

WSWS arts editor David Walsh speaks at The New School in New York City

Our reporters
9 April 2014

On April 3 some 60 people attended a talk on “Art, Socialism, and the Working Class” by David Walsh, arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, at the New School in New York City. The meeting was sponsored by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at the New School.

The lecture was a part of the tour to promote the new book, *The Sky Between the Leaves*, a selection of Walsh’s film reviews, interviews and essays on cinema and cultural issues written over the past 20 years.

The purpose of *The Sky Between the Leaves*, Walsh said, was to contribute to the political and cultural development of workers and young people. He explained, “Reality must be viewed in all its dimensions,” as part of the effort to address the tumultuous events now going on in the world.

Capitalism, he said, offers nothing but poverty, dictatorship and war. The US organizes coups and regime change around the world and has the nerve to accuse Russia of breaking the rules by invading Crimea. The world had come closer to a global war than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, or perhaps 1939. A new situation was developing, and immense dangers and opportunities were posed to the working class.

Walsh noted that there was a long history of the socialist movement addressing and intervening over art and culture. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the mass socialist parties in Europe addressed cultural issues, hosting concerts, plays and discussion groups, as part of the effort to raise the thinking and sensitivity of the working population.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was preceded by decades of the building up of an international socialist culture. The Revolution itself, the first time in history that the oppressed took power, was such a monumental

event that every serious artist of the time, “whether he or she was for or against the revolution” had to take a position in relation to it.

“The notion that art is able to reflect objective truth has been under attack for decades,” Walsh went on. He explained that this problem had lengthy historical and social roots in the response of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia to the traumas and tragedies of the 20th century. An increasingly hostile attitude to science, to progress and to the working class took hold of wide layers of the intellectuals in the wake of World War II. The mass general strike in France in 1968 “terrified the professors, many of whom turned to the right.”

“Postmodernism, identity politics and other subjectivist and skeptical trends, which dominate the universities, have had an extremely damaging influence on artistic production and cultural life,” the speaker asserted.

Walsh then discussed the sustained assault against the great Realist writers of the 19th century. Balzac, Tolstoy and, particularly, Dickens have come under sharp attack by post-structuralist and postmodern critics. The works of these authors, associated as they are with rational thought and a concern for objective reality, were natural targets of the “left” academics.

He concluded his talk by arguing that the coming struggles of the working class would have a profound impact on artists.

Following the presentation, audience members asked questions about a broad range of subjects, including abstract painting, the influence of money on the art world, the role of various ideological trends, as well as Walsh’s opinions about numerous films directors, individual films and television series.

One attendee pointed to the involvement of the military in filmmaking, especially in relation to films

directed by Kathryn Bigelow (*The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*). Walsh noted that Bigelow's case was instructive in regard to the very trends he had been discussing. Bigelow, now embedded with the CIA, was an anti-war protester in the 1970s, an "avant-garde" artist and a protégé of French postmodernist thinker Sylvère Lotringer (see: Filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow offered access to US military death squad).

Walsh observed that this right-wing movement was not a permanent feature: "When mass working class social movements emerge, they will have an impact on art both in Hollywood and among independent filmmakers."

Another questioner asked why figures such as Nietzsche and Foucault have had such an influence over artists. Walsh explained that, in addition to the disorientation brought about by the crimes of Stalinism and the horrors of fascism, "Many of these philosophical trends were able to gain popularity by default. For instance, the Frankfurt School gained prominence in part as the result of the killing off of tens of thousands of Marxist intellectuals in the USSR by the Stalinist bureaucracy."

Many attendees of the lecture stayed after the question and answer period for further discussion, and to buy copies of *The Sky Between the Leaves*. Nearly \$400 of Marxist literature was purchased.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some of those who attend the lecture. Maria, a fashion major at the Parsons School of Design, said, "I liked the way Dave related to greater social issues, class, the system as a whole. I think that it's true that art does not seek to please itself. But art itself needs analysis. That goes along with understanding the historical, political, and economic context that produces it. That is basically what he wanted to say, by telling how the film industry is in decay, not touching the issues.

"I am a fashion major but I don't enjoy it. Fashion fetishizes the body and glorifies capitalism and I would like to change that. That is why universities can be difficult."

Orfatt, a student at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, said, "I draw in my free time, but I never understood what kind of an impact it could have on people. My grandfather was an arts professor in Bangladesh, but I never knew the kind of meaning art could have or how it could show you what life was like

at a certain time. The talk showed how much art and culture means, and that it can really influence people.

"The writers David Walsh mentioned [Tolstoy, Balzac, and Dickens] are writers I was not familiar with, and I did not know they kind of effect they had on people. Artists now should by trying to show the world, and show how it should be. Art can be part of the fight for important changes."



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