

To create a genuine artistic “avant garde” means confronting critical historical issues

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The essay below by WSWS arts editor David Walsh was written for inclusion in Marc James Léger, ed. *The Idea of the Avant Garde—And What It Means Today, Volume 2 (forthcoming)*. The first volume was co-published by Left Curve and Manchester University Press in 2014.

The two volumes bring together essays on and responses to the issue indicated in the title, the character of the contemporary artistic vanguard—if such a phenomenon exists. This is the starting point for Walsh’s piece.

One is obliged, first of all, to pose and answer a number of questions: What is the history and character of the idea of the artistic “avant garde”? To what extent can one argue there is such an avant garde today? If not, what would a genuine avant garde consist of and what tasks would it set itself? What intellectual influences would sustain it? How would it orient itself politically and socially?

The notion of an artistic “avant garde” was first advanced by figures associated with French utopian socialists Henri de St. Simon and Charles Fourier in the first several decades of the nineteenth century. The conception identified art as advancing as part of or even playing a leading role in the movement for social progress.

In 1825 Olinde Rodrigues, a close co-thinker of St. Simon, adopting the voice of an artist, argued, “We, the artists, will serve as the avant garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the arts is the swiftest and most expeditious.” If the arts, he asserted, “support the general movement of the human spirit, if they assist the common cause, and contribute to the growth of general well-being, producing useful sensations for mankind ... an immense future of glory and success will immediately open up before them.”

Writing of *The Painter’s Studio* (1855) by Gustave Courbet, “a staunch partisan of socialist thought,” art historian Linda Nochlin noted that the painting “is ‘avant-garde’ if we understand the expression, in terms of its etymological derivation, as implying a union of the socially and the artistically progressive.”

In fact, the concept of the avant garde, as applied to art work, was bound up with the birth of the socialist movement.

However, the relationship between socialism and “advanced” art as it developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth is an immensely complex subject and does not yield itself to easy formulas. Only a concrete, historical study can make sense of things.

In the first place, the “avant garde” itself is not some transhistorical entity whose torch leaps from the hand of one generation to the next. Broadly speaking, the avant-garde stage is the initial, insurgent moment in the development of every significant artistic trend.

As Leon Trotsky explained, during the epoch in which the bourgeoisie still played a generally progressive historical role, each new artistic tendency emerged “from the left wing of the academic school or below it—i.e., from the ranks of a new generation of bohemian artists.” Each succeeding trend (classicism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, symbolism, impressionism) surged up, only to climb, “in its turn, after a

decent interval, the steps of the academy.”

The wide array of what became known as avant-garde movements that appeared between 1848 and 1914 had very different attitudes toward social questions: there were trends whose members were generally sympathetic to socialism or to anarchism, those that were socially indifferent, those that were mystical or decadent, those that were positively reactionary in their political views.

For their part, the leading Marxists of the day considered the fight for and the defense of art and culture as indispensable to the intellectual and spiritual development of the working class, to the ability of that class to rise to the level of its historic mission, the overthrow of capitalism. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) of Germany, the first mass workers party, organized a vast number of cultural organizations, musical and literary evenings, concerts and performances. The other socialist parties in Europe, to one extent or another, followed suit.

In 1916, Rosa Luxemburg congratulated her comrade, the Marxist journalist, historian and literary critic Franz Mehring, for having “saved everything of value which still remained of the once splendid culture of the bourgeoisie and brought it to us, into the camp of the socially disinherited.” Mehring had brought the German workers into touch not only with classic German philosophy (Kant and Hegel), Luxemburg wrote, “but also with classic German literature ... with Lessing, Schiller and Goethe. Every line from your brilliant pen has taught our workers that socialism is not a bread and butter problem, but a cultural movement, a great and proud world-ideology.”

Figures like Mehring and Georgi Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, along with Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, strove to raise the workers’ collective thinking and feeling through both the introduction of important art and literature of the past and the analysis and criticism of contemporary trends. As a result of that effort, these Marxists also engaged in an ongoing dialogue, directly or indirectly, with the most advanced artists themselves.

