

# Parcels of Rogues

Tom Jennings

In the wake of the Westminster expenses scandal, public disenchantment with British parliamentary politics – at least measured by current affairs punditry and perpetually declining election turnouts – appears to have hit an all-time low unmatched since late-eighteenth century disgust eventually prompted the Great Reform Acts. Lasting images from that period would include William Hogarth's paintings wallowing in the dissolute arrogance and greed of power, and a characteristic soundbite – albeit in nationalist guise – Robert Burns' 1791 summary dismissal of "Such A Parcel of Rogues" selling out Scotland for "English gold". Even then, however, it seems that the substance of the loyal opposition's objections to prevailing conditions revolves around moral judgements on individuals (even in their thousands) who suborn in their own selfish interests what would otherwise, by implication, be essentially neutral structures and processes of government. The common intuition that the latter institutions had always been devised and developed precisely to safeguard such private agendas – thus requiring a move back to the political drawing board – is then obscured by the clamour of reformist (and revolutionary) programmes seeking to strengthen the State, ostensibly to safeguard its potential efficacy but incidentally rendering fundamental change even harder to envisage.

Now, with collapsing international financial mafias rescued with astronomical hand-outs into corporate balance sheets even more blatant than the preceding drip of deferred government debt scheduling in Private-Public-Partnership and Private Finance Initiative scams – now largely propped up with 100% public funding – it seems astonishingly parochial for attention to divert to the minor creative accounting of MPs shaving a few thousand off the taxman. Perhaps, though, it signals a manageable, if displaced, acknowledgement of the obscenity of wagering the futures of millions of lives on us accepting depleting incomes, dissolving welfare, and generally harsher prospects – when the only visible benefits reliably accrue precisely to those plotting the wholesale plunder of collective resources. Yet politicians in all mainstream parties parrot the mantra of 'no alternative' to a vain hope for trickledown from globalised profiteering – jostling to ridicule, suppress and criminalise dissenting expression and action – so it's only right that they're all tarred with the same brush. Meanwhile the chattering classes satisfy



An Election Entertainment, William Hogarth, 1754: The scene is of an election 'treat' given by the Whigs to gain voters' support. In 1752 the Whigs decided to contest the Oxfordshire seats, heralding a two-year campaign characterised by unprecedented levels of bribery and corruption.

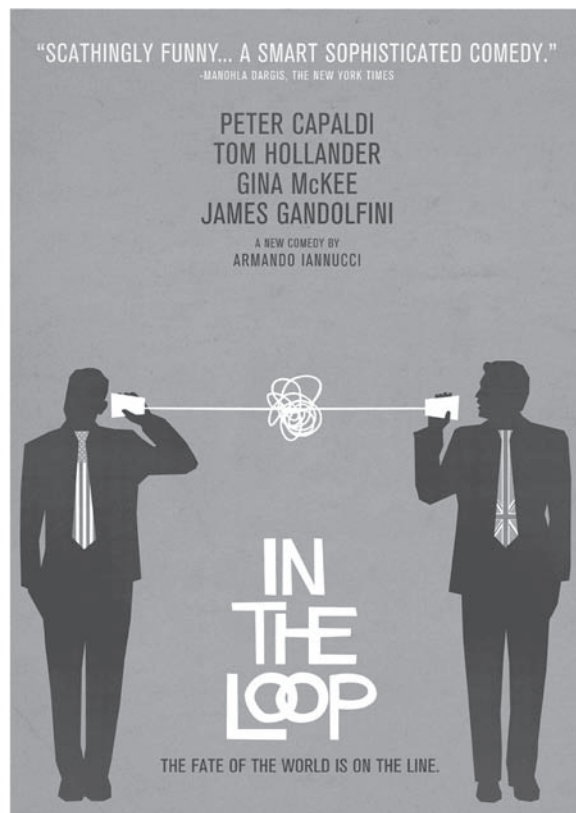
themselves with hand-wringing and crocodile tears bemoaning the supposedly sudden loss of faith in liberal democratic platitudes, tremulously wondering if further modernisation and regulation can bodge it together. So where are contemporary visions of government equivalent to those of Hogarth and Burns, focussing the righteous ire of the masses in withering critiques of such an abject here-and-now? Or, put more cynically, how do sophisticated postmodern media recuperate and neutralise popular discontent while purporting to represent it?

