Artistic and cultural problems in the current situation

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Published below is the report on artistic and cultural issues delivered by David Walsh to an expanded meeting of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board (IEB) held in Sydney from January 22 to 27, 2006. Walsh a member of the World Socialist Web Site IEB and the WSWS Arts editor.

The process of book and periodical production and consumption is riven by vast inequities, with the US producing some 40 percent of the world’s publications was over 600,000 around the globe. About 1.1 billion books were sold in the United States in 1999. The total number of US magazines circulated annually exceeds 500 million. Amazon.com claims to have 4,000,000 titles. In 2000, there were 158,000 unique periodical titles in the world and the total number of serial publications was over 600,000 around the globe.

The number of books alone is staggering. Some 1,000,000 titles are published each year worldwide. One estimate suggests that the existing world stock of books might be approximately 65 million titles. Amazon.com claims to have 4,000,000 titles. In 2000, there were 158,000 unique periodical titles in the world and the total number of serial publications was over 600,000 around the globe.

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The process of book and periodical production and consumption is riven by vast inequities, with the US producing some 40 percent of the world’s printed material while entire continents starve for information and culture.

This raises the question: has capitalism created, or is it capable of creating, a harmonious global culture?
The entertainment industry underwent an astonishing process of concentration in the 1990s. In 1993, the total turnover of the fifty largest audiovisual companies worldwide was $118 billion. Four years later, seven major media conglomerates alone reached the same figure.

In 1993, 36 percent of the companies were based in the US, 36 percent in the European Union, and 26 percent in Japan. By 1997, over 50 percent of the firms were based in the US. What much of the world is permitted to see and hear is largely determined by officials of seven media conglomerates.

We face a radically transformed cultural situation: tens of thousands of online periodicals, an enormous growth in computer-associated and digital technologies, creating art media not even conceivable only decades ago. Even if one were to consider the “traditional” art forms—fiction, poetry, painting, music, cinema (at least ‘traditional’ in the twentieth century), architecture, dance—a worldwide explosion has occurred.

The possibility of an alternative perspective to ours has been raised at our meeting this week—the possibility that we live during the birth pangs of a newly stabilized capitalist world system, in which the fundamental contradictions of social life have been overcome, opening up a vista of eventual economic prosperity and freedom from privation and deadening toil for the world’s population. If that were indeed the case, such a remarkable, liberating development ought to be accompanied by the frankest and most honest appraisals of the human condition. If we were perched on the edge of a new epoch, premonitions of that would be discovered in art.

But more specifically, if this society held out the real possibility of ameliorating the conditions of masses of people, then its official art would be engaged in the most self-critical effort, probing what exists, exposing the remaining ills and artistically anticipating their resolution. An extraordinary frankness and openness would dominate, which permitted the widest possible and most democratic discussion of the human situation.

Is this the present situation? Clearly not. What do we continually encounter? A concealment of conditions, the exclusion of vast masses of people and their lives from artistic consideration, all too often the fantasized, trivial treatment of the lives of ‘beautiful’ people without financial problems, people who don’t exist, and the systematic degradation of popular culture, the calculated effort to brutalize and render humanity indifferent to suffering and social ills.

We can say with some justice that the fact that the lives of hundreds of millions of Africans can find reflection in only 42 films (and those are not the remaining seven) for problematic existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the arts have been devastated and market principles restored. Insofar as artistic life revives, it will have to adopt a position of hostility to the mafia-capitalist elite.

If capitalism is flourishing and offers an unlimited potential, then how is it possible that its culture has failed abysmally to treat artistically the present human situation, and to the extent that this reality is treated, and exposed, does it not seem that the arts have failed to make purchase possible by local entrepreneurs who, in time, converted these into warehouses for sugar, rice, cement, and other commodities.”

When film production statisticians consider the “world,” they generally leave Africa out of the picture. The population of Africa and the Middle East combined accounted for 1.2 percent of “total world cinema spending” in 1998.

