

The Real Broken Society

Tom Jennings

Beyond flurries of current affairs sound and fury, the regressive scale of the UK coalition government's austerity programme is clear. Massive cuts in state social spending posed as a balance to the banking sector bailout may marginally inconvenience the relatively well-off, but significantly accelerate the attack on the conditions of the working-class begun with Thatcherism and refined under New Labour. Withdrawal of welfare and support infrastructure risk destitution for millions facing punitive sanctions for avoiding starvation wages and quasi-slavery conditions in neoliberal workhouse society. Meanwhile social cleansing in housing and education will leave the respectable poor nowhere to go, their precarious positions propping up the service economy usurped by children of the new middle-classes trading in cultural capital accumulated during Blair's debt-fuelled consumer growth. And as intensifying proletarianisation and downsizing of insecure professions erodes petit-bourgeois security, status distinctions congenial to flexible affective labour represent one remaining bulwark against ruin.

Structural adjustment's pitiless downward pressure on the majority's living standards could conceivably threaten the prevailing commonsense of competitive individualism as preferable and inevitable. Yet the various strata targeted for increasingly intimate disciplining and value extraction remain segmented by market imperatives – 'good citizenship' demanding hysterical self-commodification and the infinite infantile acquisition of material trivia. But this collective psychosis can only masquerade as tolerable lifestyle if its corrosive existential consequences are mystified – accomplished most readily by externalising anxiety about the sustainability of the self and personal relations via the denigration of others. So the recalcitrant underclasses retain residual mass-cultural utility as cautionary tales – their projected vulgarity and irresponsible comportment exemplify an inability to properly adapt to whatever shifts in the privatised status quo promise quick profits for someone this year.

Mainstream moral fascism, forensically dissecting and punishing failure to thrive, is mirrored in Reality TV's gratuitous sadism. Humiliation heaped on willing supplicants subjected to shaming exhortation and judgement echoes the miserable dishonesty of alienating employment and institutional relationships. Trailblazing Cameron's 'Big Society', the sub-Darwinian lottery logic peaks in Channel 4's *The Secret Millionaire* – worthy survival under compassionate capitalism depends on fitting the shallow prejudices of charitable predators, with the majority left to rot. Throughout the genre, though, fashionable counselling-babble about inadequate bodily and interpersonal health conceals morbid fascination with regimenting women in traditional caring, nurturing and parenting roles. Myths and fairytales of a 'Victorian values' bourgeois nuclear unit assuage fears by way of reinforcing forlorn hopes for an advancement that has stalled – hence being benchmarks for contemporary gloss across popular documentary and dramatic entertainment. However, a range of recent, less commercially obsequious films buck the trend, scrutinising personal and family dysfunctions among the middle- and upper-classes – whose trials and tribulations it's perhaps timely to dwell on, as the Old Etonians cover up the failings of the rich by hammering the poor with renewed gusto. A brief survey below sketches some contours in these rather nebulous realms of cinematic endeavour.



I. Family Values

In Loco Parentis

Pungent purgatives for romantic fantasies of family integrity feature isolated couples and offspring whose complacent coherence, based on carefully cultivated codes of conduct, crumbles in the face of sundry real or imagined threats to self-sufficiency. Michael Haneke's typically vicious *Funny Games* (Austria 1997; remade in America in 2008) twists home invasion horror motifs in an escalating ballet of bland pleasantries between teenage interlopers and victims unable to adjust to the psychopathic translation of civilised manners. Elsewhere, contradictions of internal motivation, explicit rationalisation and external ramification are less simplistically Manichean. Lucia Puenzo's *XXY* (Argentina 2007) postulates a teenager's polysexuality as an abomination her guardians must exorcise, for her/his own good given society's intolerance, but the child's insistence on uncertain autonomy leaves their benevolent authority in tatters. Expanding manic protectiveness to surreal proportions, Ursula Meier's *Home* (Switzerland 2009) shatters a static rural idyll as a motorway opens on its doorstep. The adolescent daughter sensibly hits the road as mum, dad and her siblings breezeblock the cottage into a fortress repelling the outside world, whereupon they immediately start suffocating and sheepishly deconstruct their own handiwork. Yorgos Lanthimos' *Dogtooth* (Greece 2009) then balefully revives paternalistic omnipotence in a grotesque tragicomedy of ad hoc home miseducation, including nonsense language and forced incest, with self-harm the only sane rite of passage. Parallelwise, in Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (Denmark 2009) a liberal marriage literally self-destructs after an infant's accidental death, in a physical and emotional bloodbath of mutual recrimination and disgust.



