An interview with Richard Linklater:

"You can't hold back the human spirit"

David Walsh
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World Socialist Web Site *arts editor David Walsh interviewed Richard Linklater recently in New York City, where the filmmaker was presenting his new film,*The Newton Boys, *at the American Museum of the Moving Image. Linklater, the director of* Slacker, Dazed and Confused, Before Sunrise *and* SubUrbia, *is one of the most interesting filmmakers currently working in the US.*

David Walsh : Could you explain how you came upon this story and why it interested you?

Richard Linklater: I read an article in the Smithsonian magazine four years ago; a story of these bank robbers, their life and times. They were four kids from west Texas who really grew up on dirt. Sharecroppers, like white slaves. At the time if the cotton crop didn't come in, you starved. They grew up four of eleven kids. Willis [Newton] was sent to prison for something he didn't do. Actually, his brother Dock, played by Vincent D'Onofrio, stole about 15 dollars worth of cotton, or even less. They sent them both—Willis had been around Dock, but hadn't participated in that particular robbery—to prison for over three years. So Willis got to experience the Texas penal system. At that time it was even worse than it is now. It was unbelievable. On the tapes he talks about how men died from the work, the conditions.

So he got out of prison and he had this attitude. He started robbing banks and then he brought his brothers in to work with him. They got really active. He was kind of a genius criminal, although he was uneducated. He had an extraordinary mind, a restless mind. Anyway, when I found this story I was really taken with it. I really related to these guys. I grew up in an east Texas town, Huntsville, where the state prison is. I related to the struggle, the ambition. I liked the fact that in his own way Willis fought back. In my previous movies I haven't had very active characters, they've been more introspective, analytical. It was fun to hang out with guys who were very active, who acted on pure emotion and drive. And you have to consider that period in history, especially. It was such a wild time, with unregulated industry. I share Willis's attitude toward banks and the insurance industry. I've always liked the minds of criminals, they seem similar to artists. You're talking about the outsiders in society and how they deal with it and how they justify what they do. I can relate to that. To get my first few films made, it's amazing what you have to do.

DW: 1919 was one of the most radical years in history. Revolutions in Hungary, Germany, the Russian Revolution was two years old, the Seattle general strike, the Winnipeg general strike.

RL: You had strikes, race riots ...

DW: I see Willis's outlook rooted in an agrarian populist protest.

RL: I think so. He was going on his own impulses, but his impulses were very much of the time. Corporations were starting to take over everything. Wealth was concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. People were really obsessed with wealth. Money had taken over everything. Unregulated capitalism. No limits to growth, everyone could be a millionaire, that whole kind of belief. Very similar to now. If you have a little money in your pension at work, you're told "what's good for Bill Gates is good for you," that kind of mentality. Everyone is encouraged to see their lives, the world through the eyes of the rich. People were grabbing for all they could get. The society was very corrupt, from the president [Warren G. Harding] on down. Unlike today. (*laughter*)

DW: Do you think there is any significance to the fact that you had to go back in time to find characters who fought back?

RL: I don't know, I haven't thought about that. I like the humane way they fought back.

DW: It's difficult to find people in our day who are fighting back.

RL: What are the outlets with which to fight back in our day?

DW: Even the attitude toward the police, the law is different.

RL: I had trouble getting this film made. Some people at the studio said, "Well, they were bad guys, they stole money from the banks. Insurance companies, banks, these are the cornerstones of our civilization." I don't want to glorify robbing banks, but I come from a world that shares Willis's view, that banks and so on are the biggest crooks of them all. My mother is like that.

DW: In your introduction to the published version of *Slacker* you quoted Greil Marcus about "a near-absolute loathing of one's time and place," and you go on to say that your generation had "something" to say that wasn't easily classifiable. "Each individual had to find it in their own way and in the only place society had left for this discovery—the margins.... This seems the place where the actual buzz of life goes on, where the conspiracies, schizophrenia, melancholy, and exuberance all battle it out, daily."

RL: That's where I saw the real world. It wasn't on the six o'clock news, it wasn't anywhere on the media. There was the official world and there was the world of people's real feelings and problems.

DW: How did you develop your own oppositional views?

RL: I don't know. I think it was really natural for me. I always sensed instinctively from the earliest age that I was being lied to. In school, the teachers, the principal, whatever system was in place. Whatever the official thought is, I'm going to have some problems with it. I asked "Why?" and I was pegged as a troublemaker.

DW: Did you have any serious problems making this film?

RL: No, it went really smoothly. I think that by Hollywood standards, believe it or not, at $27 million, we were kind of low-budget. We were sort of under the radar. People think it's such a big film, but it's really not. It felt the same as it did on every other film, just on a bigger scale. Artistically speaking, I was pretty much left alone. I had the two battles, with the budget in the beginning and the final sign-off. You have to have two massive battles there, but that goes with the territory.

DW: What does that involve?

RL: Notes, from the studio. At the beginning, it's meetings. Cut this, cut the number of days. Finally, you have to draw the line and you can't cross over it. You say, "If that's the case, I'm not going to do the film." And if they really want to do it, then they have to give in. At the end, they want

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you to cut more. They wanted me to cut some scenes that would seem impossible to do without. The head of the studio liked the movie. It's these middle guys. You have to deal with them. You have to stand your ground. It pisses them off. You pay the transgressor's price. "You get your movie, but we're only going to do this much for you [in terms of advertising and distribution]."

DW: Isn't it in their own interest for the film to make some money?

RL: Yes, but Hollywood is the strangest place in that they'll torpedo their own film to prove an emotional point. The self-fulfilling prophecy. The whole film world is this incredible mix of optimism—they hope every film is good—and greed and fear.

DW: Do they have a conception of how to market your films?

