

The future of art in an age of crisis

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The following is an edited version of the talk delivered by WSWs Arts Editor David Walsh to audiences recently at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. In February a version of the lecture was given at San Diego State University and in Santa Monica, California.

By way of introduction I want to point out that as a rule people go about their daily lives and accept the cultural life they encounter as given. The various books and films and objects are “habitual phenomena” that are not generally subjected to serious criticism.

The present economic and social crisis throws the inadequacy of most of what we presently see and hear into relief. We are attempting here to trace out the roots of some of the difficulties. A historical tracing out of the problem is indispensable, in our view.

We are concerned here with two interrelated questions: the future of art and the impact of the present global economic crisis. Let’s begin with the second.

Whatever the immediate ups and downs of the stock market, the dimensions of the economic crash of 2008 are vast and systemic. Contrary to the apologists for capitalism, the present crisis is not a failure of this or that policy, or merely the product of dishonest and greedy individuals. It is a crisis, a breakdown, of the economic and social order. An entire mode of global capital accumulation based on financial operations, fueled by mountainous increases in debt, has collapsed, as our movement has explained.

Economists estimate that over the past 12 months some \$50 trillion in wealth has been destroyed, the equivalent of one year’s global economic production. Stock markets had lost some \$30 trillion by the middle of March. Global industrial production is predicted to decline by 30 percent. Commodity prices have fallen by 40 percent.

A senior UN development official warned recently that the nearly 400 million Africans living on less than \$1.25 a day would suffer a decline in their incomes of 20 percent as a result of the slump, producing an increase of 200,000 to 400,000 infant deaths per year.

The International Labour Organization, the UN agency, warned earlier this year that as many as 50 million workers would lose their jobs worldwide in 2009 if the economy continued to deteriorate. Some 200 million people, mostly in developing economies, could be pushed into poverty.

“Another spectre is haunting Europe,” ran a headline in the right-wing *Weekly Standard* in early February, referencing the *Communist Manifesto*. The article noted that the unfolding crisis was being blamed on capitalism and warned that if economies continued to spiral downward the resulting anger would take “concrete ideological forms,” left-wing forms, “that are unlikely to be pretty.”

In the US, some 25 million people are unemployed or working short-time involuntarily, nearly one-sixth of the workforce. In March 30,000 jobs were lost a day. Five million jobs have been destroyed since December 2007. Housing prices have fallen by 30 percent, and attacks on wages, benefits, pensions are spreading throughout the economy, with the auto industry a central battleground.

The American ruling elite promoted Barack Obama in part to forestall

unrest, as well as to effect changes in its global and domestic tactics. Eight years of the Bush regime had damaged US interests abroad, and the obvious indifference and brutality of the administration was outraging the American population.

The presence of an African-American president, it was cynically thought, would be enough to satisfy the population and divert its attention from crying economic and social problems. Illusions and confusion exist, but the harsh economic reality will clarify many things.

The first 100 days of the Obama regime have been more than enough to establish its character as a representative of the financial-corporate aristocracy. Its policies are designed to defend the wealth of the ruling elite and advance the interests of American imperialism globally. Trillions for the bankers, but austerity and “responsibility” for the working population.

A recent guest commentator, a European living in the US, wrote in the *Financial Times* about the situation in this country: “I sense fear, anger and a deep feeling of injustice reminiscent of the climate on the eve of the French revolution. Just replace bread shortages with foreclosures, aristocrats with bankers, and privileges such as the right not to pay tax with stock options.”

After the disaster in Iraq, which has devastated that country and already left more than a million dead, the Obama government is shifting its focus to Afghanistan and Pakistan, preparing new catastrophes for the populations there and for thousands of American men and women—all in the pursuit of the region’s energy reserves and the reestablishment through military means of America’s lost economic hegemony around the globe.

Our student movement, the International Students for Social Equality, and our party, the Socialist Equality Party, advance the interests of the international working class against the present economic and political system. We anticipate that masses of people are going to enter into action in defense of their jobs and living conditions and that they will come into the sharpest conflict with the Obama regime and its supporters, including those on the liberal left who apologize for the Democrats as a way of life. We not only anticipate such struggles, we encourage and seek to lead them. We urge students to turn to the working class as part of our movement.

We put forward a socialist program for the crisis, centered on the need for a workers government and the transformation of the banks, other financial institutions, large industry and transportation and health care giants into publicly owned, democratically run operations. The needs of the overwhelming majority conflict at every point with the interests of the tiny elite, and one or the other must prevail.

Twenty years ago, after the fall of the Stalinist regimes, we were told, loudly and persistently, that socialism was dead, all the great historical issues were solved and the world was entering a new golden age of peace and prosperity. Our party rejected that notion at the time and oriented ourselves toward the inevitable explosions of globally integrated capitalism.