Nuclear Family Fallout

If pretensions of kinship wellbeing readily implode in hermetically-sealed quarantine, neither do surrounding communities escape contamination from its malfunctioning idealisation. In Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (France 2005), videotapes of their stylish Paris home are delivered to affluent intellectuals and their twelve year-old son. The partnership unravels as they wrestle with memory, guilt and denial once the anonymous 'stalker' also shoots the husband's childhood home and a grubby high-rise flat – the current address of the son of his parents' domestic servants, banished to an orphanage when they were among hundreds of Algerian protestors killed by police. Exploring how history dovetails individual biography and social hierarchy, the film punctures the self-serving vanity of elite Western superiority – the mystery thriller structure matching audience puzzlement with the couple's efforts to conceal from themselves their psychic preponderance of evasion and hypocrisy. Infantile envy wrecking subaltern lives may seem a heavy-handed allegory, even with class and race hatred still fundamental to Eurocentric society. But emotional and cognitive patterns conducive to oppression are nurtured early in the egos and cultures of the established middle-classes, operating precisely through misrecognition and displacement cemented by rationalisation and aestheticisation. Haneke's nailing of the discreet karma of the bourgeoisie is, nevertheless, tangentially optimistic here. Though surreptitiously embedded in the narrative, the present younger generations' directly solidaristic rebellion exposes dissembling moral dispositions among elders whose comfort presupposes ignoring the appalling social roots of its constitution.

The *White Ribbon* (Germany 2009) finds the same writer-director resuming normal service, hubristically delving into the founding fallacies of twentieth-century barbarism but offering no redemption for benighted fruit of rotten ancestry. A feudal Prussian village's festering network of baronial condescension and cruelly austere burgerdom births a malevolent 1914 cohort of diversely resentful youngsters countering peremptory patriarchal corruption with murderous delinquency – with blame displaced by default onto long-suffering, if incipiently bolshy, local serfs. Immaculate black and white cinematography enhances a metaphorical condensation of conditions facilitating the rise of Nazism and its apparently seamless acceptance, but too much real historical texture is obliterated to convince. Conversely, *Babel* (USA 2006) overeggs the postmodern pudding, cherrypicking multiple international issues from the progressive zeitgeist. This third collaboration with writer Guillermo Arriaga concludes Alejandro González Iñárritu's

depiction of contemporary collisions of fate, from class divisions in *Mexico City* (Amores Perros, 2000) and suburban US ruminations on the meaning of existence (*21 Grams*, 2003) to a worldwide web of violent correlation. *Babel's* Berber herders are framed as terrorists when an American tourist is accidentally wounded, derailing her husband's attempt to salve her unhappiness, while back home their kids and illegal nanny fall foul of border police after attending a Mexican wedding. Elsewhere a well-off Tokyo teenage deaf-mute juggles frustrated sexuality, grief at her mother's suicide, and the neglectfulness of a father whose generosity, it transpires, originally set the story in motion.

Babel's deft manipulation of narrative fragments and jumbled timelines weaves love and family melodramas across the planet with the pointed MacGuffin of power from the barrel of a gun. Disparities of wealth and mobility determine both the scale of fulfilment realistically sought and the consequences of mistakes and misfortunes. So when subsistence lifestyle encounters Third World realpolitik, embryonic imaginings of a safer future are stillborn. Meanwhile, the neo-colonial service economy exhausts its bondservants in callous class apartheid, with the relatively affluent blind to the human costs of what they take for granted. Their self-obsession insulated by consumerism allows them neither to connect meaningfully with each other nor avoid trampling over the less fortunate they depend on. The miscommunication hinted in the title flows not from faulty cultural or linguistic translation, but the contradictions of underlying sociopolitical conceptual frameworks shaping comprehension and action. The characters' negotiations of corresponding institutional discourses which regulate lives and constrain potential nonetheless yield misery for rich and poor alike – with outcomes far starker for those whose interests are marginalised most. *Babel* may scarcely capture deep structures of domination radiating globally through social fabrics, but it does underscore that, beyond men's self-important posturing and decidedly unfunny games, the most poignant pressure-points devolve the onus onto women's labours maintaining bodies, souls and socialisation.

