

David Walsh speaks on “Socialism and Cinema”

David Walsh
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Arts editor David Walsh spoke October 25 on “Socialism and Cinema,” at the University of Salford in the Greater Manchester area in the UK, as part of the “Screens and Meditations” series. We are posting an edited version of the talk.

“Socialism and Cinema” is a rather general title for a meeting, but a provocative one, and meant to be provocative. There is ample reason to be dissatisfied with the films currently offered to us. It was a terrible summer for movies in the US, by and large—in some ways worse than ever.

The title of this talk has at least two meanings, or it points in two historical directions. In the first place, we are arguing that the best film work in the past—including at the US studios—was inconceivable without the powerful presence of socialist ideas and a socialist movement.

And, second, we assert there will be no serious revival of global cinema until there is again such a presence and influence, and, in fact, the emergence of a consciously socialist and revolutionary tendency in filmmaking and criticism.

The first point can be proven empirically, in the histories of national cinemas and biographies of individual filmmakers. I do not propose to go into that extensively today.

At York University in Toronto in Jan 2007 I attempted, in a preliminary way, to present a brief history of filmmaking from the point of view of the indispensability of left-wing influence, specifically on Hollywood. (See “Film, history and socialism” Part One and Part Two)

One could point to the European émigrés in Hollywood in the pre-World War II period, some of them politically left-wing, others not, but all the products of cultural life in Berlin, Vienna, Budapest and other European cities, where the socialist workers movement played a central role and where the experience and example of the Russian Revolution (along with the defeated German and Hungarian Revolutions) carried extraordinary weight. We are not referring simply to directors, but performers, cinematographers, composers, designers, and so on. This helps account for the texture, the depth of the studio films at the time.

In terms of developments in the US itself, the shattering impact of the Depression, along with the dangers posed by the rise of fascism in Europe, radicalized artists and intellectuals. The Communist Party gained considerable influence in the film industry. By the time of World War II, for example, some 25 to 30 percent of the most regularly employed

writers at the studios were CP members. Of course, the Party by this time was a thoroughly Stalinized organization, but nonetheless the writers’ affiliation provides some indication of the leftward movement of this layer.

Among actors, of course, two writers on “Radical Hollywood,” Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, comment that the FBI believed that “Lucille Ball, Katharine Hepburn, Olivia de Havilland, Rita Hayworth, Humphrey Bogart, Danny Kaye, Fredric March, Bette Davis, Lloyd Bridges, John Garfield, Anne Revere, Larry Parks, some of Hollywood’s highest-paid writers, and for that matter the wives of March and Gene Kelly, along with Gregory Peck’s fiancée, [were] all in or close to the party.” There were many others. Edward G. Robinson met Trotsky in Mexico City, through his contact with the painter Diego Rivera.

Film directors in and around the Communist Party included Abraham Polonsky, Nicholas Ray, Joseph Losey, Elia Kazan, Robert Rossen, Jules Dassin, John Berry, Martin Ritt, Edward Dmytryk and others. Perhaps the three greatest figures of the American cinema—Chaplin, John Ford and Orson Welles—were all, one way or another, men of the left. John Huston was another ...

The anticommunist purges had a devastating impact on Hollywood and American cultural life as a whole, with consequences we still live with today. As we have frequently noted, left-wing thought was essentially criminalized and made illegitimate, in an effort jointly undertaken by the extreme right, the forces of the state and American liberalism. Liberalism’s pact with the anti-communist devil in the postwar period meant its demise as a force in any way identified with social progress.

I asserted in that 2007 presentation in Toronto that the last two decades had been the weakest in film history, not because the spark of human genius had gone out, but for reasons bound up, above all, with problems in social development. These problems have had a particular impact in the area of politics and art, especially film, drama and literature, where an understanding of historical laws and social processes plays so large a part.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the propaganda about the end of socialism, and the decay or collapse of the traditional labor organizations had an enormous impact on the intellectuals and artists in the 1990s and beyond—a considerable section of the upper middle class “left” shifted to the right, turned its back on social problems, enriching itself, concentrating in film on its own trivial activities.

