few drinks, he dozes off, and Jones is able to leave the train and get on another one. At this point, the film changes tone dramatically. The

dialogue is minimized, as we see the actual plight of the Ukrainian peasants. On the other train, in a boxcar, Jones sees haggard, starved people, with their eyes cast down. He gives them some of his food and they fight over it. He trades some bread for a peasant's coat, so he can blend in with the locals. Getting off the train, he sees dead bodies. He is soon forced to work loading sacks of grain on a train. He asks someone where this grain is headed — it's headed to Moscow. The man tips off the soldiers, who try to capture him, but he escapes into the forest. He encounters a village that seems empty, enters a house, and finds only an elderly woman's corpse.

We watch as Jones crosses a wintry field. In another village, he meets a group of starving orphans. He goes to give them some of his scarce food, and they steal all of it. He watches as a cart picks up dead bodies. He keeps wandering through this nightmare world, and we see what "Stalin's gold" has cost the Ukrainians: their villages, their lives. In what has to be the most harrowing scene, Jones enters a home where an older girl is feeding her younger siblings — orphans all — and she offers him some of their food. To his horror and revulsion, he discovers that it is human flesh. He sees that the Ukrainians have been reduced to cannibalism.

This part of the film — of a man witnessing pure desperation and horror — is the most effective.

In another village, Jones joins a bread line, with people being given small portions of bread and fighting over them. He asks a woman in line what's happening to this "black earth" region that could feed the world, and she replies that the Soviet state is killing the Ukrainians "by the millions." When he asks why, she says, "Men thought that they could replace natural law" — at which point, he is arrested.

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We move back to Moscow, where Duranty, Ada, and all the other foreign journalists gather for an announcement by the Soviet government. The reporters are informed that six British engineers working for Metro-Vickers have been arrested and charged with espionage. The amazed journalists start asking questions, but are told that none will be answered.

Now in prison with the six arrested engineers, Jones is moved to an interrogation room where Litvinov waits to talk to him. Litvinov tells him he will be released and sent back to England — but the Regime will keep the six engineers in prison. If Jones gets back and reports that all is well in the Ukraine, that there is no famine, the engineers will get to live. Jones repeats, "There is no famine."

Before returning to Britain, Jones meets with Duranty, who tells Jones that he convinced the authorities to let him go. When Jones asks how much Stalin is paying him, Duranty claims he is serving a cause greater than himself.

Back in London, Jones is introduced to Orwell, who has just released *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Orwell asks if Jones is working on a book about the Soviet Union. Jones replies that he isn't, but he does have a story to tell. However, if he tells it, six innocent men will die — but telling it might save millions of lives. Orwell tells him to speak the truth: "It is your duty, and it is our right to hear you."

We cut to Jones delivering a talk, saying that the public has got to protest the imprisonment of six innocent men, and that Stalin has achieved no workers' paradise. All Stalin has done is to kill millions of innocent people. We see Orwell in the audience taking notes. At the end, Orwell — who was a man of the left his entire life — tells Jones that "maybe the Soviets are doing the best they can." He adds that egalitarian societies take time to achieve their goals. Jones replies that "Stalin is not the man you think he is." Orwell — who was pictured earlier as telling Jones to report truthfully what he has witnessed — seems disappointed.

We move to Ada arriving at Duranty's office. Duranty's mistress removes his son from the room. Ada points out to him that when Duranty returns home, the regime will keep the boy as a ransom, along with whatever else the secret police have on him. When she says that others besides Jones will come forward, Duranty dismisses the claim. And he justifies what the regime is doing with his infamous line, "You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs." He adds, "What's being done here will transform mankind." Duranty has Ada type a note denouncing Jones, but she refuses to sign it. Duranty hints that Jones may pay with his life.

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Jones is called in to face an outraged Lloyd George, who criticizes him for what he has done. On his way out, the secretary shows him a stack of papers, all calling Jones a liar. Most strident in attacking Jones are Duranty and the *New York Times*. We cut to Jones — now publicly disgraced — walking down a street in Wales. He enters his family's house and greets his father, saying that he has lost his job. The father (played with restraint by Julian Jones) says quietly that he will make them some tea. Jones hears on the radio that the six British engineers were released by the Soviets, and that the US has now recognized the Soviet Union. We cut to a formal dinner at the New York Waldorf-Astoria, with Litvinov as the guest of honor, and see Duranty applauded as the man who convinced FDR to do this.

Back in Wales, we see Jones mocked by some local children. But he learns that William Randolph Hearst is visiting nearby. Jones manages to barge in and tells Hearst what he has witnessed. It turns out that Hearst had wanted to hire Paul Kleb, and suspected that the Soviets killed him. Hearst points out that if he publishes Jones' story, "it will be your word against Duranty's Pulitzer." But Hearst's main competitor is precisely the *New York Times*, so he publishes Jones' stories as frontpage material. Ada writes Jones, telling him that she is back in Berlin, and that she has come to see that he is right: there is only one truth. Paul would be proud of him. So this is vindication, of a kind.

