

FICUNAM 2015: Part 5

A revealing forum on “Politics and film criticism” at Mexican film festival

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This is the fifth and final part of a series of articles on the recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City. The first part was posted March 18, the second part March 20, the third part March 25 and the fourth part March 28.

The recent FICUNAM film festival in Mexico City, in conjunction with the Ingmar Bergman Chair on Film and Theater at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), held a round-table discussion March 3 on “Politics and Film Criticism.”

The two-hour session was hosted by Roger Koza, an Argentinean film critic and chief programmer for the festival. The second participant was Cristina Nord, a film critic and the cultural editor of *Die Tageszeitung* in Germany, who also teaches at the Free University of Berlin, specializing in Latin American cinema. *Die Tageszeitung* (known as *taz*) is generally oriented to the German Green Party and the middle class layers around it. The third member of the panel was David Walsh, arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

A host of important issues came up in the discussion, including the state of contemporary film and film criticism, the character of “political cinema,” the connection between the crisis in art and great historical issues, the decline in filmmaking in Germany and America, and the conflict between Marxism and various strands of post-modernism. The round-table conversation was intense and followed closely by audience members, who also asked a number of thoughtful questions.

The fact that the ideological differences ultimately took the form, as the reader will see, of a conflict between the conceptions of post-modernist Michel Foucault (put forward by Nord) and those of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky has a certain objective significance. The opposed intellectual paths were clearly set out: drawing lessons from the critical events of the 20th century based on a turn to the working class versus orienting oneself to subjectivism, Nietzscheanism and the “construction of the self.”

After introducing his two guests, Koza noted that “Film festivals do not usually give much space to film criticism, and even less to considering film criticism in political terms. There is a certain tendency in contemporary film criticism, particularly among people of my generation and even younger, to approach films as autonomous objects.” He asked Nord and Walsh, “How do you think political interpretation enters into analyzing a film, not only because a film may communicate something political in its story, but mainly how do you see what is political beyond the explicit content of films? ... How do you watch a film, politically?”

The German journalist responded, “What strikes me when we speak about political cinema is that many times it is a very limited notion. I view it with a lot of skepticism, because when a film has an openly political theme, it often stays on the surface. I always defend the idea that politics on a thematic level has to be linked with the aesthetic level of a film.” She suggested that what spoke to her more were “films that reflect in a

different way the problems that may exist when one addresses a political issue.”

The WSWs arts editor indicated that he would answer the question a bit indirectly. He first explained that he had been a member of the Trotskyist movement for 45 years, so it was obviously a special experience to be in Mexico. “Because Mexico was the only country that offered Trotsky asylum when he was being savagely persecuted by Stalinism. And that’s bound up, I think, with the profound connection between the Mexican Revolution and the Russian Revolution, two titanic events of the 20th century. Of course, the Mexican Revolution did not lead to the working class taking power, but nonetheless the gains that were made by the population in the 20th century essentially flowed from that revolution.”

Walsh went on to observe that “politics involves the life and fate of humanity. How could a serious artist not concern him or herself with the fate of humanity? ... If we look at the current state of cinema, which we are very critical of on the *World Socialist Web Site*, ... it’s very much linked to a neglect, misunderstanding, ignorance about the great events of the 20th century.” He added that “all of those questions ultimately lead to the question of the Russian Revolution, and one’s attitude toward that, and Trotsky’s fight against Stalinism.”

Koza then asked whether cinematic form in itself was “a political problem.” He referred to “two levels,” the interpretation of the relationships of characters in a specific social and physical location, on the one hand, and the analysis of cinematic form “in political terms,” on the other.

Nord remarked that there were types of narratives that were filled with clichés, “plots that we have seen thousands of times, with relations between characters that we have seen thousands of times. ... If a film deals with these topics in a traditional way, in the way we have seen it a thousand times, I start to question it. On the other hand, a film stimulates my curiosity immediately when it manages to open new forms of perception.”

Art had its own requirements and laws, said Walsh. He argued that an artist of course had to be the master of his or her field. “Good intentions, even the best of intentions, are not the same as interesting and enduring art.” However, he indicated he was dubious about so-called formal innovation and “formal politics” that did not take into account the most pressing need in cinema and art in general: “a much deeper, richer, more committed, more thoughtful, knowledgeable, engagement with the world.”