At any rate, no significant cultural figure, whatever political position he or she adopted, could ignore the emergence on the historical scene of the working class or the presence of mass socialist parties, including aesthetes as pronounced as Oscar Wilde and Stéphane Mallarmé. Wilde, of course, authored the insightful essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), and Mallarmé, in an article on impressionism in 1876, recognized the existence of the working class, “a hitherto ignored people in the political life of France,” whose participation in that process “is a social fact that will honour the whole of the close of the nineteenth century.”

Plekhanov’s *Art and Social Life* (1912) is a masterful discussion of critical cultural questions. That essay and his other works such as *V.G. Belinsky’s Literary Views*, *The Proletarian Movement and Bourgeois Art*, *Henrik Ibsen*, *On the Psychology of the Workers Movement* and *The Ideology of Our Present-Day Philistine* are unknown to the overwhelming majority of our “left” artists and intellectuals today—to their detriment.

In *Art and Social Life*, Plekhanov analyzed the debate between the

advocates of “art for art’s sake” and the so-called socially utilitarian view of art. Discussing figures such as Pushkin, Théophile Gautier, Turgenev, Baudelaire, Jacques-Louis David, Flaubert and others with remarkable objectivity and sensitivity, Plekhanov drew a vivid picture of the concrete historical and social contradictions that determined the particular artist’s attitude at any given moment (including at different points in a single individual’s career) toward society and the purpose—or lack of purpose—of art.

Taking note of the evolution of Baudelaire, for example, the later personification of “decadence” and social indifference, Plekhanov explained, “When the refreshing storm of the February Revolution of 1848 broke, many of the French artists who had believed in the theory of art for art’s sake emphatically rejected it.” Baudelaire immediately began to publish a revolutionary journal, *Le salut public* (in collaboration with Courbet, no less). The journal did not survive long, but as late as 1852, Plekhanov pointed out, Baudelaire “called the theory of art for art’s sake infantile (puérile), and declared that art must have a social purpose. Only the triumph of the counter-revolution induced Baudelaire and artists of a similar trend of mind to revert once and for all to the ‘infantile’ theory of art for art’s sake.”

In *Art and Social Life*, Plekhanov took up the contention of figures such as Gautier, that the beauty of a work of art was merely a function of its music, its rhythm, its form. He insisted that there was no such thing as a work “which is devoid of idea” and that, in the final analysis, the merit of a work was determined by “the weightiness of its content.” Furthermore, Plekhanov argued that not every idea could be successfully expressed in a work of art (“Why cannot a miser sing of his lost money? Simply because, if he did sing of his loss, his song would not move anybody”) and that “when a false idea is made the basis of an artistic work, it imparts to it inherent contradictions that inevitably detract from its aesthetic merit.”

These historical materialist notions were very much at odds with the Nietzscheanism and irrationalism that held considerable sway in artistic circles in the period leading up to World War I.

The October Revolution and the rise of Stalinism

The victory of the October Revolution in 1917, the greatest event in modern history, and the creation of the first workers state, produced a new situation. The coming to power of the working class in Russia, with the conscious goal of establishing the social principles of solidarity and equality and seen by the Bolsheviks as the first stage in the world revolution, had an immense impact on cultural life. Thus, literary critic Edmund Wilson, in *To the Finland Station* (1940), could write in this fashion of Lenin’s arrival in Russia in April 1917 and the subsequent revolutionary events: “The point is that western man at this moment can be seen to have made some definite progress mastering the greeds and the fears, the bewilderments, in which he has lived.”

The coming together of advanced politics and advanced art reached its high point in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Artists in many parts of the globe responded to the earthshaking impact of the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks under Lenin and Trotsky won over many of the most gifted and self-sacrificing artists in Russia to the cause of world socialist revolution. Vladimir Tatlin, who designed the “Monument to the Third International” (1919–20), asserted that “A revolution strengthens the impulse of invention.”