## From the Ridiculous ...

Stepping up from safe television comedy sketch shows sneering at easy targets of low-brow culture, Armando Iannucci's hilarious BBC 4 sitcom *The Thick Of It* (2005-07) viciously satirised New Labour's spin machine, showing the gymnastic contortions of information massaging and packaging necessary for variously venal, vacuous, mendacious and malicious activities and utterances comprising 'affairs of state' to resemble slickly-managed 'joined-up' policy. Harassed aides duck and dive delivering this conjuring trick from the heart of government to media interfaces, bullied into arbitrarily transient Party-line by Downing Street enforcers. Magnifying the premiss to cinema, *In The Loop* (2009) abandons banal bungling bureaucracy in a minor Ministry for big-budget geopolitical gravity as Iraq war propaganda is prepared in London and Washington DC. The fly-on-the-wall, on-the-hoof, faux-documentary style persists from television, as do archetypes of vacillating British politicians and squabbling, squirming assistants – with Peter Capaldi's No.10 PR supremo surviving in all his foul-mouthed sociopathic glory. Finally, as per usual, he gets his warlike way – any residual principles, ethics and decency comprehensively vacating the UN building – along the way culling those who won't play ball by hyping trivial scandals and leaking them to the tabloids.

Iannucci's primary strategy is to fashion screwball comedy from the petty vanities, conflicts, indignities and tyrannies of office politics married to the euphemistic inanity of modern business practices. Egotism, incompetence and communication breakdown perpetually threaten conformance to bigger pictures which the protagonists are only dimly aware of, busily chasing ever-shifting agendas and deadlines. This effectively updates *Yes, Minister's* (BBC, 1980-82) caricature of traditional patrician government, with Thatcherism's brutal diktats filtering through elite civil servants to humiliate hapless junior ministers, as well as *House of Cards* (BBC, 1990) Machiavellian high-Tory distraction. *The Thick Of It* instead skewers politically-correct Orwellian fantasies of contemporary statecraft as benign 'better management', exposing a hysterical class-based underbelly of barely-suppressed macho posturing, rage and shame – the symbolically violent regression of its wit cathartically mirroring the disavowed dirty deeds barbaric neoliberalism wreaks in the real world. *In The Loop*, however, bursts this hermetically-sealed pre-Oedipal bubble in the pragmatic US corridors of power – which are portrayed as, in their own way, just as ad-hoc a muddle of opportunistic rancour as ours even if their perks, pomp and circumstance are correspondingly grander and more grandiose.

Curiously, however, the film's US career politicians are given ideological co-ordinates underpinning their efforts, which their connivances, complacencies and flaws are genuinely mobilised to serve. Unlike the Brits, personal advancement is not their primary concern, moreover the Yanks have no equivalent of the dictatorial puppetmaster orchestrating apparatchiks, thereby allowing a freer play of the balance of forces rather than top-down fixing. Whereas the Blairites learned their rhetorical Third Way trade at Washington Consensus seminars precisely to sacrifice authentic commitment on the altar of corporate



culture. So inadvertently projecting vestiges of noble 'battles of ideas' back across the Atlantic seems a monumental failure of nerve and/or imagination – symptomatic, perhaps, of cynicism's concealed conservatism shading satire into farce. Nevertheless, at least *In The Loop* injects some riotous bile into its fictional power mechanics, pissing on the overblown saccharine complacency of *The West Wing's* (1999-2006) White House, or, for Westminster and Whitehall, the pseudo-documentary *New Labour: The Project* (BBC, 2002), and *The Deal* and *The Government Inspector* (Channel 4, 2003 and 2005) pandering to celebrity obsessiveness, and – most dystopic as well as soporific – the yuppie student narcissism of *Party Animals* (BBC 2, 2007).

Entry-points for audience identification in *The Thick Of It* and *In The Loop* lie with the legions of underlings getting bossed around, not really knowing what's going on, at the mercy of decisions made elsewhere and having to take them on board in getting the job done. This parallels the situation for ordinary folk faced with the practical consequences of deliberations conducted far above our heads – yet these protagonists are mere cogs in an apparatus of mediation, in the business of dealing only with how things appear. So while their struggle for coherent understanding in order to act can stand for our own confused paralysis in the face of the apparent insanity of the world, its empathic effectiveness depends on viewers embracing the perspectives of middle-level, middle-class bureaucrats, professionals or managers – who, to get this far, must have already aligned their sense of personal interest and integrity with the tasks of simulation and dissimulation in the service of institutional power. Conversely, the living, breathing ultimate objects of its circuits of abstraction and rhetoric have to deal with concrete outcomes – whether in foreign wars or the routine juggernauts of domestic governance – where violation is likely to be visceral as well as discursive and directly physical brutality accompanying the moral dehumanisation state-sanctioned perpetrators feel obliged to reproduce. Here, though, we are safely segregated from those in charge, cocooned off-screen along with underlying rationales for the policies or strategies imposed, and from all those unaccountably victimised. The latter only ever minimally impinge as expedient symbolic fodder for pre-existing plans or narratives – whereas writer David Peace builds from the blood, guts and imaginations of those at the sharpest end.