Here, Walsh referred to a trend in filmmaking that was prominently on display at the FICUNAM festival and which was discussed in the third part of this series: “When I see films which I find are simply bleak or dreary, or paralyzed, and, if you will pardon the expression, constipated, where there’s no movement, no life, I’m not convinced that that’s formally innovative.”

At a subsequent point in the discussion, he returned to the so-called “politics of form”: “There are various ways to approach social life, reality, I don’t think there’s a single line. I’m not convinced by the unmoving camera, the endless shot; I think sometimes that’s an evasion, frankly- not dealing head on, directly with life and its complications. I don’t think that Orson Welles did that, I don’t think Kurosawa did that, I don’t think John Ford did that. ...

“There have been artistic innovations, and we don’t live in the 19th century. There is an extraordinary development in technology and media that has to be taken into account. The artists have every right to use all of that. But still at the center of this is: are you engaging with the way the world is, are you engaging with the way life is? Are you confronting that, or are you evading that? The great dramas will concentrate those questions, find the heightened, artistic means of dramatizing those great collisions and contradictions.”

Walsh pointed to the many reasons for the artist to be troubled today. “There is mass suffering everywhere, the growth of social inequality, the threat of war. American imperialist violence in particular, which is erupting, threatens the whole world with another world war.”

So the artist had good cause to be disturbed by social reality, Walsh argued. “But I think art has the task of abstracting, standing back somewhat and trying to make sense of that reality, not simply passively reflecting it. And I find in the current ‘miserabilism,’ which is in much of the [independent] filmmaking, a false reaction... It’s an evasion of the artist’s responsibility.”

He suggested that the introduction of “more life, more vivacity, more emotion, more drama” into the so-called independent cinema was bound up with a greater appreciation of historical and contemporary issues and was also dependent on a new social atmosphere. At the *World Socialist Web Site*, Walsh said, it is understood that “there has to be a big social movement which breaks up this situation so the skepticism and pessimism that exists among the intellectuals will also be changed.”

Roger Koza asked both speakers about the decline of filmmaking in their respective countries, each of which had “an extraordinary filmmaking tradition.” In the course of discussing changes in German society over the past several decades, Nord referred to certain “depressing films” of the mid-2000s, which had “a lot of melancholic characters.” She said this phenomenon “was rooted in the fact that the idea of imagining something different, that something else could exist in our society was very difficult,” due to the failure of “real socialism” or “existing socialism, as it was described” in East Germany and the Soviet Union. The *taz* correspondent referred to “the [current] lack of hope and utopia.”

Walsh pointed to the crisis of culture--and society generally--in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as “one of the most striking examples of the difficulties I’m pointing to.” He said it was possible to understand the sense of hopelessness in the former Stalinist-ruled countries, but not to condone it. “Because that [hopelessness] is based on the great falsification of the 20th century, which is that Stalinism equals socialism, that Stalinism equals the inevitable product of social revolution.”

He added, “It’s a false reading of the 20th century, it’s a false reading of history. There was an alternative to Stalinism and there is an alternative to Stalinism. If one accepts the limits of this system, where does that leave you? ... The great art of the early part of the 20th century, however it saw the problem, based itself on the fact that society was going to raise itself to a higher social principle. The loss of that confidence, because of the crimes of Stalinism and the collapse of Stalinism [identified as the collapse of socialism], I think, is at the center of our cultural problems.”

Walsh later observed that the degeneration and turn to the right by the so-called protest generation of 1968 was also a factor in the cultural crisis. “This generation of protesters, of student middle class radicals, inherited money from mama and papa, got rich or made money on the stock market,

made money in real estate, in technology and media, and became very comfortable, and is now a major part of the ruling elite in every country.”

He directed himself to the audience: “Look at the Syriza government. Now I suspect that there are many people here who had hopes in that government, perhaps still do, perhaps still have illusions.” From the beginning, the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed the politics of Syriza and the social forces it represents, he said. “We said this was an upper middle-class party representing the affluent middle class, a section of the Greek bourgeoisie, it will capitulate to the European banks, and it did precisely that. As we said, never have so few betrayed so many so quickly in history.”

In the course of discussing the changes in German society, Cristina Nord spoke to what she felt was a critical difference today as opposed to previous periods of history. She argued that while in Germany “in many fields we now enjoy broader freedom, but at the same time the problem is that our freedom has become something that is a new form of repression, with the difference that before it was a repression that was coming from outside. Now it is like an ‘internalized’ repression, and that is a huge problem. How do we deal with that?”