We argue that all serious art contains the element of protest, direct or indirect, against the conditions of life, and that all serious criticism of social life gravitates toward Marxism—not postmodernism or “Western Marxism,” but genuine Marxism, based on the working class. A decline in

the influence of Marxism, the result primarily of Stalinism and its crimes, the eventual demise of the USSR, and the barrage of anticommunism, helped produce a decline in critical thought and work, a temporary cultural regression. It is not accidental that the falling off in filmmaking, one of the most socially communicative art forms, coincided with a low point in social struggle—certainly in the US, with strike activity in recent years reaching low levels without precedent in the modern era. Major strike activity has declined in the US almost to zero, statistically speaking.

Here we are in 2010. Our situation contradicts the superficial impressionists and right-wing ideologues. History did not end in 1991, as it turned out—indeed it has become especially lively since September 2008 and the near collapse of the world financial system, which has produced economic hardship unseen since the Depression.

In the US, there are 25 million unemployed or involuntarily working part-time; more than 1 million individuals or families will lose their homes this year. There has been an extraordinary growth in poverty. In the state of Michigan, once the center of the auto industry, household income declined *21 percent* during the past decade, a staggering decline, especially when you consider the very rich are richer than ever—we are inflicted with more billionaires now than in 2006.

Estimates put the real number of those living in poverty in the US, those unable to make ends meet, at 80 million to 100 million people. People feel deep, deep fury at the banks, Wall Street, the politicians. There is no popular language too strong for the bankers.

And the Barack Obama phenomenon has proven to be a political mirage, an utter fraud. The American ruling elite made a tactical shift with Obama, who has carried out policies—the bank bailout, the prosecution of colonial wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan, a cold indifference to the growth of poverty and unemployment—every bit as rotten and reactionary as his predecessor. Which is why the Democrats are likely to lose the upcoming election on November 2. This is not because there is some shift to the right going on in the US—on the contrary—but because there are two big business parties and under the present political system protest against the ruling party can only be expressed by sitting at home or voting for the other swine, both of which are likely to happen in this case.

The banks were bailed out globally to the tune of trillions of dollars, and now that has to be carved out of the hide of the population, through austerity measures, savage cuts in social spending. This is a universal phenomenon. The initial stage of working class response has resulted in mass protest in Greece, Spain and now France. The same is inevitable in this country, on a vast scale, in response to the unprecedented cuts proposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. There may be much confusion—and the working class here is saddled with unions and leaderships who, despite paying occasional lip service to opposition, agree with the major parties that British capitalism has to be made competitive and the banking system stabilized by wiping out half a century or more of working class gains—but these measures will, in the end, precipitate social upheaval.

So when we begin to discuss any of the questions involved with our subject this evening, we are mindful of these facts. We are not floating in empty space, but working and thinking in a definite set of circumstances, on the eve of social upheavals on a global scale. Should that have an influence on filmmakers and filmmaking? Yes, I believe it should. We believe intellectuals and artists, if they want their work to dig deeply into things and make a powerful impact, however they translate this reality into their aesthetic language and means, will have to take the character of

the epoch as a starting point: an epoch of sharp shifts, shocks and upheavals.

I think there is another side to it: the emergence of mass movements against capitalism, including and perhaps especially in the US, will begin to dissipate much of the global skepticism and pessimism. This will generate a quite different social atmosphere, a different artistic climate than the one that has prevailed for the past 30 years in particular. Such a movement will not solve all the problems, but it will make the problems much more solvable, it will put many things into perspective. Much that seems impossible or fantastic at the moment—in terms of audiences for more serious work, means of publicizing and distributing such work, the reemergence of more substantial and searching art itself—will prove to be within our grasp. This is not to paint pretty pictures, immense challenges are also bound up with a period of social struggle, but the challenges will be more interesting than most of the recent ones.

I would prefer to concentrate today, as I've probably already indicated, not so much on the history of cinema and this history of left-wing influence, but on the need for more critical filmmaking in our day, including the development of a consciously socialist current.

One could argue, I think, given the crying conditions in which the vast majority of the world's population lives and the threats (economic, military, ecological) to humanity that the continued existence of capitalism represents, that it seems high time opposition to the status quo became more widespread among film artists. It doesn't seem unreasonable given the historic failure of capitalism to suggest that one of the most powerful and popular art forms, an art form entirely bound up with the vicissitudes of the 20th century, should align itself more thoughtfully and compassionately with the way life actually is.