II. The Welfare of Queens

Fertility Rites and Wrongs

If breeding is a fundamental biosocial function of femininity, its primal mystique occasions febrile connections between resource control, cultivation and acculturation. Transcending elite bloodlines, nervousness around reproduction percolates down hierarchies of privilege, now prompting proliferating technical and discursive regulatory apparatuses. With the affluent increasingly experiencing the practical obstacle of difficulty conceiving, so viable biomass must be harvested from elsewhere – accomplished electively in Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are Alright* (USA 2010), whose enlightened lesbian moms share sperm donation. Their curious kids inconveniently reintroduce the originally anonymous passive male member into the household, destabilising its sedimentation into patriarchal order and unruly earthmotherhood – with resolution partly hingeing on the offhand dismissal of faithful subordinates whose distress isn't even noticed. Götz Spielmann's *Revanche* (Austria 2009), on the other hand, admirably balances a hapless lumpenprole's dangerous virility against the upright, uptight sterility generally strangling fulfilment all round.

However, vexatious lower-class surpluses of fecundity but fatal shortfalls in other forms of capital almost invariably precipitate unequal exchange – most evidently in Laurent Cantet's *Heading South* (France 2006), whose middle-aged female sex tourists mercilessly vampirise young



Haitian masculinity in a self-defeating addiction to ephemeral satisfaction. John Sayles' *Casa de los Babys* (USA 2003) similarly flays a bunch of middle-income Americans prospecting south of the border among those with no socio-economic option but to cash-in the fruit of their wombs. The primitively accumulating adopters neither acknowledge the trade's obscene ethics nor empathise with their benefactresses, so consumed are they by the magical promise of infantile possession. Ben Affleck's *Gone, Baby, Gone* (USA 2007) then poses even more baldly the dilemmas arising from differentially classed valuations of need and care, when borderline innercity mothers are clandestinely robbed by rogue public servants seeking their own domestic salvation.

Servicing the Domestic Economy

Even given material and cultural wherewithals securely in place, though, holding home and hearth productively together takes its toll. Treating mature order as mere veneer, Lucrecia Martel's depictions of the Argentinian provincial bourgeoisie see adults as essentially arrogant children, characterising in form and content their aimless anomie and compulsive moral confusion combined with unthinking diffidence and contempt towards the lower classes. *The Headless Woman* (2008) further explodes conservative pretensions of propriety, excavating fetid depths of family dynamics whose contradictions radiate outwards to overdetermine domination, with distraction and disavowal simultaneously facilitating class stratification's real violence and concealing its beneficiaries' responsibility. The titular middle-aged dentist anchors an extended tribe busy with the trivial trials and tribulations befitting their station, barely registering the army of indigenous minions doing the donkeywork. One day she fears she may have accidentally run over one of their youngsters in the rain. Horrified, she daren't go back to check, sinking into almost catatonic detachment about the damage possibly done – primarily to her flattering self-image. Still, the genteel everyday sheen scarcely suffers apart from her nearest and dearest closing ranks in assurance that the problem has gone away, despite not even existing in the first place – collusive reconciliation eventually being signalled by minor cosmetic renewal, and lo and behold, history is rewritten.

Bold technical disjunctions layer allusion and metaphor, with deliberately awkward framing, focus and camera movement obscuring crucial details to powerfully evoke fractured memory and perception. Flirtation with generic thriller conventions dissolves into pervasive dreamlike

anxiety as visual non-sequiturs highlight the dialogic banality and dissembling of milieu devotedly avoiding awareness. The ambient noise and incongruous pop soundtrack jar any seamless simulation of experience, forcing viewers to see through the eyes of an anti-heroine in abject disarray. Paradoxically, Martel's surgical precision stems from deep love for her family but hatred of its institutional prototype for societal structure, whereas vagaries of desire ruin individual and collective integrity and cohesion while promising liberation from the dead hand of civilisation as we know it. These dialectics resonate strongly with Argentina's trajectory – the murderous military Junta years whose horrors resist attention, through to current economic and social crises which once seemed liable to prompt revolution. Yet beyond parochial detail, light is undoubtedly shed on universal concerns – not least, the perennially fashionable refusal among middle-classes everywhere to acknowledge the profound political implications of their identity.

