WSWS International Editorial Board meeting

Artistic and cultural problems in the current situation

Part One

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Published below is the first of a two-part report on artistic and cultural issues delivered by David Walsh to an expanded meeting of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board (IEB) held in Sydney from January 22 to 27, 2006. Walsh a member of the World Socialist Web Site IEB and the WSWS Arts editor.

WSWS IEB chairman David North’s report was posted on 27 February. SEP (Australia) national secretary Nick Beams’ report was posted in three parts: Part one on February 28, Part two on March 1 and Part three on March 2. James Cogan’s report on Iraq was posted on March 3. Barry Grey’s report was published in two parts: Part one on March 4 and Part two on March 6. Patrick Martin’s report was published in two parts: Part one on March 7 and Part two on March 8. John Chan report on China was published in three parts: Part one was posted on March 9, Part two on March 10 and Part three on March 11. Uli Rippert’s report on Europe was posted in three parts: Part one on March 13, Part two on March 14 and Part three on March 15. Julie Hyland’s report on New Labour in Britain was posted in two parts: Part one on March 16 and Part two on March 17. Bill Van Auken’s report on Latin America was posted in two parts: Part one on March 18 and Part two on March 20.

In the most general sense, the present situation of art is dominated by two tendencies: on the one hand, the development on a vast scale of the objective conditions for a global artistic culture that will illuminate, delight and move masses of human beings, enriching and ultimately altering their lives in an almost unimaginable fashion; on the other, the decayed state of the existing social relations works in the opposite direction, threatening humanity with the prospect of war and dictatorship, endangering existing cultural life and suppressing the emergence of new forms and ideas.

The assault on art, the most complex part of culture, takes place through increasingly brazen attacks on artistic freedom and efforts at censorship in many parts of the world (the US, China, Britain, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, India and elsewhere), including the encouragement of the most reactionary forces, fascistic or religious fundamentalist—Christian, Hindu and Muslim; as well as through the further commercialization and trivialization of art and the corruption of layers of the intelligentsia, both openly right-wing and certain nominally “left” elements.

Any empirical survey of global art and culture is out of the question. Aside from the scientific-historical problems posed by such an enterprise, a few statistical reminders might help put the dimensions of the present global cultural situation in a clearer light.

Capitalism has failed the world’s population in terms of culture and education, along with the possibility of making a decent life for itself. Nonetheless, the sheer force of population growth and global economic expansion has produced a leap in the number of literate adults. The figure doubled from 1970 to 1998, from 1.5 billion to 3.3 billion.

The number of books alone is staggering. Some 1,000,000 titles are published each year worldwide. One estimate suggests that the existing world stock of books might be approximately 65 million titles. Amazon.com claims to have 4,000,000 titles. In 2000, there were 158,000 unique periodical titles in the world and the total number of serial publications was over 600,000 around the globe.

About 1.1 billion books were sold in the United States in 1999. The total number of US magazines circulated annually exceeds 500 million.

The process of book and periodical production and consumption is riven by vast inequities, with the US producing some 40 percent of the world’s printed material while entire continents starve for information and culture.

This raises the question: has capitalism created, or is it capable of creating, a harmonious global culture?

Trade in cultural goods has grown exponentially over the last two decades. Between 1980 and 1998, annual world trade of printed matter, literature, music, visual arts, cinema, photography, radio, television, games and sporting goods surged from $95.3 billion to nearly $400 billion. However, three countries—the United Kingdom, the United States and China—produced 40 percent of the world’s cultural trade products in 2002, while Latin America, the Caribbean region, Oceania and Africa together (nearly one-and-a-half billion people) accounted for less than four percent, according to a report by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Figures from 2001 revealed that five countries—India, China-Hong Kong, the Philippines, the US and Japan—each produced more than 200 feature films. India annually turns out 700 or more films; the Filipino film industry has subsequently collapsed—it has gone from producing 240 feature films a year to 40. The US produces 400 plus films a year; the Japanese produced about 240 films a year during the 1990s. For China, see below.

In 2001, 25 countries, primarily in Europe and Asia, produced between 20 and 199 films. Seventy-two countries produced between one and 19 films, and 88 countries out of a total of 190 had no film industry whatsoever.