### ... to the Anti-Sublime ...

Based on Peace's 'Yorkshire noir' novels *1974*, *1977*, *1980* and *1983* (Serpent's Tail, 1999-2002), scriptwriter Tony Grisoni's three *Red Riding* films (directed by Julian Jarrold, James Marsh, and Anand Tucker) paint a compelling picture of time and place, and retain much of their source's hellish intensity. Screening in March this year and representing a substantial wedge of Channel 4's drama budget, the superb design, filming and acting drip with grey-brown authenticity, showing 1970s/80s decay, depression and desperation in Northern England's rapidly postindustrialising pit villages, rotten boroughs and collapsing communities breeding the solipsistic barbarism neoliberalism would soon legitimise in this sceptic isle. But its seeds were sown long before, exemplified in the period's notorious sexual violence sagas, and in each of these intricately-linked stories a deeply-flawed protagonist gets to the bottom of botched cases of abducted schoolgirls and butchered prostitutes. A naive *Yorkshire Post* hack, supercilious Manchester DI and wretchedly ineffectual local solicitor dig into stalled police investigations – including the Ripper hunt – convinced of incompetence, frame-ups and cover-ups, their faltering progress hindered at every turn by out-of-control coppers whose obstruction readily shades into outright intimidation. Recurring throughout unremitting menace and brutality are seedy property developers, vengeance-seeking rent-boys, creepily ubiquitous priests, paedophile rings,

and disintegrating detectives trying belatedly to do the right thing surrounded by unredeemable W. Yorks Constabulary colleagues. The latter's endemic corruption extends beyond collusion and parasitism to running vice and pornography operations as well as enforcing for local Big Money, underlining their thorough integration into 'polite' society and establishment hierarchies. And the deeper we get, the more desperate the agents of authority become to paper over the cracks with torture and death-squad tactics.

Unfortunately the missing story (cut when the money wouldn't stretch) emphasised the author's primary concern to represent the struggle to understand the horrors that surrounded him while growing up in the area – helping to orientate confused readers, but not now available to viewers. Thus the controversial fictionalisation around real events (with names and details changed) given the most nightmarish spin is developed in *1977's* loose theme of collusion between cynically-bent journalists and marginally well-meaning and slightly less-compromised cops – representing the cream of professional 'truth-seekers' – during the punk era's crystallisation of hopeless fury. Peace's own feverishly obsessive boyhood fears and imaginings around the Ripper were later supplemented by sources such as the 'parapolitics' of *Lobster* magazine which – however outlandish in respectable discourse – made what happened potentially intelligible. Nevertheless he insists that his 'occult history' doesn't in principle exaggerate the scale of official wrongdoing – recommending doubters read high-profile accounts of police foul-play such as Tony Bunyan's *The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain*, Chris Mullin's *Error of Judgement*, John Williams' *Bloody Valentine*, or books by Paul Foot (we might add Stuart Christie and Robin Ramsay, among others). So it's not as if he's ploughing a lonely furrow here – and his masterpiece about the miners' strike, *GB84* (Faber, 2004), required less psychotic hyperbole because the political machinations were themselves sufficiently monstrous. Meanwhile the *Red Riding* quartet ties together in literary form the philosophical, psychosexual, visceral and political corollaries of wading into such morasses – hoping to emerge with sanity intact.

Peace's fractured hyper-modernist writing juxtaposes styles from expressionist exposition to pared-down pulp prose and noirish dialogue, diary entries, mental lists, streams of consciousness and incoherent ravings, with different kinds of texts breaking any naturalistic flow. Inspired by science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick's paranoid existentialism, the effect is precisely to blur times gone by into now, actuality into distorted perception, downright hallucination and fantasy. In the *Red Riding* novels, apprehension of the awful situations dealt with then evokes and resonates with repressed sexual and violent impulses – with neither characters nor readers sure of distinctions – which then circulate and materialise in exaggerated figures and actions in the narrative. We are not necessarily meant to interpret the results as objective reality, but are at least obliged to ponder what framework of knowledge could account for the facts such as they are. Crucially, the complete – and continuing – failure of official accounts to give satisfactory explanations of these most appalling events brings into question conventional disavowals placing such 'inhumanity' outside the purview of both normal society and official structures. Ultimately the TV version timidly shirks this final imaginative leap in favour of exactly those recognisable crime-procedural and conspiracy-thriller genre clichés that the author transcended – its grubby specificity then generating scarcely more explanatory power than a Da Vinci Code or James Bond.

