

WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh speaks at Wayne State University in Detroit

Our reporter
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World Socialist Web Site Arts Editor David Walsh spoke at Wayne State University in Detroit Wednesday on his new book *The Sky Between the Leaves*. The event, sponsored by the WSU chapter of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, drew an audience of about 70 people, including students, Detroit city workers, retirees, teachers, artists and professional workers.

In his discussion of *The Sky Between the Leaves* and related issues, Walsh emphasized that the book had been published by the Trotskyist movement as part of its effort “to contribute to the cultural and political development of the working class and the youth.” The urgency of the social and political situation “demands a revolutionary response” and art has to play a role in helping the population to see the world the way it is without illusions.

One of the themes of the collection of reviews, essays and interviews is that there is a crisis in art and filmmaking expressed in their inability to reflect life in a rich and complex manner in recent decades. Walsh spent some time examining the historical and social roots of the problems. He noted that the Russian Revolution had aroused the expectations of many artists and intellectuals, but that Stalinism had played an enormously damaging role. He referred as well to the role of the anti-communist witch-hunts in the US in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

“The future of art,” Walsh argued, “is dependent on the re-emergence of open struggle, mass opposition to capitalism. The filmmakers and writers, and certainly the younger generation, have not seen mass struggle for decades. When American and European workers erupt by the millions ... it will have an enormous impact on art. It will turn artists once again to the big questions.”

The WSWS arts editor devoted the final sections of his talk to the question of artistic truth and the struggle against postmodernism and subjectivism. Marxists insist that the artist, like the scientist, arrives at objective truth, which deepens humanity’s understanding of itself and the

conditions of social and psychological life. Post-structuralism, postmodernism and related trends, which dominate university art and literature departments, have relentlessly attacked the conceptions of objective truth, reason and progress for the past four decades. Walsh took up the attack on the Realist novel of the 19th century, on Dickens and Balzac in particular, and associated this with the attack on rational and objective analysis of reality in general, including the efforts of the socialist movement.

Following Walsh’s presentation a wide-ranging discussion ensued over issues raised in the lecture. Several people asked questions about the emphasis Walsh gave in his talk to a critique of postmodernism and its denial of objective truth.

In response Walsh said, “We are opposing the conceptions that have long dominated academic life. I wanted to discuss what we consider to be central questions in my talk. Understanding history is a big issue. It is not possible to go forward until significant sections of the population understand where we are. Masses of people are unhappy, but they don’t see an alternative. We believe one of the principal tasks of artists is to understand what happened in the 20th Century.”

Several other questions dealt with Walsh’s critique of the state of contemporary filmmaking. Walsh replied, “When we speak sharply about the present situation we are not suggesting that the light of human genius has gone out. There are exceptions. There have been remarkable films made in Iran, Taiwan, China. There is always something. Even in the midst of a reactionary time not everybody is swayed by the deplorable political climate. The biggest failure, however, is the understanding of history. We are trying to concretize some of the difficulties and give it an historic sense.”

He continued, “We are also saying to the artist: wake up, think about these things. Why has there been such a dominance of the self-absorbed? If you think of Charlie

Chaplin's *Modern Times*; Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath*; Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*; there are no comparable characters in current filmmaking that express a whole epoch."

A retired worker asked Walsh to express his views on three recent films dealing with slavery: *Django Unchained*, *12 Years a Slave* and *Lincoln*, as well as his thoughts about the role of the abolitionists in the period leading up to the American Civil War.

Walsh said that he was highly critical of Quentin Tarantino's work *Django*, as well as *12 Years a Slave*. "You don't get any closer to truth by rubbing your face in violence," he said. As far as *Lincoln*, Walsh said that while it was in many ways an admirable film, with very powerful scenes, it lacked any sense of the mass movement that developed in opposition to slavery.

Walsh said that within certain historical limits there was a parallel to the work of the abolitionists and the present day work of the Socialist Equality Party. "They fought to make people aware of social injustice. The book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe brought slavery to the attention of millions. It was an example of the influence of art on social life."

Lawrence Porter, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party, noted that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became the best-selling book in the United States outside the Bible. "It reached an audience that was receptive. You began to have a major change in social consciousness. In that sense there is a connection to today. There is a relationship between art and the development of social consciousness."

Afterward the WSWs spoke to several of those who attended the lecture. Zachary, a WSU art student, said, "It got my mind turning over things I hadn't thought about before. Asking questions like, why do I think the way I do? Now I want to investigate things and analyze things. I want to investigate thinkers who came earlier."

"If you are watching most contemporary films you would think that everyone lives in a nice house, at least that is true of blockbuster films. You might see aspects of real life depicted at a film festival, but not in theatres."

"To me art is a conscious practice. This city has really influenced me. I think I could offer a different perspective on things."

Harvey, a secondary education major at Wayne State University, said, "The lecture was insightful and covered a great deal of topics. You don't often hear discussions about the validity of objective reality. In my courses there are often claims that everybody has his or her own reality

as if there was no such thing as universal truth for everyone. But a good teacher has to educate young people about the truth.

"The lecturer spoke about socialism, which has been demonized for so long. It's a difficult subject to discuss on the campuses because everything is geared towards making you feel like you better not sacrifice what you have to fight for something better. Even the structure of college education puts students in a situation where while they are studying they are increasingly being put into debt and will be forced to work to pay off the debt after graduation.

"You can't be close-minded about history and art. A mass movement will not happen over night. It took years for the abolitionists to shape people's views. Tonight's meeting helped educate and is part of this process of enlightenment."

Allen, a graduate student in philosophy, said, "The lecture was quite interesting and informative. I am not a Marxist but I don't have a problem with the notion of objective truth. I read some of the lecturer's reviews in preparation for this meeting. I share a lot of his views especially about post-modernists who are always 'deconstructing' this and that.

"In the 1980s I was a fine arts major and I took a course with the film critic Robin Wood at York University in Canada. He was known as an expert on Hitchcock and other directors. He was one of the best professors I ever had. I see that David Walsh interviewed him.

"I am sympathetic to Walsh's views. Art can train you to feel in a certain way to reveal beauty that mankind should strive for."



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