Questions and answers at David Walsh's talk at York University in Toronto

David Walsh
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Students and faculty members attended the talk on "Film, history and socialism" *given by WSWS arts editor David Walsh at York University in Toronto, January 17. The following is an edited version of the question-and-answer period that followed Walsh's presentation.*

First questioner: I was really interested in your talk, and there are a couple of things I'd like to try to piece together. On the one hand, you speak about this incredible political and cultural ferment that went on in the 1930s and 1940s due to both immigration and a more active "Left" in both the United States and in Europe, which you are quite right to say is lacking now.

Yet this implies that we now need a much bigger crisis in order for that type of ferment to happen again. Would conscription in the United States right now, for example, make people more politically engaged? So this is something I'd like to hear more about. I'm interested in, and a little skeptical of, this notion of the past always having a far more engaged public sphere. If we look at the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s, that sort of critique continuously comes up with this sort of nostalgia for a better past.

David Walsh: I don't want to set up any sort of parallel lines between now and the 1930s. And whether you choose to believe it or not, I have not the slightest nostalgia for that period. It was a time of the greatest defeats of the working class, terrible tragedies in Germany and Spain, the murder of Trotsky himself in 1940, the destruction of the socialist intelligentsia in the Soviet Union through the Moscow Trials—I have not the slightest nostalgia for that.

I want to emphasize that the past century has not taken place for nothing. We don't begin from zero, at any point. We feel that there has been a temporary cultural regression that is attributable to those basic tendencies that I outlined: the decline of the influence of Marxism and socialism as a result of the crimes of Stalinism and the relative prosperity and boom of the 1950s, which was itself only possible on the basis of tens of millions of corpses and a world war. Those events can be tapped into, they can come to life, we're certainly not saying, "First Hitler, then us."

First of all, I think you underestimate to a certain extent the degree to which a radicalization has already taken place. Certainly in the United States, the present situation is a very peculiar one. There was an election that repudiated the policy of the president, and he is proceeding with precisely the policy that was repudiated. And the so-called opposition party is quite happy to go along with it. So what is the population to do?

We obviously draw some conclusions, such as the radical conclusion that the two-party system itself is worthless and the population is going to have to draw that conclusion for itself and create alternatives. Now the process by which that takes place is obviously very complicated. A population or a social class doesn't change perspective like you or I change shirts. In the United States, for example, the residue of pragmatic, individualist thinking weighs heavily. There has been a mass discrediting of the establishment over the course of a series of events, starting with the manufactured impeachment scandal against Clinton, the stealing of the election in 2000, the launching of a war based on lies—these things have had an impact, believe me.

But how they express themselves politically is a more complex manner. How that is translated into a political movement is a complex process, and how that is translated into a cultural advance is perhaps even more complicated. Culture lags behind. Of course when it comes to an extremely mediated institution like the Hollywood film industry, it lags even farther behind.

So as I said, I'm not saying this is a repetition of the 1930s. There are convulsive events ahead, and I think there are great shocks in store. Absolutely, and we don't have any control over that. I'm not urging conscription, I'm not urging war in Iran. A war in Iran would be a disaster, but do I think it's likely? Yes, I do. Because the American ruling elite will stumble from a disaster in Iraq to an even greater disaster in Iran.

We have no control over their intentions. We live in an extremely revolutionary and convulsive period. What people make of it, and how this appears in their consciousness and in their art, is another matter. Obviously we're calling for a certain orientation, but events will present themselves, I don't think there will be any shortage. On the contrary, one has to worry about truly horrifying events taking place.

But in the 1930s, American capitalism had considerable reserves. As Trotsky said, Germany has to re-organize Europe, but America will have to re-organize the world. That's what you see today, the attempt by America to re-organize the world. And it will provoke enormous radicalization not only in the Mideast, but also in the Midwest.

Second questioner: I was interested in how you said that you think filmmaking is going to get better, and that it will be from young filmmakers hopefully stepping up and changing things. Do you see technologies such as the advent of more democratizing film production practices as being a signal towards this sort of change?

DW: Yes, I think that is an element of it. Again, I don't want to pat anyone on the back or flatter anybody, but I think the digital culture that you have all grown up in is an extraordinary culture with extraordinary potential. Do I think it's being utilized in the most advantageous way? Obviously not, as my presentation would indicate. But the possibilities in terms of its informality, flexibility, universality, and yes, the democratic character of this technology, are absolutely extraordinary.

I don't think you or I have any idea what this will look like in five years from now, and linked to a mass movement I think the sky is the limit. And, yes, there will be difficulties. There are difficulties in ideas, difficulties in perspective, but I see absolutely no reason for pessimism. Look at what we've seen with the mass protests in 2003 over the war, and the way in which protests themselves are organized these days via the Internet—the fact that there are social explosions that can be organized that way is far more democratic. And there are new means of distributing films, technologies, and artistic works, though frankly I'm probably the wrong person to ask because I'm somewhat of a technological dinosaur. But I have great confidence that if this generation learns to think more deeply—and it has to do that!—and combines that with this technology, it

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would be extraordinary.

People will learn much more quickly than my generation or previous generations. Again, though, in order to learn you have to be oriented *towards learning* and studying the history of social theory, and the theory of the art form itself. But I have every reason to be confident in this potential.