Reducing to offscreen allusion the body counts and actual depictions of the heinous crimes further censors the voices of victims previously given due weight. Instead, the narrative arcs are "made more distinct than those in the novels", privileging minor heroic gestures which otherwise drown in the implacably malevolent logic and interchangeably vicious complicity of serial killers and erstwhile pursuers. Wanting "to be released



from that hell by the end", and stressing that Peace "doesn't save anyone. Whereas I needed to"<sup>1</sup>, Grisoni gropes for what the books refused – an overall solution, redemption, and an identifiable locus of organised evil pulling the strings to excuse the State from ultimate culpability (if only its guardians lived up to ideals). So the story's salience no longer radiates from past to present throughout the land, merely envisaging bad apples infecting this particular barrel of northerness – just like G.F. Newman's earlier *Law & Order* quartet (BBC, 1978) did for the contemporaneous Met and London's criminal justice system. Anyway, mainstream critical responses eagerly followed suit, working overtime to refuse any wider persistent real-world relevance, able to blame the author's intransigent interpretive idiosyncrasies on his own maniacal genius/perversion – just as the general prevalence of socialised and sexualised abusiveness is peremptorily dismissed as so much personalised sickness with none of the intimate relationship to respectable patterns of power we might suspect. With the most subversive elements of the novels thus lost, the net effect here is to consign *Red Riding's* 'dark Satanic' costume drama to pretty much as conservatively remote a terrain as *Life On Mars*.

Tackling the centrality of the police monopoly of violence in the hidden abusive logic of government, Peace pursues parallels between masculine insecurity and malevolence and motive forces permeating social and institutional networks but repressed from awareness at all levels. Thus acquiring all the more motivating force they coalesce in specific crimes of sexual violence as well as the general habits and lifestyles of vice-ridden officers and municipal patriarchs, which the police are constitutionally incapable of resisting or recognising. So while it looks as if specific devilish conspiracies are solely responsible, actually the norms and rules circumscribing official structures and processes nurture such outcomes – the 'wrong-uns' and fuck-ups on both sides of the law and their comprehensive entanglement with local conduits of money and power. But the TV trilogy's more didactically conventional trajectory dismisses these insights as mere contributory factors allowing specific baddies in blue their hegemony, implying that enlightened reform can weed them out. This historical closure is reinforced if organised police violence originates purely in base impulses at lower levels seeping upwards over time – so that the long-established rank-and-file culture of racism, class hatred and elite exclusivity, also prevalent elsewhere, takes root all the more severely in the absence of public oversight and with special suitability in fuelling sadistic excess

and all manner of corruption.

Suppressed from explicit expression by protocols of political correctness and minimal controls afforded by complaints procedures, these patterns, of course, persist. For example, the BBC's *Secret Policeman* (2003) exposed white racist Manchester recruits, and the Jean-Charles de Menezes and Ian Tomlinson cases demonstrate the systemic neglect of safeguards against misconduct also seen in an Enfield Crime Squad recently disbanded for torturing suspects and looting possessions. However, the meshing of police hierarchies with surrounding institutions has accelerated since the 1980s, using New Public Management corporate models and 'fast-tracking' university graduate officers. Tinpot dictatorships of Chief Constables rising from the ranks were never really the core problem. Instead, privatised lack of accountability visible in rogue units throughout the country of varying degrees of scale and viciousness – or gangsterism versus freemasonry – now reconstitutes centrally in the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), which has no obligation to consult or inform anyone of its activities co-ordinating nationwide strategic planning and implementing resulting policies. Meanwhile successive governments underwrite escalating *carte blanche* to arrest anyone on suspicion of anything, inevitably encouraging – indeed, if anything, insisting upon – out-of-control policing. With crime itself recast as anti-social individual thought and communication as well as action, proliferating surveillance and biocontrol technologies provide infinite evidence. Institutions, though, are, almost by definition, innocent. So if the War on Terror reflects awareness among the political classes of their impotence, perverted psychopathy potentially attributable to all is both a perpetual alibi for the health of the state and an eternal reminder of its sickness. Hence the recurring fascination with compromised politicians, now rehashed on both sides of the Atlantic in *State of Play*.

