

Politics of decency

Michael Vestey

The film industry, like the media generally, tends to attract people on the left of centre, some anxious to peddle their beliefs, others merely and instinctively slanting it their way on the assumption that everybody thinks like them except for some rednecks out there in the strange world of Middle England, with which they are unfamiliar. So it was no surprise to hear a chorus of lefties in *Movies with a Message* on Radio Four this week (Sunday, repeated Wednesday) praising Labour's 1944 propaganda film about the wonders of the coming welfare state. Encouraged by the COI, the Central Office of Information as it then was, the socialist Humphrey Jennings and fellow socialist novelist E.M. Forster made *Diary For Timothy*, a schmaltzy but remarkably effective plug for post-war welfare.

In the first of a three-part series, the film-maker David Puttnam, now a Labour peer, pointed out that, after the first world war, the 'Homes Fit For Heroes' for returning soldiers and their families failed to materialise as Britain faced the Depression. By the second world war, expectations of better housing, education and healthcare were higher, and there's no doubt the Jennings film caught the mood of the time. It was made in the form of a diary to a baby called Timothy and was full of clever emotional stuff about how there should be a better future for the child — Blairite way before its time — and this was how it should be done. Listening to the clips played in this programme, it comes across as extraordinary and shameless political propaganda and even Puttnam thought it had crossed the 'fine line' between information and propaganda.

Lord (Richard) Attenborough thought Jennings was 'uniquely gifted'; he had watched him edit film and had been inspired by him. The social historian Professor Peter Hennessy recalled that it was Aneurin Bevan who told Barbara Castle at the time to 'look into the perambulators'; that was what the welfare state was for, the children of the future: 'The politics of decency,' explained Hennessy. 'Everybody has the right to a decent home, a decent education, decent respect and treatment, and that word decency was the key word of the 1940s.' You certainly find it used a lot in George Orwell's essays and journalism. Simon Heffer offered a more sober view that *Diary For Timothy* was a script written by the new governing class. 'They made this film to a definite socialist

agenda, which very much caught the spirit of the time.' Not since 1832 — the Reform Bill, I guess he meant — had there been an example of idealism suffocating reality. There's no doubt that the Jennings film was hugely influential in post-war cinema, leading to the kitchen-sink plays and films of the late 1950s in which working-class characters weren't patronised and made to look 'lowly, comic figures', as the film historian Sir Christopher Frayling put it.

Of course we've gone from the welfare state to the Labour government's client state, and by the late 1950s a certain disillusionment with the wonderful workers was beginning to set in, as Puttnam examines in this Sunday's programme about the Boulting brothers' film *I'm All Right Jack*, with Peter Sellers as the Stalinist union activist Fred Kite, who was actually based on a shop steward at Denham studios. Roy and John Boulting were well placed to know about union intransigence as the unions were largely responsible for wrecking the British film industry. Attenborough wasn't convinced that the film was just an anti-union attack, though. As he recalled, the Boulting brothers were anti-authority and that included union leaders as well as the establishment. It seems astonishing now but, according to Frayling, among the taboo subjects of the time — sex and the monarchy — was also labour relations, and the British Board of Film Censors wouldn't allow any films that touched raw nerves, so *I'm All Right Jack* was quite a breakthrough.

Heffer thought the film captured the anxieties about Britain's economic under-performance and increasing industrial conflict, and although it was funny it was also depressing, a monument to cynicism, as he



'A great shame... In his day he was one of Britain's greatest juggling acts.'

put it; the workers were portrayed as feckless, lazy and dishonest, the management as corrupt, self-serving and lazy. The message that came across was one of hopelessness. As it happens, the situation was indeed pretty hopeless, and it took more than 20 years of union strife for the Thatcher government finally to deal with it. The last programme looks at Ken Loach's pro-IRA film *Hidden Agenda*, a truly spectacular example of the crazed self-delusion of a film director.

