

A review of David Walsh's *The Sky Between the Leaves* from Uruguay

“The Permanent Revolution in film criticism”

By Marcelo Arias Souto
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We are posting today a comment on WSWS arts editor David Walsh's *The Sky Between the Leaves*, (see www.skybetweentheleaves.com) written by Marcelo Arias Souto of Montevideo, Uruguay.

The review appeared February 9 in Spanish, in a somewhat longer version, on the author's blog.

The comment reflects a growing and welcome interest in filmmaking and film criticism that takes social life, and the problems of wide layers of the population, more seriously.

Some critics have been able to do something more than make a serious and sharp analysis of cinema: they have elaborated their own cinematographic language, challenging, and at times even transforming, not only the viewer's perception of what he sees on screen, but also his vision of the world, the connection between the reality of a film—necessarily a construction or a representation—and the reality that transpires outside of it. The first that come to my mind are André Bazin, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Manny Farber, Andrew Sarris and Serge Daney.

In the last 30 years or so, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Jim Hoberman, Kent Jones and Adrian Martin have done significant work, and perhaps deserve to be a part of this celebrated list. But in many respects, the most important contemporary film critic is David Walsh. Arts editor of the *World Socialist Web Site* (www.wsws.org), where he writes about film from a Marxist perspective, Walsh is the cultural journalist who best explores the relation of cinema with the world in which we live. There is no other writer today displaying such a profound historical understanding when reviewing a particular film or a director's career in general, on the basis of the political, economic and cultural context.

Since I discovered his work, I realized that Walsh was not a mere commentator, but a film thinker: someone with the vocation to develop a personal theory of the history and aesthetics of cinema, with a tone and a way of writing that challenges both the trivial preferences of the most unthinking entertainment journalists, but also the trends and figures appreciated by the most sophisticated moviegoers and critics. As a Marxist, Walsh conducts his work as a means to oppose the existing social order and its culture, to demand that his colleagues not be so indulgent either toward the more conventional cinema or that which introduces itself as its alternative. And his conviction and well-argued passion, his rebellion against any type of cliché, create the sensation of pleasure and the liberating effect that I had found before (or would find later) in the writings of Bazin, Truffaut, Farber, Sarris or Daney.

I experienced the same feelings reading *The Sky Between the Leaves*, a collection of his film reviews, essays and interviews with directors and colleagues, made between 1992 and 2012. Most pieces of this anthology were posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, launched in February of 1998 by the International Committee of the Fourth International. But it

also contains articles written between 1992 and 1996, which appeared in newspapers published by the Workers League, the predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party.

The book was published in November 2013 and a Spanish translation has yet to be produced. But those who know English and prefer to read it in its original version can get it from Amazon or through Mehring Books. At this address, there is also a special site dedicated to the book's publication where one can see an interview with its author and also read some sections of this work.

As a summary of Walsh's thought and work, *The Sky Between the Leaves* confirms his ability to explore every film with an almost scientific meticulousness, stripped of hyperbole and arbitrariness. Walsh is not an aesthetic theorist, he does not focus on the ontology of the image, as Bazin did. Nor is he a stylist as a writer, he has not Farber's innovative prose. And perhaps he doesn't have the encyclopedic knowledge of film history of some of his most eminent colleagues. But he does have a historical and social perspective that allows him to think about cinema with greater depth than any critic I know, past or present. He also communicates his ideas with a fluid writing style, which mixes the usual severity of his evaluations with sparks of wit and humor.

The book has an introduction in which Walsh describes his personal and political trajectory over the last two decades, his ideological vision, and his conception of cinema. He reveals that the title of his book comes from Breton's poem *In the beautiful half-light of 1934*, which he interprets as “a reference to the attempt to see through the immediate obstructions to a brighter and broader reality.”

After the prologue, the book is structured in four chapters. The first one brings together reviews of *Riff-Raff* (1991) by Ken Loach, *Naked* (1993) by Mike Leigh, *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) by Abbas Kiarostami, *A Borrowed Life* (1994) by Wu Nienjen, *The Thin Red Line* (1998) by Terrence Malick, *Platform* (2000) by Jia Zhangke, *Yi Yi* (2000) by Edward Yang, *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) by Ari Folman and *A Separation* (2011), by Asghar Farhadi, among a long list.

This section also includes an examination of classic films, screened in restored versions, such as Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954), Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* (1958) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The second part of the book offers the coverage of some festivals (Toronto, Vancouver, Buenos Aires). The third chapter has interviews with critics Andrew Sarris and Robin Wood, and filmmakers Abbas Kiarostami, Jia Zhangke and Mike Leigh.