Nor does it seem unreasonable to say to the self-centered layers who have dominated the film world for the past several decades in particular: Enough about you! We would like to see a bit more of the world, we would like to see something aside from these superficial and not very edifying pictures of yourselves—I don't think it's too much to ask.

Of course, life is far more complex than that. The transition to a richer cinema will not take place automatically, because it is 'historically overdue,' or as the result of somewhat formal arguments, as reasonable as they may be. We are dealing with enormously complex processes: the relation between the artistic imagination and social reality, the inevitable lag between social reality and its reflection in thinking in general, the specific difficulties presented by the past decades of political life, the legacy of anticommunism, the role of various ideologies (especially prevalent on university campuses and among intellectuals) parading as Marxism, etc. And there is the not insignificant issue of the ownership of the media and film industry, especially in the US, by a handful of giant conglomerates. But the effort has to be undertaken. It has to be fought for.

In the US we tend to be saddled at the moment with either stupid and forgettable blockbusters; Quentin Tarantino and his imitators, including the porno-sadistic element, who are helping to inure the population to brutality and cruelty; the self-indulgent efforts of 'independent' filmmakers, who haven't lived through or understood much; 'small-bore,' passive realism; or slight character studies that do not stick in the memory. Writing for television is sometimes more interesting at the moment—with all their limitations, series such as *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, *Hung*, etc., seem to bear a greater resemblance to life than most film efforts.

There are obviously sincere and serious people at work at present. It is generally an encouraging experience to attend the Toronto film festival, for example, which I've been doing now for 17 years on behalf of the *World Socialist Web Site* or its predecessors.

We always or nearly always encounter a number of serious films and filmmakers in Toronto. I have been surprised and pleased at times—given the generally poisonous ideological atmosphere—by the fact that there are still a considerable number of people who are using their brains, who feel something for human difficulties, who are not swept away by the dominant social indifference. And that number will only grow.

This year we saw and commented on a number of interesting works, from the US, from here, from Norway, from Spain, from Kyrgyzstan, from South Korea, from Iran.

As we wrote: “The more serious film writers, directors, producers and performers see and feel the impact of certain things: the global financial crisis, the deteriorating conditions of life for tens of millions, the vast social fissures that have opened up everywhere, the general hypocrisy and hatefulness of those in power, the ongoing neocolonial wars in the Middle East and Central Asia....

“These phenomena and their interconnections are not yet understood at a highly conscious level, nor is a political and social alternative grasped by a great many, but the development of the world is inevitably making itself felt. To absorb the truth of the world and express it in images, to find the most artistic means of coming to terms with life—this remains the ‘most difficult inner labor’ for the filmmaker.”

We spoke to a number of directors and writers, including director Ken Loach and screenwriter Paul Laverty: the latter conversation raised a host of interesting questions. I think Loach is a serious figure, a limited figure, but someone who has maintained his principles.

Ken Loach learned something from the Trotskyist movement: a confidence in the working class, the understanding that Stalinism was the opposite of socialism and that the socialist transformation of society was necessary to prevent catastrophe. But this didn't solve all his problems. He has been isolated, many “lefts” of his generation deserted, the younger generations expressed little interest for some time. To be fair, his artistic limitations are also a product in part of this isolation and these unfavorable conditions.

At the same time, the influence of Trotskyism among the intellectuals here—a legacy of the efforts of Gerry Healy and the Socialist Labour League in the late 1960s and early 1970s—meant that when the collapse of the USSR and Stalinism came in 1989-91, the former didn't simply fall to pieces, because they had learned that Stalinism was the enemy of socialism. That's one of the reasons why you have had generally left-wing figures continue to work here, while elsewhere in Europe we have seen almost the virtual collapse of such filmmaking.

One of our pieces on the Toronto film festival was headlined “Walking around and near the problems,” which comes from an essay by the Soviet literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky, a Bolshevik, an adherent of the Left Opposition, who was murdered in the Stalinist purges in 1937. Voronsky spoke about artists approaching reality, but drawing away in fear, or overwhelmed by the difficulty of looking life straight in the face.

