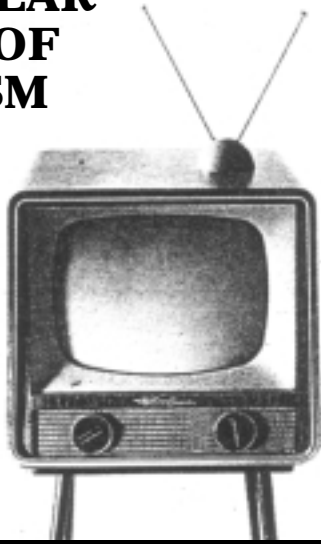


THE POPULAR CULTURE OF LIBERALISM

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DAVID GRAHAM



The discussion about contemporary culture has been pervaded by the notion that it is saturated with “bourgeois” or capitalist values, either directly imposed by media owners, or unconsciously reflecting the dominance of a capitalist mode of production.

“Bourgeois” is a tricky word, defined by a series of historical snapshots of other cultures in other phases. I find it a difficult word to apply to the present.

A more moderate and more cautious group of (mainly) academics speak of “corporate bias” and confine their attention to news and current affairs media, where it is easy to demonstrate the overarching influence of the Westminster “consensus”, of establishment power and of opinion management by the corporate state. This group has nothing to say about popular non-news programmes, and would find it difficult to extend this analysis to them.

By “popular culture” I mean a culture that is mainly, now, a TV culture, and a culture shared by certain English speaking countries. There is an incredible range of work in this portmanteau, and it will be easy to contradict any generalization I make in this article.

I disagree completely with the view expressed in the first paragraph. I believe that our popular media explicitly celebrate and explore “liberal” values. And “liberal” doesn’t mean “bourgeois” and it doesn’t mean “capitalist”.

A PERSONAL MORALITY

Let me begin with the seminal and brilliant piece of cultural criticism, Raymond Barthes’ essay called “The World of Wrestling”.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

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I was fascinated by wrestling on TV before I read Barthes and used, with some embarrassment, to watch it on Saturday afternoons. This went on for about a year. After a while I realized that the crucial event was a match between a good man and a bad man, and that the crucial moment was reached when the good man, under terrific provocation, was permitted to break the rules and revenge himself on the bad man who had, of course, been breaking the rules all along.

In fact the “rules” of wrestling are somewhat flimsy and unreliable, epitomized by ropes which do not contain the fight and can indeed be a way of escaping justice. And a referee who frequently loses control and is often fooled or deceived.

It took Barthes to define for me the quality of the drama I was watching. He described a wrestling match as “nothing but the popular and age-old image of the perfect intelligibility of reality”. But what is the “reality” that is made “intelligible”? The reality of a personal morality. A wrestling match dramatizes the moment when an individual, fired by a sense of “natural justice”, acts from a sense of personal right and is justified. In other words there is a morality that is higher than the “rules” and it justifies actions that the rules don’t permit.

Popular notions of right and wrong are often referred to disparagingly as the “baggage” of popular drama. Sometimes it’s stronger than that. Here’s Pauline Kael writing about *Dirty Harry*.

“In the action genre it’s easier — and more fun — to treat crime in a medieval way, as evil, without specific causes or background ... fascist medievalism has a fairy-tale appeal.”

But do words like “fascist” or “medieval”, which trip so easily off the tongue, really fit? Let’s look at the current state of opinion on capital punishment, something which has been repeatedly tested. Polls show that most people support capital punishment because they think murder should be punished by death (a moral notion). However, this view is not static. There has been a shift in recent years towards a preference for painless execution. Moreover a lot of people are hesitant about implementing their views because of their lack of confidence in our court system.

Middle-class opinion-formers have missed the point of all this, since they tend to think the argument should hinge on whether or not deterrence works (a pragmatic notion). I adduce all this to show that a popular opinion, which some would call “fascist” or “medieval”, is quite complex and is evolving.