Television

Festive viewing

James Delingpole

I can't remember a Christmas where I watched so little Christmas TV as this one, which is a shame in a way, because I do think that mammoth sessions in front of the box are the key to feeling truly Christmassy. Going to church helps, too, obviously, but it's never quite enough. The only way you're ever going to trick your mind into conjuring up an approximation of all those Christmases you think you remember from childhood where cheery robins perched on snowy gateposts, the turkey breasts were never dry and the presents were always as exciting as you'd hoped they'd be is by brainwashing yourself with constant exposure to Christmas specials and Christmas movies and Christmas adverts, all lying sweetly about how Christmas ought to be instead of how boring it is.

What I did instead, mostly, was play bridge with our evil-lawyer bridge friends Helen and John down the road. I'm still buzzing from the six spades contract I made last night, which wasn't one of those ones that plays itself — I had to do clever things like work out how to dump my losing singleton, etc. Are there any TV programmes I'd sacrifice a game of bridge for? *The Sopranos*, *Das Boot*, *Band of Brothers* — but since none of them was on the issue didn't arise. You may notice that *Rome* (BBC2, Wednesday) isn't on this list. That's because I now realise it's utter pants and if it weren't for the lesbian sex scenes, Polly Walker and the regular scenes of satisfying ultraviolence I would have given it up weeks ago.

My Christmas TV-watching strategy comprised mainly forcing my children to watch films I felt they ought to enjoy, even though of course all they really wanted to watch were those hyperkinetic Japanese cartoons that psychologist Dr Aric Sigman tells us are cut at a pace especially well-g geared to frying a child's brain. Trying to get your kids to sit in front of *The Railway*

Children (ITV1, Christmas Day) instead is like trying to tell a crack addict: 'It's OK. I promise you'll get just as big a buzz from this delicious cup of coffee.'

The Railway Children. Yes, I too never fail to crack up during that glorious final scene when Jenny Agutter sees her long-lost Daddy materialising from the steam. But what I'd forgotten was just how thin the rest is. There's the other famous scene where they avert a rail disaster by waving their conveniently red petticoats. But otherwise it's just a string of fairly ho-hum non-sequitur incidents, which make me wonder whether the film really deserves its classic reputation.

I enjoyed the 1993 film adaptation *The Secret Garden* (BBC1, Christmas Eve) more, apart from the scene where, among all the cute woodland creatures gathered in the garden, you see a verminous grey squirrel. Surely, in Yorkshire, it should have been a red one. Also, I'm sure that in Frances Hodgson Burnett's brilliant original, the children were much spikier and more difficult than the ones in the movie. But, then, I suppose in her day audiences were more willing to give initially troublesome characters the benefit of the doubt, whereas now, so used are children to having everything predigested for them, they'd quickly lose interest.

This is the problem I've been having trying to persuade Boy Delingpole to let me read him *A Christmas Carol*. I can only get him to do so with a combination of threats and bribes, which does defeat the object, slightly. But even though Dickens bores me damn nearly as much as it bores Boy, I'm persisting because I'm sure like cold weather and long walks and liver it's good for him. And also because I believe that the march of progress is something we should all be striving to sabotage at every turn.

Russell T. Davies's *Doctor Who* special — *The Christmas Invasion* (BBC1, Christmas Day) — had the new Doctor Who David Tennant showing worryingly peacenik tendencies. Just after the Doctor had persuaded an evil race called the Sycorax to bugger off in their gargantuan, rock-shaped spaceship and never trouble Earth again, the Prime Minister Harriet Jones — after brief consultation with Washington — sent up a huge rocket and blew them to smithereens. Our wussie new Doctor was outraged by this underhand behaviour, but it seems to me that the Prime Minister was only doing her job. What guarantee had these hissing, slimy, alien creatures provided that they would never try to conquer Earth again? None at all. I hope the nation's kiddies were sensible enough to see through Davies's dangerous pacifist propaganda.

