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Art and the Influence of Revolution

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Mehring Books is pleased to announce the release of a collection of essays from the *World Socialist Web Site: Art and the Influence of Revolution*, edited by WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh. We are publishing the Editor's Preface today. The book is available from Mehring.com here.

This collection of essays, centered on the landmark artistic achievements of 1925, explores the profound connection between high-level intellectual creation and the social upheavals of the early 20th century. Walsh contends that the flourishing of American literature—represented by figures like Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway—was not an isolated phenomenon but rather a response to the emergence of the United States as a global power and the substantial cultural "pressure" exerted by the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. A commitment to realism and the pursuit of objective truth allowed these artists to navigate an epoch defined by war and revolution.

In contrast to the historical triumphs of 1925, the preface presents a scathing indictment of contemporary intellectual decay, characterized by postmodernist irrationalism and a cynical retreat from external reality. Walsh rejects the notion that art should remain indifferent to social life, asserting that enduring and meaningful work can only be forged through engagement with the fundamental challenges of our epoch.

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Editor's Preface

Art and the Influence of Revolution is a collection of articles and essays devoted to novels, films, poetry, and music that appeared or were created a century ago, in 1925. The starting point was both a recognition that the works in question were of a higher artistic and intellectual level than contemporary efforts, and an attempt to determine what had made the overall achievement possible.

1925 remains a high point in American literature, with the publication of Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Lewis's *Arrowsmith*, and Hemingway's *In Our Time* (short stories), with the latter's *The Sun Also Rises* and Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues* appearing the following year and Upton Sinclair's highly uneven but intriguing *Oil!* coming out in 1927.

Various factors contributed to this growing artistic complexity and flourishing, including the emergence of America as a world power and its participation in World War I, the rapid growth of heavy industry, working-class concentrations of an increasingly global and cosmopolitan character in large urban centers, and the accompanying general erosion of provincialism in intellectual life. As is argued in several of these pieces, under these conditions, the impact and "pressure" of the 1917 Bolshevik-led Revolution on American culture, despite the mythologies of anti-communism and academic liberalism, was substantial.

The greatest upheaval in modern times, the first stage in the world revolution, calling into question the existence of the capitalist system everywhere, shook American life as it did life in every corner of the globe. No serious understanding of twentieth-century cultural life, its greatest triumphs and greatest retreats, and our current challenges as well, is possible without considering the impact of the socialist movement and its decades-long struggle to raise the thinking and activity of the working class, culminating in the 1917 Revolution. Of course, the impact of the October Revolution was most direct and inseparable for the Russian-Soviet artists themselves, Eisenstein, Shostakovich, Gorky and others.

In addition, we have included Leon Trotsky's remarkable tribute to Soviet poet Sergei Esenin, who committed suicide in the last week of 1925, and an assessment of the little-known but significant Soviet Armenian poet Yeghishe Charents. The writers and filmmakers discussed here had widely different histories and aesthetic approaches, but they shared a commitment to realism, not as an artistic school, but as a philosophy of life; a deep feeling for the world "of three dimensions" as it is and a determination to bring out its most essential characteristics. Stendhal's comment, "Now, above all, I want to be truthful," served as the watchword for generations of artists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, Dreiser echoed it quite directly: "The sum and substance of literary as well as social morality may be expressed in three words—tell the truth," while Fitzgerald insisted that an author's main purpose is "to make you see."

Decades of irrationalism, postmodernism, and overall cynicism and intellectual decay have produced bad results. Art, we are told, is not a reflection of external reality, but merely other images. There is no depth or essence to things, only surfaces. Knowledge is socially constructed and "truth" (always in inverted commas) entirely relative, so art cannot act as an objective mirror. Instead of accurately reflecting reality, art and thought in general only make further unstable and unreliable, sometimes entirely misleading, claims on us. The artwork influenced wholly or in part by such false and demoralizing views is inevitably weakened, lacking in confidence, turned inward and diverted from concentrating on "life as it is."

This is not a small matter considering the state of life at present. As we work on publishing this book considering artistic effort and problems past and present, American and Israeli bombs and missiles are raining down on cities in Iran. The bloody, illegal war began with the pulverizing of a school in Minab, southern Iran, resulting in the deaths of more than 150 "seven- to twelve-year-old girls." A press account describes children's bodies lying partly buried under the debris. In one video, a very small child's severed arm is pulled from the rubble. Colorful backpacks covered with blood and concrete dust sit among the ruins. One girl wears a green dress with gingham patches on her pockets and the collar, her form partly obscured by a black body bag. Screams can be heard in the background.[1]

This is the "war of choice" of Trump and Netanyahu, a "total war" as pioneered by the Nazis. The *World Socialist Web Site* has justly argued that the pyromaniacs and sadists in Washington and their allies in Tel Aviv "are setting the entire region aflame and threatening to plunge the

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world into a catastrophe of staggering dimensions." As part of that overall plan, the US and Israeli barbarians have also set about bombing Iranian world heritage sites and historical landmarks, including the Golestan Palace, the third-century Falak-ol-Aflak Citadel, and other "cultural jewels," as part of the effort to terrorize the population and destroy Iran as a society. Rosa Luxemburg offered a vivid indictment of imperialist "civilization" in the midst of World War I:

> Violated, dishonored, wading in blood, dripping filth—there stands bourgeois society.… The ravening beast, the witches' sabbath of anarchy, a plague to culture and humanity. Thus it reveals itself in its true, its naked form.[2]

Humanity stands face to face with the choice between socialism or the descent into barbarism. Precisely at such a moment we hear insistent voices proclaiming that filmmakers (and artists in general presumably) "have to stay out of politics because if we make movies that are dedicatedly political, we enter the field of politics. But we are the counterweight of politics, we are the opposite of politics. We have to do the work of people, not the work of politicians." This was the wrongheaded comment of veteran German filmmaker Wim Wenders opening the 2026 Berlinale.