Marxism, scientific socialism, has been vindicated by the eruption of this crisis. In *Capital*, Marx wrote: “Along with the constantly

diminishing number of the magnates of capital, who usurp and monopolize all advantages of this process of transformation, grows the mass of misery, oppression, slavery, degradation, exploitation; but with this too grows the revolt of the working class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organized by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself.”

Out of this arises the objective necessity for socialist revolution.

Are the artists prepared for the crisis?

This evening we are primarily addressing some of the historically specific problems that artists confront, or the historically specific form that the struggle for artistic truth takes today.

Aleksandr Voronsky, the Soviet critic and opponent of Stalin, pointed out 70 years ago, in his essay “The Art of Seeing the World” (1928), that it was very difficult for the artist to discover and genuinely accept the world, to see the world as it is, independently of us, inherently complex and beautiful, “in all its freshness and immediacy.”

He pointed to the habits, prejudices, frustrations and the host of other pressures of everyday life that weigh us down, deadening “the sharpness and freshness of perception and attention” and lending reality “a peculiarly gray, doleful and wretched coloration.”

Against all this, the artist seeks out, Voronsky wrote, “unspoiled and genuine images of the world,” which he described as “the principal meaning and purpose of art.”

If Voronsky was correct, and I believe he was, telling the truth in art has always been a great struggle. It is a demanding mental and physical effort, not to be undertaken lightly.

But are there not particular difficulties today? And are there not specific failings? Why does it seem there is such a chasm between artistic efforts and the character of present-day life, which for masses of the world’s population involves a daily struggle for survival? Why does art so often seem indifferent or blind to the crisis of human society, and to great historical and social questions in general?

We don’t agree that the central focus for art should be the artist and his or her impressions, but the independently existing world and its complexity, including its social complexity.

We propose to fight for something different. In the first place, objective conditions will impose a change. There is no possibility of going about one’s business in the same way. The world situation has taken a dramatic turn in the past year, and no one can shut his or her eyes to that—no one, at any rate, who intends to be taken seriously.

We have made the point on numerous occasions, that all layers of American society are unprepared for the present crisis.

Wide layers of the population too are taken unawares, shocked and stunned by the events altering their lives. Sooner rather than later, that shock will bring about changes in political consciousness.

What about the artists and intellectuals—how prepared are they? How aligned are they to the realities of the situation?

To put it somewhat more concretely: is there a body of work, or a single major novel, film, play or other art work that in some fashion alerted the population to the smash-up that was coming? Not perhaps in the sense of providing a specific economic warning signal, but a work, or works, that pointed to deep dysfunction ... who was it, for example, pointed to the elemental fact that the monstrous accumulation of wealth out of parasitic and quasi-criminal means could not go on forever?

Has the theme of social inequality, for example, the central social problem in American life in recent decades, featured prominently or even as part of the backdrop for major works?

What conscious attention has been paid to the facts of stagnating or declining living standards for tens of millions? Given the history of the US, the persistence of the “American Dream,” America’s supposed “exceptionalism,” it would seem worthwhile to look into the conditions of those being tossed about by big changes. Were the myths about American life alive and well?

Where is the great novel or play or film about the Wall Street tycoon, the hedge fund manager, the financial speculator, which goes beyond commonplace judgments to broader and more historically insightful evaluations?

I could go on. These questions have a rhetorical element. We know the answers to them, by and large. It would be difficult to point to a single major work that provided a serious, universal critique of American life and indicated that things were going very, very badly. Critical pictures of life, large or small, but pictures that took as their point of departure opposition to the status quo and committed concern for the fate of the mass of the people.

I want to emphasize at the outset that the artistic landscape has not been a barren one. The spark of human genius has obviously not gone out. Far from it. One can point to remarkable individual films (or scenes), novels (or passages), individual paintings and so forth that go against the grain, that confront life in a richer manner. In popular culture too, there are obviously enormously gifted, ingenious and energetic people at work. The ability to create dazzling and startling images and sounds has reached qualitatively new heights; nothing seems technically out of reach of contemporary artists. A variety of new media offer almost limitless possibilities for communication.

Serious difficulties, however, remain. For example, there have been a number of sincere anti-war films made about Iraq and the Middle East (*Stop-Loss*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *Rendition*, *Battle for Haditha*, *Grace is Gone*, *The Situation* and others). But often such movies only go so far and no farther, or they contain a hodge-podge of left and quite right-wing patriotic notions.

It is difficult to point to a genuinely completed work, or body of work, in which the central challenge for any artist—how to shed light on life in this time and place in all its important dimensions?—is worked through exhaustively, to the very end, where the artist has given his or her all and made a substantial contribution to humanity’s understanding of itself.