### ... and from Rogue Statesmen ...

Kevin Macdonald's passably entertaining blockbuster *State of Play* sees a young likely-lad gunned down in a professional hit, whereupon Cal McCaffrey (Russell Crowe), intrepid chief reporter at *The Washington Globe*, investigates. Immediately afterwards nearby, a political researcher falls under a commuter train, with her Congressional Committee boss Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck) tearful at an ensuing press conference arousing Monicagate-style tabloid suspicions. However, McCaffrey discovers that his victim phoned the dead woman immediately before the murders – after a bagsnatch yielded surveillance material on her, having obviously tried to flog it back to the killer. So McCaffrey commandeers the now-merged story, helped enormously by being the Congressman's old college-buddy. Repelling interference from police, his editor and colleagues, and, with the assassin running amok, he unravels a plot further thickened by revelations that the monolithic private security contractor Collins was probing ran the researcher as a mole – planted, moreover, by his own Party grandee mentor. Touching all the tainted bases of the contemporary military-state-industrial complex, the film thereby neatly fits current ultra-cynical (or, arguably, realistic) Hollywood fashions.

Abandoning increasingly tired international espionage templates, 1970s US conspiracy thrillers exploited greater awareness of high-level hi-jinks among Big Money and Power – with well-meaning reformers, journalists and citizens victimised by government and corporate agencies in *The Parallax View* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *Winter Kills* (1979) and *The China Syndrome* (1979). Then, after a protracted cinematic truce, Jonathan Demme's *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) conservatively revised John Frankenheimer's 1962 Cold War mind-boggler, with benign intelligence services and traditionalist politicians now deploying patriotic dirty tricks only against the multinational menace, while John Sayles' equally transparent anti-Bush sentiment in *Silver City* (2004) resuscitated countercultural heroics to thwart naked neo-con pollution. And whereas the Bourne series and its ilk pit macho postmodern solipsism against schizophrenic secret-state apparatuses, the more sophisticated *Syriana* (dir. Stephen Gaghan, 2005) sketches parapolitical convergence among conflicting powerful interests overdetermining apparently insane global events. Yet throughout – however strident the rhetoric – generic resolution looms via public exposure of the evil exceptions infecting otherwise robust body-politics.

*State of Play* reproduces clichéd individual corruption despite twisting its tale to also indict the Democratic good guys, whose righteous crusade derails after adopting methods usually attributed to the other side. Incipient critique is, however, undercut by displacing dispassionate checks-and-balances onto a heroic independent press – albeit with capacity all-but hamstrung by modern downsizing imperatives favouring profitable cheap tat like celebrity chitchat and the opinion-peddling bloggery that McCaffrey so derides. But then our film's low-rent blown conspiracy hardly measures up to its explicit cinematic inspiration either – the *Washington Post* Nixon-busters classically portrayed in *All the President's Men* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1976), naffly referenced by locations in Watergate and sinister underground carparks. But here the ruling echelons escape scot-free, with even the shocking scoop the screenwriters conjure – a Blackwateresque privatised monopoly of state security – already yesterday's news (except it has never been reported properly). Plus the story was in any case sleuthed by the congressman, not the newshound – thus representing a remarkably tepid testament to the virtues of old-school investigative journalism. In effect, if this is the fourth estate's best shot, it's hardly surprising the sector faces terminal decline.

All the more ironic that the source material for such a disappointing cop-out was so provocatively intelligent. The BBC's 2003 six-part drama

