

David Walsh speaks on “Art, War and Social Revolution” at meetings in California

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World Socialist Web Site Arts Editor David Walsh spoke at San Diego State University and the University of California, Berkeley in late April on “Art, War and Social Revolution.” The talks addressed the present political and cultural situation in America, explaining the long-term decline in critical and anti-war films, novels and other forms of art work.

Both meetings, sponsored by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), were well-attended and followed by lively discussions.

Walsh began his lecture by outlining the eruption of American imperialism over the past quarter century, beginning with the first Gulf War in 1990-91; the Clinton administration’s further interventions in Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia and Haiti; the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq carried out by George W. Bush; and those operations either continued or launched under Barack Obama, including the devastation of Libya and Syria and the murderous drone strikes against Pakistan and Yemen.

The speaker suggested that anyone who had come of age in the US in the 1990s or 2000s belonged to a generation that “had known only war.” During the last 15 years in particular, the American military had “been embroiled in killing people *on a daily basis*.”

The first portion of the lecture dealt with both the physical harm wreaked by imperialist violence and, beyond that, the scarring psychological impact.

After detailing some of the indices of the material and spiritual damage, including the emergence of sadistic and psychopathic trends in filmmaking, Walsh turned to a brief history of American filmmaking in relation to war. He emphasized that in a previous period a significant number of films were more critical and realistic. “A true anti-war film shows the atrocities *your country* commits against the so-called enemy,” Walsh

argued.

Walsh noted that in contrast to contemporary works about Iraq and Afghanistan, a number of the films about World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, “attempted to take head-on enormous social and political themes.” However, he emphasized that socialists do not look upon this era as a Golden Age that must be re-created, and the time period certainly had its own definite limitations.

“For Marxists, art is ... no less concerned with getting at the truth than the hard sciences. Art largely shows, it doesn’t explain. When we look back on these films, the filmmakers tended to look more critically” at American life and society.

Walsh described the achievements and limitations of the films and literature about the current wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. He suggested there were some valuable works in this category, but by and large the films and novels treated the momentous events in a narrow manner, concentrating on immersing the viewer or reader in the immediacy of the events and evading any larger considerations.

“No one is taking the problems head on, and that hasn’t always been the case. In an earlier period, authors and filmmakers tried to analyze the fundamental problems of the age. Art holds a mirror to society and says ‘this is where you’re failing, these are your deficiencies,’ and this is largely absent today.”

The WSWS Arts Editor posed this as a “central issue” of the lecture: “We’ve had 25 years of war, 15 years of perpetual war—by now you would think that a great work would have appeared that captured this period in concrete imagery. And yet where is the novel, film, drama or painting that captures the age of the War on Terror?”

He pointed to numerous long-term and shorter-term

issues, including the anti-Communist purges in Hollywood, the decades of political stagnation and the lurch to the right by considerable layers of the erstwhile liberal or “left” middle class. But he also suggested that there was a specific problem in regard to the conception of art itself. Walsh argued that postmodernism, with its emphasis on the subjective “mini-narrative” at the expense of a coherent theory of society and history, had exercised an enormously damaging influence on cultural life in recent decades.

Commenting on the correlation between artistic integrity and the building of a socialist culture, Walsh stressed, “Our concern is with the education of the working class. We need a new art committed to the truth at any cost.”

During the discussion in Berkeley, one IYSSE member asked, “What will lead to a new, critical cultural awakening among artists?”

Walsh replied, “First and foremost, a change in popular mood, a movement of the working class. A mass anti-capitalist movement ... would have a revivifying and rejuvenating influence, which, as Trotsky says, will ‘blow away the clouds of skepticism and pessimism.’ The impact on the artist of that sort of social movement will be very powerful.”

An attendee joining online from the University of Oregon asked, “Can you talk more on art and the role of identity politics?”

Walsh responded, “Identity politics has had a disastrous impact on art because it narrows the artists’ outlook. There are democratic rights issues involved, and we resolutely defend them. But we do not believe the great questions of the day involve gender, race, or sexual orientation. Identity politics has encouraged individualism, narcissism and careerism. The postmodernists have had their way for 30 to 40 years—where is the great work of art?”

In San Diego, Joe, a recent graduate student from the University of California, San Diego, found Walsh’s analysis of the postmodernists’ influence on art particularly striking, saying, “Postmodernism is a paradigm that has shifted through all forms of art, affecting how the artists see the world.

“I like how he brought out the fallacies of the postmodernists. In most disciplines, these thinkers are unavoidable and we need to bring out their fallacies and their politics, such as those of Michel Foucault, for

example. It is important to shed light on their politics and their influence.”



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