

The future of art in an age of crisis—Part 2

By David Walsh
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The following is the second part of an edited version of the talk delivered by WSWWS Arts Editor David Walsh to audiences recently at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. In February a version of the lecture was given at San Diego State University and in Santa Monica, California. Part 1 was posted yesterday.

The anti-communist witch-hunts

The anti-communist purge of the labor movement, the film industry and every other institution where it could be carried out in the late 1940s and early 1950s had a major impact on American cultural life.

Anti-communism had the aim of decapitating the workers movement in the US, reinforcing the domination of the right-wing labor bureaucracy and subordinating the working class to the Democratic Party and bourgeois politics. This permitted the American ruling elite to pursue its policy of Cold War “containment” and counter-revolution abroad.

A considerable section of the liberal intelligentsia had allied itself with Stalinism in the 1930s, during the period of the Popular Front. Without a revolutionary perspective itself, this liberal layer leaned on the Communist Party and Stalinism, and advocated a vague program of social reform in the US. The *Nation* magazine was a center for liberal, pro-Stalinist propaganda in the late 1930s, even apologizing for the show trials in Moscow that resulted in the extermination of much of the old Bolshevik leadership.

The Communist Party supported Roosevelt, and later the war effort, and prostrated itself before the supposedly liberal-minded sections of the ruling elite. Its members and supporters kept silent about the crimes of Stalin in the Soviet Union, Spain and elsewhere, and slandered the Trotskyists and those who exposed these crimes.

The needs of American imperialism in the aftermath of the war, when the temporary alliance with the USSR came to end, meant a sharp change in the political situation. CP members and supporters were now treated as “foreign agents” and “subversives,” aiming to undermine “American democracy” in the interests of the Kremlin. From 1947 onward, a great effort was launched by the government, the FBI, Congress and the media to drive left-wingers out of prominent positions in government, the film industry, the media, the universities and elsewhere.

Many of the Communist Party’s former allies (and enemies) among the liberals joined in the effort, seeking to settle scores and win positions for themselves at the expense of the Stalinists. The CP, through its opportunism and defense of Stalin’s crimes, helped soap the rope with which it was hanged.

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings between 1947 and 1953, the FBI surveillance and harassment, the imposition of loyalty oaths on masses of government employees, the passage of anti-subversive laws, the imprisonment of the Hollywood Ten and the prosecution of Communist Party leaders, the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs—all of this was intended to terrorize and intimidate the population. And it did a good deal of damage under conditions where American capitalism, after the upheavals of the 1930s and the post-World War II strike wave, could be forced to make substantial concessions to the

working class.

The virtual criminalization of socialist ideas meant the narrowing and lowering of artistic and cultural life and the self-censorship of the artists and intellectuals. Two of the greatest figures of the American cinema, Chaplin and Welles, were effectively driven out of Hollywood. In addition, talented younger figures in the film industry, like Polonsky, Losey, Endfield and others, were blacklisted or exiled, along with countless gifted performers. Or take a Dashiell Hammett, the “inventor” of the hardboiled detective novel (*Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*), jailed for six months and blacklisted. Many others “repented,” were tamed and became far less interesting as artists.

What was lost in filmmaking, for example? The “socially conscious artist” is a phrase that has been much abused, but used meaningfully it refers to a figure who has some overview of human behavior and circumstances, and treats those as historical and alterable. This would encourage a certain flexibility and even “lightness of touch” in whatever genre: historical drama, “screwball comedy” or murder mystery. Human beings are not predestined to be what they are at present. They have infinite possibilities. It should be an optimistic, exploratory view of things. Humanity as a fascinating work in progress, with the artist—himself or herself a participant in the process—“reporting” on the state of life. This set of ideas and feelings was substantially excised from movies.