A vast social gap exists between those who control the cultural means of production and wide layers of the world’s population. Moreover, the very depth of the crisis, the human urgency of the present situation, renders it too explosive to be treated seriously by the official culture.

Trotsky writes that the “decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art.” I find that a compelling insight into the present world situation.

Worsening social contradictions, transformed into personal contradictions, producing an ever-greater need for liberating art. This ever-greater need is answered at present by the official culture by ever greater levels of dishonesty and insensitivity.

We could look at Russia and Eastern Europe, where society has experienced birth pangs of a sort, but is this new social organism a progression or a horrifying regression? The notion that capitalism offers a way forward can be disputed simply by looking at the dismal and demoralizing cultural-artistic conditions in most of those countries. Russian cinema turns out for the most part hysterical, pessimistic, misanthropic works, or commercial works that imitate the worst of Hollywood’s vulgarity and brutality.

The theater was once the jewel of Poland’s cultural life, the site of experiment in the 1960s and 1970s, including Grotowski’s legendary “Poor Theatre.” A recent commentator notes that Warsaw is “hurting these days less ‘towards a poor theatre’ than towards a bland, international, slightly impoverished one, indistinguishable from that of any provincial capital.”

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We’re entitled to ask: what is the moral state, so to speak, of the global culture? Here statistics will not suffice.

Trotsky insisted, rightly, that any penetrating look at life would inevitably contain an element of protest. How could it not, given the conditions in which the vast majority live? The traumatic political experiences of the middle and late twentieth century, one might say, had
several related temporary (but enduring) consequences: they damaged the confidence of the artist in an alternative to capitalism, they discouraged him or her from taking a penetrating look at life, and they rendered such efforts, when they did occur, far more diffuse and confused, far less associated with the historical and political perspective of socialism.

Advanced art from the late nineteenth century through the first two decades or more of the twentieth could feel relatively confident that a broad-based opposition to the present order existed, from which it could draw intellectual and moral sustenance and encouragement as to the possibility of a radical change in social relations. It would be entirely implausible to explain the extraordinary richness of creative efforts in those decades entirely apart from the relationship between culture and revolutionary political ideas and organization.

Economic factors have compounded the present ideological difficulties. The enrichment of a considerable layer of the intelligentsia has taken place, all the more willingly acceded to, given the political and moral confusion that prevails. In that sense, the conditions are perhaps more similar to those described by Plekhanov in the pre-1914 period: A turn to the right, to political indifferentism, after 1905 on the part of many Russian intellectuals.

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We have described the evolution of elements of the generation of 1968 on numerous occasions. A new crowd of Bush fellow travelers in the US—Christopher Hitchens, Paul Berman, Todd Gitlin (the former SDS leader who declared after 9/11 that “lived patriotism entails sacrifice”) and various others, participants in Socialist Scholars Conferences of old—has made its noxious presence felt. Renunciation of principle, renunciation of one’s past, renunciation of one’s integrity—this continues to be a booming business. Opportunism and cowardice take their place in the process alongside disorientation and historical-political ignorance.

This is a worldwide phenomenon. An Egyptian journalist for an establishment weekly there, inspired, in fact, by Harold Pinter’s Nobel Prize speech, recently denounced “a cultural apparatus that deals with [culture] only as an ornament of the Establishment.” She referred to a book, *Intellecuals for Sale*, which has apparently created an uproar in Egypt. The author was a close advisor to the minister of culture for the past 18 years before falling out of favor.

The journalist noted that “the stories of corruption, and perhaps more importantly, the stories about the mechanisms employed by the ministry to co-opt intellectuals, are still hair-raising.” She spoke about “the destruction of culture that has taken place in Egypt over the past three decades [that] would not have been possible without the intellectuals for sale.”

A certain section of intellectuals has gone on sale everywhere.

