



CRIMINAL USE OF THE CLICHÉ

TV's missed opportunities

Professional TV reviewer and broadcaster Victor Lewis-Smith has a reputation for praise where praise is due and hard criticism tempered with humour where a programme falls short of its promise.

On 22nd March this year, ITV broadcast a **World in Action** documentary entitled **Britain's Untouchables**. This promised to be an important programme dealing with rising public concern over juvenile crime. Victor Lewis-Smith's review of this programme, originally published in the *Evening Standard* on Tuesday 23rd March 1993* speaks volumes regarding the media's representation of crime in general as well as the specific role of documentary programmes such as *World in Action* in particular.

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Television cameras nowadays can faithfully record almost anything – from the smallest insect to the most massive constellation – but, when it comes to crime, something peculiar happens to the picture, and all verisimilitude inexplicably vanishes.

Tell a camera crew to start following a policeman? Hey presto, he'll immediately tilt his hat and start dancing in the street with the nearest black person. Film a criminal in silhouette? Lo and behold, he'll instantly become a reformed soul: "Cor blimee guv'nor, it wuz society wot did it to me, gawd luv the dar old Queen mum, I'm bang-to-rights."

During Granada's heyday, **World in Action** (ITV) acquired a formidable reputation for uncompromising and original investigative journalism, but now all that seems to remain of that glorious period are the perennial opening titles, with Da Vinci's geometric man revolving gracefully in 1960s Doors-style Hammond organ.

I could almost hear the cries of "bring back the birch"

Britain's Untouchables, followed members of the Cardiff police around a local estate and succeeded in cramming every last uninspired media cliché about juvenile crime into a mere 28 minutes. Just the sort of stuff to get the blood-



pressure soaring in the nursing homes of Eastbourne.

We had it all. Fifteen-year-old drunken robbers defecating in bedrooms, sheds broken into, joyriders, ramraiders, suspected assault, affray, drug dealing, and even illegal possession of strimmers. When the kids were stoned on this estate, then so were the adults; literally, since small children happily carried buckets of rocks for gangs of big kids to lob through the grown-ups' windows.

A sombre voice intoned endless facts and figures – 100,000 offences each year committed by the under-17s, a fifth of all crime caused by children – proving beyond doubt that documentary makers are the biggest single cause of statistics.

Inspector Knacker told us: "We want more powers to deal with these children... to detain them from society at large." The Social Worker said: "They need more activities." Then we had the voice of reason from the man in the street. "They nicked me strimmer ... they're not much better than animals."

Between sad shots of police cars pursuing Honda 50 mopeds, on came a succession of chattering heads, attempting to reduce the complex problems of juvenile delinquency to a few hackneyed phrases.

A voice-over asked whether unemployment was to blame for the rise in crime. The social worker said that the kids "needed some stock-car racing", although it was pretty clear that they had learned to make their own amusements.

Finally, to make sure that the blood-pressure in Eastbourne went clean through the roof, a young prisoner told us that "detention centres are good ... lots of activities, Nintendo".

I could almost hear the cries of "bring back the birch" and "it all comes out of our taxes" wending their way inland.

Juvenile crime is, of course, a serious issue, and one that seems to offer a problem for every solution. Lock them up and

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they learn from their cell mates how to be better criminals; let them go, and they carry on doing it anyway, birch them, and someone, somewhere, gets an erection.

Whatever the answer might be, this feeble programme was quite unable to come to terms with its subject matter, and the scene where the local Cardiff constabulary apprehended some local ruffians proved to be nothing short of pantomime: "Why lads, you was taunting us! You stuck your fingers up at us ... anyway, run along now."

The total lack of police sarcasm was astounding.

This trivial documentary has done precious little to raise the level of debate about an important concern. If *World in Action* continues to treat serious problems in such an anodyne way, perhaps its executive producer Charles Tremayne should consider renaming it *World Inaction*.

The shows seems to have lost its teeth and, regrettably, they were not kicked out in the cells in the noble pursuit of journalistic excellence; no, they have decayed and rotted due to an unrelieved diet of bland pap.

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