Much was allowed after that, except the questioning of society’s foundations. Of course, left-wing thought continued to hold influence in America in the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement would have been unthinkable without it. That goes for literature and film as well, within limits. On a world scale, socialism remained a powerful force in the consciousness of masses of people.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were years of enormous social upsurge. Revolution was a possibility in numerous countries; capitalism was never so close to being overthrown. In France, perhaps the greatest strike of modern times took place. In Italy, too, there were mass struggles with insurrectionary implications. Argentina experienced social convulsions. In Portugal the masses poured onto the streets to celebrate the downfall of a dictatorship. The Francoist regime in Spain collapsed, as did the “Regime of the Colonels” in Greece. The masses suffered a bitter defeat in Chile under Allende. An enormous and militant strike wave hit the US, in addition to the upheavals in the inner cities.

The tragedy of the radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s was the dominant role still played by the labor bureaucracies and Stalinism, along with Maoism, centrism and bourgeois nationalism. These elements played a destructive, counter-revolutionary role. It was not, in other words, simply the offensive of the ruling classes that led to the present intellectual impasse, but also the pernicious role played by these “left forces.”

Particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was not possible to develop a perspective without a reworking of the historical experience of the 20th century, a project in which our party has been engaged since 1992. So much had happened, truly momentous events, that needed to be explained—the disappearance of entire countries, civil wars in

others, the global integration of the economy, the demise or decay of existing parties and organizations. The population was blithely informed that “History” had come to an end without being told what it had been composed of, what it all meant. Marxism had to offer an explanation, and the International Committee of the Fourth International did that. We continue to do it.

The present crisis will create the conditions whereby many of these problems can finally be confronted and overcome. The emergence of a consciously socialist and revolutionary current among the artists is a pressing need.

In our view, what the artists need first and foremost at present are historical insight and honesty. The poverty-stricken character of present-day Hollywood, for example, is bound up, above all, with the falsity and shallowness of so many of its images and ideas. And even the more critical films or television programs tend to accept at crucial moments commonplace and conformist ideas (including the essential greatness and legitimacy of “American democracy”). They are only critical to a point. They generally succumb to the various ideological and financial pressures.

The filmmakers and others lack deep insight into the social process, their ideas have not been worked through. They either believe in the present system or resign themselves to it. (For example, David Simon, the creator of the highly praised, socially critical HBO series, *The Wire*, recently told interviewer Bill Moyers: “Listen, capitalism is the only engine credible enough to generate mass wealth. I think it’s imperfect, but we’re stuck with it. And thank God we have that in the toolbox.” This, in the face of worldwide economic breakdown and the discrediting of “free market” ideology.)

It’s not possible to make an artistically convincing work that ignores or fails to address seriously the most burning human questions. Art depends upon utter sincerity.

There is a relationship between the commitment of the artist to work through his or her material, to reflect the world accurately and dynamically, on the one hand, and the final product and its impact on the spectator, reader or viewer, on the other. As Trotsky pointed out, the artist is not an empty machine for creating form and the spectator a machine for consuming it. They are both living beings with a psychology and outlook created by social conditions.

“A false idea, a false content cannot find a perfected form, i.e., cannot aesthetically move us in a profound manner,” as Voronsky commented, following Belinsky and Plekhanov. A deceitful or evasive approach to life, one that conceals the real character of social relationships and perhaps the nature of the social order itself, has an impact on the artist’s internal mechanism; it muddies things, it makes the imagery and feelings emerge half-heartedly, less convincingly. In our time, pyrotechnics (whether in the form of cinematic special effects, violence and bombast or the linguistic or visual “tour de force”) often substitute themselves for genuine thought and analysis.

Of course, this problem has to be treated with great historic concreteness. Hollywood directors of a certain day believed deeply in democracy, justice and “the American way of life.” They were able to make relatively honest and important films, although much of their thought was quasi-mythological. They believed in what they did, although even there we find weaknesses, large gaps, sentimentality, the glossing over of big questions.