In other words, 160 out of 190 countries in 2001 each produced less than 20 films. Sub-Saharan Africa produces an average of only 42 films a year. Vietnam, with 83 million people, has 60 cinema screens. Brazil, with 170 million people, has only 2,000. The US has 36,700.

The Hollywood studios own a worldwide share of 85 percent of cinema
screens, with peaks above 90 percent in some European, African and Latin American countries. Hollywood revenues were down 6 percent, $500 million, in 2005. Box office revenues are down in Western Europe too. This is attributable, in part, to higher ticket prices, the general economy, the DVD market, cable television—but also the generally inferior quality of the films. Audiences are responding to the miserable quality of so many films.

Entertainment is one industry in which the US possesses a massive surplus. European films control 1 percent of US market. China (which permits only 20 foreign films a year), Russia, Turkey, India, France, South Korea are some of the countries where local or at least non-American films control a significant portion of the domestic market.

The Chinese film industry is now the world’s third largest, in terms of revenue, behind Hollywood and India, with 260 films made in 2005—an increase of almost 20 percent (76 were made in 1997). Chinese domestic box office revenue was $248 million in 2005, an increase of 30 percent over the year before, with another $204 million made in overseas markets. The 30 percent increase in domestic box office was substantial, but it pales next to the 58 percent increase in 2004 over 2003. China still suffers from a relatively small number of cinemas and, of course, widespread poverty. In 2004, its domestic box office revenue was only one quarter of South Korea’s.

The entertainment industry underwent an astonishing process of concentration in the 1990s. In 1993, the total turnover of the fifty largest audiovisual companies worldwide was $118 billion. Four years later, seven major media conglomerates alone reached the same figure.

In 1993, 36 percent of the companies were based in the US, 36 percent in the European Union, and 26 percent in Japan. By 1997, over 50 percent of the firms were based in the US. What much of the world is permitted to see and hear is largely determined by officials of seven media conglomerates.

We face a radically transformed cultural situation: tens of thousands of online periodicals, an enormous growth in computer-associated and digital technologies, creating art media not even conceivable only decades ago. Even if one were to consider the “traditional” art forms—fiction, poetry, painting, music, cinema (at least ‘traditional’ in the twentieth century), architecture, dance—a worldwide explosion has occurred.

The possibility of an alternative perspective to ours has been raised at our meeting this week—the possibility that we live during the birth pangs of a newly stabilized capitalist world system, in which the fundamental contradictions of social life have been overcome, opening up a vista of eventual economic prosperity and freedom from privation and deadening toil for the world’s population. If that were indeed the case, such a remarkable, liberating development ought to be accompanied by the frankest and most honest appraisals of the human condition. If we were perched on the edge of a new epoch, premonitions of that would be discovered in art.

But more specifically, if this society held out the real possibility of ameliorating the conditions of masses of people, then its official art would be engaged in the most self-critical effort, probing what exists, exposing the remaining ills and artistically anticipating their resolution. An extraordinary frankness and openness would dominate, which permitted the widest possible and most democratic discussion of the human situation.

Is this the present situation? Clearly not. What do we continually encounter? A concealment of conditions, the exclusion of vast masses of people and their lives from artistic consideration, all too often the fantasized, trivial treatment of the lives of ‘beautiful’ people without financial problems, people who don’t exist, and the systematic degradation of popular culture, the calculated effort to brutalize and render humanity indifferent to suffering and social ills.

We can say with some justice that the fact that the lives of hundreds of millions of Africans can find reflection in only 42 films (and those are not distributed evenly across the continent) is a disgrace, a shameful state of affairs. But do the hundreds of films produced in India, most of them silly musicals, do justice to the lives of that population, or, for that matter, do the hundreds of Hollywood films made annually, by and large, shed any substantial light on the lives of the American people?

The first sub-Saharan African feature film did not appear until cinema was 70 years old, in 1966. We reviewed it recently. From personal experience I can tell you that no film had been produced entirely in Chad, a sizable African country with a population of 10 million people, until 1999, because I interviewed the director in Toronto in 2000. In a continent where illiteracy is exceptionally high, cinema is one of the principal means by which people might see something about their lives and the world.