Trotsky observed in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936) that when the first workers state “had a seething mass-basis and a prospect of world revolution, it had no fear of experiments, searchings, the struggle of [artistic] schools, for it understood that only in this way could a new

cultural epoch be prepared. The popular masses were still quivering in every fiber, and were thinking aloud for the first time in a thousand years. All the best youthful forces of art were touched to the quick.”

The rise of Stalinism and the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union and the various Communist parties had incalculable consequences, including for artistic and cultural life.

In 1938, Trotsky pointed out that while art, the most sensitive and the least protected component of culture, was suffering intolerably from the decay of bourgeois society, history had set a “formidable snare” in the artists’ path in the form of the Stalinized Soviet regime and parties. The “leftist intelligentsia” in many cases had changed “masters,” and now followed the Soviet bureaucracy and its various organizations, but “What has it gained?” (*Art and Politics in Our Epoch*)

Trotsky, André Breton and Diego Rivera offered an alternative to the official servile “leftism” of the day in their *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* (1938), which asserted that the “totalitarian regime of the USSR, working through the so-called cultural organizations it controls in other countries, has spread over the entire world a deep twilight hostile to every sort of spiritual value.”

The *Manifesto* explained that “in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction. No, our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution.”

Testifying to the immense difficulties the revolutionary tendency confronted is the fact that the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art, which the *Manifesto* proposed to establish, fell victim to the fierce hostility of the Stalinist apparatus, the outbreak of the second imperialist war and Trotsky’s assassination.

In this same period, in the face of the coming to power of Hitler, the monstrous Moscow Trials and the betrayal and defeat of the Spanish Revolution, various artists and intellectuals began to question the prospects for socialism and the revolutionary capacities of the working class. For a growing number it seemed problematic, or even beside the point, to treat art from the point of view of its responsibility for deepening the sensitivity and awareness of masses of the population.

By 1939, it was therefore possible for Clement Greenberg, a future sympathizer of Max Shachtman’s Workers Party, to publish “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” in *Partisan Review*, which proposed that the “avant-garde” poets and artists “derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in. The excitement of their art seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.” This development, Greenberg suggested, “calls for neither approval nor disapproval.”

Behind this resigned and snobbish hollowing out of the idea of the “avant garde,” and ultimately its severance from any connection with socialism and the working class, lay great and tragic political events. Frightened and demoralized intellectuals of the Greenberg type, and there were many, had grown increasingly disappointed with the course of the class struggle.

The Shachtman tendency broke from the Trotskyist movement in 1940. It rejected the definition of the Soviet Union as a degenerated workers state (in favor of identifying it as a type of “bureaucratic collectivism”) and opposed the defense of the USSR in a war with imperialism. The grouping reflected and transmitted the pessimism of portions of the middle class intelligentsia who were rapidly breaking any links with the October Revolution on the eve of World War II.

The anti-Marxist Frankfurt School, which rose to prominence in large measure by default, through the mass extermination of a generation of

genuine Marxists by Stalinism, also played a crucial role in neutering the concept of the avant garde. A “left” disciple of the reactionary irrationalist Heidegger, Herbert Marcuse dismissed the capacity of the artist to cognize the world and influence an audience through the rationality and truth of his or her efforts. Indeed, why should a School that found no *objective conditions* that would provide a socioeconomic impulse for the development of socialist consciousness preoccupy itself with an exploration of “our life of three dimensions”?