I think the comment has a bearing on our current circumstances. A growing awareness exists about the massive human crisis, expressed by so

many developments: the economic suffering, the consequences of neocolonial war or communalist conflicts, the conditions facing refugees and immigrants, the physical and psychological harshness of everyday life for so many, the brutality and indifference of the authorities, the deep sense of alienation from all existing institutions and authorities—without a grasp as of yet of or confidence in any viable alternative.

The development of the world determines the development of art—but this is a highly contradictory determination, mediated by many historical and social factors.

What holds back a more direct engagement by film writers and directors with the world, at least the world as it is experienced by the great majority of the population? I want to emphasize no one is attempting to limit the territory that the artist can explore—the life of the middle classes, including the upper middle classes, is an entirely legitimate subject. The problem is that the films about these social layers are not profound, or honest.

Make films about anything, the most personal matters, or the most socially sweeping, but make them with deep feeling and commitment, with precision, and elegance, and knowledge, and if you leave out the quality of our life at this point, the specific character of our historical moment and dilemmas, even your most lyrical efforts will be devoid of substance.

It is one of the signs of intellectual regression in our day that artists, encouraged by swarms of “left” ideologues, believe they can (or perhaps even *should!*) avoid economic conditions, the conditions of everyday life, changes in social life, when they consider the relations between individuals, including at the most intimate level. The detail is everything, the broader picture is nothing.

In my view, such notions have had the most pernicious consequences for art. To consider emotional life, psychic life, sexual life held quite apart from history and social development qualitatively falsifies the human condition. It makes accurate portraits of life impossible. It is a regression, frankly, in terms of the development of film and literature itself. And this ‘holding apart’ is even made into a program!

“Identity politics,” the concentration on various gender or racial issues, has had dreadful consequences for art and film as well. Such views are damaging aesthetically because they are false: the world is not divided along sexual or ethnic lines. The picture established on the basis of such positions is an inevitably inaccurate and distorted one, aesthetically unpleasing and incapable of fully engaging us. A false idea “cannot find a perfected form, i.e., cannot aesthetically move us in a profound manner,” as Aleksandr Voronsky noted, following Plekhanov and others.

Identity politics encourages the striving for privileges by layers of the middle class, and it breeds self-involvement, narcissism, self-pity. Art demands absolute sincerity and honesty, and some considerable degree of objectivity, or at least the ability to get oneself out of the way during the process of creation. To begin (and often end!) in art with one's own ‘life and hard times’ is a poor and unreliable method of work.

Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Edith Wharton and others examined the world, as well as their place in it, with an extraordinarily clear and unflinching gaze and, on that basis, produced indelible work. There is nothing comparable in the recent period, changing what must be changed, and for definite political and ideological reasons.

Every aspect of life needs to be treated, but seriously, evocatively treated. Trotsky speaks about the artist needing a “definite feeling for the world”: i.e., not to evade life, or ignore it, or elevate oneself above it, but to accept life and reality as the basis for art. Not to accept the existing social organism, but to accept our life of three dimensions as the basis for filmmaking, and to explore all sides of it, relentlessly, freely, honestly.

This presupposes, and this is a breathtaking presupposition on many university campuses at present, that our subjective sensations have, or can have, an objective significance, that we cognize an objective world independent of us.

What, as I say, are the principal obstacles to richer, more complex work? Human beings have not lost the spark of genius—we see in it technology, medicine, science in general, with their astonishing advances. We still have eyes, ears, brains—the difficulties are primarily of a social and historical character: traumas, betrayals, disappointments bound up with setbacks to the cause of world social revolution and the crimes of Stalinism, the discrediting of socialism in the eyes of millions. Generations of artists were disillusioned, discouraged, their perspective narrowed and stunted. The artist is told that a concern for social life and the fate of the population has been tried and failed. ‘Good-bye to all that.’

And of course there was real reason for concern on the part of the artists: the concentration camp of art that Stalinism established in the Soviet Union and the repressive, destructive character of various theories of so-called “Socialist Realism” and “Proletarian Culture,” which had limiting and damaging consequences for artists and filmmakers around the world. A quite legitimate reaction took place against the lack of spontaneity, the lack of unhampered artistic freedom, associated with even genuine social realist trends after the Second World War. All of this has hampered more serious treatment of life.