Skepticism and demoralization have both a right-wing and a “left” face. Two figures with whom we need to engage much more seriously—and today is not that engagement, but a brief consideration—are Terry Eagleton, the British critic, and Fredric Jameson, the American academic, each perennially described as a “leading Marxist critic.” These are the leading ‘Marxist’ critics in the English-speaking world and perhaps beyond, I believe. Both were associated with revisionist politics.

Eagleton, after leaving the state capitalist International Socialists group in the mid-1970s, was a member of Alan Thornett’s Workers Socialist League while at Oxford, a not insignificant fact. Jameson explicitly associates his analysis of postmodern culture with Ernest Mandel’s theory of ‘late capitalism.

One of Eagleton’s most recent works, *After Theory*, identifies the “theory” in the title with the “golden age of cultural theory” associated with the work of Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, as well as Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Jurgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said. One doesn’t want to tar this group of thinkers with one reductive brush, but, on the whole, this is a bloc of anti-Marxists, not without insights, but a bloc of conscious anti-Marxists—the cream of late twentieth century hostility to dialectical and historical materialism.

Eagleton declares in the opening of his book that the “golden age” of cultural studies has passed. He goes on: “There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit. It is not as though the whole project [of critical theory] was a ghastly mistake on which some merciful soul has now blown the whistle.... If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever.”

The idea that “theory” means a reflection “on our guiding assumptions,” not the examination and cognition of the external world and its laws of motion, speaks volumes. (And, in fact, produces volumes, which you will see if you visit any bookstore in a major metropolitan center or one located near a significant university.)

Aside from the fact that his description of pre-postmodernist criticism is a caricature, that serious twentieth century bourgeois cultural criticism did far more than declare Keats to be “delectable,” we have to remind ourselves that this is a self-described Marxist. He appears to be arguing, if one takes him at face value, that before Althusser and Lévi-Strauss and Derrida and Habermas, no serious critical, cultural theory existed, there was merely bourgeois academia. What of the Marxist tradition? This body of work does not even merit being raised in this context, so thoroughly does Eagleton identify himself with those trends identified loosely as structuralist, post-structuralist or postmodernist. Eagleton presents himself as a critic of these tendencies, but he begins on his knees.

Eagleton’s book has a value of another sort. He does provide insight into the present situation in “cultural theory,” and here, although his tone is complacent, he no doubt speaks from first-hand knowledge. “Structuralism, Marxism, post-structuralism and the like are no longer the sexy topics they were. What is sexy instead is sex. On the wilder shores of academia, an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. In some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East. Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism. Among students of culture, the body is an immensely fashionable topic, but it is usually the erotic body, not the famished one. There is a keen interest in coupling bodies, but not in labouring ones. Quietly spoken middle-class students huddle diligently in libraries, at work on sensationalist subjects like vampirism and eye-gouging, cyborgs and porno movies.

“Nothing could be more understandable. To work on the literature of latex or the political implications of navel-piercing is to take literally the wise old adage that study should be fun. It is rather like writing your Master’s thesis on the comparative flavour of malt whiskies, or on the phenomenology of lying in bed all day. It creates a seamless continuity between the intellect and everyday life. There are advantages in being able to write your Ph.D. thesis without stirring from in front of the TV set.” An attractive picture.

Fredric Jameson, as we discussed briefly last summer, views contemporary global capitalism as a thoroughly nightmarish and overwhelming phenomenon, in which the population is dominated by a web of bureaucratic control and media manipulation on a massive scale. The possibility of social convulsion, much less “the ultimate senescence, breakdown and death of the system as such,” is largely excluded.

Jameson, in 1995, argued that global capitalism had never had such room for maneuver, writing that “all the threatening forces it generated against itself in the past ... seem today in full disarray when not in one
way or another effectively neutralized.” A new proletariat would perhaps
emerge at some future date, but meantime “we ourselves are still in the
trough, however, and no one can say how long we will stay there.”

In his newest book, we are still apparently in the trough, perhaps deeper
than ever. Jameson has written a work extolling the virtues of utopianism,
a tendency about which we have written and spoken.