The “genuine avant-garde,” Marcuse wrote, would be those who bring about “a radical change in style and technique.” He argued that art created a distinct realm, “constituted by the aesthetic form,” which represented and criticized “the prevailing unfreedom” and thus encouraged the individual to imagine his or her own psychic liberation. Echoing Greenberg in his own fashion, Marcuse asserted that “the political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension.” (*The Aesthetic Dimension*, 1977)

Discussing Theodor Adorno, Peter Bürger states the case rather plainly when he suggests that this leading figure in the Frankfurt School “not only sees late capitalism as definitively stabilized but also feels that historical experience has shown the hopes placed in socialism to be ill-founded. For him, avant-gardiste art is a radical protest that rejects all false reconciliation with what exists and thus the only art form that has historical legitimacy.” In other words, advanced art becomes here a gesture of individual-aesthetic protest against an ugly, wretched and essentially unalterable world. (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1974)

In recent decades, any connection between the “avant garde” in art and revolutionary or radical politics has largely disappeared, with the exception of the activities of a few isolated groupings. “Avant-garde art” is defined at present almost entirely as a formal category. In reality, it has lost any significant meaning.

Any “theory of the avant garde” that ignores the concrete-political dynamics of the twentieth century is without value. Serious art has not declined because of the particular qualities of postwar bourgeois society, or the adaptability or supposedly infinite flexibility of “late capitalism” or the nature of art as an “affirmative” bourgeois institution, but as part of a generalized, *temporary* cultural regression brought about by historic defeats suffered by the working class due to the politics and policies of definite parties and leaderships (Stalinism and social democracy, above all).

The lengthy period of reaction and stagnation resulting from the betrayals of global revolutionary opportunities, along with the accompanying dominance of national-reactionary bureaucracies over the working class movement, depressed and weakened the artist and artistic life.

Art cannot save itself

What follows from the above conclusion is the understanding that art cannot save itself. The messianism of various groupings is inappropriate and counterproductive. Art cannot overcome, or make an “end run” around, the crisis of revolutionary leadership and perspective in the working class. That is a political-revolutionary task.

Art can, however, contribute powerfully and in a unique fashion to the process through which social reality and human psychology are more deeply and richly grasped, through which the mystification of bourgeois social relations is pierced, through which the existing values and institutions are undermined, through which the outrage and indignation of masses of people are ignited. Art can act as a mirror in which the population sees its shortcomings, illusions and stupidities, even its

atrocities—“a living mirror,” of course, with distinct and intensely complex qualities. All this plays an indispensable part in creating an atmosphere in which social revolution becomes thinkable and realizable.

Cultural questions remain today as they have been throughout the modern era, intensely explosive political questions. Every significant work of art has social consequences. The ruling elites are tremendously sensitive to this—keeping the population numbed and paralyzed is a matter of life and death for them. Writers, filmmakers, painters, novelists, poets, composers are jailed and shot for a reason, because their efforts call into question the status quo.

“Avant garde” has a militant connotation. The phrase appeared in the title of many socialist and left-wing publications in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century for that reason. But little or nothing of that combativeness remains in the art world today. To what extent are “avant-garde” artists in the front lines of the struggle against a new world war, against poverty and unemployment, against police violence, against the danger of police-state dictatorship? The question hardly requires an answer.

In my view, if the idea of an artistic avant garde, the vanguard, is to recover any concrete meaning today it must involve, before anything else, determined, uncompromising opposition to the existing social order.

Much of what I see in galleries or exhibitions that presents itself, or is presented, as “avant-garde” is very unsatisfactory. So-called experimental filmmaking is equally poor. At best there is a hankering after a shock effect, which becomes its own form of conformism, or some technically innovative method of working with materials or images.

A certain number of “radical” artists appear to be working under the influence of distorted or one-sided interpretations of Bertolt Brecht’s “alienation effect” or the impact of Adorno-like views that only inaccessible art has value today—or a combination of the two. Much of the time such work is chilly and unaffectionate, abstract and far removed from the big difficulties and issues of modern social life.

Furthermore, works described as avant-garde are often bound up with the promotion of identity politics, the self-centered—and ever more poisonous—obsession with gender, sexuality and race that dominates substantial layers of the upper-middle class.

Then, certain “radical” artists go to some lengths to prove that art museums and other establishment institutions are funded by big corporations and function ... as establishment institutions. Some of this is useful, but on the whole it is not much more, at best, than a series of truisms. The content of enduring art is life.