For that, one has to have a coherent and integral view of life and society, something more painstakingly and deeply informed. One feels that the genuinely remarkable artist is not simply reacting to this or that immediate stimulus, with an impression or series of impressions, no matter how sincere, but has arrived at an understanding of and a feeling for the whole. Such a special gift of insight is not easily arrived at, but it makes itself felt in every aspect of a work, in its textures, its layeredness, its inescapable truth. We feel that in the great films of Welles and Chaplin and Ford, for example.

The fact that even entertaining the ambition to contribute to humanity’s understanding of itself sounds outlandish and presumptuous is an indicator of a difficult artistic period.

In novel writing, there have been serious efforts, but largely reworkings of the same themes, middle class discontent and anxiety, the self-observations and occasional self-loathing of the professional class, alternately tormented and self-satisfied, but rarely gazing beyond its apartment buildings and lofts.

The events of September 11 and its aftermath produced a flurry of novels—by Updike, DeLillo, Roth et al—and other works; understandably so, it was a major event. But one must say that the lack of historical insight into 9/11 is bound up with the general lack of interest in great historical and social questions, including the conditions of the broader population at home. The writers, many of whom live in New York or the Northeast, were shaken up by the terrorist attacks, but not driven to think

deeply about them.

There is little serious new theater worth talking about, and poetry is largely a lifeless, academic affair.

We have lived through several decades in which official life has been dominated by foul ideas—the worship of wealth and selfishness, religious bigotry, militarism and chauvinism, the law-and-order hysteria, the victimization of the poor, and so on. The counteroffensive against the working class began in the late 1970s and has essentially never let up.

Along the way, various liberal and left intellectuals caved in—without too much resistance, in many cases. They found it pleasant to be wealthy and be in with the people who counted.

The self-denial of the intelligentsia, its relatively modest economic status, was a thing of the past. They wanted spacious condos and expensive cars and seats at the best restaurants and houses in the south of France, and to look at and create art about themselves.

Much of the wealth accumulated was based, directly or indirectly, on the stock market and profits boom. All made possible by the increased exploitation of the working class, the lowering of wages and living standards that drove up share prices.

No one paid too much attention to any of that. The wealth poured in. Art galleries registered unprecedented prices for paintings, bought as investments by increasingly dubious figures. Until the crash of last September there were nearly 100 living American artists who were commanding a million dollars or more for a single work at auction. A recent article in *Newsweek* observed that until the crash began a new painter “showing for the first time in a barely reputable gallery was asking—and getting—\$10,000 to \$20,000 per picture.”

New York state’s attorney general has just indicted hedge fund manager Ezra Merkin for funneling \$2.4 billion into Bernard Madoff’s Ponzi scheme and reaping nearly half a billion dollars in fees. Merkin is also one of the world’s largest collectors of paintings by Mark Rothko. The total value of the collection is estimated at \$150 million to \$200 million. This is the New York art world.

The hedge funds, just before the crash, got into filmmaking. Leading actors became voices and faces for credit card companies and airlines and carmakers. A corrupt and orgiastic atmosphere prevailed, where everyone who could was cashing in. Did it occur to anyone that this was rotten and, moreover, doomed?

Vast amounts of wealth and complacency, and relatively little critical thought. Who could object to this astonishing moneymaking machinery, never mind that the Madoffs and Allen Stanfords and their only slightly more legitimate brethren at the major banks were at the controls?

The artistic-cultural atmosphere will not be cleansed until some accounting is made of the social indifference, the commercialization of art to the nth degree, the banality of so much of cultural life. How did it happen? Why did no one notice what was really going on in the world? Where was the elemental sympathy for the plight of others that ought to be integral to the artistic personality?

A concrete example: the city of Detroit, ravaged by the auto corporations. The population has been traumatized. Yet virtually no artistic reflection of this process, which would have an impact on the rest of the US population and global public opinion, has been made. In truth, the intellectuals have helped conceal the realities of American life, they have helped perpetuate the myth to the present moment that the US is basically a prosperous and contented country.

Now all that is in the process of coming down around people’s heads. The crisis will make itself felt one way or another. All sorts of individuals will make the necessary adjustments. There’s the danger that people who didn’t think too much before will go on not thinking too much and simply take two steps to the left, adapting themselves to the new situation.

American artists of previous periods offered insight into the general state and psyche of the country.

The post-World War I period produced *such* works as *Gatsby*, *An American Tragedy*, Hemingway’s first novels, Dos Passos, the Harlem Renaissance.

These artists saw and felt a society heading for a crack-up; the lie of the American Dream, the price paid for success, the awfulness of American materialism and commercialism and conformism. The artists followed these questions, worked them through.

The socialist movement had an immense presence. Modern culture generally, and modern American culture in particular, is unthinkable without the influence and impetus provided by the Marxist analysis of society. Not that the artists entirely shared that analysis, but its active presence was a critical element in their artistic and intellectual approach.