Two more South American tales purportedly prioritise insubordinate female perspectives in specifying their parasitisation. Sebastián Silva's *The Maid* (Chile 2009) intimately portrays a misanthropic housekeeper whose lifeblood drains in drudgery sustaining petulant employers. Meanwhile Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* (Peru 2008) pits indigenous endurance against civilised savagery – first neoconservatively in sexual atrocity during 1980s guerilla insurgencies, then neoliberally in the plunder of cultural inheritance. But the latter's capricious perpetrator is surely the director's alter-superego projecting a rapacious other. Moreover, both films' cheerful lower-class life, along with Silva's infinitely patient mistress, represent classic ruses displacing bad faith – the weight of the world's phantasmically rosy glow mitigating guilt while validating objectifying sentiment. No such palliative pathos punctuates Claire Denis' mordant *White Material* (France 2009), whose European plantation owner desperately rushes to extract a last harvest of West African coffee before civil war overruns her. Indentured locals give up the collaborative ghost en masse, her husband has jumped ship, and the son sinks into psychotic stupor – before fitfully rousing to join drug-addled child rebels routinely butchered by government forces whose leaders vie for remaining crumbs. Her imperial majesty thus left barren to face the karmic storm, the end-credit dedication – “To all the fearless young rascals” – nonetheless plants seeds of hope among catastrophe's progeny even if no nourishable grounds are intellectually identifiable on its biopolitical terrain.

III. A Poverty of Aspiration

Downwardly Mobile Makeovers

Fortunately for them, however, Western matriarchs need no longer persevere with patriarchal overdetermination, thanks to feminisms' erosion of male supremacist hegemony. With faultlines prised open in the combined and uneven development of liberal individualisation and commodity fetishism, further lines of flight become available to women of means to seek passionate independent self-realisation without shouldering burdens of guilt for the wreckage. But with newly sovereign selves under injunction to grow and flourish, the flypapered pedestal of the goddess loses its allure and madonna-whore trapdoors their purchase. Archaic romance trajectories then unravel, whereupon costume melodrama revisionisms reassert the last instance of capital frittered away from the commanding heights once libidinal investment refuses to valorise the same old straitjackets. Pascale Ferran's aseptic *Lady Chatterley* (France 2006) thus dilutes D.H. Lawrence's surrender to shameless



carnality, emphasising sensual mutualism in a liaison still ultimately foundering on rocks of proprietary and polite acceptability. Saul Dibb's *The Duchess* (UK 2008) similarly exploits Lady Di's postfeminist fairytragedy in a coffeetable biopic of her nineteenth century Devonshire precursor – complete with burlesque couture, uncourtly dalliance and tepid pseudopolitical dabbling. Back in the present, Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love* (Italy 2009) honours Antonioni and Visconti's wallowing in exquisite decadence, with a perfect nouveau riche wife plumping for middlebrow epicurean earthiness to abandon her ice-cold industrialist aristocrats just as they sell out to global speculators.

Affairs become even thornier as passage down class-structural snakes-and-ladders may tip miscreants into social oblivion rather than marginally less rarefied airs and graces – where pernicious double standards preserve men's prerogatives to control purse-strings and pursue promiscuous relations. These open secrets intelligibly populate entertainment genres pitched at pressurised middle-class women, whose 'polymorphous perversities' are judged far more punitively not least because, amidst the manic multitasking maintaining domestic machinery, serious peccadilloes are harder to hide. Worse,

indulging them accrues costs which threaten the whole inherently tenuous house of cards of serene status, undermining its ability to reproduce itself socially and materially – and thus tainted feminine goods represent occupational hazards for smug illusions of security demanding strict cultural policing. So intolerable conduct should take a battering in Roger Eyre's spiteful *Notes on a Scandal* (UK 2006), which instead strives to forgive a beautiful bohemian schoolteacher's paedophilia. This gymnastic moral contortion is achieved by excoriating her bitter and twisted spinster ally as a psychosocial leech barging into professional bastions but incapable of capitalising on coveted upward drift. The spectacularly differential denigration is compounded by angelic male innocence, unerringly reinforcing righteously inequitable battlelines of sex and station where the emotive force of shame cements respectability's rule.