The *taz* journalist suggested that since repression was now internalized, “you have to find other ways than the ones used by [German filmmaker R.W.] Fassbinder, for instance. I believe that is a fundamental change. The system we had until the 1950s, 1960s--when [people] worked in a factory, subordinated to a very strict order--has changed a lot. Now the whole idea of working has to do with ‘self-development’ ... which is a lie, it is pure ideology. However, it is something that many people have in their minds, they have it within themselves, and it is very difficult to escape from that.” In other words, the issue was no longer one of class oppression, including the violence of the state, but the individual having swallowed whole the official version of things and subjugating him or herself. This is hardly a new argument, but brings to mind Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School.

In the question and answer period, some of these issues emerged even more sharply.

The first questioner referred to some of the “clichés of current forms” in contemporary independent cinema, which Walsh had spoken of, and asked whether the European institutions and foundations that co-produce many films had an impact “on the political level.”

In his response, Walsh indicated he had little knowledge about the influence of institutions, that was outside his experience “and I’m not attuned to that world.” He went on: “It’s not so much a matter of the institutions as it is a certain social sensibility, a social mood. What do these films, the second- or third-generation of that school, suggest about the world? It seems to be resignation, passivity, fatalism. ...

“I’ve been in the working class movement for 45 years and spoken to people who are in very distressed circumstances, sometimes tragic circumstances, and I don’t simply find depression, even there. Individuals can be depressed, individuals can commit suicide, but, as Trotsky says, when whole populations have such burdens, they make revolutions.”

The moods that were largely being excluded by filmmakers at present, Walsh continued, were associated with the possibility of the oppressed acting for themselves and resisting.

He went on to warn of the dangers of festival directors and programmers becoming institutionally invested in such an outlook: “You can begin to live off the industry of misery and resignation and passivity. This is not a moral issue, the danger then is that you become a link in a causal chain. Because if you tell people continually that there’s nothing but resignation and passivity, and hopelessness in the world, that has a certain impact. We have an impact with what we do.”

These comments provoked Cristina Nord to present her views more explicitly: “I fully agree with the idea that we can do something, we always can do something. On the other hand, I think that some things are a

bit more complicated. To me, [Michel] Foucault is a more important reference point than Trotsky, for example. The whole idea of power and oppression, the fact that we can see so clearly where power and the oppressed are, has become something more complicated in the course of the last decades. I believe that [repressive] power is within us. That does not mean that there are no completely clear problems, as the situation in Guerrero and the disappearance of students, etc. There is an immense clarity in this case.

“But on the other hand, power and oppression are within us. So, the question is how to work with that, how to talk about that, how to take a clear position when the situation is a little fuzzy. ... It is not an individual problem, it is a problem that has to do with the kind of societies in which we live, and it has to do with the promise of freedom that we are given, even though that [freedom] somehow exists, because in terms of how we live our lives, at least in Germany, we are much better than thirty years ago. [A revealing comment.] However, at the same time, freedom is a lie. So, how we live in such a situation, when one thing that is a promise also becomes something dangerous, a method of oppression, but a much more subtle oppression than the one that occurs in other places.”

David Walsh welcomed “the division between Foucault and Trotsky” as an appropriate personal embodiment of this ideological conflict. He explained, “I’m deeply hostile to post-modernism, I’m deeply hostile to Foucault, [Jacques] Derrida and all these figures. They’re deeply reactionary figures, who have dominated the academic world. It’s had an absolutely debilitating and damaging effect on culture and social life.”

It was not a matter of Foucault the individual, something of a tortured soul, “but his thought is dreadful, thought based on Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and the traditions of German irrationalism and subjectivism.”

As to the question of internalized repression, Walsh argued that when certain films by Fassbinder and others emerged in the 1970s, they raised legitimate questions. “Does one have to be critical of one’s own relations with others and aware of the ways in which class society and oppression find expression?”

But to suggest, he went on, “that people are simply the victims of that, so damaged by that, that they can’t act, I reject completely. Marx responded to that issue in the *German Ideology* many, many years ago. The real cultural revolution takes place after the social revolution. ... People are products of this society, and they suffer damage in this society, the damage of oppression. But they are not incapable of cognizing their historical and social situation, and overcoming it; throwing off the exploitative and oppressive basis of capitalism, and on that basis, new men and new women will develop, who will be able to solve the problems that plague us today.”

The second questioner asked about the relation between politics and cinema, not only in terms of political content, “but above all the technological development as ‘political technology.’” Does cinema function, he asked, “as a device that takes a decision on what we are allowed and not allowed to see?”

