

Benjamin Halligan

Why I read the WSWS

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I first came across the World Socialist Web Site in 1997 or 1998. I was struck by the quality of the analysis, the general level of information and the uncluttered presentation. And this was at a time when—relatively early in terms of the Internet and what was accessible online as a common resource—you just didn't have that much in terms of reportage, serious comment and analysis. Most mainstream newspapers had yet to establish a substantial online presence, for example. And the World Socialist Web Site was one of the first sites I came across when I started using the Internet, together with a few other databases, which were useful for research and general interest. So I remember bookmarking the site, and then checking it regularly, and have read it ever since then.

Thinking back, this was the right moment to find the WSWS: in the UK, Blair's New Labour party had come to power and dragged in its wake a large and gullible liberal crowd and media apparatus, just thankful that the Conservative party had gone, and who were surprised to find that their illusions, or hopes, were to be systematically shattered.

There was a need for an historically literate and anti-capitalist perspective at this point. Where else was that to be found? And we see the same process now in the US, with those who pinned their hopes on Barack Obama. At the other end of this period, with the Blair government's complicity in all aspects of the "War on Terror", the WSWS was able to deliver a clearer perspective on the momentous protest events around the UK than that found on the "left" wing of New Labour, or the Socialist Workers Party. And at the point at which, a year and a half ago, rioting broke out across the country, the WSWS stood firm against the exodus to the right as the entire establishment, its media and its legal apparatus, and its entertainers, perceived an entire class as essentially criminal.

For me, one of the great strengths of the WSWS is the approach to the arts. In no sense is any of the commentary or analysis typical of the more mainstream press. The WSWS isn't in hock to celebrity cultures or strung along by whatever is fashionable; there's no compulsion to celebrate the new, and mistake that for news or analysis. The WSWS has always had the advantage of being very clear-sighted. If something is bad, they'll call it ... and the context for such a judgment that then follows is worth more than the usual scramble to salvage something of worth, as found in the mainstream media.

There is an independence of mind when it comes to dealing with film culture, and especially in the writing of David Walsh. He is not responding so much to film as film, and in respect of the flows and eddies of international film cultures, but to film in relation to a series of more compelling concerns. David offers a perspective that's not found in the mainstream media and not often found in academic writing either. It is part of what lends the WSWS a very characteristic and unique voice. And with each discussion, there is a renewal of ideas, and re-articulation of positions. To talk of a crisis in film culture is to talk of a wider crisis, and to question the role of the filmmaker in society. At work is an understanding that various writers, actors, producers and directors, in attempting to talk about something, invariably find themselves confronting issues that are common not only to the artistic world but the world beyond.

Consequently, when the WSWS interviews filmmakers, dialogue occurs. This isn't just a matter of promotion, but a matter of insight, an exchange of views, which invariably return to questions of the roles of the artist, and cinema, in society. I'm thinking in particular of the interview with Marco Bellocchio, but also with figures from the New Iranian Cinema. And

also of the coverage of Harold Pinter, in his final years, as he received the Nobel Prize for literature.

It was at a time when Pinter was very much on my mind; he had spoken at the 2003 anti-war rally in Hyde Park. His physical frailty was very apparent. His hands were shaking in the cold but his voice thundered: he called Blair “a hired Christian thug”. He spoke with authority and audacity. Clearly the broadsheets had had enough of this and his searing anti-war poetry. So there’s a common current of received opinion in the liberal media, and the WSWS remains above all this. Difficult now to remember the trivial details of the attempted trashing of Pinter from most quarters, but the WSWS response remains with me.

This remains the case now, in the coverage of Julian Assange. And, again in terms of the British press in the coverage of the Royal Family, and the coverage of the “election” of the new Pope. And yet nuance and measured consideration remain: a number of articles on Princess Diana, reflecting on how her fate sheds light on elements of British society and institutions, come to mind. In the lifetime of the WSWS, editorial lines have only been tightened in the mainstream press, further squeezing out any “licensed” space for dissent. In these respects, the WSWS is an essential resource.

This is true in terms of teaching too, and the university environment. I’m often asked to provide students with reading lists as they research and prepare work. Where concerns range from “identity politics” to recent Hollywood films that have dealt in violence (often with postmodern irony) WSWS articles are a welcome counterbalance.

Undergraduates can find this a refreshing experience, moving from the uncritical to the critical. The idea of the normalisation of brutality, considered in respect to state violence—especially since 2001—and as connected to the “new brutality” in film, is one that opens up another horizon of discussion.



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