No one honest with himself or herself could make a film defending the brutal war in Iraq or Afghanistan. We need novels about bankers, but it would not be possible to write an honest or artistic novel if one adopted uncritically the standpoint of the banker. That would provide too narrow a base for art. The self-justifications of the banker would not move anyone, because art is about communication between living, thinking beings, with their own knowledge and experience of the world.

How many literary or dramatic works at present contain characters who are entirely believable, who seem to possess a complete life? How many figures appear fully “of their time,” figures whose work and thoughts and feelings are bound up with the complexity of the period? Many grotesque and horrible situations are presented, often in isolation, overwrought and one-sided, not deeply situated in the conditions of the time.

New artistic forms today will arise out of new important aims. There is a great deal of chatter about the avant-garde and very little of it means anything at present. The emphasis on formal innovation is largely artificial and exhausts itself rapidly.

In any event, there is no such thing as a purely artistic avant-garde, for the reasons I’ve just discussed. There is no such thing, in fact, as the “purely artistic.” Art is not an immaterial element feeding on itself, but a function of social men and women, inseparably tied to their lives and circumstances.

To be in the genuine avant-garde today means, first of all, to take stock of life and society and draw the necessary critical conclusions. And if the artist approaches life fully and honestly, the spectator or reader will tend to draw the social conclusions that flow from the circumstances.

We are confident that such an avant-garde, which would truly live up to its name, will develop the appropriate artistic forms.

The Frankfurt School and Postmodernism

The long-lasting impact of anti-communism on American life is one source of the present difficulties, but it is by no means the entire story. There are other aspects of the problem, perhaps more complex.

There is no avoiding a discussion of historical questions, including perhaps a discussion of figures and trends with which you may not be familiar. Events before many of you were born and developments that may go untreated in the classrooms and contemporary media have shaped the present cultural situation and the current mood among the artists. And the views of a host of thinkers you may not know trickle down and find their way into the universities and media today.

As I indicated, the socialist aspirations of the artists (and not only the artists) were dealt a severe blow by the consolidation of the Stalinist regime in the USSR, the betrayal of the principles of the Russian Revolution and the transformation of Soviet cultural life into a “concentration camp,” in Trotsky’s words. The Communist parties of the world did immeasurable damage in dragging the noblest ideas through the mud.

This was not simply a theoretical and spiritual devastation. Inside the Soviet Union and wherever they could get their hands on left-wing opponents outside the USSR, the Stalinist bureaucracy and its secret police eliminated socialist intellectuals and workers. In 1937, for example, it is estimated that 1,000 Communists a day were being given brief trials and shot in Moscow. Intellectuals, workers, artists—individuals who had given their entire lives to the cause of socialism.

Voronsky, along with many others, fell victim to the Stalinist purges. Leading artist victims in the USSR included the famed stage director Meyerhold, the playwright Tretyakov, the writer Babel, the poet Mandelstam, the novelist Pilnyak and countless others.

These blows did incalculable damage, along with the blows of Hitler and Mussolini and European reaction. A considerable portion of the great Marxist intelligentsia was physically wiped out between 1919—Rosa Luxemburg’s assassination—and 1940—the year of Trotsky’s death. The first victorious workers revolution in Russia in 1917 provoked a sustained and furious counterrevolutionary response.

Our movement survived physically, but under difficult conditions for many years. The trends that remained standing, so to speak, and were widely considered “Marxist” in the aftermath of the Stalinist and fascist onslaughts against socialism had little in common with Bolshevism.

I am referring in particular to the so-called Frankfurt School, the school

of Critical Theory, individuals such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and others. Whether or not you know these names, they have influenced, directly or indirectly, the approach taken by academics in various disciplines, and many artists themselves. Go into many university bookstores, and you will see shelves devoted to “Critical Theory.”

If you encounter the conception that Enlightenment rationalism led to the ruthless domination of nature by humankind and that modern science itself is threatening and totalitarian in its implications.... If you read or learn that modern society is a “totally administered” nightmare from which all exits have been blocked.... If you are told that the working class has been embourgeoisified, that, indeed, the workers are in with love their exploiters and their exploitation.... Then you may be encountering, in fragmentary form, the influence of the Frankfurt School.

Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others witnessed, as German Jewish political exiles, the greatest tragedy of modern history, the victory of fascism. It is not our aim or interest to demonize anyone. The triumph of Hitlerian bestiality, with all its consequences, in the most cultured country in Europe, was a traumatizing event.

However, the Marxist movement underwent the same experience and drew certain conclusions about modern imperialism in crisis and the parties and leaderships of the working class that had allowed the victory of fascism to take place. Trotsky concluded that it was necessary to break from the Communist International and form our movement, the Fourth International, to put an end once and for all to the system responsible for the concentration camps and other hideous crimes.

The members of the Frankfurt School drew quite different lessons. They concluded that the effort of the socialist movement to make a rational appeal to the working class had failed. They became increasingly pessimistic about the workers’ revolutionary potential. The leading figures in the Frankfurt School determined that culture, the mass media, education and the family played a direct role in maintaining oppression. [1]

These are all factors. We pay close attention in particular to culture and the media, that’s why we’re holding this meeting—but we are historical materialists. Our starting point is the existence of a society and class struggle existing outside us, objectively, relatively independent of individual consciousness. The great changes that come about do not originate in consciousness—although they come to be reflected in human thinking—but in this objective social struggle and the economic facts of life. The media and other social factors play a role—they may hinder, block, impede, confuse, mystify, and we combat them, but they are not the ultimately determining factors.

One of the important works of the Frankfurt School is *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, by Adorno and Horkheimer, published in 1944, toward the end of the war. The authors draw the direst and most misguided conclusions from the experience of Nazism.

They argue that the project of human beings pursuing knowledge itself has authoritarian consequences, leading ultimately to the construction of the gas chambers. Humanity takes control of nature to control and dominate it. “Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them.”

This is not simply giving up on Marxism and the working class, but on rational thought, science, and the last several hundred years of historical progress.

The section in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on “The Culture Industry” contains a number of striking passages, but in their unrelieved (and ultimately tedious) hostility to popular consciousness and popular culture in the US, Adorno and Horkheimer prove lamentably “undialectical.” There is hardly a hint here of a historical understanding of the problems and contradictions of American society and culture.

The war and the Nazi crimes helped shape the special grimness of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but the conclusions did not come out of the blue. Herbert Marcuse, another leading figure of the Frankfurt School, who significantly influenced the student protest movement of the 1970s with works such as *One-Dimensional Man*, had drawn the conclusion that art and culture were essentially repressive in an essay in 1937, *The Affirmative Character of Culture*.

In that essay Marcuse argued that art was particularly problematic because it has the unique capacity to provide an illusion of happiness in the present, unlike religion or philosophy. Through the beauty of a work of art, according to Marcuse, the individual’s discontent with the world is momentarily suspended, and thus art, by making the beautiful appear possible within the existing oppressive conditions, “pacifies rebellious desire.... Men can feel themselves happy even without being so at all.”

Marcuse suggests that centuries of culture have served to accommodate human beings to the contradiction between the society’s professed ideals and its brutal reality, and, in fact, play no small part in the willingness of individuals to “march with so little trouble in the communal columns of the authoritarian state,” that is, participate willingly in the fascist movements or armies.

These are false views, in my opinion, whose ideological roots lie in German subjective idealist philosophy. There is an actual content to art, not simply the beauty of form. Not content as a lump, or a single “message,” but “a living complex of moods and ideas which seek artistic expression.” (Trotsky) Art can make a deep, objective penetration of existence, its development, its history, its contradictions. What if—in and through art—individuals learn something about their “unfreedom,” about their social existence, what if their discontent, in fact, is deepened?

In various spheres of social life or culture, Frankfurt School thinkers work backward from their conclusion about the impossibility of social revolution and assert why the particular sphere renders rebellion impossible, why it disciplines, conditions, suppresses, mutilates, distorts. But Marxists understand that capitalist social life contains contradictions, objective impulses, which—reflected in human consciousness—educate, develop, sensitize, prepare, test, broaden.