Disrespect Agendas

Though the bourgeois edifice can survive mothers teetering over the cultural abyss, if somewhat depleting its haughty cachet, disillusionment with the alienating repercussions of recuperation can't be quashed indefinitely. Anne Fontaine's *Natalie* (France 2003) naughtily mocks the two-faced mythos of fidelity to the nuclear family's alms race when a high-powered matron turns private eye, hiring a presentable escort to prove suspected spousal philandery. But the mischievous temptress intuits from the tricks of her trade that disgust disguises desire. So she transgresses job descriptions and fabricates evidence for her employer's delectation, seducing her with erotic embroideries of her own prurient wishes. Fontaine wisely holds back from healing the resulting open wounds of class and sexuality – whereas Atom Egoyan's bloated remake, *Chloe* (USA 2009), slams the penthouse door shut before the whore can bolt. With pompous angst humourlessly misconstruing the source's subversive refusal of a traditionally sticky end for a femme fatale's attraction, he transforms the women's crossborder ambivalence into equalised frustrated yearnings for what the other is mistakenly assumed to safely possess. But this enlightened evenhandedness wishes away vastly unbalanced forces mustered in support – a repressed reality which returns in thoroughly reactionary restoration. Dangerous instability is doubly annihilated – tellingly, when the upstart arriviste turns her beady eye on the children – sacrificing both the stirring soul of the wife and its reflection in the broken body of the lover and her degraded lower feminine faculties.

Denis Dercourt's *The Page Turner* (France 2006) is another nubile aspirant sabotaging marriage's sanctity – born now of envious hatred rather than need, let alone playful gender-baiting. Her audition ruined by a visiting star's casual carelessness, a piano prodigy turns the tables years later insinuating herself as indispensable factotum. Sham adoring devotion fools the self-obsessed diva so successfully that she falls in love, whereupon her erstwhile paramour vanishes – in vitriol inverting the already ruined hopes of her humble family's investment in the future. That any creeping class-conscious promise of sociosexual intercourse can never be trusted, given the alien incomprehensibility of the harbingers, is thereby brought home once more. Nevertheless, its heroines occasionally genuinely burn sundry bridges of accrued familial, material and embodied distinction, irrespective of cost-benefit calculation. Catherine Corsini's *Leaving* (France 2008) slyly foregrounds the modern moneyed overconfidence that there is no alternative, contriving a bereft husband's cost-cutting coming back to haunt him as his wife escapes with the subcontracted handyman. A subsequent campaign of legal and financial attrition makes explicit the hostile instrumentality inherent in objectified relations miming mature realism which also catalysed her betrayal. The joyous fleshly intensity of the adultress in renewed youthful fire yields grim determination, but every turn of the bitter cuckold's credit-crunching screw inflicts vindictive

indignity for her audacity. With negotiable options negated and even contrite rapprochement intolerable, she chooses life as a fugitive murderer.

Lucia Puenzo's *The Fish Child* (Argentina 2009) comparably gestures at conflictually compulsive rites of passage, before morphing inexorably into another irreversible insurrection against affluence. A sullen daughter of a seedy Buenos Aires judge prepares elopement with a sexually exploited Paraguayan maidservant, but the latter's framing for his honour's execution prompts descent into overwrought noir and sex-slave jailbreak to salvage romance. The title's mythic Guarani guardian of dead children's spirits echoes everywhere – lamenting Argentina's specific state-sanctioned 'disappeared' as well as generic exiles to economic necessity; now extending to those relinquishing comfortable cushioning, plus all disappointed sophists of bourgeois order. With its imaginary societal institution irredeemably deathly – condensed in the sordid prison-industrial Oedipal complex the implicated magistrate threatened to expose – his family had itself already expired. Only structural nodality and worldly and cultural infrastructure ever gave it an approximation of life, but when those labouring low to animate it vacate the premises, along with the artistic goods the lovers filch to fund exodus, nothing of substance remains bar the stench. Moreover, the screenplay's apparently proletarian agent provocateur of universal lust herself actually originated in contrasting constellations of incestuous privilege – more poignantly deploring the tragic sins of paternal power, but no longer pretending to appreciate the positions of those who never harboured such vain hopes to be punctured.