Every new tendency in art begins with rebellion. There is no reason to accept the current prejudice that advanced art needs to be defined by any particular set of formal qualities, or the absence of other ones. It would be better, in my view, to judge art today by its attitude toward the existing social order and suffering, struggling humanity.

In that sense, contrary to Walter Benjamin (“The tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense,” *The Author as Producer*, 1934) and others, there is no good reason why disparate approaches, as long as they all reveal a desire to explore reality freshly and evocatively, and bring out its essential truth, could not co-exist as equally “avant-garde” under contemporary conditions. We have to begin to change the current situation.

Of course, this is not an open-door policy, or mere liberalism in regard to artistic form. Some approaches and methods have been surpassed or discredited by historical-artistic experience. Recourse to outworn photographic naturalism and passive realism, much less dreamy mysticism, emotional bombast or the manipulation of the spectator’s heartstrings, will not bring happy results.

In any event, whatever anyone else may do, we Marxists will not be embarrassed to call the genuinely advanced artists by their proper name.

Art is born in protest, but against what? Realism is not a matter of style

or school, it comes in myriad forms, but it involves a commitment to engage fearlessly with life and the world. Every form of realism continues to be blackguarded with references to Stalinist “Socialist Realism,” which represented a systematic, violent repudiation of both socialism and realism and of the entire Marxist tradition.

We are speaking of *historical, psychological* realism, the ability to reveal the times, to get to the core of things, by whatever artistic means. So many phenomena have not found expression at all, or only in the most limited manner. There has not been for decades a film, or play, or art exhibition that has left an audience or a viewer truly, profoundly shaken—or wholeheartedly, unrestrainedly laughing.

What really needs to be done today? Looking at the current situation, certain things are striking. We have now lived through almost fifteen years of the “global war on terror,” which has been used as the pretext to curtail liberties, repress political opposition and create the structure for authoritarian rule. Yet very little of substance and nothing of genuine world-historical dimensions have emerged in literature, film or drama, or in any other medium, for that matter, dealing with these enormous events. One has only to compare this with the work generated by World War I, World War II, and even the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Nor has the staggering, unprecedented accumulation of wealth by a tiny fraction of society been treated in anything but the most superficial, unserious manner. The working class has all but disappeared as a subject for artistic treatment. Not only in North America, but in Europe, South America and Asia as well. And yet the proletarianization of the global population goes on apace. How is this obliviousness, this willful ignorance, to be accounted for?

Why is there no savage mockery of this society rotting on its feet, its swinish ruling elite, its repugnant political campaigns, its ignoramus candidates, its squalid billionaire-swindler “entrepreneurs,” and all the filth that has floated to the surface and now forms the daily content of authorized public life?

Any honest assessment of contemporary life—as a precondition—would require casting a critical eye on what passes as official ideology, including middle-class leftism—the dreadful racial, gender, sexual and “green” politics and everything that goes with them, the self-serving affectations of the not quite top 5 or 6 percent wealthiest portion of the population. Among the many things in desperate need of satirical treatment is this American (and global) “left,” this pseudo-intelligentsia. The art and academic worlds are saturated with this stuff.

In these circles, one finds the worst conformism and conservatism, and frequently a bitter hostility to the working class. “Avant garde”? Really, this is more often than not the rear guard of bourgeois complacency.

If the artists want to make some headway, they could start by paying less attention to themselves and those around them. Someone has to say it: you are really not that interesting!

One of the great difficulties at present is that contemporary “avant-garde artists” are largely working with recycled ideas, long ago analyzed and rejected by serious artists and intellectuals. There is a great deal of pretension. Words and phrases are thrown around, and an incomprehensible jargon has become standard. The more substantial artists of an earlier period recognized a distinction between sensationalism, the artificial creation of “controversy,” and something else entirely, a more critical appraisal, which always involves examining the socioeconomic foundations of society.

