

A low down dirty lack of shame

Tom Jennings

One of the most interesting aspects of Channel 4's new drama series *Shameless*, written by Paul Abbott, is its lack of explicit moral judgement—either on the part of the characters within the script, or in the structure and rhythm of the narrative and its logic and (partial) resolutions. This despite the fact that the scenario and subject matter seem almost obsessively to invite criticism of both the individual characters—their behaviour, choices and interactions; in fact their very being—and the collective attitudes, orientations and situations that accompany them. The result is a complicated balancing act between representation and caricature, honesty and romanticisation, comedy and tragedy, empathy and patronisation, celebration and pathos. For that matter, the chaotic and tumultuous existence of its main protagonists, the Gallagher family, is also a complicated balancing act—comprising six siblings aged three to twenty-one, living on a sink estate in a contemporary northern city, with a progressively absent, unemployed alcoholic father and whose mother has done a runner.

Friends, Neighbours, Fellow Travellers

A corollary to the deliberate amorality of *Shameless* is precisely the absence of feelings of shame exhibited by the characters, not only in their vulgar and uncouth manners, but in their responses to their apparently hopeless plights and prospects and their sense of responsibility or moral culpability for their situation. The title of the series is both ironic and apt: apt because the Gallaghers oscillate wildly between good intentions, indifference and hurtfulness towards loved ones, but there is little sign of the overweening feelings of self-worthlessness and self-disgust that

characterise real shame; and ironic because accusations of shamelessness, for example made by 'respectable' neighbours, represent moral condemnation that tends (and intends) to render its targets beyond the pale of acceptable humanity. It reveals far more about the accusers, hinting at their deeper hidden shame and insecurity concerning their own lowly social status, and furthermore legitimises in their eyes the hostile actions and persecution by 'the authorities' that ultimately disrupt or preempt any meaningful sense of their own community.

The attitudes of the conservative, respectable and aspiring working class thus neatly dovetail with, for example, state initiatives concerning policing and welfare—demanding stringent monitoring, control and punishment, not only for transgression but for the offense of their existence. Likewise, middle class charity and much of socialism—from the Fabians, Eugenics and Leninism through to old and New Labour, has also comprehensively nurtured, articulated with, and fed upon such reactionary beliefs about the innate inferiority of the poor and the need to intervene and 'do something about them'. *Shameless* thus invokes several conventional discourses relating to the nature and potential of working class people, only to then flout and undermine them—and in the process to question the social and political philosophies and programmes that, at root, depend on class-based ideologies of moral deficit and ethical inadequacy for their normative and pragmatic utility.

Family Affairs

The main tactic used to achieve this confrontation with accepted homilies, stereotypes and clichés about the degraded poor is a resolute refusal to centre the story around supposedly objective

'problems' or 'issues'. The focus instead is the family's determination to stay afloat together, and to maintain a sense (or illusion) of agency and hope. In the way are a multitude of obstacles and constraints, most of which are clearly shown to be overdetermined by a combination of historical shaping, situational reality and personal attributes. Any positive outcomes (such as they can be) always emerge from a deliberate (although usually not self-conscious) meshing of sociality, imagination and desire.

But this is no glib, easily or effortlessly achieved solidarity, and neither is it straightforwardly positive. Indeed the violence, abuse and humiliation the characters sometimes heap on each other, and the occasionally indiscriminate volatility of their anger, hatred and destructiveness, are intrinsically linked to their mutual affection, respect and active commitment to each other. This dense patchwork effect is reinforced by the contemporary setting of material which originated in Paul Abbott's childhood and adolescence in the 1960s and '70s—which partly accounts for distinct residual tinges of nostalgia (as well as the absence of the panoply of 'child protection' professionals which might be expected given current hypocrisies and hysterias). But although details of events, characters and storylines are massively condensed, jumbled up and redistributed, what shines through is a sense of trying to comprehend and deal with the apparently ineffable wash of life—from a point of view simultaneously of innocence and thoroughly streetwise worldweariness. The family members are at times so emotionally close as to feel part of each other, and at other times so distant in their thoughts and preoccupations as to be alien to each other even while under the same roof. The fascination with sexual antics rings especially true from this perspective, in an

environment where both emotional and physical overcrowding can make common knowledge—but only very partial understanding—of private passions and their effects and ramifications.