“Utopia seems to have recovered its vitality as a political slogan and a
politically energizing perspective. Indeed, a whole new generation of the
post-globalization Left ... has more and more frequently been willing to
adopt this slogan, in a situation in which the discrediting of communist
and socialist parties alike, and the skepticism about traditional conceptions
of revolution, have cleared the discursive field....

“What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the
universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the
historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and
impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let
alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of
such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation
on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the
social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental
change in our social existence which has not thrown off Utopian visions
like so many sparks from a comet.”

This is Jameson par excellence, a pretentious accommodation with
existing reality, a worship of the accomplished fact. Incapable of
imagining a struggle against the present difficulties, he is a product of
1970s radicalism, who long ago gave up, if he ever possessed it to begin
with, a confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the working class, the
American working class, above all.

Many have undergone an even more pronounced moral and intellectual
disintegration.

French artistic and intellectual life reveals some of these tendencies in
the sharpest form—a temporary but serious eclipse of French cinema and
fiction. One novelist/editor says categorically, “French literature has
become a desert.” In that desert we find, as one of the most prominent
French authors, Michel Houellebecq. We wrote about him on the WSWS
a few years ago (http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2003/05/nov-m02.html).

In his novels, Houellebecq alternates descriptions of cold, deliberately
tawdry sexual activities with long passages describing the ridiculous
antics of sections of the French middle class to stay afloat spiritually,
passages written without historical context or human sympathy. These are
tedious works which skim the surface of French life. His characters or
narrator may hint at anti-Arab racism; the author says this is not his voice,
but the works so lack a critical framework or distance that it is impossible
to tell.

The degrading activities are not criticized, but wallowed in. This is a
relatively unmediated response to the general decay of French capitalism
and the specific decomposition of the 1968 generation—all this somehow
blamed on the population itself and its capacity for self-delusion.
Houellebecq has been compared to Louis-Ferdinand Céline, author of
Journey to the End of the Night. Trotsky, in a famous essay, called Céline
a deeply wounded moralist, who had to choose between the light or the
dark. In the event, he chose fascism and anti-Semitism. This ought to be
warning enough, but Houellebecq is no Céline. There is no urgency, or
seriousness, no bite to his satire, except against the relatively defenseless.

A few words on American fiction and cinema. There has been in recent
years in the US a certain revival of the social novel—Don DeLillo,
Jonathan Franzen, Richard Powers and others. Their books demonstrate an
awareness of certain social processes—the existence of globalized,
computer-driven economic life; the criminality of big business and
government; the spiritual disenfranchisement of the American people; the
growing disaffection of the population, its alienation, its moral isolation
and often wretchedness.

In DeLillo’s latest work, Cosmopolis, a kind of black comedy, a 28-year-
old billionaire asset manager, who lives in an apartment worth $104
million, inches his way across Manhattan in his white limousine in the
midst of a mid-day traffic jam. He conducts his business, which at the
moment consists in betting against the yen (he loses hundreds of millions
in the course of the 200-page novel), from his limousine, on a series of
screens and handheld devices in its back seat. He meets en route with his
various advisors—financial, security, medical—and his “chief of theory.”
He encounters his wife of 22 days, who seems a total stranger, he has sex
with various people, although not his wife, and ends up getting
assassinated, all in the course of this one trip across town. It’s a
perceptive, occasionally amusing, but quite chilly work.

There is something dissatisfying ultimately about these new American
novels. Brilliant, but somewhat inhuman, distant from the reality of
everyday life, sometimes facetious, exaggerated. The book reviewer of the
New Republic, James Wood, attempted to use the weaknesses of these
works against them in an article following the September 11 attacks.
Wood, who is one of the more serious fiction critics in the US, argued for
American novelists to abandon efforts to uncover social reality; he hoped
that 9/11 would “allow a space for the aesthetic, for the contemplative, for
novels that tell us not ‘how the world works’ but ‘how somebody felt
about something’—indeed, how a lot of different people felt about a lot of
different things (these are commonly called novels about human beings).”