If you doubt this, read Fitzgerald’s letters, for example. He followed the developments in the Communist Party in the 1930s and called himself a “Marxian” without irony. The Stalinist degeneration of the USSR and the Communist Party was a factor in his own growing demoralization.

As it was for the entire American intelligentsia.

There is no doubt that the ‘great disappointment’ that set in during the late 1930s, as the realities of the Stalinist crimes became clear and the various revolutionary opportunities—in France, in Spain and elsewhere—were strangled and betrayed, played an immense role in creating the framework within which cynicism, social indifference and opportunism flourished.

But we want to consider some of the trends that played a role in the postwar period, further discouraging the artists from treating life in a serious and honest fashion.

The anti-communist witch-hunts

The anti-communist purge of the labor movement, the film industry and every other institution where it could be carried out in the late 1940s and early 1950s had a major impact on American cultural life.

Anti-communism had the aim of decapitating the workers movement in the US, reinforcing the domination of the right-wing labor bureaucracy and subordinating the working class to the Democratic Party and bourgeois politics. This permitted the American ruling elite to pursue its policy of Cold War “containment” and counter-revolution abroad.

A considerable section of the liberal intelligentsia had allied itself with Stalinism in the 1930s, during the period of the Popular Front. Without a revolutionary perspective itself, this liberal layer leaned on the Communist Party and Stalinism, and advocated a vague program of social reform in the US. The *Nation* magazine was a center for liberal, pro-Stalinist propaganda in the late 1930s, even apologizing for the show trials in Moscow that resulted in the extermination of much of the old Bolshevik leadership.

The Communist Party supported Roosevelt, and later the war effort, and prostrated itself before the supposedly liberal-minded sections of the ruling elite. Its members and supporters kept silent about the crimes of Stalin in the Soviet Union, Spain and elsewhere, and slandered the Trotskyists and those who exposed these crimes.

The needs of American imperialism in the aftermath of the war, when the temporary alliance with the USSR came to end, meant a sharp change in the political situation. CP members and supporters were now treated as “foreign agents” and “subversives,” aiming to undermine “American democracy” in the interests of the Kremlin. From 1947 onward, a great effort was launched by the government, the FBI, Congress and the media to drive left-wingers out of prominent positions in government, the film industry, the media, the universities and elsewhere.

Many of the Communist Party’s former allies (and enemies) among the

liberals joined in the effort, seeking to settle scores and win positions for themselves at the expense of the Stalinists. The CP, through its opportunism and defense of Stalin's crimes, helped soap the rope with which it was hanged.

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings between 1947 and 1953, the FBI surveillance and harassment, the imposition of loyalty oaths on masses of government employees, the passage of anti-subversive laws, the imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten and the prosecution of Communist Party leaders, the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs—all of this was intended to terrorize and intimidate the population. And it did a good deal of damage under conditions where American capitalism, after the upheavals of the 1930s and the post-World War II strike wave, could be forced to make substantial concessions to the working class.

The virtual criminalization of socialist ideas meant the narrowing and lowering of artistic and cultural life and the self-censorship of the artists and intellectuals. Two of the greatest figures of the American cinema, Chaplin and Welles, were effectively driven out of Hollywood. In addition, talented younger figures in the film industry, like Polonsky, Losey, Endfield and others, were blacklisted or exiled, along with countless gifted performers. Or take a Dashiell Hammett, the "inventor" of the hardboiled detective novel (*Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*), jailed for six months and blacklisted. Many others "repented," were tamed and became far less interesting as artists.

What was lost in filmmaking, for example? The "socially conscious artist" is a phrase that has been much abused, but used meaningfully it refers to a figure who has some overview of human behavior and circumstances, and treats those as historical and alterable. This would encourage a certain flexibility and even "lightness of touch" in whatever genre: historical drama, "screwball comedy" or murder mystery. Human beings are not predestined to be what they are at present. They have infinite possibilities. It should be an optimistic, exploratory view of things. Humanity as a fascinating work in progress, with the artist—himself or herself a participant in the process—"reporting" on the state of life. This set of ideas and feelings was substantially excised from movies.

Much was allowed after that, except the questioning of society's foundations. Of course, left-wing thought continued to hold influence in America in the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement would have been unthinkable without it. That goes for literature and film as well, within limits. On a world scale, socialism remained a powerful force in the consciousness of masses of people.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were years of enormous social upsurge. Revolution was a possibility in numerous countries; capitalism was never so close to being overthrown. In France, perhaps the greatest strike of modern times took place. In Italy, too, there were mass struggles with insurrectionary implications. Argentina experienced social convulsions. In Portugal the masses poured onto the streets to celebrate the downfall of a dictatorship. The Francoist regime in Spain collapsed, as did the "Regime of the Colonels" in Greece. The masses suffered a bitter defeat in Chile under Allende. An enormous and militant strike wave hit the US, in addition to the upheavals in the inner cities.