IV. The Socio-Economic Crisis

Failures of Psycho-Social Cohesion

Unsurprisingly, children reared amidst such destructive patterns of intimate passion deeply internalise their elders' disaffection. Supposedly secure emotional boundaries and channels for cathexis deliver, at best, anxious dissatisfaction bequeathing confused fledgling egos guided by neither coherent models for interpersonal fantasy nor intelligible templates organising desire into agency. However, reliably banal economic flows nourishing vicissitudes of bodies and souls are more readily intuited – with a plethora of personality deviations deploying the self's flesh and blood adornment as manageable social capital, encouraged by media commodifications of callow youthful sexuality. So, reversing *American Beauty's* (Sam Mendes, USA 2000) parental regression to adolescence when the suburban family fractures, David Ross' disreputable *The Babysitters* (USA 2007) pursues its incestuous logic with high-school senior prostitutes tricking college funds from each other's fathers. This film's hopeless plea for orthodox Oedipality matches the dishonesty of British television's *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* (Lucy Prebble, 2007-10), whose happy high-class hooker lifestyle entrepreneurship conceals its real-life source's temporary pragmatics to pay tuition fees. Elsewhere, in more believably callous worlds, desperate contortions of sexual subjectification yield predictably despiriting results.

Somewhat superfluously, David Mackenzie's *Spread* and Steven Soderbergh's *The Girlfriend Experience* (both USA 2009) convey the self-defeating anaesthesia of personable young American gigolos and escorts exchanging material security for mechanical simulations of erotic intensity with surrogate parent clients – a process irrevocably spoiling any mutually meaningful or lasting relations outside of cynical manipulation. More intriguingly, in Guillermo Arriaga's overwrought *The Burning Plain* (USA 2008) a woman's self-harm manifest in perilous one night stands stems from childish anguish at her matricidal interruption of a clandestine affair – whereas a sex addict in Clarke Gregg's *Choke* (USA 2008) endlessly seeks climactic lack of affect after a manically exciting and unstable boyhood. But irrespective of the exotic or mundane specifics

of disturbance, hysterical efforts to square its circular intrapsychic arguments eventually exhaust motivation to persevere. Various means of escape then aim to rid the self of unbearable attachment – whether in isolated communion with idealised nature in Sean Penn’s *Into The Wild* (USA 2007), an upper-class pregnant junkie’s refusal of parental regeneration in Francois Ozon’s *The Refuge* (France 2009) or, in Rebecca Miller’s *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee* (USA 2009), the wholesale suppression of individuality as trophy wife.

Sadly the dynamics of hollow characters seeking impossible completion prevent them stewing in their own solipsistic juices, fanning out into threadbare fabrics of sociality with markedly more warp than weft. But the radical unknowability of others lights fuses of furious frustration whose tantrums explode childish romance – in cretinous designer paranoia in Doug Liman’s *Mr and Mrs Smith* (USA 2005) or more realistically restrained European cosmopolitanism in Maren Ade’s *Everyone Else* (Germany 2009). Alternatively, friendship networks bear brunts of shallow self-satisfied snobbery, from drearily vacuous teen melodramas and romcoms to tedious timeless middle-class enclaves blissfully detached from vulgar hardship substituting bitching about fashionable distinction for guts and bite – witness *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* or the *Four Weddings/Notting Hill/Bridget Jones* franchise splenetically trashed in Stephen Frears’ *Tamara Drewe* (UK 2010). In fact, no matter what fairytale sidetracks paper over the cracks – from timid hipster mysticism tapping magical supernatural power to any number of surreal serial thrillers, identity assassins and agents secret even from themselves – the old economy’s forces and government media men simply can’t put Humpty’s greedy frightened babies back together again; and therefore we all suffer the consequences.