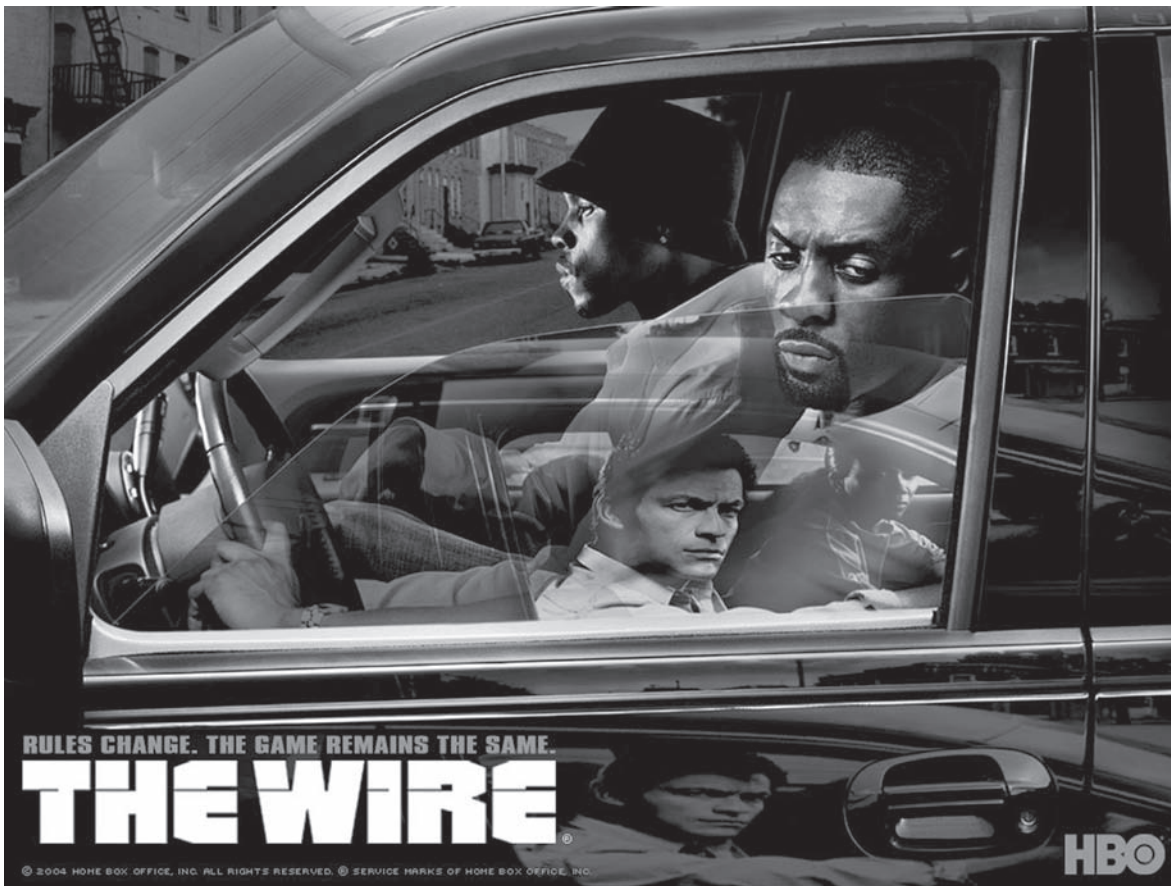
directed by David Yates shattered a similar hiatus in UK intrigue after some doom-laden mid-Thatcher prognostications – sundry Cold War throwbacks, nuclear nightmare in the *Edge of Darkness* (1983), and Chris Mullin's *A Very British Coup* (1988) embroidering Wilson-era aristocrats plotting soft-socialism's overthrow. Presumably later Tory megasleaze (rather than penny-ante expenses chiselling) rendered fictitious finessing superfluous, after which Blair's new deal took time to fester – but Paul Abbott's *State of Play* emphatically puts the boot in. His script implicates Cabinet-level machinations arranging the espionage (by the energy lobby) of their own rising-star MP, specifically undermining the adversarial posture which simultaneously furnishes the government's public-interest alibi. The resulting policy stitch-up represents a prescient metaphor for New Labour's entire neoliberal trajectory, boosting heavyweight economic agendas, socialising risks and privatising profits – disingenuously concealed under vapid spin complemented by the newspaper's proprietorial Murdoch/Maxwell amalgam riding shotgun. Whereas the film's lone crooked politico conniving a corporate paymaster's advantage pales infinitely limply in comparison.

Worse, Macdonald's cardboard cut-out cast's stereotypically wooden acting cements a complete lack of believably rounded human intercourse matching entirely unconvincing institutional settings. Conversely, the television series fully incorporates personal biography into political allegory, fleshing out threadbare idealism, compromised loyalty and troubled maturity into fractures and divergences in professional and intimate relationships and ambitions. The intricate social nuances work effortlessly thanks to impeccable dialogue and performances, so that even weaker plot points pass muster – as does the microcosmic contrast of conflict, morale, scheming and suspicion in the newsroom and at Westminster. The humble utopian core of Abbott's vision is his fully-functioning reporting ensemble – representing, at a stretch, any genuine collective of ordinary folk. Diverse skills and flaws meld in their relatively egalitarian endeavour to transcend systemic collusion characterising an official public realm constitutionally riddled with corrosively alienating manipulative duplicity – the writer's lack of interest in superhuman saviours and liberal grand narratives of journalism's lofty nobility obvious in playing its management as farce. Meanwhile, Hollywood's contempt for honest dirty work – and final clinching evidence of Macdonald's all-round botch-job – surfaces in Collins' objection to a privatised military based on its employees only showing 'loyalty to the pay-packet'. So much for the honour of wage-slaves everywhere – but what on earth does he imagine motivates the low-rank-and-file to enlist in the armed forces in the first place? From all wide angles, therefore, *State of Play's* pretensions to contemporary relevance break down into a bungled bog-standard retro-rump fingering absolutely none of the president's men. Whereas *The Wire* damns them all and their entire bankrupt system.