The conclusion of Marcuse, Adorno and others that humanity’s cultural heritage is essentially repressive, that it serves, in the end, to defend the existing political and economic system, is not at all the Marxist conception, although it has widely been accepted as the “left-wing” view, especially in academic circles, for much of the past half-century or more.

We regard spiritual and material culture as a contradictory phenomenon. On the one hand, culture embodies everything that humanity has built, learned and created in the struggle for the improvement of its existence; on the other, because human development has necessarily proceeded through the evolution of class society, culture has a class character and serves those in power.

In the struggle against capitalism we base ourselves on the entire heritage of human culture, without which the working class cannot raise itself up and rebuild society on higher foundations. Of course we treat this culture from our own standpoint, dispensing with some elements, religion, for example, accepting some others more or less en bloc (advances in science and technology, for example) and working over others critically, including artistic achievements.

The arguments of the Frankfurt School had implications for art, and their influence has been widespread. These were articulate figures, with a wide knowledge of culture and claiming a connection to Marxism, who wrote off the working class and the objective possibilities of social revolution. Their disorientation found a response in sections of the intelligentsia who were all too ready to turn away from the difficult struggle for socialist principles. These once obscure figures found a considerable following for their ideas in the postwar period.

The serious artistic picturing of contemporary life was of little interest

to the Frankfurt School. The emphasis was placed on the psychic shortcomings of the population, its repressed sexuality and other drives. Only a different kind of human being could bring about freedom. This is Marcuse in particular, who championed a revival of utopianism.

We reject that. We base ourselves in art, too, on the real development of society, not our fantasies or wishes. Half-jokingly, in an argument with Soviet Futurism, Trotsky suggested one time that “Presentism” might be given a try. American artists could use a serious confrontation with present-day life as well.

Mere photographic realism is not the aim. The artist must also be a social scientist and a psychologist; he or she must know what to look for, to get at the deepest currents. The artist focuses his or her attention on critical elements, not diverted by the mass of detail. His or her efforts correspond to the nature and properties of the object under investigation. The audience will experience the same process.

There is nothing passive about artistic cognition of this kind, nor is the audience reduced to passivity. A serious attitude toward the existing social order will show it to be transitory, merely one stage in human development. Such an understanding will find its way into the artist’s approach, not arbitrarily or in a contrived manner, but as a necessary and organic element. The eruption of popular upheaval will encourage such an approach.

Nor are artists going to return to Tolstoy or Courbet and the realism of the 19th century (although a study of such figures would only be beneficial). There is a great deal in the spontaneity, ingenuity and individuality developed by modern artists that is important and valuable. Those qualities, in our view, have to be put to use to produce more intense, richer pictures of an objectively existing world; and the more insightful the pictures, the more critical and revolutionary their impact will be.

It would not be appropriate to discuss the current artistic and cultural crisis without referring to the deplorable role played by varieties of post-structuralism and postmodernism in recent decades.

The defeat of the 1968 general strike in particular permitted the French intellectuals to rid themselves of the remnants of their old “Marxism.” They could finally say goodbye “to all that.” Not bound any longer by any constraints, the postmodernists eventually disdained the effort to make coherent sense of society and history, ushering in a wild relativism and irrationalism.

In one fashion or another, these arguments have influenced various disciplines in the universities for decades and filtered into the broader society, including artistic thinking. And these are often passed off as “left” and “radical” ways of seeing things. A central argument revolves around the hostility to objective truth, i.e., the possibility of reflecting the world and its properties accurately. Such a project is rejected out of hand by postmodernism. Everything depends on one’s perspective; all truth is socially and self-interestedly constructed. The phrases may be familiar: “the crisis of representation,” “the instability of meaning,” “the rejection of meta-narratives or grand narratives.”