In Pauline Kael’s view, then, the “intelligibility” of a wrestling match is “fascist” or reactionary. But let’s look at the question another way. A personal morality enables me to make my mind up and act. It tells me what to do, without forcing me to refer upwards. It liberates me from dependence. This freedom is what is celebrated in a wrestling match. A person who adopts a traditional or conventional morality and adapts it by experience or new knowledge is providing a basis for personal choices. The wrestling match is particularly joyous when goodness is rewarded. But as the weakness and arbitrariness of the “rules” imply, the world is not, in a general sense, a place where a good person is safe. “Evil”, as Barthes says, is “the natural climate of wrestling”, and the environment of popular culture is one where the “rules” do not protect you completely and where evil is prevalent. This upsets intellectuals who believe they can bring our social environment under rational control. Consequently intellectuals presume that the violence of popular culture is a celebration of disorder and anarchy, or a brutalist enjoyment of suffering. This is an error.

THE BATTLE BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG

The political achievement which is valued most by ordinary people and by our popular culture is, I guess, stability. Perhaps one of the answers to the puzzlement occasioned by the fact that our state system does badly by every measure economists and sociologists use, yet still gets a high level of public support, is that it has delivered stability in a turbulent century. Stability allows ordinary people to get on with their own lives and accumulate personal possessions. Yet here we encounter the great paradox of our time, a paradox enacted in a thousand ways: personal liberty (epitomized, for instance, by a just man’s revenge) and political stability are, in some

respects, opposed. Evil is seen, in popular drama, partly as something that just exists and partly as something caused by the tension between these two desirable values. People generally don't believe evil can be demolished, and accept that "freedom" has a price.

Most of us are happier when we externalize these moral questions, referring to the issue as "law and order" which has a satisfying administrative content. The archetypal political document of the twentieth century is the Western. Here the "rules" are not so much tricky and obscure as just temporarily non-existent, making the frontier a paradigm for a liberal, open, non-authoritarian society, with its consequent risks and benefits. In every Western the good guys and the bad guys slug it out. With the sheriff's badge not counting for much, law and order is maintained by a combination of right values, physical courage and skill.

The "violence" of popular culture is a battle between right and wrong that sends us up to bed at night thanking our lucky stars that the forces of good keep winning ... which certainly doesn't exclude the possibility that some programmes — or some viewers — have quite different intentions. What we miss if we are preoccupied with the violence is the incredible range of nuance in the ways by which morality is upheld in the crime series, which now seems to have taken over from the Western. In an essay called *The Comedy of Public Safety*, David Marc refers to two openings, *Dragnet* first:

Pan of Los Angeles Harbour

Friday (voice over): "This is the city — Los Angeles. More cargo is handled by its piers than any other port on the Pacific coast. Sometimes people steal some of it. That's where I come in. I carry a badge."

Music, full screen close up of L.A.P.D. badge.

Now *Rockford*:

Pan of abandoned solitaire game on cluttered table.

Telephone answering machine (voice over): "Hello, Rockford? This is Acme One-Day Martinizing. If you don't pick up your shirts by Wednesday afternoon, 5.00 p.m., they will be donated to a reputable charity."

Music: Synthesizer plays *The Rockford Files*.

Shot, from driver's seat, of freeway overpass.

Friday and Rockford are both protecting the classical liberal values of freedom from force or fraud, protection of property and security of contract. In the USA private detectives have been mythologized into a freelance good and evil squad. People know they don't really exist any more than the A-Team or the Incredible Hulk. In real life law and order is more fragile and more problematic ...

THE SKILLS OF THE PEOPLE

In Britain, where evil is portrayed as more obscurely and deeply rooted, many crime series have an explicitly subversive content. Morality resides in tough, hardnosed Sweenies. The pragmatists — university educated, fast-stream, smart-alecs — are not to be trusted. Sweeny goes on about "fancy lawyers" who'll "screw you up like a fag packet" and who can afford fancy holidays when he only gets a fortnight in Eastbourne. Such series see the world from the eyeline of the largest social groups in our society. Bodey and Doyle in *The Professionals* are archetypal C2s or blue collar workers. They're the people who do the dirty or dangerous jobs - and are good at it - for bosses who are inscrutable and unreliable, except for the odd one who comes down to the shop floor. The ability to shoot straight or give a karate chop becomes a shorthand for the skills that all defenders of good causes cannot afford to neglect, as well as a code for the multiple separate skills of people who use their hands in their work.