Anti Social Bourgeois Orders

Rendering explicit neoliberal narcissism’s inexorable projection of self-hatred, a rich-kid house-party in Gael Garcia Bernal’s *Deficit* (Mexico 2007) degenerates into venal discord counterpointing the corrupt downfall of financier parents. Olly Blackburn’s *Donkey Punch* (UK 2007) then twists teen horror tropes, with sexual venture capital coming unstuck when stockbroker-belt scions lure onto daddy’s yacht package-tour lasses more worldly than anticipated. And if it’s symptomatic how the hard-won spoils of class war are risked for whimsical cheap thrills, Sidney Lumet’s *Before The Devil Knows You’re Dead* (USA 2007) turns the hatchet-job terminally inward – its botched smalltime heist a rancid family collapse whose offspring hyenas pick emotional, economic and bodily bones of hapless petit-bourgeois forebears. But despite tentatively prophesying late-capitalist nihilism’s universal disaster, such theatrical experiments rarely generalise circumscribed circumstances to entire dysfunctioning communities – as hard-boiled down in Michael Winterbottom’s *The Killer Inside Me* (USA 2010).

This adaptation of Jim Thompson’s 1952 novel trades dark literary interior monologue for vivid visualisation. Concealing raw hatred, Deputy Sheriff Lou Ford’s affably dim Deep-South demeanour discursively bludgeons everyone he encounters – thinly veiling narcissistic self-pity which evaporates when imagined slights threaten the grandiose paranoia typical of borderline syndromes. So, professional and personal entanglement with prostitute Joyce punctures his character armour, unleashing suppressed hostility and undermining fatally fragile boundaries in relation to childhood sweetheart Amy. Ford’s pathology stems from sadistic fathering in a miserable middle-class background, contextualising his sexual proclivities and modus operandi, but in mistaking cod-Freudian conceit for moral core Winterbottom expunges the author’s withering cultural commentary. For example, here’s the anti-hero’s rejoinder to a doomed patsy dubbing him fair and honest:

“We’re living in a funny world, kid, a peculiar



civilization. The police are playing crooks in it, and the crooks are doing police duty. The politicians are preachers, and the preachers are politicians ... The Bad People want us to have more dough, and the Good People are fighting to keep it from us. It’s not good for us ... If we all had all we wanted to eat, we’d crap too much. We’d have inflation in the toilet paper industry ... That’s about the size of some of the arguments I’ve heard” (Orion Books edition, 2002, p.105).

Adding that most avoid awareness of how screwed up things are by internalising rules of respectability and scapegoating non-conformists, Thompson plausibly accounts for particular horrors and hypocrisies entirely from serially homicidal sociopathic attitudes, yet ascribing equal culpability to biography and social institution in nurturing such outcomes.

The film’s glossy 1950s West Texas supplants Ford’s alienated understanding with transparent reality – spectacularising extreme transgression to ignore the inherently collusive nature of mainstream morality and continuity between exploitative societal hierarchy and individual monstrosity. Here, lurid exceptions masquerade among comforting norms, parroting the psychotic logic of detached compulsion which drives ‘freaks’ like Ford as well as other exemplary embodiments of capitalism’s congenital antisociality. The deaths of twinned femmes fatales are thus anatomised with morbid fascination but merit mere workmanlike paragraphs in the book illustrating macho prejudice – Joyce seeking power’s covert endorsement, risking expulsion by polite society which craves her; Amy demanding overt affirmation to avoid the former’s fate. Their killer’s conduct stands for patriarchal relations generally, where the sadomasochistic perversity of domination is reinforced through denial – desire being fatal because it must be repressed and displaced into partial, rigid pathways destined to frustrate and escalate. But with women’s passive complicity now explained as complementary personality defects, masculine control materialises as natural order – repeating the fetish’s psychological purpose and rewarding feminist complaints of simple misogyny. But Ford also models the constitutive camouflage of false self in class stratification, stifling offences to pious propriety which jeopardise the interests of the powerful. Closing the gap between his distorted apperceptions of his lovers and their own potential agendas arguably mirrors Thompson’s misanthropy, but his pessimism subtly pinpointed bourgeois society’s incapacity to reliably apprehend, care about, or benefit those at the bottom of its heap.