The arguments, when the dense language is peeled away, are often puerile. From the fact that human consciousness reflects the world imperfectly, approximately, with *relative* objectivity, the postmodern thinkers chose to conclude that an *absolute* divide existed between thinking and the objective world.

A commentator says of Jean-François Lyotard, the author of *The Postmodern Condition* and originally a leftist, for example, that he opposed “modern reason, Enlightenment, totalizing thought, and philosophies of history,” in other words, any attempt to derive the law-governed character of history and society, much less base a political practice upon it.

He held the view that “reality consists of singular events which cannot be represented accurately by rational theory. For Lyotard, this fact has a

deep political import, since politics claims to be based on accurate representations of reality.” [2]

In politics, in fact, this is an argument for uncontrolled opportunism, since it is impossible to generalize from any of the experiences of the past. One is always starting from zero, with a blank slate.

Lyotard, we are told, favored heterogeneity, plurality, constant innovation, local rules and “micropolitics.” While the postmodernist thinkers bitterly disagreed among themselves, they all agreed that Marxism had “privileged” the working class in an impermissible fashion, and in many cases they provided the theoretical arguments for the various reformist single-issue social movements and identity politics, rooted in gender and ethnicity, “micropolitics” in practice.

The attack on universalism has had terrible consequences for the artist. If everyone has his or her own narrative, all equally valid or invalid, if truth is entirely relative, if the representation of the world is an impossible undertaking, where does this leave the artist who wants to communicate his or her ideas and feelings and believes them to be important and universal? Art, like all cognition, is universalizing by its very nature.

The act of creating art is a presumptuous one: the artist assumes that he or she has something illuminating and original to convey. There are no half-measures in art, no half-victories. The attack by the postmodernists and others on the objectively truthful character of artistic representation reduces art to a game, a purely formal exercise, whatever you like, anything but a serious struggle for truth in which the artist is prepared to pay the highest cost, and in which the stakes are immense.

What are the consequences of postmodernism for art? Look around at much of contemporary visual art, for instance—cold, clever, “conceptual,” as unfeeling and uncommitted as stone. These moods and trends, including identity politics, have encouraged self-involvement, narcissism, social indifference, cynicism....

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Briefly, then, these are some of the problems that in our view create special difficulties for creative life at present, that continue to “ensnare” the artist.

The artists, in our view, must orient themselves toward investigating our reality, bringing to bear all the creativity and depth of feeling available to the human heart and mind, to represent the present human condition in its complexity and dynamism. Such a task, carried out honestly, will inevitably bring them closer to the struggle for socialism in the working class. Art cannot save itself, its fate is tied to the rebuilding of society on a higher basis.

This requires a major intellectual effort that cannot be avoided. The artist must have great intuition, but intuition is not everything in art. The conscious, rational, cognitive side of art-making has been underemphasized for decades. The artist must once again learn to think critically and deeply. Marxism will prove to be indispensable in that effort.

Concluded

Notes:

1. “The Frankfurt School began in the early 1930s to utilize psychoanalytic concepts in social analysis, in large part as a result of an increasing pessimism about the revolutionary potential of the working class. Freudian theory, they hoped, would help explain the psychic sources of mass instinctual conservatism—’the misplaced love for the wrong which is done them,’ as Adorno and Horkheimer wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—if properly filtered through a revised Marxist perspective on industrial society.” (*Marxism and Modernism; an historical study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, Eugene Lunn, 1984, University of California Press)

“The first generation of the Frankfurt School...emphasized the negative and oppressive aspects of modernity. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* short-circuits the Marxist theory of revolution by positing a

self-producing, stabilized capitalist system without any significant revolutionary opposition. The theory of revolution loses its historical grounding in a revolutionary proletariat and becomes a utopian ideal. Thus, capitalist modernity is, in effect, presented in much critical theory as a self-producing and stabilizing system of commodity production and exploitation under the domination of capital.” (*Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, 1991, The Guilford Press)

2. Ashley Woodward, University of Queensland, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

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