Most British reforming movements, as E. P. Thompson makes clear in *The Making of the English Working Classes*, have been about the right to hold property without interference — from nobles, from the taxman, or from an intemperate employer. The British trade union movement was fashioned by artisan activists nourished on Tom Paine. That is why the term "bourgeois" means not a lot when we talk about the dominant themes of our popular culture.

Our popular culture has no place for the larger administrative or economic units which preoccupy the intelligensia. The largest employer in *Coronation Street* is Mike Baldwin's factory. No GEC, no British Gas, not even a town hall. Large organizations, nationalized industries, the caring professions (except for doctors, nurses and firemen), experts ... all are absent from large swathes of our popular culture. Why does the "mythology" of the soap (the exception is *Brookside*) exclude large organizations, or what J. K. Galbraith called the "technostructure".

Our soap operas are today's samplers, primers of morality to help people make up their minds and do the best thing. In *Crossroads* a pretty girl gets an offer from a man who says he runs a modelling agency. Is he on the level? Should Deidre go off with Mike Baldwin? Should I go to University and leave my boyfriend behind, asks the girl in *Brookside*? Michele is pregnant: what are we going to do? As we are being constantly reminded, you have to answer those questions, yourself. That's freedom. It's up to you in the end, but with luck you've got a family, and trusted friends, and an attentive soap to help you down the road. Worries about the durability of this support system do not seem to make the social services more attractive. And what advice can the "techno-structure" offer.

THE SUBVERSIVENESS OF CHRISTIANITY

Let me end with a more off-the-wall notion. The values of our popular programmes are close to the values of the most popular works of all time, the synoptic gospels written by Matthew, Mark and Luke. I go along with the theory that the historical Jesus was a religious nationalist, executed by the Romans for what they regarded as subversive activities. The gospels are versions of earlier documents, rewritten by Greek speaking Christians from the larger cities of the empire, after AD70 when Jerusalem was destroyed, the Jewish branch of the Christian Church wiped out, and huge anti-Jewish triumph celebrated in Rome. From this point the association of Christianity with a Jewish activist was positively dangerous, and probably distasteful. The gospels were rewritten by white-collar Greeks.

Out of this synthesis of two powerful traditions — one Jewish, one Hellenic — came a religion that was right for the developed Roman world. The revolutionary Jesus gets transmuted into the radical Jesus, contemptuous of the observance of mere forms, promoting an accessible personal morality. Greek-speaking *literati* had no interest in seeing the empire collapse, but they no doubt felt alienated, disliking the imperial politicians, resenting official Roman religion. Jesus' tirade against the Pharisees and Saducees and their ritual observances, originally motivated by the fact that they cooperated with the Romans, was converted into a coded attack on another official religion too dangerous to specify. Christianity has, written into its genes, this tension between personal and official values. A recent writer called the traditional family "subversive" because it reaches its own view and resists opinion management from above. The Jesus story gives us the active tense of that notion.

Am I saying our popular culture is a Christian culture? Certainly not. I'm saying it's a moral culture, it's a liberal culture and that it supports and eulogizes certain values. Yet at its heart is a huge and pervasive anxiety about the stability of a modern state and its value systems. That anxiety is reflected in what people loosely call the "violence" of popular culture. The twentieth century is momentarily different from any period that came before it, and while some may like to feel they understand our times, our popular culture is more honest, addressing a huge and anxious question about the future history of our civilization, our political destiny. "Whither is it leading us?", asked Jose Ortega y Gasset in *The Revolt of the Masses*. "Is it an absolute evil or a possible good? There it is, colossal, astride our times like a giant, a cosmic note of interrogation, always of uncertain shape, with something in it of the guillotine or the gallows, but also with something that strives to round itself into a triumphal arch."

Who dares to say he knows better than that? In the narrower confines of the present, however, I dare to say that our popular culture is a version of our liberal heritage. I wait for brickbats.