A great deal of superficiality and eclecticism dominate in art circles. By and large, we have cliques and “celebrities,” figures with “careers” and perhaps corporate support and eventual government honors, rather than artists and artistic schools that stand for something important and groundbreaking, dedicated to the pursuit of truth at any cost.

Is this generation of artists less talented or committed than previous ones? Perhaps, but talent and commitment themselves are products of

social and historical circumstances. Artistic greatness is not summoned “from the vasty deep” by mere will power or mental effort alone.

The contemporary crisis of cultural life can only be understood on the basis of a serious study of the critical experiences of the twentieth century, the experiences that have shaped present-day social and psychological reality.

In “left” artistic circles one encounters numerous references to Marxism, to the Russian Revolution, to Stalinism, but often names and tendencies are indiscriminately and carelessly lumped together (or worse), without context or any serious examination of the experiences with which they are associated.

Trotsky

In “leftist” aesthetic literature, Trotsky, the greatest revolutionary of the century, is generally mentioned, if at all, only in passing. The various commentators studiously ignore *Literature and Revolution*, *Class and Art*, *Art and Politics in Our Epoch*, *Problems of Everyday Life* and other writings, although these works provide the most indispensable insight into the problems of culture in the present epoch.

Trotsky’s ideas still provoke a hostile reaction from those who take the trouble to respond. With all due respect, the positions of one of the contributors to Volume 1 of *The Idea of the Avant Garde*, Boris Groys, call for the sharpest criticism. In his morbid essay “On Art Activism,” published elsewhere, the German-born academic inveighs, above all, against the notion of progress, “which leaves behind only debris, ruins, and personal catastrophes.” The “ideology of progress,” he writes, is “phantasmal and absurd.”

Groys continues: “Traditionally, we associate art with a movement towards perfection. ... Modern and contemporary art wants to make things not better but worse—and not relatively worse but radically worse: to make dysfunctional things out of functional things, to betray expectations, to reveal the invisible presence of death where we tend to see only life.”

Finally, he refers to Trotsky—whose revolutionary optimism he finds most objectionable—as one of those “leftist and Socialist theoreticians [who] remained under the spell of the idea of upward mobility—be it individual or collective.” Groys cites the deservedly famed concluding paragraphs of *Literature and Revolution* in which Trotsky envisions the future: “Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser, and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movement more rhythmic, his voice more musical. ... The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”

This remarkable passage, which has inspired generations of revolutionaries, only appalls and repels the gloomy Groys: “It is this artistic, social, and political alpinism ... from which modern and contemporary art tries to save us. Modern art is made against the natural gift. It does not develop ‘human potential’ but annuls it. It operates not by expansion but by reduction. Indeed, a genuine political transformation cannot be achieved according to the same logic of talent, effort, and competition on which the current market economy is based, but only by metanoia [the process of experiencing a psychotic breakdown and subsequent psychological healing] and *kenosis* [the “self-emptying” of one’s own will and becoming entirely receptive to God’s divine will]—by a U-turn against the movement of progress, a U-turn against the pressure of upward mobility. Only in this way can we escape the pressure of our own gifts and talents, which enslaves and exhausts us by pushing us to climb one mountain after another. Only if we learn to aestheticize the lack of gifts as well as the presence of gifts, and thus not differentiate between

victory and failure, do we escape the theoretical blockage that endangers contemporary art activism.”

Groys, who predictably refers in his essay to Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and Foucault, is here glorifying reaction and repudiating any connection with progressive ideas. This flows inevitably from the orientation of postmodernism and related trends.

In the 1930s Trotsky exercised enormous influence because the fate of socialism was identified with the Russian Revolution and the generation of revolutionary Marxists who had provided its intellectual and moral leadership. To this day no one’s ideas are more radical or “advanced” than Trotsky’s.

Taking a position on the struggle between Stalinism and Trotskyism was the harshest and most revealing litmus test of that earlier period, a test that most artists failed.

