

Corona Blues

by Fergus Downie



'Suddenly men in black were seen on the building and gunfire rang out'.

As news commentary went, to a 9-year-old it was bracing particularly when we had been steeling ourselves for the mind-numbing tedium of the World Snooker Finals. I can't stand the sport but like all impractical men I've always been fascinated by master craftsmen, even if their craft was to shoot multicoloured balls into pockets in front of rapt and patient audiences permanently on the brink of inexplicable excitement. On this occasion though even Steve Davis a man with so ennui inspiring a void for a personality he had a kind of default charisma, could not complete with the finale to the Iranian embassy siege. When Margaret Thatcher insisted it was filmed live, displacement was total. In the grand scheme of things, not quite Entebbe, but kosher enough to make bad men nervous. I only reminisce now as after 4 weeks working from home I have more than enough time to do so and my recommendations on

YouTube (I am not completely vulgar – other recommendations are ‘Alabama bass pond adds blue gill’ and ‘Man feeds shad to blind bass’) give me a feast for bad taste. After the real thing some exceptionally bad (and enjoyable) films followed but Lewis Collins running around in flares, dagger collared shirt and diligently saving assorted Americans generals from armed rich German brats looks positively dignified compared to the soft porn churned out in cyberspace which pullulates with titillating uploads of death condensed into manageable clips for short attention spans. It’s a morbid diversion but it’s ‘human all too human’ nonetheless, and in an age which has stripped away all the fine drapery and ritual distance, the desecration of taste has got much worse. There is something to be said for not letting too much daylight enter onto these things. War and combat is a bit like porn – it depicts some necessary subject matter, but you’ll exhaust yourself and go blind if you take it that seriously. Stylising it with some camp and bad acting keeps a necessary distance. We live in a less violent age, but the voyeurism increases in inverse proportion and I cannot be the only one to notice this race to the bottom. The notorious Hitler channel, a long tedious interlude between shark documentaries and unlikely scenarios of fights between polar bears and tigers, is a wretched example of this mental slumming and what’s worse is the inclination to manufacture ersatz emotions.

Compare any episode of this pub philosopher fare with The World at War and Laurence Olivier translating the words of a German NCO in the Ukraine as peasants, alternately sullen or weeping, are separated in preparation for an unspoken end or a camera shot of a stream of German women with black eyes and bloody lips heading west and you can appreciate the decline in taste. He didn’t have to spell it all out and the silence evoked the quiet awkward pity any decent person would feel. It’s a declining art because the audience has declined and here I’m afraid the coronavirus roll call of woe has signed the death warrant of all dignity. It’s hard to say this. At a

time like this the urge to be quiet is overwhelming particularly when staying at home and nipping out for the heroism of orchestrated clapping is all we're expected to do. This is war millennial style and what's worse is all the unearned saccharine emotion.

For a washed-up nation the NHS has become a totem of unearned emotion and pride. It's not particularly good, truth be told, but worshiping it is the lowest common denominator virtue for people who think caring is a magical quality (the Iranian embassy siege segway to this missive was rooted in a nauseating tabloid article titled 'Who Cares Wins') that somehow resides in a bureaucracy of compassion that we can all play a part in by murmuring insincere platitudes. Brown in an unwittingly profound moment thought Britishness was epitomised in the NHS. How right he was. We're worshiping our inner sick patient. No one who actually uses it can with an honest breath say it remotely measures up, and what in any case is so particularly virtuous about doctors doing their job when shop workers, denied by snooty journalists the opportunity to accuse the Tories of genocide, carry on with quiet humour and dignity for eight pounds an hour.

It's the edifying converse equivalent of paedophile hating (we can at least make a moral judgement there) but in actual fact the underlying emotion can turn ugly at any time. Critical thought it seems is anathema at such times and Trevor Kavanagh the only heavyweight journalist apart from Peter Hitchens to question the insanity, has been received with a tide of semi-literate abuse for questioning the price of our lockdown. The silence from the left leaning outlets meanwhile has been deafening and it is all the more striking when one considers the conspiracy theories that usually abound in those quarters (the breathless seriousness with which a paedophile network in the Houses of Parliament was investigated was a new low by feral broadsheets).

All of which raises an uncomfortable question.

Four weeks ago Boris Johnson was on course to stick with the Swedish option and strike a sober balance between freedom and hygiene, after a widely ridiculed scientific expert predicted up to half a million corpses he has dutifully set about pauperising us all amidst pious incantations to the wonder of the world.

Scientists barely know how we save a life, but it is beyond doubt they cannot tell us it's value. The cure in any case is already looking worse than the disease. Much pious talk has been had about 'pulling together' and even Johnson has breathed life into a pathetic straw man. The Big Society has seemingly found its meaning long after David Cameron trailed this banality to deadened apathy. If it is to be found in these gormless parades of happy clappers God save us from it. I couldn't alas summon the cynicism, especially as its combined with a certain twitching nastiness. The left have been largely silent on police officers interrogating working class people on the contents of their shopping baskets, and whereas yesterday this fragment of the lumpenproletariat were racist overseers of the capitalist state they now have found novel respectability as an instrument for disciplining the great Brexit voting unwashed. I don't like mocking uniforms that guard us whilst we sleep but they've been asleep on the job for a while and Americans can barely imagine how rude and officious British police officers are and there is something sinister about the conspicuous diligence with which they have risen to their new role, particularly when real unsung heroes don't yet get their garlands. My Binmen after all came out as usual and did their job, a lot more useful than mine, and I spared them the condescension of bourgeoisie compassion. They are better men, so I told them and went inside for some inner struggle.