The last part of the book consists of essays and presentations delivered by the critic in different cities (Detroit, New York, Toronto). There is an article about Roman Polanski, written in November of 2009, while the Polish director was imprisoned in Zurich, and efforts were made to extradite him to the US for having unlawful sex with an adolescent girl in Los Angeles in 1977. Walsh exposes the political agenda of the American

authorities—and the corruption of their Swiss counterparts—to settle accounts with Polanski, who had just finished shooting *The Ghost Writer* (2010), a political thriller with a critical look at the Iraq war and the US and British intelligence agencies, and in which the resemblance of a character to Tony Blair is no mere coincidence. Walsh notes accurately that the vicissitudes of Polanski's remarkable career are linked to his personal traumas (the murder of Sharon Tate), and mainly to some of the tragedies of the 20th century, suffered by the director himself during his childhood, such as Nazism and the Holocaust.

In his review of *The Sky Between the Leaves*, published in the Uruguayan newspaper *El País*, the critic Guillermo Zapiola wrote: "Walsh's usual procedure when he reviews a film is to start from it, but later expand his horizons to locate that particular work within the career of its director, and the historical, political and social context surrounding him and his piece. In this way, the review of *The Player*, for instance, actually becomes an exploration of Robert Altman's career." But I would add that Walsh does something more ambitious: when he approaches a historical film, he also explores the context of the time in which that piece is set. Thus, the review of *Gangs of New York* (2002) by Martin Scorsese, offers an illustrative look at American culture of the mid-19th century; and the one of *Munich* (2005) by Steven Spielberg returns to the late 1940s, to offer a brave comment about the origin of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The result is usually a fascinating and enlightening journey.

There are two recurring themes in the book: on the one hand, the notorious and progressive decline of American cinema. A brief look at its history underscores the value of what was produced in the 1930s and 1940s in reflecting the great social dramas of the epoch: the rise of fascism, Stalinism, the Great Depression and the Second World War. According to Walsh, the ability of those great films to represent the social reality had to do with the fact that a large number of the most prestigious members of the film community (directors, screenwriters, actors and technicians), belonged to the political left.

Walsh is not the only critic who knows that the best years of the American cinema were the 1930s and 1940s (Chaplin, Raoul Walsh, Ford, Welles, Wilder, Wyler), and the 1950s (the best of Hitchcock, Hawks, Anthony Mann, Minnelli, Sirk). But he is one of the few that remember that it was in those years that it was the most politically progressive. He says that Chaplin, Ford and Welles, "arguably the three greatest figures in the American cinema" were considered at the time as "figures of the Left," and that the FBI viewed Ford "as some sort of a subversive," far from the image of the old reactionary racist which, curiously, some intellectuals and artists still have today of that master.

The critic quotes a fragment of the book *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's Favorite Movies*, by Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, which includes several stars of the major studios among the progressive figures. Walsh rightly underscores the great influence of directors who emigrated from Europe, where socialist movements played a transcendent role in the first decades of the past century. And in contrast, the Trotskyist critic argues that there is not one recent cinematographic production that synthesizes the problems the US has confronted in the first decade of the 21st century ("a hijacked national election, or perhaps two, a major terrorist attack, two criminal wars, vast Wall Street plundering and a massive crash"). He does mention a number of interesting works made during the last 20 years. But when he compares them with the classics of the Golden Age of Hollywood, the decline is clear.

The other recurring theme of the book is what the author perceives as the major cause of this collapse: McCarthyism, the anti-Communist persecution which began in the late 1940s and destroyed the careers of various of the industry's professionals. His meditation on that historical period culminates with an article about Elia Kazan, written shortly before the director was given an honorary Oscar, in 1999. The examination of

Kazan's filmography is followed by an interview with Abraham Polonsky, the director of *Force of Evil* (1948), and victim of the blacklist, who sharply criticizes Kazan for his treason, and the decision of the Academy to reward his career (when Walsh addresses this issue, he makes me recall Homero Alsina Thevenet, the dean of Uruguayan film criticism, who in his book *Listas negras en el cine* also pointed out that the witch-hunt eliminated the cinema of social exposure and criticism in postwar American movies. Walsh's scrupulous writing style, combined with a dose of humor, reinforces this sensation).

As Zapiola wrote, Walsh's understandable annoyance at the persona of Kazan, affects a little his judgement of Kazan as an artist: there is an underestimation of his most accomplished films (*Panic in the Streets*, 1950; *A Face in the Crowd*, 1957). But in the case of Kazan, both facets are almost inseparable, due to the use of cinema as a means to justify his actions (especially in *On the Waterfront*, 1954). There is no essential injustice in the detailed evaluation of his work.