The tragedy of the radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s was the dominant role still played by the labor bureaucracies and Stalinism, along with Maoism, centrism and bourgeois nationalism. These elements played a destructive, counter-revolutionary role. It was not, in other words, simply the offensive of the ruling classes that led to the present intellectual impasse, but also the pernicious role played by these "left forces."

Particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was not possible to develop a perspective without a reworking of the historical experience of the 20th century, a project in which our party has been engaged since 1992. So much had happened, truly momentous events, that

needed to be explained—the disappearance of entire countries, civil wars in others, the global integration of the economy, the demise or decay of existing parties and organizations. The population was blithely informed that "History" had come to an end without being told what it had been composed of, what it all meant. Marxism had to offer an explanation, and the International Committee of the Fourth International did that. We continue to do it.

The present crisis will create the conditions whereby many of these problems can finally be confronted and overcome. The emergence of a consciously socialist and revolutionary current among the artists is a pressing need.

In our view, what the artists need first and foremost at present are historical insight and honesty. The poverty-stricken character of present-day Hollywood, for example, is bound up, above all, with the falsity and shallowness of so many of its images and ideas. And even the more critical films or television programs tend to accept at crucial moments commonplace and conformist ideas (including the essential greatness and legitimacy of "American democracy"). They are only critical to a point. They generally succumb to the various ideological and financial pressures.

The filmmakers and others lack deep insight into the social process, their ideas have not been worked through. They either believe in the present system or resign themselves to it. (For example, David Simon, the creator of the highly praised, socially critical HBO series, *The Wire*, recently told interviewer Bill Moyers: "Listen, capitalism is the only engine credible enough to generate mass wealth. I think it's imperfect, but we're stuck with it. And thank God we have that in the toolbox." This, in the face of worldwide economic breakdown and the discrediting of "free market" ideology.)

It's not possible to make an artistically convincing work that ignores or fails to address seriously the most burning human questions. Art depends upon utter sincerity.

There is a relationship between the commitment of the artist to work through his or her material, to reflect the world accurately and dynamically, on the one hand, and the final product and its impact on the spectator, reader or viewer, on the other. As Trotsky pointed out, the artist is not an empty machine for creating form and the spectator a machine for consuming it. They are both living beings with a psychology and outlook created by social conditions.

"A false idea, a false content cannot find a perfected form, i.e., cannot aesthetically move us in a profound manner," as Voronsky commented, following Belinsky and Plekhanov. A deceitful or evasive approach to life, one that conceals the real character of social relationships and perhaps the nature of the social order itself, has an impact on the artist's internal mechanism; it muddies things, it makes the imagery and feelings emerge half-heartedly, less convincingly. In our time, pyrotechnics (whether in the form of cinematic special effects, violence and bombast or the linguistic or visual "tour de force") often substitute themselves for genuine thought and analysis.

Of course, this problem has to be treated with great historic concreteness. Hollywood directors of a certain day believed deeply in democracy, justice and "the American way of life." They were able to make relatively honest and important films, although much of their thought was quasi-mythological. They believed in what they did, although even there we find weaknesses, large gaps, sentimentality, the glossing over of big questions.

No one honest with himself or herself could make a film defending the brutal war in Iraq or Afghanistan. We need novels about bankers, but it would not be possible to write an honest or artistic novel if one adopted uncritically the standpoint of the banker. That would provide too narrow a base for art. The self-justifications of the banker would not move anyone, because art is about communication between living, thinking beings, with their own knowledge and experience of the world.

How many literary or dramatic works at present contain characters who are entirely believable, who seem to possess a complete life? How many figures appear fully “of their time,” figures whose work and thoughts and feelings are bound up with the complexity of the period? Many grotesque and horrible situations are presented, often in isolation, overwrought and one-sided, not deeply situated in the conditions of the time.

New artistic forms today will arise out of new important aims. There is a great deal of chatter about the avant-garde and very little of it means anything at present. The emphasis on formal innovation is largely artificial and exhausts itself rapidly.

In any event, there is no such thing as a purely artistic avant-garde, for the reasons I’ve just discussed. There is no such thing, in fact, as the “purely artistic.” Art is not an immaterial element feeding on itself, but a function of social men and women, inseparably tied to their lives and circumstances.

To be in the genuine avant-garde today means, first of all, to take stock of life and society and draw the necessary critical conclusions. And if the artist approaches life fully and honestly, the spectator or reader will tend to draw the social conclusions that flow from the circumstances.

We are confident that such an avant-garde, which would truly live up to its name, will develop the appropriate artistic forms.