In Wenders's mind he may have been striving to preserve the "purer" realm of art from the corrupt and contaminating world of conventional politics. But the notion, in effect, that "politics should be left to the politicians" is a horrifying one given the trajectory of global society under the "management" of Trump, Netanyahu, Merz, Starmer, Macron, and the rest of the criminals and thieves who rule the world at present. No, these figures and their domain shouldn't be avoided; all that should be subjected to unrelenting exposure and criticism, including by artists. The Wenders-type comment implies that art's "natural home" is humanity's inner (or spiritual) life, as though that could be separated from its "outer life." But the essence of humanity, Marx explained a very long time ago, was "no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations." And art is one of the means that people have developed, out of the millennia of social practice and interactions, to shed light on that "ensemble."

How fitting it is that Wenders and others have come to the conclusion that art should steer clear of "politics"—in fact, of opposition to the imperialist status quo—when the various ruling classes are more than ever frightened of "every new word." The crisis-ridden, increasingly discredited, politically fragile system cannot endure any oppositional artist who might have—or gain—a popular following and help spark revolt. The White House lashes out nervously and insultingly against every popular musician or actor who dares to criticize the would-be Führer. The Israeli government has shown the way here, as it has in so many areas, by liquidating poets, photographers, visual artists, scholars, intellectuals, and journalists in Gaza by the hundreds, but the Trump administration and the rest, each in its own way, have declared war on progressive cultural life. The coming into existence of "The Donald J. Trump and The John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts," whatever its ultimate fate, will forever be a monument to the present perilous condition for intellectual creation, endangered by the continued existence of the profit system.

The governments would very much like the artists "to stay out of politics." And when they don't behave, they confront censorship and state repression. Again, what sort of artist ignores the "plague to culture and humanity" the present political and social setup represents? What type of work emerges from such a stance? In fact, one has merely to look around to see a great deal of such stuff today, trivial, self-involved, complacent, or simply tailored for this or that market. "Pure art," as Trotsky and André Breton suggested in the 1938 "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," too often "serves the extremely impure ends of reaction." They insisted that their "conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society."

That is the question. Art is not mere self-expression. Neither is the artist an "empty machine" who exists for the sole or primary purpose of creating form. Nor is it true that art lies beyond rational criticism or influence because it speaks to the individual's inner life, generated by the "tragic nature of human life as such." Art is not politics, and an art work has to be judged in the first place by its own law, by the law of art, but if artists are not troubling themselves with the most insistent human problems, then, frankly, their undertakings will not have much value. They will be mere scribblings or playthings for personal diversion or that of the ruling classes.

Art is, above all, concerned with investigating and reproducing men and women's lives, their relations with one another and with the world around them from every possible point of view. The artist is a specialist in this, obsessed with this. The artist and the reader or spectator or viewer are living men and women capable of communicating with and understanding one another because of a shared psychology resulting from social and historical circumstances. Art is a function of social humanity inextricably bound to its life and environment. It is a form of social consciousness, one of the principal means by which people gain their bearings in the world. How could art remain indifferent to the social earthquakes we are living through? "The events are prepared by people, they are made by people, they fall upon people and change these people. Art, directly or indirectly, affects the lives of the people who make or experience the events. This refers to all art, to the grandest, as well as to the most intimate." (Trotsky)

What Marxists have insisted upon since the 1917 Russian Revolution is that however they might accomplish the task, the artists had to come at least to general terms with the nature of their epoch, one of wars and revolutions. This wasn't a demand or an "ultimatum" placed on them by the Marxists; it was simply a frank spelling out of what has defined the important artists at every point in history, that they rise to the fundamental challenges of the time if their work is to have a deep and enduring and meaningful character.

Despite the vicissitudes of the past century or more, tragically marked by more defeats than victories, with the former concentrated above all in the degeneration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy, we retain this view. More often than not, this conception has been "proven" in the negative, as artists and intellectuals, particularly from the late 1930s on, retreated from an attraction to socialism, revolution, and the working class. The resulting pessimism and disorientation, taking root in the various existentialist, irrationalist, Frankfurt School and, more recently, postmodernist strands, have not been conducive to artwork. What do these last decades have to show in this regard? The writers and painters and filmmakers have more often than not differed from one another most revealingly in the ingenious ways they have avoided facing up to the character of the era.

That period is now, under the blows of imperialist violence and economic upheaval and resurgent class struggle, giving way to another, more explosive and socially, culturally dynamic one. The new art, Trotsky argued in *Literature and Revolution*, also published almost exactly a century ago—the art that would make a significant mark and expand the genuinely creative channel—would be created "under the influence of revolution." Political blows to come made that more difficult than Trotsky could have imagined at the time, but the work discussed here proves the ineradicable correctness of his argument—the enduring art of our time would and will only be created under the influence of revolution.

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Endnotes

• “Minab School Bombing: What Evidence Is There That the US Was Responsible?” *Guardian*, March 10, 2026.

• Rosa Luxemburg, *The Crisis of German Social Democracy* (1915), also known as the *Junius Pamphlet*, chap. 1.

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