Walsh goes back again and again to the crimes of Stalinism, the corruption and betrayal of the American Communist Party, the witch-hunters and the complicity of their liberal allies in justifying the purges and the blacklist. In his opinion, these traumatic events produced a demoralizing effect on artists, which explains the contemporary filmmakers' lack of will to make films that reflect the social crisis. But one of the most comforting elements in Walsh's writing is that he is a humanist: he does not fall into easy cynicism or defeatism.

Unlike Godard, Daney and Susan Sontag, his vision of cinema is not pessimistic, nostalgic or elegiac. "There is no going back to Ford or Welles. The greatest work, we have confidence, lies ahead." He does not blame the filmmakers for the current decline, but historical events. In any case, he asks them to overcome the historical traumas, to have a deeper knowledge of history and contact with ordinary life and people, "to contribute to the cause of liberating global humanity from ignorance, exploitation and poverty."

It is clear that for Walsh, culture is essential to develop a revolutionary consciousness toward capitalist society. But it is not necessary to be a Marxist to appreciate his work. His cultural background, his argumentative skill, his ethical and aesthetic consistency are reasons enough to admire him. It is true that, sometimes, his writing becomes a form of preaching, but his point of view never excludes ambivalence. Beyond political and aesthetic disagreements, *The Sky Between the Leaves* is the work of a critic as rigorous as few others.

One of the aspects that makes this book a breath of fresh air in the current climate of film criticism internationally, is its relentless approach to some celebrated American filmmakers of the past 40 years and some postmodern icons. One of my favorite pieces is the review of Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*, in which Walsh destroys Scorsese's brutal historical reductionism. "The notion that American society emerged out of mindless violence and squalor, 'in the streets,' is a reactionary and anti-intellectual distortion of history. In fact, the US experienced what is now referred to as its Renaissance during the 1840s and 1850s, when figures such as Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Dickinson, Whitman and Stowe all produced their most influential works. This list alone, notwithstanding the fact that many of these writers did not know success at the time (or even, in Dickinson's case, make her work public), testifies to a high level of culture and literacy. It was within this remarkable culture, influenced by the Enlightenment thinkers, German philosophy and utopian socialism, that many of the ideological foundations of the Union cause in the Civil War, the second American Revolution, were laid down."

It is not surprising that another of his targets is Quentin Tarantino, perhaps an heir of Scorsese, with whom he shares a taste for superficial and exploitative violence, misanthropy, empty aestheticism and a primitive view of society and history. In his review of *Kill Bill, Vol. 2*

(2004), Walsh suggests that the porno-sadism, violence and revenge that characterize that movie and the rest of Tarantino's work are related to a wider phenomenon in American society. He recalls that, ironically, this film premiered in the US on April 16, 2004, less than two weeks before the abuse and torture of Iraqis detained at Abu Ghraib was made public.

For Walsh, films like *Gangs of New York*, *Kill Bill, Vol. 2* and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), are representative of America's post-9/11 reactionary atmosphere. He does not blame these filmmakers for the decayed state of American society. But he points out that the Iraq war and other horrors have had a negative impact on their work.

Some of his colleagues and filmgoers have two objections toward Walsh's style of criticism: a) he imposes an ideological agenda on cinema, and b) his reviews therefore become predictable. The first argument is a fallacy: Walsh has a political and social outlook, like any other journalist. In any case, he is more explicit and honest about it. And his viewpoint is what makes him a more independent figure, able to pose uncomfortable questions to the reader, and to point to a cultural crisis whose implications most critics do not care to contemplate. And, above all, he is an intellectually honest individual, the essential condition one should require from any journalist or writer, whatever his (or her) political stance.

The second argument is simply wrong: If there is an element of repetition in his articles, an insistent exposure of the lack of historical perspective, it is not his fault, but that of the directors' incompetence. Moreover, a careful reading reveals that Walsh is full of surprises: someone able to appreciate a film he politically disagrees with, and to reject mediocrities with whose intentions he may agree. Like Trotsky, he opposes Stalin's authoritarian view of art, his reduction of it to propaganda, and "socialist realism" which, in the critic's own words, "had nothing realistic, or 'socialistic,' about it." Walsh says that one of his biggest influences is *The Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art*, written in 1938 by Trotsky and Breton (although Trotsky's signature was replaced by Diego Rivera's). *The Sky Between the Leaves* shows that its author learned the lesson of the writer of *Permanent Revolution*.

To prove this point, it is worth reading some of his surprising articles posted on the WSWS dealing with, for instance, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, Pedro Costa, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Béla Tarr and Michael Haneke. The strong commentary on these directors, considered by many prestigious critics as the most socially committed and aesthetically radical one can find in contemporary cinema, may cause some jaws to drop. But the book contains some equally provocative passages, in the best sense of that word. One of them is directed toward the new paradigm of film criticism and cinephilia: Jean-Luc Godard. The filmmaker's grim opinion that cinema has no longer anything to say about the world to contribute to building a better society, is answered by Walsh with a glorious boutade [outburst], worthy of Godard himself.