The Frankfurt School and Postmodernism

The long-lasting impact of anti-communism on American life is one source of the present difficulties, but it is by no means the entire story. There are other aspects of the problem, perhaps more complex.

There is no avoiding a discussion of historical questions, including perhaps a discussion of figures and trends with which you may not be familiar. Events before many of you were born and developments that may go untreated in the classrooms and contemporary media have shaped the present cultural situation and the current mood among the artists. And the views of a host of thinkers you may not know trickle down and find their way into the universities and media today.

As I indicated, the socialist aspirations of the artists (and not only the artists) were dealt a severe blow by the consolidation of the Stalinist regime in the USSR, the betrayal of the principles of the Russian Revolution and the transformation of Soviet cultural life into a “concentration camp,” in Trotsky’s words. The Communist parties of the world did immeasurable damage in dragging the noblest ideas through the mud.

This was not simply a theoretical and spiritual devastation. Inside the Soviet Union and wherever they could get their hands on left-wing opponents outside the USSR, the Stalinist bureaucracy and its secret police eliminated socialist intellectuals and workers. In 1937, for example, it is estimated that 1,000 Communists a day were being given brief trials and shot in Moscow. Intellectuals, workers, artists—individuals who had given their entire lives to the cause of socialism.

Voronsky, along with many others, fell victim to the Stalinist purges. Leading artist victims in the USSR included the famed stage director Meyerhold, the playwright Tretyakov, the writer Babel, the poet Mandelstam, the novelist Pilnyak and countless others.

These blows did incalculable damage, along with the blows of Hitler and Mussolini and European reaction. A considerable portion of the great Marxist intelligentsia was physically wiped out between 1919—Rosa Luxemburg’s assassination—and 1940—the year of Trotsky’s death. The first victorious workers revolution in Russia in 1917 provoked a sustained and furious counterrevolutionary response.

Our movement survived physically, but under difficult conditions for

many years. The trends that remained standing, so to speak, and were widely considered “Marxist” in the aftermath of the Stalinist and fascist onslaughts against socialism had little in common with Bolshevism.

I am referring in particular to the so-called Frankfurt School, the school of Critical Theory, individuals such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and others. Whether or not you know these names, they have influenced, directly or indirectly, the approach taken by academics in various disciplines, and many artists themselves. Go into many university bookstores, and you will see shelves devoted to “Critical Theory.”

If you encounter the conception that Enlightenment rationalism led to the ruthless domination of nature by humankind and that modern science itself is threatening and totalitarian in its implications.... If you read or learn that modern society is a “totally administered” nightmare from which all exits have been blocked.... If you are told that the working class has been embourgeoisified, that, indeed, the workers are in with love their exploiters and their exploitation.... Then you may be encountering, in fragmentary form, the influence of the Frankfurt School.

Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others witnessed, as German Jewish political exiles, the greatest tragedy of modern history, the victory of fascism. It is not our aim or interest to demonize anyone. The triumph of Hitlerian bestiality, with all its consequences, in the most cultured country in Europe, was a traumatizing event.

However, the Marxist movement underwent the same experience and drew certain conclusions about modern imperialism in crisis and the parties and leaderships of the working class that had allowed the victory of fascism to take place. Trotsky concluded that it was necessary to break from the Communist International and form our movement, the Fourth International, to put an end once and for all to the system responsible for the concentration camps and other hideous crimes.

The members of the Frankfurt School drew quite different lessons. They concluded that the effort of the socialist movement to make a rational appeal to the working class had failed. They became increasingly pessimistic about the workers’ revolutionary potential. The leading figures in the Frankfurt School determined that culture, the mass media, education and the family played a direct role in maintaining oppression. [1]

These are all factors. We pay close attention in particular to culture and the media, that’s why we’re holding this meeting—but we are historical materialists. Our starting point is the existence of a society and class struggle existing outside us, objectively, relatively independent of individual consciousness. The great changes that come about do not originate in consciousness—although they come to be reflected in human thinking—but in this objective social struggle and the economic facts of life. The media and other social factors play a role—they may hinder, block, impede, confuse, mystify, and we combat them, but they are not the ultimately determining factors.

One of the important works of the Frankfurt School is *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by Adorno and Horkheimer, published in 1944, toward the end of the war. The authors draw the direst and most misguided conclusions from the experience of Nazism.

They argue that the project of human beings pursuing knowledge itself has authoritarian consequences, leading ultimately to the construction of the gas chambers. Humanity takes control of nature to control and dominate it. “Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them.”

This is not simply giving up on Marxism and the working class, but on rational thought, science, and the last several hundred years of historical progress.

The section in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on “The Culture Industry”

contains a number of striking passages, but in their unrelieved (and ultimately tedious) hostility to popular consciousness and popular culture in the US, Adorno and Horkheimer prove lamentably “undialectical.” There is hardly a hint here of a historical understanding of the problems and contradictions of American society and culture.