RL: They think they do. But if they miss, they really miss. They're kind of doing that on this film. The way that films are released now it's hard to be a word-of-mouth film, where it grows, the way a hit single used to grow. It would start in Pittsburgh or wherever and then take off. You get one opening weekend now and then you just take it from there. If that's not big, you never see the film.

DW: Did your other films make their money back?

RL: I think everything I've done, while none of them has been a hit, has made its money back. *Before Sunrise* did very well internationally. It made as much in Italy and Korea as it did here.

DW: Your success is not the usual story, for someone who is genuinely nonconformist in this industry.

RL: I think I got really lucky with *Slacker*. That was a film that probably shouldn't have been seen. That was such an underground work, from the margins. I am still amazed to this day that that film—I thought I was making something that would alienate everyone in a certain way, just the structure of it, there's no story—I thought it would be on video, an underground kind of thing. I was surprised that it got distributed, I wanted it to, but that was something I never anticipated. Plus, being from Texas, which is not exactly at the center of the industry. For every film festival it got accepted to, it was turned down by two, by all the major festivals across the board.

DW: What do you make of the period we're living in?

RL: It's kind of scary. It feels a lot like the 1920s to me. I think this bloated thing is going to come crashing down. It feels to me like the year is 1927. The stock market scares me. This continual rise that people are buying into. Money is God. This city scares me. It's sort of a police state. No one is asking what happened to all the homeless. No one cares, because it's easier to get on the subway and not be accosted. Where are they? In Texas they throw the homeless in jail. Something about Texas I'm not proud of is that our state murdered 37 people last year alone. In my hometown. They play on our basest fears. They emphasize violent criminals to build prisons and they fill them with drug offenders, and insist on the death penalty.

And national politics, this Clinton scandal, is like a circus side show. It's so abstract, it's like the stock market. It involves only 4 or 5 percent of the population, and the rest of us are just being entertained by it. We can't even relate it to our own lives. Whatever politician takes office, our lives don't change. They're all doing the will of the Fortune 500, so what does it matter? Voting is a symbolic act. It doesn't mean anything, because there are no choices anyway.

The biggest lie about America is, "Well, it's not perfect, but it's the best we've ever come up with." Whether it's the court system, whether it's our two-party system, whatever. That's just drilled in your head from the first grade on. "We've made mistakes, and it's not perfect, but it's the best thing that anyone's ever come up with." Bullshit.

DW: I think your films are very honest and moving. It's not a bad thing to be isolated sometimes.

RL: That's why I live in Austin, Texas. I did *The Newton Boys* and during the whole process of making the film, I may have spent a week in Los Angeles. A night here, a night there.

DW: We've lived through 15 or 20 difficult years, stagnant years. The cultural level is very low.

RL: It's disappointing to see films become pure entertainment, so that it's not an art form. You see *The Grapes of Wrath* and that was a big hit. There were some wonderful films. There are different levels of politics. I've always been most interested in the politics of everyday life: your relation to whatever you're doing, or what your ambitions are, where you live, where you find yourself in the social hierarchy. Where I'm from, when I read a story like the Newtons', I feel an immediate attachment. I'm attracted to that story. I worked offshore as an oil worker for a couple of years. I want to make a film about a factory worker.

I like Ken Loach, Mike Leigh. These are the British filmmakers who haven't sold out, who haven't got hired by Hollywood. Hollywood has a way of sucking the world's talent to it. These directors have stayed there and made films in their own backyard. The ones who come here, it's all over for them. They're kind of mercenary. They grew up doing commercials. I think you have to make a choice. I've never done a commercial or directed a music video. I only want to do my films.

At the core *Titanic* is a lie, isn't it? There's no human like the character Leonardo DiCaprio plays. It's myth. I could never do that. Everyone has been swept up by this juggernaut.

DW: Other filmmakers?

RL: There are so many. [German director R.W.] Fassbinder is one of my favorites. Our film society in Austin did a 10-film retrospective. He'll always be one of my favorites. We show a free film every week on campus, and about 400 people show up. Last year our film society showed 136 films. It has about one thousand members. We give out grants to Texas filmmakers. We had an 18-film [French director Jean-Luc] Godard retrospective. We did a [Iranian director Abbas] Kiarostami retrospective. I love his films. One of the worst developments in the exhibition world is that there is no market for those films. Either the American public is not interested or it's not in anyone's financial interest to distribute these films.

DW: There is a monopoly worldwide of American commercial films.

RL: To me it's a real crisis. The worst thing is that you used to be able to show interesting films on campuses. Those places are all gone. Even at the University of Texas, the second largest university in the country, they closed the theater on campus, because it lost $30,000. They're putting up million-dollar buildings, there's expansion, there's always money for athletics. They closed the film theater. We had a rally on campus. I spoke at it. I said, "This is your four years here, what you leave with doesn't mean anything to these people. They're constructing these buildings, those are capital assets they're going to have for a hundred years. You have to fight for this. To see films from around the world, this is part of your education. This is your life." That's pretty indicative of the times.

It's amazing to me when people say, "Oh, there's no money in that [showing artistic films]." Well, you have to keep your faith in the fact that there are a lot of intelligent people who are actively looking for something interesting, people who have been disappointed so many times. I think the situation will turn around. You can't really hold back the human spirit. Just like you can't stop filmmakers. The films will get made, somehow, some way, no matter what's going on, and worldwide. Filmmakers are going to make films, just like painters are going to paint.

As a filmmaker I trust that there is this core of people that I can communicate with. There's something inside people.... If I'm honest with myself, there is a connection, people will respond to that. If you have to anticipate emotions, create them artificially, you're rudderless. Then you don't know, it's all hit and miss. "I *think* this will affect people emotionally," but if it doesn't affect *you* emotionally, you're dead.

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