The book includes negative reviews of Hollywood blockbusters, like *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), which, instead of questioning the audience's intelligence, explores the cultural reasons for its critical and box office success; on the other hand, there is a warm look at *Cecil B. Demented* (2000), a low-budget subversive satire, by iconoclastic director John Waters. But although Walsh regrets the increasing superficiality of US commercial cinema, he has mentioned that he has more confidence in the industry to make powerful films than in several self-indulgent independent filmmakers.

As an example of this, it is worth reading his negative review of *Elephant* (2003), Gus Van Sant's story based on the Columbine massacre, and his defense of *Munich*, Spielberg's political thriller that recreates the actions of a group of agents hired by the Mossad to kill the Palestinian leaders responsible for the abduction and killing of 11 Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics.

Once again, these texts demonstrate Walsh's lack of prejudices and open mind: the objection to an experimental film of an uneven yet personal director, an emblematic figure of the best independent cinema in the beginning of his career (*Drugstore Cowboy*, 1989; *My Own Private Idaho*, 1991); and the favorable reception to the work of someone regarded by many critics simply as a crafted Hollywood entertainer. And this issue should not shock anyone: while much of the American cinema and pop culture seems fascinated with vendetta, Spielberg is one of the few Hollywood directors who has been able to criticize it as a tool of justice and political struggle.

Walsh's review of *Munich* is particularly incisive; a remarkable film for which Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner were attacked by right-wing groups and Zionists in the US and Israeli media, but also by Arab and left-wing critics. Walsh highlights their skill in portraying the growing moral conflict and anguish of the Mossad agents, which questions the decision of the state of Israel to use counterterrorism as a response to the Palestinian attacks, and therefore criticizes the George W. Bush administration and American foreign policy since September 11.

At the same time, Walsh questions the lack of any reference to the origins of the state of Israel in *Munich* and the suggestion that the violence in this region began in 1972. Walsh reflects: "In a painful sense, both the Israelis and Palestinians are victims of history, victims of the twentieth century and its thwarted hopes." And he synthesizes Spielberg and Kushner's greatest achievement in a single sentence: "*Munich*, inadvertently perhaps, points to the bankruptcy of terrorism as a method of struggle of the oppressed." This is Walsh's writing at his best, his most humane and insightful. It is difficult to find a similar example of thought, clarity and sensitivity in current international film criticism.

Of course, the reader does not always have to share his opinions. I think he overestimates Robert Altman and Mike Leigh, whom he considers the most important contemporary British director, a title more deserved by Terence Davies, a filmmaker also appreciated by Walsh, as the reader will notice from his review of Davies' *Of Time and the City* (2008), and his comments about *The House of Mirth* (2000), during his interview with Robin Wood.

My biggest disagreement with the book is the rave review of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), perhaps Michael Moore's best documentary to date, although undermined by the director's typical self-indulgent manipulation. It is true that Walsh was wondering at that time whether Moore was a committed artist, or a populist demagogue. But I think this is one of the few times in which the arts editor of the WSWS prioritized the ideological implications of a film over its intellectual and artistic relevance. Anyway, he is such a skilled reviewer that even his most arguable evaluation forces the reader to think, and make a considerable effort to refute it.

A minor objection has to do with the selection of the reviews of some forgettable, insignificant movies, such as Woody Allen's *Melinda and Melinda* (2004), and Roland Emmerich's *Anonymous* (2011). His regular readers will probably regret the absence of some texts about much more interesting films and directors: his exploration of Robert Bresson's filmography, after the death of the French master; the analysis of Hou Hsiao-hsien's career, while attending the Buenos Aires film festival; his reviews of *The Newton Boys* (Richard Linklater, 1998), *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999), *Hamlet* (Michael Almereyda, 2000), *Caché* (Michael Haneke, 2005), *Lorna's Silence* (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 2008), and his interview with Jafar Panahi, regarding *Crimson Gold* (2003). In any case, those articles are available on the WSWS. And given the fact that he has written hundreds of reviews and essays over the past fifteen years, one hopes that this is not his last collection.

Outstanding from beginning to end, *The Sky Between the Leaves* deserves a wide circulation. If it gets the proper attention from his colleagues and the mass media, it should be possible to have a translated

version in Spanish-speaking countries. Few critics write like Walsh does, and this anthology is essential reading, as Andrew Sarris, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Tony Williams and Joseph McBride remark in the book jacket. Walsh's biggest achievement is that the content of his collection actually lives up to its ambitious title.

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