### ... to Failed States

Widely acclaimed as the best television ever, US crime saga *The Wire* finally arrives on freeview in Britain, continuing on BBC 2 into the summer. "A political tract masquerading as a cop show"<sup>2</sup>, the first season introduces central characters and situations in the inner-city narcotics trade and its policing in Baltimore, Maryland – or in local street argot 'Body-More, Murdaland – intended to represent any decaying second-tier rust-belt metropolis (or, less seamlessly, the 'developed' world generally). The self-defeatingly stupid but electorally compelling 'War on Drugs' focuses the five seasons' test-case of the dysfunctional amorality of postmodern government – subsequent narratives expanding these narrowly-delineated parallel micro-worlds into the contemporary social complexity of a tragically ailing urban America and the terminally failing institutions nominally charged with its welfare. The net effect is a





forensic fictionalisation of economic ruination in the docks and trade unions, corruption and bureaucratic degeneracy in municipal politics, chaotically incompetent and helpless leadership in the police department and school system, and comparably cynical sociopathic management in local media and drug-dealing franchises – with great pains taken to demonstrate the convergent operation of power as all these contexts interact in prioritising the establishment and reproduction of personal gain and the protection of privilege.

Beginning in early-90s West Baltimore, yet another teenage gangbanger is murdered and, as we encounter his peers and police investigators, the suspected ‘corner-boss’ culprit wriggles free after witness intimidation. A frustrated detective persuades the judge to pressure the brass into tackling the gang who, despite running things for years, are unknown to official ‘intelligence’ because City Hall prefers paramilitary tactics to pack crime-stats. Loaded with dead-weight from sundry divisions, the new squad nevertheless makes headway via telephone intercepts, and glimpses into the targets’ social and professional networks thereafter intercut with those of the taskforce. The range of idiosyncratic personalities involved grows, manifesting varying degrees of strength and weakness, wit, intelligence and compassion, malice, violence and selfishness – with the significance of conduct for personal gratification, misery and effectivity depending on position and impact upon wider interests. Conversely, ongoing activities are regularly disrupted by banal, brutal and/or arbitrary twists of fate, mistakes, external forces, and decisions and conflicts higher up both foodchains. Final outcomes are provisional compromises, minor defeats and victories, in the drug trade and its law enforcement mirror – the overriding message being ‘the game remains the same’, reinforced by concluding roving pans around successive generations of city districts and organisations negotiating their way through each manifestation of its dialectics.

The plotlines and arcs crowding sixty *Wire* episodes in five series originally emerged from meticulous journalistic research by David Simon (former police reporter with the *Baltimore Sun*) and Ed Burns (ex-city detective and secondary schoolteacher). Filmic forays first followed documentary books *Homicide: Life on the Killing Streets* (with Simon embedded in murder investigations; Barry Levinson’s television adaptations running from 1993-9) and *The Corner* (from hanging out with drug-dealers and their milieu, portrayed in a 2000 mini-series<sup>3</sup>). The resulting material organised into a guiding vision was spun by a top-notch script team, including crime novelists George Pelecanos, Richard Price and Dennis Lehane, cementing a seamless literary sprawl and verisimilitude of dialogue and relationships among an impressive

and massive ensemble of relatively unknown actors and amateurs. Repudiating good/bad guy simplification and capturing the everyday humour and pathos of protagonists at all levels constrained by circumstances allowing only limited ethical and practical options, the resulting Dickensian specificity attracted fierce partisan loyalty – among the cast but also local and (inter)national viewers in the ghettos and lower reaches of officialdoms depicted, seeing aspects of their lives detailed realistically for once. Meanwhile the non-naturalistic economy and meticulous artfulness of narrative execution, condensing full-spectra societal conflict into unflashy visualisations a few hours long, fascinated cultural commentators, media pundits and intellectual fans amenable to the show’s ideological and artistic ambitions.