Third questioner: You talked a lot about early cinema and about how the movement had to come up against the Hollywood system, and I think that's what's so interesting about those directors. They somehow used cinema to sort of weave around what was going on and the constructs they were working under. I know you're not pleased with what is going on now, but you certainly can't cast out everyone. Do you think amongst the people who are working against globalization, which seems to be the underlying crux of the political shift that's been happening over the past 15 to 20 years, there are any bright lights in cinema? You had a long list of earlier cinema so I'm wondering if you also have a list of filmmakers now.

DW: I'm not sure it's quite posed that way. In the last couple of years, we've seen a more honest appreciation of some of the difficulties, and not necessarily just from the younger generation of filmmakers. A lot of it relates to the first question, and it's about the war in Iraq, the torture at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo—these things have an impact in the United States and elsewhere, obviously. And you know, shame is a revolutionary sentiment, among the better elements of the intelligentsia. These things are being done in the name of the American people. So there are films like *Syriana*, *Good Night, and Good Luck.* I also thought *Munich* was interesting, and that's Spielberg.

So you know, there are signs of life, but I think they are all limited. This fall we noted a host of films, dozens, that were of enough substance for us to feel we had to deal with them. From *Babel* to Clint Eastwood's film, even Scorsese's film, which I didn't like at all, there were dozens of films about the political and social situation in a general sense. And they continue to come out—*Children of Men*, *Freedom Writers*—in a certain sense there are many that are well-intentioned, so the general weight of the average American or international film has increased. You can feel it, there is something more substantial. I can't say that I've thought any of those films were truly successful, but I think there is a change.

But again, to get back to what I was trying to say before, this change is bound up with what has shaped people. You know, you come into this situation, you're revolted by the Bush administration, you're revolted by war, social inequality, the criminality of the corporate elite—there are many blights on American society, Canadian society, French society, etc. But what baggage do artists have when they bring these issues up? What are they bringing to these issues? In my view, in many cases, very little. That to me is the crisis. You can sense the intentions, you can sense the honesty, but there are very limited efforts because of the conditions that have formed people. So in that sense they are not equipped to deal with these things they are trying to take on. So there is nobody who I look to as a shining light.

I think it will be more generalized than that. I can't say that there is anybody who I think is really, really remarkable, but there are a lot of people who are beginning to do interesting things. But how could they not? Unless you are a complete hack, how could you not be impacted by the events of the last decade? And people have been, even in Hollywood. It's a very difficult situation there where people are making literally tens of millions of dollars, and they have to be guarded, they have to have those entourages around them and live through a kind of gauze or a haze. It's very difficult, and I have a certain sympathy. How can their work have any immediate direct contact with the world when they don't have it in their daily lives?

That's just speaking of Hollywood, but to be honest with you, independent cinema doesn't do a great deal for me, this year at least. I know there are people who have done serious works, but there is also a lot of self-involvement.

Third questioner: Hasn't there always been that?

DW: Yes, but especially the last few years.

Third questioner: Well, it actually seems that our technology has allowed us to be even more self-involved.

DW: Yes, but I don't think that's just it, because these people have been formed under very different conditions. I don't want to just sneer at them, though I know I just did; to be fair, people aren't responsible for the conditions into which they are born. However, they then have a certain responsibility to try to come to terms with those conditions and with their own limitations. And you can only do that by studying history, the history of society and the history of your own art form. If you consistently see works that have more weight than the work that you're producing, then you have to figure out why. And I don't see a great deal of effort along those lines.

Fourth questioner: My question is based on what you've expressed in your talk regarding consciousness, intent and purposefulness. Do you think the artist creating a work of art should have a political intent or purpose in the work that they create? Or is it sufficient to just want to entertain?

DW: That's a very difficult question that I think depends on all sorts of circumstances. The unconscious itself is historic; the French artist in 1924 took for granted a hatred of religion, government institutions, police, the military, the king, war, patriotism, so is that truly unconscious? People's unconscious lives say a lot about their historical conditions. Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin set out to make entertainment, but what did they bring to it, both in terms of their artistic sensibilities and histories, and also in terms of the politics of the era?

So I don't think you set out to make a politically exact film as such, or let me say, I don't think you set out with a block of ideas that you then flesh out. Obviously, you have a set of ideas, conceptions about the world, but it has to be done with a certain spontaneity. If you begin a work knowing all there is to know about the final result, then there is no point in doing it. It will be dead and have no effect upon anyone. A work of art should involve an exploration of what you don't know. Also, you delve inside yourself and find out things about yourself you don't like, as well as things you take pride in. So it is somewhere in this mix of spontaneity and important ideas that serious work gets done.

Goethe said you must *be* someone to *do* something. I'm not blaming the present generation for its lack of experiences; you can't just invent these sorts of things. But you can orient yourself towards these experiences historically and in the present day. You can't make a film from a recipe book, you make it from life. And in a certain sense when you're writing about films, that's what you're trying to sort out. Sometimes you're successful, sometimes not, sometimes you're unsure. What is authentic in the work? What strikes a chord? What seems to come from an authentic or spontaneous place? Who is a poseur? Who is just trying to impress? Who doesn't mean a damn thing he or she says, and just wants his or her name dropped in the right circles? There's a great deal of that kind of thing going around, even here in university. I think that is a very vexing problem. So that's just a partial answer to your question.

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