Now, a New Year question for my military-minded chums. I'm reading *The Cage* by Dan Billany and David Dowie. Any of you serve with them or know what became of them? I'm at Jamesdel@dircon.co.uk.

High life

A rare treat

Taki

Gstaad

Nursing the inevitable Karamazovian state, I watched the pretty Georgina Rylance on New Year's day playing the heiress in an Agatha Christie TV adaptation of *The Mystery of the Blue Train*. It didn't help at all. Some of you may recall that Miss Rylance infamously turned down my offer to become her chevalier servant some time ago. Being a good actress, she should have faked it. So seeing someone as beautiful as her prancing about the Blue Train only brought regrets. There is something painfully nostalgic about the French Riviera, and the train I used regularly to take on my way down to that fabled land. Loss of youth and all that, plus the fact that the place is now a sweaty, overcrowded hellhole inhabited by filthy people full of filthy lucre. But this is a new year and we should start on a happy note.

Such as the party given for my friend Jean Claude Sauer's 70th in Paris. I flew there as a guest on John Sutin's Pilatus, the private plane for all seasons. Pilatus is the best-kept secret among the folks who know small aeroplanes. It takes off like a fighter, and can land on a 100-yard-long patch of grass or snow, if need be. It is Swiss-made and was conceived for landing on glaciers. From Geneva to Paris it took eight of us, plus the pilots, less than an hour, its turboprop quiet and cruising at 285 knots. Soon I shall be the owner of one, or, better still, a part-owner.

When my father died, like a true *nouveau riche*, I began making the rounds ask-



'Nice sermon, Vicar — not sure about the less "churchy" image.'

ing about flying private. 'Don't do it unless you fly 400 hours a year,' said Lord Hanson. 'Otherwise you will definitely kill yourself through pilot error.' The good lord knew what he was talking about. Apparently, pilots are like athletes. They have to fly regularly, otherwise they lose their edge. The answer, of course, is part-ownership, although it takes a very truthful man to admit to a sweet young thing that others, too, own the flying machine that's whisking her to him far from the madding crowds of Heathrow.

So what's a white lie every now and then? Actually, it is not even a lie. It's withholding a fact, *c'est tout*. Pilatus aside, the party in Paris was just about perfect. All the old pals of the Paris of my youth, fun speeches, lotsa booze and flamenco dancing, and the discovery of the best nightclub in years, the Matisse, as elegant as the artist's paintings and full of young and beautiful women who did not resemble his models. Jean Claude was a famous war photographer for *Paris Match* for 40 years, and now, at the age that I shall reach this summer, still vigorous and impossible to keep up with. When my buddy Sutin dragged me out of the Matisse at 6 a.m., Sauer was still going at it full throttle. With no sleep we flew back to Geneva, dropped off my host and went on to Gstaad, Châlet Palataki, and finally some sleep.

But there was no rest for the weary poor little Greek boy. My children have been throwing a New Year's Eve party chez nous for the past ten years or so, and this year was no exception. Although Evelyn Waugh was right in saying that children can never lend anyone an important sum of money, there are things that compensate for it. Such as the young people one's children hang out with. Ushering in the new year in the company of youth is a rare treat. People my age are bores, especially in expensive resorts like Gstaad. Many of the women have had their necks cranked once too often, rendering them unable to blink, which can be a scary sight when late into the night and under the influence.

But thank God for the snow conditions. I cross-country ski around lunchtime, ski downhill in the afternoon, and then go to the karate dojo and kill all sorts of imaginary enemies. Actually, karate came in handy during the holidays because the slopes were too crowded. Richard Amos, a terrific instructor, and I trained daily, and got two more black belts to mix it up with us. For once there were no serious injuries, which means I must be improving. Richard and I are *rokudans* (six *dans*) and the other two were four each. Twenty *dans* with no injuries after three days means we are either fooling ourselves and pulling our punches, or are getting too good to get hurt. Somehow I believe it's the former. But what the hell. As John Wilkes said, 'Life can little else supply/But a few good fucks, and then we die.'