In its multilayered refusal of individual or collective resolution, the creators conceived series 1 as “a training exercise ... to watch television differently” so as to appreciate their relentless “deconstruction of the American Dream” – namely, the postwar consensus whereby supposedly “everyone gets to make a living”<sup>4</sup>. The show then proceeds as a modern equivalent of Greek tragedy – except that capricious late-capitalist institutions rather than omnipotent gods orchestrate hierarchies and systems according to their interests, agendas, whims and fancies, “hurling lightning bolts, hitting people in the ass for no reason”<sup>5</sup>. However, rather than mythical fairytale stereotypes, actual city characters and events are woven together with their contours and logics intact, including the most apparently outlandish figures and developments. But then reality is more bizarre, as Simon sketched in a *Guardian* essay last year<sup>6</sup> concerning a major criminal justice scandal which recently propelled Baltimore’s mayor to Maryland governorship but was never publicly analysed – yet all its salient features repeatedly skew *The Wire*’s prognoses. Thus, being “separate, unequal, and no longer even acknowledging each other”, the “two Americas” can connect in this TV ‘entertainment’ but not in “the stunted political discourse ... eviscerated, self-absorbed press ... [or] any construct to which the empowered ... comfortable and comforted America, gives its limited attention”. Yet beneath the bluster of belligerent broadsheet broadsides about public accountability and media morality, uncertainty hovers about exactly whose attention and action – beyond cable channel and box-set sales – is being courted.

Flouting film and current affairs conventions to question fundamental tenets of mainstream US discourse, this is surely a refreshing and magnificently sustained artwork. Yet it is restricted by working assumptions consistently privileging objectifying observers – the title itself and its eavesdropping metaphor underlining the nature of knowledge acquired. Even the most vividly well-rounded characters are perceived through the

policing prism, in terms of salience to identifying and solving ‘problems’ defined and acted upon by external others. So, however tangential to the drugs scene, neighbourhood residents only appear in that context – and myriad additional social and cultural interactions and dimensions are neglected, ruling out their own understandings, relative independence and collective potential. Whereas the filmmakers’ mission – like the authorities – renders the world intelligible in terms amenable to the agency allowed in their field, and thus the questionable binary “two Americas” firmly reinstates passive victims in traditional positions. The creators’ honest anger about the complacent indifference of power to the suffering and wasted human energy of millions is palpable. But so is nostalgia for a time before current trends in political economy when life was (or might have been) better – unmistakable in the affectionate tribute to old-time newspapermen; with union boss ‘Frank Sobotka’ in series 2 encapsulating the fantasy best: “You know what the trouble is? We used to make shit in this country; build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy’s pocket”. Whereas such dreams of national unity through social-democratic prosperity were yesterday’s illusions incubating today’s fiascos – *The Wire* equally, in the end, being ‘a cop show masquerading as a political tract’.

Throughout its storylines, thoughts of reform are commonly expressed in humble aspirations to decent behaviour, but also further up the ladder as exasperated functionaries try to marry rhetoric with effect. An underlying humanism – in stark contrast to *Red Riding* – posits originary benevolence and genuine interest in meeting social needs, all other things being equal. But the latter never holds – the exercise of domination intended specifically to prevent it – any such manoeuvres being nipped in the bud as soon as potential autonomy is noticed by superiors. Correspondingly, prospects for real change are tied exclusively to leading figures in the hierarchies, in the absence of collective grass-roots bonds forged in explicit opposition to the status quo rather than mirroring it – whether in the drugs game’s bloody adolescent sociobiology or *In The Loop*’s infantile sociolinguistic circularity. Pressure from below relies wholly on hitching to bureaucratic, corporate or electoral careers, with no communal activity with remotely political potential visible outside church and charity ‘NGOs’ plugged awkwardly into the gravy train. Unravelling the synergistic failure of the system by exposing exemplary travesties, as in *State of Play*, then not only spectacularly misses the point but inoculates ruling discourses with illusion of protection from the evils which are in fact intrinsic to their power. This possibility is at least hinted by the almost instant redundancy of *The Wire*’s titular investigations, even if its protagonists are given no wherewithal to react – beyond, that is, shrugs of the shoulders before returning to the serious narrow individualism of selfish concerns that the paradigms deployed to produce the series disproportionately concentrate on. No wonder Hogarth and Burns still resonate.

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#### Notes

1. Cited by Nick James in ‘Bloody Yorkshire’, *Sight & Sound*, March 2009.
2. David Simon, interview with Lauren Laverne, *Culture Show*, BBC 2, 15th July 2008.
3. And new Simon & Burns’ Blown Deadline Productions exploiting similar reportage-based strategies for fine-grained television serial fictions are *Generation Kill* (2008) about US marines in Iraq, and *Treme* (due to air in 2010) about local musicians in post-Katrina New Orleans.
4. David Simon, interviewed by Oliver Burkeman, *The Observer*, 28th March 2009.
5. *Culture Show*, see note 2.
6. ‘The Escalating Breakdown of Urban Society Across the US’, 6/9/08.