

WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh's remarks to Pontiac meeting on censorship and the arts

"On what basis should a movement in defense of artistic freedom be founded?"

7 March 2000

David Walsh's remarks at the March 4 meeting in Pontiac: "Fear No Art: The Politics of Correctness"

I appreciate the invitation and the opportunity to address this meeting. It's high time such a discussion is held, as the police operation mounted today against Jef Bourgeau's exhibit demonstrates. In these introductory remarks I'd like to raise a number of issues which I believe need to be addressed, in this forum and in others to follow. Above all, I'd like to pose this question: on what intellectual and political basis should a movement in defense of artistic freedom and democratic rights be founded?

I think there should be no illusions about the seriousness of the problem. In this country there has been a sustained campaign by the religious right, which dominates the Republican Party, over the past decade or more against freedom of expression. There's no need to repeat what is well known, some of which has been referred to by other speakers.

But this is an international phenomenon. In Australia, the National Gallery canceled the "Sensation" show after the New York controversy. A number of films have been banned or threatened with bans there as well. In November police raided a video store in Berlin, at the behest of a Green Party local government, and seized films by David Lynch and Rainer Fassbinder, among others. In Austria, the ascension to power of Haider's neo-fascist party in a coalition government has already meant increased censorship and the threatened purging of the state-run television network.

On our web site we have launched a campaign in defense of Indian-born filmmaker Deepa Mehta whose film set was destroyed by Hindu chauvinists in

February. In Sri Lanka artists face death threats for opposing the ruling Peoples Alliance regime. Filmmakers in Iran, a country that's witnessed a flourishing in the cinema in the past 15 years, are facing increasing censorship and in reality the possibility that their window of artistic opportunity may be closing. These attacks on artists take place under quite different circumstances, but, in our view, they have this in common: they are secreted by the crisis of a social system that has no healthy answers to any of the social, intellectual or moral problems of the day.

In this country the media would have us believe that things have never been better. For whom? Social inequality has reached levels unprecedented in modern times. In the past two decades 97 percent of the increase in household income has gone to the top 20 percent of the population, 3 percent to the remaining 80 percent. We're confronted by two political parties and their candidates whose programs are essentially interchangeable: austerity, worship of the free market, law and order, support for the death penalty, everything for big business, whatever needs to be done to sustain share prices.

The attacks on artists and art serve several purposes. They represent an effort to whip up the most backward and susceptible elements of the population, many of whom feel increasingly insecure economically, into a frenzy about "cultural" issues—child pornography, pornography on the Internet, homosexuality, abortion and so on—as a means of diverting attention from the social issues: the destruction of decent jobs, downsizing, lowering of living standards, homelessness, poverty, racism, police violence. The

constituency for the program of the ultra-right is quite small; there is an effort to find issues around which a movement of an extremely right-wing character can be built, while concealing its real social and political agenda.

The attack on art is also an attack on the critical faculties of the population and anyone who seeks to encourage those faculties. Serious creative activity always involves criticism of the existing state of things and points to the possibility of another, more human reality.

Toward whom should artists look for support in their efforts to defend the conditions of creative activity? What did the recent “Sensation” controversy demonstrate about the liberal cultural elite? It was only grudgingly and half-heartedly prodded into issuing polite criticisms of [New York Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani. Hilary Clinton described the mayor's action as “very wrong” and then deplored the exhibition as “deeply offensive” and pledged to boycott it.

The Clinton administration record on civil rights and civil liberties is atrocious, from support for the so-called Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996, to strengthening the police ability to obtain wiretaps, to speeding up the death penalty process. And we should not forget that it was the Clinton Justice Department which appealed a federal court's ruling that the law requiring the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] to consider “general standards of decency” was unconstitutional to the Supreme Court and won, against Karen Finley and three others. The commitment of the liberal or formerly liberal establishment to democratic principles is extremely weak. This is a privileged, deeply conservative layer. And the perspective of lobbying the Democrats, Clinton, [Democratic Party presidential hopeful Al] Gore or [Detroit Mayor Dennis] Archer on behalf of the arts, is one of the most futile and demoralizing imaginable.

Is there a connection between the defense of artistic freedom and the defense of the democratic rights and social conditions of wide layers of the population? Or to put it another way, can the defense of artistic freedom be seriously undertaken without building a broad-based movement aimed at the foundations of the system which is generating the attacks? I don't believe so. Such a movement will need to take an anti-capitalist direction.

The defense of art is also bound up with the present crisis of art, the stagnation, the sense of intellectual impasse. Physical and legal attacks are not the only dangers confronting artists. The commodification and trivialization of art, conformism and corruption, are equally serious dangers. The subordination of art to the unmediated demands of the market has had the most destructive impact. Artists must feel this. I would suggest again that genuine art by its very nature is critical.

In an earlier period, a substantial number of artists recognized that the struggle in defense of art and culture was bound up with the struggle to create a new society. As André Breton, the great Surrealist poet and critic, declared in 1935: “From where we stand, we maintain that the activity of interpreting the world must continue to be linked with the activity of changing the world.” It's with that spirit, I believe, that this discussion needs to be animated. Thank you.



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