For instance, Brecht could announce one evening in 1931 at a café, according to Benjamin, that there were “good reasons for thinking that Trotsky was the greatest living European writer,” but was unable, even in the face of his own collaborators disappearing in the genocidal purges in the USSR, to break with the Stalinist milieu. Benjamin himself, who also read Trotsky assiduously, eliminated comments by the latter from an address he was to give at the Stalinist-run “Institute for the Study of Fascism” in Paris in 1934.

True, uncompromising radicalism and independence are rarely found among artists. Many if not most, were the truth told, crave acceptance. They want and need an audience and recognition-legitimization-compensation from the society of which they are members, or from a powerful apparatus like the Stalinist bureaucracy, even if they disapprove intellectually of that society or apparatus.

Something of this finds expression in the comment of filmmaker R.W. Fassbinder, in a 1974 interview, in regard to the German writer Theodor Fontane: “He lived in a society whose faults he recognized and could describe very precisely but all the same a society he needed, to which he really wanted to belong. He rejected everybody and found everything alien and yet fought all his life for recognition within this society. And that’s also my attitude to society.”

Without for a moment underestimating the objective, socioeconomic processes at work, it would be wrong as well to underestimate the impact that the general absence of historical knowledge has had, including on the artists themselves. In this regard, postmodernism, poststructuralism and related trends have played the most deplorable role, attacking the possibility of establishing historical, objective truth.

Yes, we have a “Marxist” this or that on every hand in artistic and intellectual circles, but there is hardly one of these supposed Marxists who can make sense of a single important global development. The endless “war on terror,” the sociocide in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, the right-wing coup in Ukraine and the imperialist threats against Russia, the divisions between the US and China—how can one pretend to produce significant art when one knows so little about all this, when one cannot explain anything in a reasoned, consistent manner?

So many “radicals” and “leftists” have found themselves dragged behind one or another “human rights” cliché, these poorly disguised imperialist interventions, beginning more than two decades ago in Bosnia (Susan Sontag, 1993: “Like most of the people in Sarajevo, I am waiting for Clinton”) and carrying on in more recent days in Libya and Syria—with Iran, Russia and China to come? Rejecting “kneejerk anti-imperialism,” i.e., principled opposition to great power politics and neo-colonial oppression, is the latest watchword of the pseudo-left.

Many artists were enraptured by Occupy Wall Street, only to see it collapse ignominiously in a matter of months and become yet another path back to the Democratic Party and the Obama campaign in particular. And what about the widespread support for Obama himself among artists, the candidate of “change,” this grotesque product of the military-intelligence

apparatus and high finance?

One cannot be so wrong about so many major events and still claim to possess extraordinary insight. Surely, at some point a degree of self-criticism must set in. The “avant-garde” artists, the intellectuals, are as hopeless as the average “man on the street” at present, probably more so. History demonstrates that it is not enough to bear a grudge against bourgeois society. Bohemianism does not exact a high cost and can even be a marketable commodity in its own right.

It is absurd to imagine that one can orient oneself on the issues of our time aside from working through the critical historical questions. Postmodernism evolved precisely as an attempt to codify and legitimize an evasion of such questions. The end of “metanarratives” (social progress, the heritage of the Enlightenment, Marxism, the class struggle, etc.) was pronounced. There was no need any longer—in fact, it was positively harmful and deceptive—to speak about “Truth,” “History” and so forth.

As the arch-pragmatist-postmodernist philosopher Richard Rorty observed, when the subject of objective knowledge or truth came up, he preferred to “change the subject.” But this is in no way improved upon by the “leftist” academic and former Maoist Bruno Bosteels’ encouragement of “active forgetfulness to combat the culture of memory” (a version perhaps of Nietzsche’s “Forgetting is essential to action of any kind”).

