David Walsh continues book tour at Cornell University

Our correspondents
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WSWS arts editor David Walsh continued his tour in support of the recent publication of *The Sky Between the Leaves* at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York on Thursday, March 27. The book is a collection of Walsh's film reviews, interviews and essays on cinema that have appeared on the *World Socialist Web Site* and its print predecessors over the previous 20 years.

Some thirty people, most of them undergraduate students and young workers, attended the talk, entitled "Art, Socialism, and the Working Class," which was held at the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts on Cornell's campus.

Walsh began by noting the context in which the discussion took place: the US and German drive against Russia over the Ukraine. Walsh pointed to the countless American invasions and acts of "regime change" in recent decades. The Obama administration's accusations of Russian aggression are "hypocrisy that beggars description," he said. "The current situation is one of grave risks and great opportunities."

Truthfulness in art and cinema, Walsh repeatedly emphasized, would play a vital role in building a socialist, working class opposition to war, social reaction and mass impoverishment. The relative absence of mass working class struggles in recent decades, he said, had created a situation of "social malnutrition" for artists. The coming mass struggles would alter this situation.

Walsh addressed a wide variety of historical and artistic questions. He compared and contrasted the role of the artist to that of the scientist—both seek to reveal truth, he said, but the artist works with images and is more susceptible to social reaction. Walsh defended the 19th century novelists Dickens and Balzac against attacks by academic postmodernists.

Walsh noted the impact in the 1920s and 1930s of the Russian Revolution on artists and writers, citing as one example novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. "It is impossible to talk about art and literature in the 20th century in the US … without talking about the Russian Revolution," Walsh noted. He then referred to the impact Stalinism and the post-World War II Red Scare on artists and intellectuals in the US. "The consequences of the purge we have yet to overcome in cultural life in America."

The discussion after Walsh's talk continued until a university worker politely reminded organizers that the room had to be vacated after two hours. Numerous audience members made comments or asked questions about problems of contemporary culture, history, technology and social life in America. The discussion then continued in the Schwartz Center's hallways.

One audience member commented on the pervasive emphasis on violence and brutality in modern American cinema, and asked whether portraying even small victories for workers in film, for example, the recent Verizon strike, would be a step forward.

In response, Walsh commented on the self-indulgence and misanthropy of directors such as Quentin Tarantino, whose sadistic works delight in morbid violence. He also mentioned director Steve McQueen's *Twelve Years a Slave* (2014), in which the filmmaker sought to make his audience suffer through scene after scene of violence and carnage.

Walsh also responded that the Verizon strike had not resulted in a victory for workers, but was a betrayal by the unions, which at most represented a brief stalemate between the workers and the corporation. The strike was one where the union leaders had "snatched defeat from the jaws of victory."

A student related the situation in Detroit to that which exists in Greece. He said that Detroit is a test case for the rest of the country, but that with the virtual media

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blackout of all news and commentary of the crisis, whether documentary or artistic, American workers do not or cannot recognize the revolutionary situation that exists here.

Walsh answered that the social conditions and contradictions in the United States would inevitably lead to upheavals; it was not a matter of "if there will be a social explosion, but when." The problem that will confront workers will be that of revolutionary leadership and the need for a clear program to overcome the crisis created by decayed capitalism.

He explained that numerous factors had contributed to the forcible suppression over the past several decades, including the incorporation of the national trade union bureaucracies into corporate management. Walsh referred to the criminal role played by the United Auto Workers union in enforcing factory closures and mass poverty in Detroit. He also discussed the role of postmodernism and poststructuralism in the universities, which has disoriented many students and graduates and made them less able to comprehend the current crisis, or place it within a historical context.

Other questions concerned the role of art and filmmaking in the Egyptian revolutionary crisis, the specific role of documentary filmmaking in portraying objective truth, the reasons behind the absence of substantial social criticism in contemporary literature and what post-revolutionary art would take as its subject matter.

One participant suggested that perhaps social media in the 21st century had replaced art as a progressive means to criticize society. Walsh responded that social media was a powerful weapon for organizing a social movement, but not a substitute for art. "If that seems to be the case [that social media is a substitute for art], that is, above all, a comment on the weakness and unpreparedness of art in our time so far." If the new media were combined with social substance and artistic skill, "the sky's the limit."

Kelly, an astrophysics student at Cornell, said he enjoyed the talk and was happy "that it covered so much ground." He said he especially enjoyed Walsh's defense of the 19th century realists.

Another student, Kimberly, is an aspiring documentary filmmaker from nearby Ithaca College. "It was really interesting," she said. "I really liked his critique of film and art. I am going to buy the book. I want to make political documentaries, but I want to learn more about the history of film and the documentary as a genre."

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