A commentator wrote several years ago: “Hopes and projections of political and economic renewal and transformation under the aegis of World Bank-mandated adjustment programs, and other liberalization measures, and the positive fall-out that these were expected to have, especially on the cultural sector, actually turned out to be disastrous. African filmmakers began to experience the painful effects of budget cuts and the gradual loss of both external and internal funding for production. At the same time, the slow but orchestrated disappearance of movie houses, one of the sad occurrences of the 1990s, began as privatization made purchase possible by local entrepreneurs who, in time, converted these into warehouses for sugar, rice, cement, and other commodities.”

When film production statisticians consider the “world,” they generally leave Africa out of the picture. The population of Africa and the Middle East combined accounted for 1.2 percent of “total world cinema spending” in 1998.

A vast social gap exists between those who control the cultural means of production and wide layers of the world’s population. Moreover, the very depth of the crisis, the human urgency of the present situation, renders it too explosive to be treated seriously by the official culture.

Trotsky writes that the “decline of bourgeois society means an intolerable exacerbation of social contradictions, which are transformed inevitably into personal contradictions, calling forth an ever more burning need for a liberating art.” I find that a compelling insight into the present world situation.

Worsening social contradictions, transformed into personal contradictions, producing an ever-greater need for liberating art. This ever-greater need is answered at present by the official culture by ever greater levels of dishonesty and insensitivity.

We could look at Russia and Eastern Europe, where society has experienced birth pangs of a sort, but is this new social organism a progression or a horrifying regression? The notion that capitalism offers a way forward can be disputed simply by looking at the dismal and demoralizing cultural-artistic conditions in most of those countries. Russian cinema turns out for the most part hysterical, pessimistic, misanthropic works, or commercial works that imitate the worst of Hollywood’s vulgarity and brutality.

The theater was once the jewel of Poland’s cultural life, the site of experiment in the 1960s and 1970s, including Grotowski’s legendary “Poor Theatre.” A recent commentator notes that Warsaw is “hurting these days less ‘towards a poor theatre’ than towards a bland, international, slightly impoverished one, indistinguishable from that of any provincial capital.”

These conditions or worse dominate Eastern Europe, where budgets for the arts have been devastated and market principles restored. Insofar as artistic life revives, it will have to adopt a position of hostility to the mafia-capitalist elite.

If capitalism is flourishing and offers an unlimited potential, then how it is possible that its culture has failed abysmally to treat artistically the
present human situation, and to the extent that this reality is treated, and one sees a shift in mood in this direction, it is done from an oppositional, increasingly anti-capitalist point of view?

Erich Auerbach, in his work *Mimesis*, a study of the representation of reality in Western literature since antiquity, describes the foundations of modern realism in the early nineteenth century, when society was experiencing genuine birth pangs, in these terms: “The serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior social groups [the working class, in other words] to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background ...”

What do we encounter today? Almost the precise opposite of this approach.

We’re entitled to ask: what is the moral state, so to speak, of the global culture? Here statistics will not suffice.

Trotsky insisted, rightly, that any penetrating look at life would inevitably contain an element of protest. How could it not, given the conditions in which the vast majority live? The traumatic political experiences of the middle and late twentieth century, one might say, had several related temporary (but enduring) consequences: they damaged the confidence of the artist in an alternative to capitalism, they discouraged him or her from taking a penetrating look at life, and they rendered such efforts, when they did occur, far more diffuse and confused, far less associated with the historical and political perspective of socialism.

Advanced art from the late nineteenth century through the first two decades or more of the twentieth could feel relatively confident that a broad-based opposition to the present order existed, from which it could draw intellectual and moral sustenance and encouragement as to the possibility of a radical change in social relations. It would be entirely implausible to explain the extraordinary richness of creative efforts in those decades entirely apart from the relationship between culture and revolutionary political ideas and organization.

Economic factors have compounded the present ideological difficulties. The enrichment of a considerable layer of the intelligentsia has taken place, all the more willingly acceded to, given the political and moral confusion that prevails. In that sense, the conditions are perhaps more similar to those described by Plekhanov in the pre-1914 period: A turn to the right, to political indifferentism, after 1905 on the part of many Russian intellectuals. *To be continued*

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