V. The Big Bad Society

Abstracting small-scale doldrums to wider world disorder, Robert Altman’s *Gosford Park* (USA 2000) indelicately overviews an English stately pastoral standing for the universe of Western incivility – like younger ensemble exponents Paul Thomas Anderson and Iñárritu, only patchily overcoming mannered modernist stylisation. Arrogant overreach also cripples Lars Von Trier’s faux-Brechtian *Dogville* and *Manderlay* (Denmark 2003 and 2006), creditably failing to entwine imperious ruling-class vanity and stubborn subaltern backwardness. Similarly, pretentious television dramas aspiring to literary novelistic ambit usually prefer pandering to power in mimicking epochal insight, while more trenchant critiques in *The Sopranos* (David Chase, USA 1999-2007) and *The Wire* (David Simon/Ed Burns, USA 2002-8) succumb to analogous strangleholds of tragic determinism and naturalistic fixation. At least *Red Riding* (Tony Grisoni, UK 2009) intractably dredges the obscene unconscious underbelly of mainstream morality facilitating Thatcherism’s

malice – perhaps glimpsing the ex-Soviet Bloc shock doctrine’s cannibalistic sex-slavery whose criminal inhumanity David Cronenberg’s *Eastern Promises* (UK 2007) magnifies. But obsessive negative nostalgia and defunct defences of heroic individuality preempt dialectics – yielding resigned fait accomplis prefiguring and rubberstamping renewed barbarism. So the present exploration concludes with a film conceived and executed well after the financial meltdown which supposedly changed everything, which also secretes within itself a germinal appreciation that another way is possible.

Juan José Campanella’s *The Secret In Their Eyes* (Argentina 2009) first flirts with derivative cop capers, as retired prosecutor’s assistant Benjamin reminisces about his mid-1970s drunken genius sidekick Pablo, wisecracking like Latin Starsky and Hutches battling the corrupt Buenos Aires justice system prior to dictatorship. Cheap and cheerful kitsch then darkens, cross-fertilising crime procedural, romance and political thriller to meditate on love and hate, guilt and regret – melodramatically contrasting passions and obsessions and their intimate effects where, despite awkward shifts of tone, the structural flexibility leaves many questions satisfactorily unanswered. Stressing the partners’ emotional and investigative synergy reflecting shared humble origins, flashbacks revisit a traumatic case – a raped and slaughtered newlywed whose bereft husband trusted their premature assurance of closure. They eventually identify the psychopath responsible, but empathetic solidarity sours with our hero’s shy infatuation with aristocratic high-flyer boss Irene, who equally hesitantly reciprocates – neither summoning the cojones to act. Benjamin’s departmental nemesis springs the killer from life sentence to death squad operations, whereupon his protests precipitate Pablo’s assassination. He escapes thanks to Irene’s contacts, and back in the present the couple belatedly shack up.

Social and official constraints on perception and comprehension here influence immediate action and retrospective assimilation in individual and collective biography, so this brief encounter with vicious, pernicious history might resonate with anyone’s shared suffering. But whose attitudes, situations and potentials count? The lower-class victims had no protection against brutal reality to allow guilty distance from the distress of others – whereas, like his quarry, Benjamin ‘got out of jail free’. Representing social democracy’s uneasy monopoly of professional middle- and progressive upper-classes, our paramours’ personal truth and reconciliation helps them imagine that everyone’s satisfactorily moved on. But liberal pretensions secured no justice – their entire shambolic careers as well as private lives, implicitly, wastes of time – stranding the grieving widower to deal alone with the repercussions, in a direct, robust, unmediated manner their worldviews cannot accommodate. Furthermore, specific historical circumstances expose another secret in this story’s eyes. Its brave new world of affectionate national partnership, settling unfinished business from a painful past, embarks in 1999. Yet within two years Argentina’s casino capitalism catastrophically crashed, much earlier than elsewhere, leaving millions of lives again in ruins. Wishing away the material foundations of social crisis thus simply increases the likelihood that projected solutions remain flimsy fantasies, destined to precipitate tragedy and farce – as well as critical acclaim, misreading the fluffy denouement’s red-herring as redemptive resolution. Unless, that is, ordinary folk forgo mourning the inability of their ‘bettters’ to safeguard their lifeworlds, and take it upon themselves together to hold the future to account.

www.tomjennings.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk

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