But the terror today against being associated with picturing social life, or taking some sort of a social stand, of speaking openly and frankly about the existing social order! This has to be addressed. It is genuinely debilitating. Where is the disgust, the derision, the scorn artists of an earlier day were unafraid to heap on bourgeois society?

Of course many things come into play, but if a figure in the film industry in the US today dares to make a comment about the Iraq war or some other atrocity, he or she then has to apologize for the next six weeks in the media, and genuflect before ‘American democracy’ and reassure the media that he or she really does believe the US is the greatest country on earth—it’s repugnant, and it can’t go on. It blocks a penetrating view of things.

Benjamin Péret, the French surrealist (and Trotskyist for a time), used to spit every time he passed a priest or a nun on the street. We have no reason to imitate that sort of behavior, but greater disrespect for nation, president, king or queen, and church would be entirely appropriate—we encourage every ounce of politically coherent disrespect for the bourgeois order and its institutions, we attempt to incite it and build it up.

Prescriptions and writing to order, even with the best of intentions, kill art—no one with any brains or sensitivity would suggest or put up with such a situation. But if art is not about the biggest human problems—and not simply the petty concerns of a relative handful attempting to come to terms with their anxieties and self-doubts, or worse, grappling with career moves and vaguely “finding themselves”—than what is it?

Those who speak about the ‘purely artistic’ or the ‘purely formal’ are

talking through their hats. Those phrases have no meaning: the artist is not an empty machine for producing form and the spectator/reader/viewer is not an empty machine for consuming it. They are both social creatures, living in, shaped by and responding to definite social and historical circumstances. Those who base themselves primarily or exclusively on the “transhistorical,” that is to say, on elementary physiological and psychological conditions largely unrelated to the qualities of the here and now, are making an enormous mistake.

Art is not a product in its most striking features of the lowest common denominator, but of what makes life what it is as a social phenomenon, and human nature what it is as the ensemble of social relations. Otherwise, there would be no change in art and we would be doing the same thing the old Greeks or the Elizabethans did, and this is clearly not the case. There are problems that are specific to us, as much as there are constants in life which make it possible for us to feel and learn from art works of past ages. Past artists did not become enduring by setting out to do self-consciously “timeless” work, but by penetrating their own circumstances so deeply that they raised certain problems and representations above the immediate—and that is the responsibility of the filmmaker or artist in the present circumstances.

In the work of an Orson Welles or a Luchino Visconti, for example, one encounters an enormous seriousness about the historical moment, the social dynamics, the complexity of social relations, as well as an utter commitment to the truth about the individual, about human behavior—a tracing out of the relations between the social and the individual in a vivid and convincing, lifelike manner. These are films made from life, not from schemas, but made with real social and historical knowledge.

Social circumstances have shaped the current difficulties. We do not hold the individual artist responsible. As much as possible, we stay away from denouncing individual figures. These are objective problems. What have the film writers and directors seen? What do they know about life, social struggle, mass movement, opposition?

The struggle for artistic truth is difficult under all circumstances. It demands everything, for the important artist it poses itself as a life-and-death issue. Today’s filmmakers, instead, for the most part, have *careers*. Much of this will come to be seen as a curse, a burden.

One has to feel considerable optimism. Neither society nor filmmaking starts from zero. The history of both is lodged in the present moment. It has to be studied, extracted, worked through, as part of the process of coming to terms artistically with our times, our problems.

A great challenge has to be wedding the explosive new technologies, which are capable of the most astonishing imagery, the rapid forms of communication, the dynamics and the refinement of artistic devices brought into being in recent decades, with a far richer social and historical understanding. Important art is not created by accident, you do not stumble on it. As Hegel suggests, it does not come to the artist in his or her sleep. The unconscious and non-rational play a greater part in art than in science, but they are not the only elements. The artist needs to know something important, in order to feel and think more deeply.

Along these lines, with artists having lost much of the oppositional characteristics that were more widespread earlier in the past century, the role of Marxism, Trotskyism, is much more substantial in our period. We are called on to shed light on the general course of development and assist the artists with the great problems of artistic and historical perspective. This is what we have dedicated ourselves to at the *World Socialist Web*

Site.



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