

Hey, Jimmy

Peter Naylor

Over the years we have become accustomed to appalling bearded ex-teachers passing themselves off as the voice of the proletariat by penning supposedly realistic plays and films that only add to the embarrassment of Liverpool's long suffering populace. Inexplicably, even sane friends of mine have been known to treat Jimmy McGovern as a special case, some offering the opinion that he is somehow 'alright'. In my opinion he is the equivalent of John Prescott; he is the man people who don't want to admit the truth cling to. But, like the lovable deputy PM, he is deep down 'one more whore at the capitalist gangbang', as Bill Hicks put it. Let us examine McGovern's record.

That he started out at *Brookside* is probably enough to condemn him, but we can all make mistakes in our early years. He was involved in transforming Bobby Grant from a principled trade unionist into a misogynist caricature who cared for nobody but himself when his wife got raped. He also made that scab Billy Corkhill into a lovely feller who ended up snaffling Bobby's bird. None of this was anti trade union of course, Jimmy was only breaking new dramatic ground by questioning old certainties and challenging stereotypical caricatures. By painting the scab as a lovable family man and the trade unionist as uncaring and absorbed by the union. Very innovative I'm sure.

However it was during the highly praised *Cracker* that the first serious doubts about McGovern surfaced. As a series, its acclaim has always baffled me. Pseudo-psychiatry and a large girthed man being chased by an unfeasible number of gals couldn't disguise the fact that it was just one more cop show. What was more revealing was what it told us about the writer.

One story line involved a black man who was a rapist—never one to deal in stereotypes, Jimmy—who at one point tells the assembled white policemen that their worst nightmare is their wife being raped by a black man. This hit home with our white brethren who had clearly been troubled by just such a worry. Now, maybe I'm wrong or different but in ten years of marriage it has never occurred to me to entertain this notion. In McGovern speak, this sort of rubbish is known as confronting our demons. In reality it is just a regurgitation of hoary old myths and stereotypes. It reveals McGovern as a man who is wracked with guilt about his own bigotry, but has found a way of making a small fortune out of it. A recent interview in *Esquire* saw lovable Jimmy pissed and letting slip one or seven anti semitic remarks to a clearly frightened woman interviewer.

Crime number two in *Cracker* was the story of the Hillsborough victim. Leaving aside the fact that Robert Carlyle should have been nominated for the Nerys Hughes services to the Liverpool accent award, this set of programmes was full of even more dangerous nonsense. Carlyle has been at Hillsborough and still suffers from the trauma. One day he's going home from work and an Asian shopkeeper won't let him off with ten pence till later. Carlyle does what everyone who survived Hillsborough would do, goes home, shaves his head, gets a knife and stabs the shopkeeper to death and makes it look like a racist murder. But it's not racist, cos Jimmy's not like that and so Carlyle tells the shopkeeper that he is being murdered because he's a capitalist. Carlyle then broods about Hillsborough, sings Liverpool songs to the wrong tune on top of buses and kills some more people. But because he's a good socialist he only kills people who deserve it. The whole series

finishes with the cheap payoff of a tabloid journalist who wrote lies about Hillsborough getting blown up by a letter bomb from Carlyle.

Again McGovern tells us more about himself than he intends. Instead of questioning why no Hillsborough survivors have turned into mass murderers, or what it is about socialists' view of humanity that seems to stop them becoming serial killers, Jimmy merely sees the absence of these things from society as a gap in the market, no-one till him was clever enough to think of it. His complete misunderstanding of the people he's writing about comes through more in this set of programmes than in any other. Hillsborough, the drama, played an important role in highlighting the issues around the continuing denial of justice to the families. But I don't think you would go far wrong if you saw the whole thing as a huge act of contrition for the *Cracker* fiasco.