The film ends with Jones walking down the street in Wales, bag in hand. An intertitle tells us that he died the following year — 1935 — while reporting on events in Inner Mongolia, allegedly killed — like Kleb — by bandits. But his "guide" was a member of Stalin's secret police. Jones died just a day short of his thirtieth birthday. Walter Duranty died in Florida at age 73. The final lines of the movie read, "His Pulitzer Prize was never revoked. In memory of the millions killed in the Holodomor — Stalin's famine."

*Mr. Jones* is a brilliant movie — politically important and morally insightful. The acting is outstanding throughout, with James Norton and Peter Sarsgaard giving superb performances.

There are flaws, to be sure — mainly in the first 40 minutes, where many important historical characters are introduced without background being provided, as if the average theatergoer will automatically know who, say, Malcolm Muggeridge was. Moreover, some of these characters seem unnecessary.

For example, Orwell is briefly introduced, and makes a couple of subsequent appearances; but although *Animal Farm* is a superb historical attack on the Bolshevik Revolution and the rise of Stalinism, there is no clear connection made in the film between him and Jones. It hints that Jones' articles on the famine woke Orwell up to Stalin's crimes, but it was more likely Orwell's experiences in the Spanish Civil War that made him understand the nature of Stalinism. Worse, it leads the viewer to think that Jones was writing at the time Orwell was writing *Animal Farm*, when in fact Orwell wrote it from 1943 to 1944 and published it in 1945 — nearly a decade *after* Jones was murdered.

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The apparent nascent romance between Ada and Jones seems to add little to the film. The actual journalist Malcolm Muggeridge is only briefly named — not even portrayed briefly. Considering that he was the only other major journalist to tell the truth about the Holodomor, that is a shame.

And it would have been good if the film had brought out the fact that virtually all the major journalists in the film — Lyons, Muggeridge, even Orwell and Jones — were leftists of various sorts (communists, socialists, or just “fellow-travelling” progressives). They would not have been allowed to enter the Soviet Union otherwise. The Stalinist spy agencies were the only parts of that vicious regime that functioned efficiently, and they knew the political background of every journalist who sought to report from there.

But the latter part of the movie, where Stalin’s crimes in the Ukraine are portrayed with less dialogue and more visual acting, is brilliant and moving in its message. This movie is clear in its condemnation of Stalin’s genocide of the Ukrainians. And it is clear in its condemnation of the debauched and dissembling Walter Duranty. But I think it makes two other ethical points, both about journalism. Let’s put them as “the two temptations if the journalist.”

First, the dialogue between Jones and Ada brings up the temptation to let one’s agenda or personal ideological orientation influence one’s reportage. This is a common failing of ideologically committed journalists. And since the regime saw to it that only leftist journalists got to come to Moscow, while Jones and Muggeridge reported the truth about Stalin’s crimes, the others generally denied it.

Second, the party scene at Duranty’s show the temptation to curry favor from a regime or politician by writing flattering things about it. The journalist’s desire for acclaim, power, money, sex, or other goods trumps his desire to report the truth. Clearly Duranty — who was apparently nothing like a true believer in communism — routinely lied about Stalin’s regime to keep his position of privilege, his access to sex, drugs, and jazz, and the reputation it gave him.

One suspects that this explains why the Pulitzer committee refuses to retract the prize it awarded Duranty. The committee is affiliated with the Columbia University School of Journalism, and it is for journalists as something like the American Bar Association for trial lawyers — an institution for the aggrandizement of the profession. The Pulitzer committee respects journalists who become famous shapers of policy, not journalists who merely inform the public of the unvarnished truth. And this can lead, as it did in the case of Duranty, to the committee supporting an evil cause.

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## NOTES

[1] “Paul Kleb” is a fictional character. The name is apparently an homage to journalist Paul Klebnikov (1963–2004). Klebnikov was a journalist doing investigative reporting into the Russian criminal kleptocracy, whose honest and brave reportage cost him his life. He was shot four times by what were obviously hired assassins in 2004. Despite repeated demands



that the Russian government find his killers, nothing has ever been done by the Russian government. In 2004, the Committee to Protect Journalists gave him a posthumous CPJ International Press Freedom Award.

[2] Walter Duranty (1884–1957) grew up middle-class in Britain. He attended Cambridge. In World War I, he got a job as a reporter for the *New York Times*. He first gained notice for a story about the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. In 1921, he moved to Moscow. He lost his left leg in an accident in France in 1924. Duranty's articles about Stalin and Stalin's first five-year plan (1928–1932) made his reputation and got him a long, private interview with Stalin. His articles in 1931 (mainly praising Stalin's governance) that won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1932.

[3] Eugene Lyons was a socialist who came to Moscow as the correspondent for the United Press. By the late 1930s his views began to change, and he later became an influential anticommunist.

[4] Malcolm Muggeridge is not pictured in the film. But he should have been. When he arrived in Moscow to cover the Soviet regime, he was sympathetic to the cause of socialism. What he saw led him to reconsider his views. He exposed the famine in pseudonymous articles sent to Britain in a diplomatic pouch and published after he had left Russian soil. After World War II he became a vocal critic of communism.

[5] Unlike most of the characters in this film, "Ada Brooks" is fictional.

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*Review of Mr. Jones, directed by Agnieszka Holland. Klaudia Śmieja-Rostworowska, Stanisław Dziedzic, and Andrea Chalupa, 2019, 119 minutes.*