Wood argued that following the terrorist attacks “novelists will be leery
of setting themselves up as analysts of society, while society bucks and
charges so helplessly. Surely they will tread carefully over their
generalisations. It is now very easy to look very dated very fast.” He
asked: “For who would dare to be knowledgeable about politics and
society now?”

A more reasonable question, given the dimensions of the 9/11 atrocity,
bound up as it was with international politics and history, might have been:
“Who would dare not to be knowledgeable about politics and
society now?”

Wood’s counterposing of “human” versus “social” novels is deeply
false. He wants novels about “individual consciousness,” he says. We too
want serious books about human beings, not templates or tracts.

But what is individuality? The particular manner, Trotsky notes, in
which “tribal, national, class, temporary and institutional elements”
are welded together. Individuality resides in the unique manner in which these
elements are combined.

The reader contains the same essential elements as the artist, although
perhaps in a different combination; this is why the reader can understand
the artist—what serves as a bridge from one human being to another is not
the unique, but the common. Only through the common is the unique
known.

If the particular were not reduced to the general, there would be no
communication and no art. And this common element is made up of the
deepest and most persistent conditions of life, education, work and so
forth. This social condition is, first of all, the condition of class affiliation.
Serious attention to the human soul therefore requires serious attention to
social class and to history. Lyricism and social analysis are not opposed to
one another as the bourgeois philistine supposes.

Wood is wrong about the big questions, but he makes valid criticisms
of this school of American social novels, and this has a bearing on cinema
too, in my opinion. “Nowadays anyone in possession of a laptop is
thought to be a brilliance on the move, filling his or her novel with
essaylets and great displays of knowledge. Indeed, ‘knowing about things’ has become one of the qualifications of the contemporary
novelist.... The result—in America at least—is novels of immense self-
consciousness with no selves in them at all, curiously arrested and very
‘brilliant’ books that know a thousand things but do not know a single

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In practice his people and his atmospheres, contemporary as they are to the truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation for the origins and evolution of modern realism. Regression has taken place, when a great deal has been lost, to ignore the artistic history. Such things are not possible, in any case. But I think it takes a high degree of artistic objectivity and deep personal determination to treat life seriously, problematically, tragically... The newness of this attitude—exhibited by Stendhal and Balzac, and the new type of subjects which were seriously, even tragically... The newness of this attitude [exhibited by Stendhal and Balzac], and the new type of subjects which were seriously, problematically, tragically treated, caused the gradual development of an artistic style.

In a sense of artistic proportion is missing when the artist or artists are more or less distant from the real driving forces in life and society, when the true array of social and psychological forces is unclear and lacking concreteness. Skepticism about human capacities and more than a morsel of misanthropy are also often present.

Clearly, there are objective historical problems contained in these difficulties. Art cannot save itself or entirely clarify itself. The social movement of masses of human beings plays a decisive role. Trotsky writes about the struggle for freedom of the oppressed classes and peoples [that] scatters the clouds of skepticism and of pessimism which cover the horizon of mankind.

We have to maintain a sense of proportion and a certain patience. There is no point in simply hammering individuals, when the problem lies in the general conditions. Nonetheless, we have to insist on the need for a change, struggle for it and, in that manner, help lay the basis for it.

I think what Auerbach says about Balzac, the great French novelist, is à propos: “In practice his people and his atmospheres, contemporary as they may be, are always represented as phenomena sprung from historical events and forces... the source of his invention is not free imagination but real life, as it presents itself everywhere. Now, in respect to this manifold life, steeped in history, mercilessly represented with all its everyday triviality, practical preoccupations, ugliness and vulgarity, Balzac has an attitude such as Stendhal had had before him: in the form determined by its actuality, its triviality, its inner historical laws, he takes it seriously and even tragically... The newness of this attitude [exhibited by Stendhal and Balzac], and the new type of subjects which were seriously, problematically, tragically treated, caused the gradual development of an entirely new kind of serious or, if one prefers, elevated style.”