As though one could bypass the experience of the Russian Revolution, the struggle between the theory of Permanent Revolution and Stalin’s “socialism in a single country,” the lessons of the critical moments in the global class struggle in the twentieth century and hold a coherent view of the present political or cultural situation! Certainly political-historical ignorance and artistic vision do not go hand in hand.

At the time of the demise of the USSR in 1991–92, only the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Trotskyist movement, insisted that everything depended on a reworking of the Russian Revolution, that all creative thought was bound up with a study of the greatest experience of the working class and socialist movement. Only on that basis has something positive been produced. The *World Socialist Web Site*, the most widely read socialist Internet publication on the planet, launched in 1998, is one of the products of that effort.

The past several decades have witnessed the intellectual coming of age of a generation educated outside any genuine Marxist tradition (not the fraudulent Frankfurt School or “Western Marxism” variety). What has taken place on the watch of the postmodernists, the “critical thinkers” and the rest?

No individual has emerged in the past forty years in global culture or politics that one would *have to come to grips with* to orient oneself in the current situation—there has not been, in fact, *a single irreplaceable figure*. That is the fruit of the extreme relativism, subjectivism and irrationalism that have ruled the roost in the art and academic worlds.

The scientist attempts to understand the laws of nature accurately for the purposes, ultimately, of improving human life. The Marxist revolutionary attempts to reflect accurately in his or her thought the law-determined movement of the objective world, including social development, and make this reflection the basis of revolutionary practice.

But isn’t this effort, to align thought with reality and translate that into a practice or a material object, part of art work too?

Trotsky’s comrade and fellow Left Oppositionist, Aleksandr Voronsky, the most insightful Marxist literary critic of the twentieth century and also—one is tempted to say *for that reason*—ignored by the intellectual “left,” insisted that the artist who “surrenders” him or herself to the richness of the world, finds the latter “as it is in itself, in its most lively and beautiful forms.” An artistic work is truthful, Voronsky argued, if the sensations and conceptions it arouses in us “correspond to the actual ‘nature of things,’ if they have the character of objectivity.” The artist does not differ from the scientist in that—“the object is the same. The

uniqueness or particularity of the artist is that he thinks in images rather than abstract categories.”

What the artists presently know of and think about the world is inadequate. The current shibboleths and fashionable formulas cannot be simply shuffled around. New intellectual matter, new problems, new concerns have to be introduced into the intellectual bloodstream.

Objective conditions will play a major role. The working class has been held back from active participation in political life for so long by its bureaucratic misleaders. It is now re-emerging onto the historical stage. What has now become a more or less open rebellion by autoworkers in the US against the United Auto Workers—no longer a “union” in any meaningful sense, but a multi-billion-dollar business, a corporate-labor syndicate—has enormous implications. A mass movement by workers against capitalism will do much to disperse the “clouds of skepticism and of pessimism which cover the horizon of mankind,” including the artists.

In my view, artists and intellectuals need to study and understand certain critical events and developments in the twentieth century. Those include, above all, the October Revolution, the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy and struggle between Stalinism and Trotskyism; the bitter lessons of the conflicts and defeats in Germany, Britain, China, Spain, France; the titanic effort to build a new revolutionary international, the Fourth International, founded in 1938, and its subsequent internal battles, bound up with the struggle to establish the political independence of the working class.

To a large extent today, perspective—including artistic perspective—is history.

To conclude: there is every reason to have confidence that events will give a new and forceful impetus to artistic life. Revolutionary crises not only expose what is inadequate, dated and corrupt; they also serve to inspire that which is genuinely creative, resourceful and honest.

The coming eruptions of social struggle will shatter many reputations overnight. The term “celebrity” will acquire an exclusively pejorative connotation. The great artists of the new age will not be given medals at the Kennedy Center nor will they think of submitting themselves to such a disgrace.

The genuine avant garde that emerges in moral and political solidarity with the upsurge of the working class will be compelled to draw heavily upon the strategic experiences and lessons of the great revolutionary struggles of the past. The new avant garde will understand its own work as part of humanity’s historical movement from oppression to freedom.



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