The war and the Nazi crimes helped shape the special grimness of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but the conclusions did not come out of the blue. Herbert Marcuse, another leading figure of the Frankfurt School, who significantly influenced the student protest movement of the 1970s with works such as *One-Dimensional Man*, had drawn the conclusion that art and culture were essentially repressive in an essay in 1937, *The Affirmative Character of Culture*.

In that essay Marcuse argued that art was particularly problematic because it has the unique capacity to provide an illusion of happiness in the present, unlike religion or philosophy. Through the beauty of a work of art, according to Marcuse, the individual’s discontent with the world is momentarily suspended, and thus art, by making the beautiful appear possible within the existing oppressive conditions, “pacifies rebellious desire.... Men can feel themselves happy even without being so at all.”

Marcuse suggests that centuries of culture have served to accommodate human beings to the contradiction between the society’s professed ideals and its brutal reality, and, in fact, play no small part in the willingness of individuals to “march with so little trouble in the communal columns of the authoritarian state,” that is, participate willingly in the fascist movements or armies.

These are false views, in my opinion, whose ideological roots lie in German subjective idealist philosophy. There is an actual content to art, not simply the beauty of form. Not content as a lump, or a single “message,” but “a living complex of moods and ideas which seek artistic expression.” (Trotsky) Art can make a deep, objective penetration of existence, its development, its history, its contradictions. What if—in and through art—individuals learn something about their “unfreedom,” about their social existence, what if their discontent, in fact, is deepened?

In various spheres of social life or culture, Frankfurt School thinkers work backward from their conclusion about the impossibility of social revolution and assert why the particular sphere renders rebellion impossible, why it disciplines, conditions, suppresses, mutilates, distorts. But Marxists understand that capitalist social life contains contradictions, objective impulses, which—reflected in human consciousness—educate, develop, sensitize, prepare, test, broaden.

The conclusion of Marcuse, Adorno and others that humanity’s cultural heritage is essentially repressive, that it serves, in the end, to defend the existing political and economic system, is not at all the Marxist conception, although it has widely been accepted as the “left-wing” view, especially in academic circles, for much of the past half-century or more.

We regard spiritual and material culture as a contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, culture embodies everything that humanity has built, learned and created in the struggle for the improvement of its existence; on the other, because human development has necessarily proceeded through the evolution of class society, culture has a class character and serves those in power.

In the struggle against capitalism we base ourselves on the entire heritage of human culture, without which the working class cannot raise itself up and rebuild society on higher foundations. Of course we treat this culture from our own standpoint, dispensing with some elements, religion, for example, accepting some others more or less en bloc (advances in science and technology, for example) and working over others critically, including artistic achievements.

The arguments of the Frankfurt School had implications for art, and their influence has been widespread. These were articulate figures, with a wide knowledge of culture and claiming a connection to Marxism, who

wrote off the working class and the objective possibilities of social revolution. Their disorientation found a response in sections of the intelligentsia who were all too ready to turn away from the difficult struggle for socialist principles. These once obscure figures found a considerable following for their ideas in the postwar period.

The serious artistic picturing of contemporary life was of little interest to the Frankfurt School. The emphasis was placed on the psychic shortcomings of the population, its repressed sexuality and other drives. Only a different kind of human being could bring about freedom. This is Marcuse in particular, who championed a revival of utopianism.

We reject that. We base ourselves in art, too, on the real development of society, not our fantasies or wishes. Half-jokingly, in an argument with Soviet Futurism, Trotsky suggested one time that “Presentism” might be given a try. American artists could use a serious confrontation with present-day life as well.

Mere photographic realism is not the aim. The artist must also be a social scientist and a psychologist; he or she must know what to look for, to get at the deepest currents. The artist focuses his or her attention on critical elements, not diverted by the mass of detail. His or her efforts correspond to the nature and properties of the object under investigation. The audience will experience the same process.

There is nothing passive about artistic cognition of this kind, nor is the audience reduced to passivity. A serious attitude toward the existing social order will show it to be transitory, merely one stage in human development. Such an understanding will find its way into the artist’s approach, not arbitrarily or in a contrived manner, but as a necessary and organic element. The eruption of popular upheaval will encourage such an approach.

Nor are artists going to return to Tolstoy or Courbet and the realism of the 19th century (although a study of such figures would only be beneficial). There is a great deal in the spontaneity, ingenuity and individuality developed by modern artists that is important and valuable. Those qualities, in our view, have to be put to use to produce more intense, richer pictures of an objectively existing world; and the more insightful the pictures, the more critical and revolutionary their impact will be.

It would not be appropriate to discuss the current artistic and cultural crisis without referring to the deplorable role played by varieties of post-structuralism and postmodernism in recent decades.