So then: The serious or elevated, problematic and even tragic treatment of real life, in its historical and social concreteness and movement. We have no templates or prescriptions. We attempt to critically illuminate the path, as Trotsky said, but we would encourage this mixture of artistic seriousness and everyday life... how that will take place today will not be determined by what French novelists did 150 or 200 years ago, but this sort of growth of seriousness and elevated style in treating our contemporary existence is one of the keys to the development of a new art.

In their debate during the 1930s, the German playwright Brecht accused the critic and pro-Stalinist Lukacs of wanting “Balzac, only modern.” This is not our conception. Our reality, the reality of contemporary mass society, is extremely complex. A great deal of water has flowed under the bridge.

To treat life requires a high degree of artistic objectivity and deep feeling for humanity. We are not seeking to repeat any particular phase of artistic history. Such things are not possible, in any case. But I think it would be light-minded under the present circumstances, when a genuine regression has taken place, when a great deal has been lost, to ignore the origins and evolution of modern realism.

So what might be some of the personal contradictions called into being by the present worsening of social contradictions? Of course, brutal economic and social realities, conditions of work today, all the psychological dilemmas associated with vast changes and new pressures—the binds that people find themselves in, torn by different demands—the impact on love and friendship and personal relations, the moral contradictions created by shocking changes and circumstances. The relations between all social layers. A story of a businessman might reveal things about life that are otherwise hidden. There is no shortage of drama in our world.

How will this be represented?

It’s impossible to predict precisely. It may begin without great formal flourish or innovation. That may not be the immediate challenge for artists. It may begin with rather conservative or conventional forms suddenly treating explosive problems, with some of the old baggage towed along.

We campaign for a far greater attentiveness to the problems of everyday life, insisting, however, against the populists, Stalinists and various radicals, that the truth about this reality can emerge only when it is treated in the most sophisticated, sublime artistic, “world-historical” fashion, without templates and prettification.

“Artistic creation has its laws—even when it consciously serves a social movement... Art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself” (Trotsky, Art and Politics In Our Epoch). And here’s where the limits of even the best postwar schools, Italian Neo-realism, Iranian cinema and others emerge, in my view. That they censored themselves, tied their own hands behind their backs, according to populist criteria, which precluded a classical grandeur and seriousness, by and large. Naïve, simple or simplified works will not suffice.

A shift in mood is unquestionably under way—see it even in popular films in the US, films at the recent Toronto film festival; we have the recent example of Pinter—a moral distancing from capitalism and its official culture, a hint of upheavals to come.

In his Nobel Prize speech Pinter offered a blistering attack on US policy, calling its crimes “systematic, constant, vicious, remorseless.” He described the invasion of Iraq as “a bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of international law.”

He concluded: “I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory.”

Such a comment is not simply an aberration, a voice in the wilderness. It reflects a growing sentiment among the most sensitive observers of the human condition and it expects to find a hearing, which it has.

We’ve referred to the significance of Munich, not a milestone in the history of cinema, but a work that opposes the brutality and callousness built into so much of recent popular culture, including the stupid arsonists like Tarantino.

What do we ourselves need? A more concerted and broader international effort to follow artistic and intellectual developments—a more systematic and theoretical approach. We cannot simply jump from one work to the next. We must have a theory of contemporary artistic culture and its evolution, working over Eagleton, Jameson and other figures, following the major bourgeois literary critics. We must have greater international cooperation and participation—in the US, more attention to fiction, in particular, and the debates surrounding it; in Britain and Germany, the theater, in particular; in Asia, cinema and novels too; in Australia, fiction writing, in particular. We must pay more attention to the visual arts, in general.

What we do has an objective weight and significance, a weight and significance that will only deepen and broaden. What we do and say is
followed widely. We have every right to feel confident in the success of our efforts.

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