

# Letters on WSWS arts editor David Walsh's trip to Britain

16 December 2008

*Last month, WSWS arts editor David Walsh visited Britain, giving a lecture on Art and Socialism and speaking with scenewriter-playwright Trevor Griffiths, artist and photohistorian David King, and filmmaker Mike Leigh. The following letters were sent to the World Socialist Web Site in response to this trip.*

On "Writer and Revolution: WSWS arts editor David Walsh in conversation with Trevor Griffiths Part One" and Part Two

I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed reading that article; it was really fascinating in every way. I never really knew much at all about Thomas Paine, or Trevor Griffiths, and they both were (are) amazing people. The John Tagg speech is absolutely engrossing and inspiring. Reading that speech, picturing a real actor reciting it to a theatre as engrossed as I was simply reading it, dispelled any doubts I had about art being capable of expressing complex, very relevant ideas. Not only did that speech impart important "intellectual" ideas, it was truly art. I'm probably not saying this very well, but I think you get it.

And if all the wonderfully insightful and informative talk on historical/socialist perspective and art wasn't enough, there was a Kurt Vonnegut quote. I've read a few of his books (*Slaughterhouse Five* being my favorite), and the quote from the article provides a great example of his art. Vonnegut is one of the funniest people who ever wrote literature, but he doesn't content himself with that. He is inseparable from what I can only think to call a "truly human" viewpoint.

Once again, I am so glad "The Writer and Revolution" appeared on the WSWS, great work and thank you.

Regards,

Julian Q

British Columbia, Canada

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I just read last night Part II of your article on "The Writer and Revolution" covering the content of your joint presentation with Trevor Griffiths.

My first thought after reading the excerpt from "The Party" was, "Wow!" I had never read the play before, although I read *These Are the Times* after Ann Talbot's article about it.

Trevor Griffiths is an amazing writer and I'm so glad you did this presentation with him and posted it on the WSWS! I

suppose that the television people in the UK deemed that particular speech (along with the rest of Griffiths' works) "too much information" for the general audience, much less the working class, who these media executives must think are neanderthals. What a typical "elitist" (in its true sense) view of their audiences! Far better, they must imagine, for programming to lull watchers to sleep with simple and banal formulae! It's the age-old "bread and circuses" again—without the bread. To these media moguls, there is no greater danger than presenting serious ideas in a dramatic setting. Heaven forbid that their productions should give the audience "ideas."

Thank you again for these meetings and articles. I also particularly enjoyed the article about David King. I have just ordered a copy of *The Commisar Vanishes*.

Your trip to the UK was truly a fruitful one and we all are the more enlightened for it.

Carolyn Z

California, USA

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I'd like to commend David both for this interview and his supplying textual and video extracts (here and here) of his talk with Trevor Griffiths. I found the Mike Leigh interview of interest and hope that David will find some time to also interview Ken Loach whose work still needs greater appreciation than it has. I've also accessed the valuable interview with Jim Allen on this site.

However, I find several problems in this interview. First, Leigh refers to the same type of denigration of the naturalist discourse that has featured in British culture from the time of Michael Powell into the pioneering work of television during the 1960s onwards. David Mercer, Don Taylor, and Dennis Potter attempted to break away from this superficial surface reality aspect in several ways. I do understand how naturalism became fossilized in cinema and television in the same manner that the classical Hollywood mode of representation became within Soviet socialist realism. But naturalism was originally dynamic and multifaceted. Colette Becker's study on realism and naturalism (only available in French) is very insightful on this matter.

However, when the movement began with Zola, it was much more critical and dynamic. Although Zola emphasized heredity and environment (sometimes in too mechanical a fashion as his

"Experimental Novel" essay unfortunately did), he used the technique to explore beneath the superficial realities and ideology of a given society in very much of a critical manner. This movement continued in different ways in many countries in the early 20th Century (America, Spain, Germany, etc.) before it became denigrated by high culture and academic criticism as a debased movement. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* and *Sister Carrie* are two other examples of how this movement was intended to be critical and regarded as a threat by the establishment. By the time of the Cold War era, the a-political and a-social aspects of American New Criticism had virtually brought about the extinction of naturalism as a "respectable" literary movement.

However, as Raymond Williams points out in his "Cinema and Socialism" essay in his posthumous collection of essays *The Politics of Modernism*, "the leading principle of Naturalism is that 'all experience must be seen within its real environment'" and "I would be more impressed by contemporary radical rejections of Naturalism if I did not hear virtually the same rejections by the most orthodox film and theatre people, who for a certainty don't know what it means." (113).

Although Leigh is by no means "orthodox" he does share in these assumptions.

Furthermore, although he mentions the carnivalesque elements in his work that stylistically distinguish his productions, they are far from the radical use of these traditions explored by Eisenstein and Mayakovsky in the Soviet modernist movement suppressed by Stalinism or British 1970's alternative theatre. Leigh's use of the grotesque appears to demean many of his fictional characters in a manner that Ken Loach does not do. They resemble the Dickensian grotesque of supercilious caricature rather than the radical type of modernist grotesque that appears in the work of Orson Welles and others that derived from '30s New Deal Theatre and continued in "film noir."

Although I would not elevate Lauder and Gilliat's *The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan* above *Topsy Turvey*, the latter film contains too much of Leigh's own version of Ealing comedy eccentricity that sold this type of cinema in the USA, a cinema certainly devoid of social commentary as Michael Balcon's iron rule over that studio demonstrated. Leigh's working-class characters become comic stereotypes differing little from the way mainstream British cinema from the 1920s onwards chose to depict this subordinate class. Despite his stated intentions, Leigh's caricatures unhappily belong to this tradition no matter how much he attempts to divorce his works from these unhappy precedents.

To conclude on a positive note, thank you David and WSWS for making this cultural material readily available to us. But I hope you do find time to interview Ken Loach, Tony Garnett, and those surviving figures who became politically marginalized from the 1980s onwards who featured in

Catherine Itzin's study of a now (temporarily, hopefully?) brave new world of alternative political theatre *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theater in Britain 1968*. Why did they become marginalized while Leigh became an international success? This investigation may yield some interesting results.

Tony W  
Illinois, USA

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I would like to thank and congratulate David Walsh on a compelling and inspiring discussion with Trevor Griffiths. This and the recent Mike Leigh interview offer great insights into both the creative process—as experienced by two wonderful practitioners— and Marxist criticism of art. It is no mere coincidence that both Griffiths and Leigh were born in working class areas of Manchester around the middle of the last century, and grew up amidst much struggle.

The WSWS has also been making excellent use of YouTube videos since the redesign. However, I feel that some events—such as the Griffiths meeting where not much happens visually—better lend themselves to an audio format. Might I suggest that WSWS branches out into podcasts as well as videos and text? If you did, you would have at least one subscriber, and I suspect many more!

AF  
Merseyside, UK

*On "Art and socialism: the real premises"*

I enjoyed reading David Walsh's recent lecture in the UK found on WSWS website. I found it to be interesting and thought-provoking. I am still curious to discover if socialist views are more or less consistent with the scientific viewpoint, when compared to capitalist views.

Nan  
Michigan, USA



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