Walsh responded by objecting somewhat to the framework of the question. “The question, in my opinion, is this: is the artist capable of cognizing the world in an objective way? Now, not *absolutely* objectively, but in a *relatively* objective way. Here is where post-modernism, as well as identity politics, is so bankrupt: women can only make films about women, Jews about Jews, blacks about blacks. There’s no possibility of cognizing the world objectively. We are all utterly and impossibly stuck with ourselves. Well, I think that’s nonsense. The history of art disproves that.”

He argued that we never know the world absolutely, that human thought is a series of approximations. “But do our approximations have something to do with the external world or not? Post-modernism throws that question out the window. Its answer is: of course not. History doesn’t exist, it’s

just an invention, a narrative. We all have our own narratives. This horrible subjectivism and irrationalism ... We have to make a war on it if we’re going to make any progress in culture or politics. Because if you assume that position, you can’t do anything. You can’t explain anything historically or socially. You’re completely crippled intellectually.”

In terms of “political technology,” there were certainly many issues, Walsh asserted. He referred to an anecdote told to him by film historian Joseph McBride, who had worked with Orson Welles for 15 years. “He told me that when Welles was speaking to a group of film students at the University of Southern California [in the 1970s], I think it was, and they began to ask him all sorts of questions about ... this or that technique. And he got impatient. He said, read, study, know something about the world first. And that’s my basic argument.

“Of course you have to master your field and you have to be aware of the dangers of manipulation, all the horrors of the entertainment-media apparatus and the way it numbs people, or attempts to numb people. You need to know all that, and you have to create an honest art that doesn’t manipulate or exploit; but above all, you have to know something and have something to say! Goethe says, to do something, you have to be something.

“I think the young artist, the young filmmaker today, has to study, has to study the history of his or her society, has to study the great events of the 20th century, has to begin to understand how it is that we have reached our present social and human predicament. Because if you can’t do that, then how in the world are you going to make a film that’s helpful or valuable to anyone?”

The final questioner asked about the role of film festivals and their impact on cinema. She noted that various Mexican filmmakers seemed to be responding to “fashions” typical of festivals. She wanted to know what had happened to the spirit epitomized by Soviet filmmaking in the 1920s, when filmmakers “took a position toward reality and made films for people,” when images took a position, so to speak.

“Directors,” she argued, “are making films for festivals. They are not making movies to show their outlook on reality. And I think this is a political problem.”

Walsh replied that he did not feel the fundamental problem lay with filmmakers or festival organizers, although they are not “complete innocents. ... The problem lies with the distribution system, the monopoly of giant conglomerates, and the general political and cultural problems. I would hesitate to blame the filmmakers for these difficulties that lie outside them.”

Changing the situation, he explained, depended, on the one hand, on the artists and filmmakers doing more interesting work, work that had more artistry and richness and strove to make a point of access with a mass audience, which great films had done in the past; and, on the other hand, a change in the political and social situation.

“If you have an eruption in Mexico,” Walsh went on, “as you will, of mass social movements, believe me- filmmakers and others will find new ways to see and distribute films. I promise you, the present situation is not going to last forever. The same is true in the United States. If you think Disney and Fox and Sony and these outfits are all-powerful and will last forever ... please, don’t think that. That would be a very distressing thought, for one thing, and it’s also not true.”

He added, “When masses of people feel that there are things they need to see, they will find ways to see them. Whether it’s on their cell phone or however it is, they will find ways to see them. Part of the problem today is that wide layers of the population don’t feel that many films, including the art-festival films, are absolutely necessary for their existence. And, unfortunately, to a certain extent, they are correct. There’s an instinctive distrust of a certain kind of art film. This isn’t the artist’s or filmmaker’s individual fault, but there is this distance and distrust. The filmmaker also has a responsibility to show broad masses of people that he or she feels a

certain responsibility toward them. It goes both ways. When that connection is made, and that connection is made under conditions of upheaval, many of the problems we see today will melt away.”

Walsh concluded, “People are endlessly clever, endlessly ingenious, and they will find ways of distributing important works for the first time in history, to billions of people at once. Can you imagine that? Our movement is based on the international unification of the working class. The Mexican and American workers have one struggle. This border is utterly reactionary, and should be torn down. At a time when millions and millions of people across the globe see the same images, face the same political problems, I think the possibilities are immense.”

Concluded



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