The defeat of the 1968 general strike in particular permitted the French intellectuals to rid themselves of the remnants of their old “Marxism.” They could finally say goodbye “to all that.” Not bound any longer by any constraints, the postmodernists eventually disdained the effort to make coherent sense of society and history, ushering in a wild relativism and irrationalism.

In one fashion or another, these arguments have influenced various disciplines in the universities for decades and filtered into the broader society, including artistic thinking. And these are often passed off as “left” and “radical” ways of seeing things. A central argument revolves around the hostility to objective truth, i.e., the possibility of reflecting the world and its properties accurately. Such a project is rejected out of hand by postmodernism. Everything depends on one’s perspective; all truth is socially and self-interestedly constructed. The phrases may be familiar: “the crisis of representation,” “the instability of meaning,” “the rejection of meta-narratives or grand narratives.”

The arguments, when the dense language is peeled away, are often puerile. From the fact that human consciousness reflects the world imperfectly, approximately, with *relative* objectivity, the postmodern thinkers chose to conclude that an *absolute* divide existed between thinking and the objective world.

A commentator says of Jean-François Lyotard, the author of *The*

Postmodern Condition and originally a leftist, for example, that he opposed “modern reason, Enlightenment, totalizing thought, and philosophies of history,” in other words, any attempt to derive the law-governed character of history and society, much less base a political practice upon it.

He held the view that “reality consists of singular events which cannot be represented accurately by rational theory. For Lyotard, this fact has a deep political import, since politics claims to be based on accurate representations of reality.” [2]

In politics, in fact, this is an argument for uncontrolled opportunism, since it is impossible to generalize from any of the experiences of the past. One is always starting from zero, with a blank slate.

Lyotard, we are told, favored heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation, local rules and “micropolitics.” While the postmodernist thinkers bitterly disagreed among themselves, they all agreed that Marxism had “privileged” the working class in an impermissible fashion, and in many cases they provided the theoretical arguments for the various reformist single-issue social movements and identity politics, rooted in gender and ethnicity, “micropolitics” in practice.

The attack on universalism has had terrible consequences for the artist. If everyone has his or her own narrative, all equally valid or invalid, if truth is entirely relative, if the representation of the world is an impossible undertaking, where does this leave the artist who wants to communicate his or her ideas and feelings and believes them to be important and universal? Art, like all cognition, is universalizing by its very nature.

The act of creating art is a presumptuous one: the artist assumes that he or she has something illuminating and original to convey. There are no half-measures in art, no half-victories. The attack by the postmodernists and others on the objectively truthful character of artistic representation reduces art to a game, a purely formal exercise, whatever you like, anything but a serious struggle for truth in which the artist is prepared to pay the highest cost, and in which the stakes are immense.

What are the consequences of postmodernism for art? Look around at much of contemporary visual art, for instance—cold, clever, “conceptual,” as unfeeling and uncommitted as stone. These moods and trends, including identity politics, have encouraged self-involvement, narcissism, social indifference, cynicism....

* * *

Briefly, then, these are some of the problems that in our view create special difficulties for creative life at present, that continue to “ensnare” the artist.

The artists, in our view, must orient themselves toward investigating our reality, bringing to bear all the creativity and depth of feeling available to the human heart and mind, to represent the present human condition in its complexity and dynamism. Such a task, carried out honestly, will inevitably bring them closer to the struggle for socialism in the working class. Art cannot save itself, its fate is tied to the rebuilding of society on a higher basis.

This requires a major intellectual effort that cannot be avoided. The artist must have great intuition, but intuition is not everything in art. The conscious, rational, cognitive side of art-making has been underemphasized for decades. The artist must once again learn to think critically and deeply. Marxism will prove to be indispensable in that effort.

Notes:

1. “The Frankfurt School began in the early 1930s to utilize psychoanalytic concepts in social analysis, in large part as a result of an increasing pessimism about the revolutionary potential of the working class. Freudian theory, they hoped, would help explain the psychic sources of mass instinctual conservatism—’the misplaced love for the wrong which is done them,’ as Adorno and Horkheimer wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—if properly filtered through a revised Marxist perspective

on industrial society.” (*Marxism and Modernism; an historical study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, Eugene Lunn, 1984, University of California Press)

“The first generation of the Frankfurt School...emphasized the negative and oppressive aspects of modernity. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* short-circuits the Marxist theory of revolution by positing a self-producing, stabilized capitalist system without any significant revolutionary opposition. The theory of revolution loses its historical grounding in a revolutionary proletariat and becomes a utopian ideal. Thus, capitalist modernity is, in effect, presented in much critical theory as a self-producing and stabilizing system of commodity production and exploitation under the domination of capital.” (*Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, 1991, The Guilford Press)

2. Ashley Woodward, University of Queensland, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy



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