Recently McGovern has collaborated with some ex-dockers and friends to write the minimalistically titled *Dockers*. Typically and arrogantly, Jimmy insisted that a scab had to be a central character and that he had to be 'lovable'. This news was delivered to the dockers by Jimmy with all the gravitas of Moses descending from that mountain with a few rules. But why does the scab have to be lovable? It's always possible that one or two scabs in history have been quite nice to their kids, but the vast majority are despicable twats. However Jimmy's a groundbreaker and an innovator, so the scab gets to be played by the only decent actor in the entire film—are there no actors who are actually from Liverpool?—and the trade unionist gets to treat his wife like shit. Haven't we heard this somewhere before? To suggest that the *Dockers* film would have been less of a drama without the addition of the already well overstated world view of the scab says a lot about McGovern's approach. And given that he is seen as radical it says even more about tv and film drama in general.

While it is relatively easy to pick holes in McGovern's films, he is often defended on the grounds that 'he gets things done' or that 'he raises issues nobody else will touch'. Both of these things are true as far as television is concerned, but surely that is a reason to condemn television rather than a feather in Jimmy's cap. And just because he tells stories that at least include a radical working class point of view, does that elevate him and his work above criticism? Are we to be grateful that the powers-that-be allow us a fleeting and shallow amount of exposure and not kick up a fuss?

Part of the problem arises from the fact that, while Jimmy may include radical subject matter in his scripts, they are contained within an entirely conventional framework. Thus he cannot tell a story from only one side for that is not 'drama'. This willingness of allegedly radical writers to accept that there are certain immutable principles to writing drama is profoundly depressing. It is also dangerous. It has been widely reported that McGovern's next project is to be a film based on the events of Bloody Sunday in Derry. Following on from his insistence on including a lovable scab in *Dockers*, will there have to be a lovable squaddie in the Bloody Sunday film? Will the logic run that it is not 'drama' if we do not see two worlds collide? I fear that the answer to both questions will be yes.

It is perfectly possible—I would say vital—to make a film entirely from within the Bogside. The debates and discussions within that community at

that time—against the backdrop of the Battle of the Bogside you had questions about the role of the state; the logistics of urban guerrilla warfare; self organisation of policing, welfare and social provision; links with other liberation movements etc etc carried on at a high level and leading to immediate practical action; as well there was the generational divide over rioting, the fact that we were only two years on from the troops being welcomed etc.—are more than sufficient as subject matter and as an audience we should be forced to face the actions of the British Army on the day with the same degree of bewilderment and unpreparedness as the people on the march did. There is no need to restate the Army's view of the day, and even if there was it is surely not the role of a radical dramatist working with families of the victims of Army terror to do so.

This debate is by no means confined to drama, the tyranny of balance pervades television and infects documentary making even more. But of course the balance demanded is selective. A documentary on victims of crime is not required to be balanced by an interview with a burglar or mugger; documentaries on the financial system are not required to present us with the human casualties of stock market fluctuations; a film on child sex abuse need not bother interviewing a paedophile. So if balance is optional and negotiable, what's wrong with us negotiating it from our side. What's wrong with excluding the viewpoints of the police, the judiciary, big business and other over-represented bodies from drama and documentary depictions of working class life and struggle?

Myself and others made a series last year for Granada television called *Tales From The Riverbank*. The first point we made in the treatment for that series was that there would be no balance, that it was unnecessary given the volume of negative, anti-working class coverage of Liverpool's history over the years. The series was essentially a working class history of Liverpool over the last forty years. It was an unashamedly rank and file, bottom up history that contained no balancing interviews on any issue; riots, rent strikes, strikes and council rebellions included. If a tiny independent company in Liverpool can do that, how much easier would it be for a bankable 'name' script writer? And how liberating would it be for others to have successful examples of unashamedly biased films to point to as precedents.

All film making, documentary and drama, is authored. All script writing is biased. Until film makers, screen writers and others consciously acknowledge this and start to question and experiment with the fundamentals of the grammar and narrative voice of film, along the lines of James Kelman's seismic shifts in literature, we will remain mired in the current situation where attempts to make 'balanced' films lead to the more or less conscious adoption of the prevailing ideology.

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Guttersnipe* magazine.



Jimmy McGovern