Clear and Present Dangers

Despite the all pervading conflicts and crises, the predominant styles of fictional representation of working class life in social realism are also refused. Gone is the tragic pessimism which can only be overcome by individual heroism or the painstaking work of diligent self-improvement. There is no pandering whatsoever to the notion that the family are an imminent threat to themselves or to (polite) society, which can only be averted or contained by the enlightened action of outside forces (the state, employers, experts, etc). Such institutions are recognised as only having the capacity to destroy both the Gallaghers' fragile practical unity and their sense of who they are, as fully imbricated in each other's lives rather than separate individuals with isolated needs. So *Shameless* replaces earnest negativity with exuberance, the yearning for passionate fulfilment, and outrageous comedy bordering on farce.

The price paid to avoid succumbing to the tragic vision may appear to be a trivialisation of the levels of drudgery, misery and suffering experienced by many people in similar positions. Furthermore the exoticisation of their pleasures and the general comic rendering skates over the more ominous manifestations of depression, envy, malice and hatred which regularly afflict those reared in emotionally and materially deprived and dysfunctional environments (clearly, what counts as dysfunctional is crucial here), where urgent necessity prevents distance or reflection. However, it should be clear, to anyone who cares to pay attention, that all of the characters in *Shameless* are deeply unhappy about many

things for most of the time. The difference is that, since this is a mode of being which is entirely familiar and expected ('it's how life is'), there is no particular reason to dwell on or agonise over it. Personal or social catastrophe may often follow events within a family which can be attributed to individual psychology and conflict. But it is just as likely to be precipitated by more or less unpredictable externalities—particularly the intervention of state agencies, or activities resulting from crime and the pathologies of those outside one's immediate social nexus. The sheer number and range of threats and their potential origins means that a pragmatic fatalism is the only sensible policy, if stultifying depression or reactive paranoia are to be avoided.

So, as with all the best television depictions of working class life, it is the emotional realism on this phenomenological level which will most strike a chord with viewers from similar backgrounds. But unlike virtually all other examples that I can recall, there is an overriding sense in *Shameless* that given the ongoing state of emergency, everyone knows that things will—and will have to—change. And while all manner of disasters are just around the corner or are already beginning to unfold, the only strategy that makes sense to effect change for the better, irrespective of how desperate circumstances are, is to mobilise that single most important source of hope, imagination and practical agency which is embodied by the local social network where individual strengths and heroics only matter if they contribute to collective effort.

The Uses of Enchantment

Accounts of working class experience expressed in social realism in the arts, literature and media or in the social and human sciences often also mirror prevailing discourses of class, particularly by constructing a unifor-

mity of 'the masses'. This contrasts with the differentiation and distinctions found at higher levels of society which have the power to institute general programmes and solutions from above. Similarly the guardians of interpretation and taste (reviewers, critics, academics) try to force representations of lower class life into narrow and rigid categories, leading to a most unseemly disarray in newspaper and magazine reviews trying to categorise *Shameless* in terms of its genre status, quality and relationship to current politically sensitive issues. Seen through these lenses, the complexity and diversity within and among the characters and the fecundity of their ensemble is lost—when it is precisely this differentiation, woven in practice into a wealth of meaning and possibility, which yields the promise of active, productive, collective self-organisation. As postmodern pastiche, and in wit and irreverence, comparisons with *Roseanne* or *The Simpsons* surely make sense; and in terms of affection and unapologetic self-criticism, *The Royle Family*, *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Bread* spring to mind. But the predictable, static and safe sitcom framework has been removed along with the fundamental appeal to respectability that all of the aforementioned series relied upon. With a level of explicitness entirely appropriate to its subjects, the proximity of horror and the sublime, and most of all its dynamic indeterminacy, *Shameless* is in a class of its own—in which optimistic reading it is anarchic in the best sense, rather than the worst.

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