



by James Bowman

# The Powers That Be

**Brits fail where a Frenchman naturally succeeds.**

If you were, like the hero of *Austin Powers, International Man of Mystery*, a British secret agent suddenly transplanted from “swinging” London in the 1960’s to the just-vaguely-circling London of the present day, I can’t help thinking you’d notice more differences than Powers does. Mike Myers, who plays the witless hippie agent as well as his nemesis, Dr. Evil (and who wrote the screenplay), picks up about two and a half. You can’t treat women like dolly-birds anymore and you can’t have quite so much promiscuous sex. The relative scarcity of hallucinogenic drugs in the 1990’s is also mentioned, but not so obviously regretted. Out of these ingredients Myers and Jay Roach, who directed, manage to squeeze a few laughs (though most seem not to depend on Powers’s being in the wrong decade), but they miss the essential difference. This is that, in the sixties, sex and drugs were fun; now they are hard work.

Or so it would seem from watching a contemporary British film like *Twin Town*. Directed by Kevin Allen and executive-produced by Danny Boyle and Andrew MacDonald, who gave the world *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*, this film has some of the latter’s attitude about it and most of its world-view—which can be summed up as nihilism on speed. Everything goes to show that all authority is corrupt or impotent, that aggressive self-indulgence is the only principle of life and that belief in anything beyond or better is pathetic or stupid or vicious or comic.

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That’s “reality,” mate. The mods and teddy boys of the 1960’s, recalled for us by Austin Powers, brought the thrill of truancy to their vices, and so implied in spite of themselves a better standard. It is a point made by Myers’s Dr. Evil in a different way when he gloats that “Freedom failed!” To be disillusioned with the promise of free love and mind-expanding drugs implies that the old restraints were better.

The characters in *Twin Town* (as with *Trainspotting*, the title is a bit of ironic whimsy) have gone way beyond disillusionment. They have no more innocent enjoyment in sex or drugs, but they continue to indulge themselves with both in a grim and businesslike way, seemingly for their own sake. The main characters, known to everyone in their neighborhood of South Wales as the Lewis twins (Rhys Ifans and Llyr Evans) though they are in fact brothers born three years apart, are car thieves and glue sniffers who live in a trailer with their drunken father, their clueless mother, and their sluttish sister. And these are the sympathetic figures. The bad guys are two drug-dealing policemen, Grayo (Dorien Thomas) and Terry (Dougray Scott), and a roofing contractor and underworld boss called Bryn Cartwright (William Thomas).

It would be tedious to go over the plot, a cleverly contrived tale of appalling violence and revenge decorated, after the fashion of this burgeoning genre, with coarse and often quite funny jokes. But the despair that lies just beneath the surface is unmistakable and obscurely connected with the presumed plight of the provincial Briton. “If all else fails, try Wales,” says a jolly English wag and drug

dealer. His other witty saying is: “Be lucky, and if you can’t be lucky, top [i.e., kill] yourself.” Small wonder that the suicide rate among British males aged 20 to 24 increased by 71 percent during the 1980’s. A substantial portion of the dead probably came out of movies like this one and went straight home to put their heads in the oven. The only reminiscence of beauty or goodness here is a traditional Welsh male-voice choir which appears at the very end to sing a stirring version of “Myfanwy.” But this is nothing but a lament for a dying world.

Music—in the form of a village brass band—is used for a similar purpose in *Brassed Off* by Mark Herman. This is a more commercial proposition than *Twin Town* and has bigger stars (Ewan McGregor, Tara Fitzgerald, Pete Postlethwaite), so that, oddly, it is able to push a more overt political agenda. In fact, it ends up being the crudest sort of left-wing propaganda. All the salt-of-the-earth Yorkshire miners come off as noble and brave and funny, while the representatives of the National Coal Board and the government are cruel and mendacious. Perhaps the film’s most memorable moment comes when one of the brave and good miners, Phil (Stephen Tompkinson), distraught by debts and his father’s illness, has an outburst against God who “took John Lennon, and those three lads down t’Ainsley pit, and looks as if He’ll be takin’ my dad. And Margaret Bloody Thatcher lives? What is He playin’ at?”

Nowadays, not even the new Labour government proposes to keep mining coal that nobody wants or needs and that gives horrible diseases to those who spend their lives mining it. Yet in the world of artists and intellectuals like Mark Herman it still seems a bold and intelligent thing to blame God for Lady Thatcher. You can’t

help thinking that they hate her so much because she offered hope of national renewal, and intellectuals are much more comfy and cozy with their precious despair. It gives them the illusion of being more knowing than the rest of us, less prone to illusion—which is the greatest illusion of all. Danny, the band leader in *Brassed Off* (Mr. Postlethwaite), gives his musicians a lecture on how the band “symbolizes pride” in the town. “The only reminder of a hundred bloody years of hard graft is this bloody band.” But in the end he has to chuck it all to make a futile and silly political gesture.

And that isn’t even the worst of this spring’s crop of awful British pictures. That title has to go to Peter Greenaway’s *The Pillow Book*, a typical Greenaway blend of the bizarre, the disgusting, and the boring. Especially the boring. You wouldn’t think it, would you? That a man could concentrate so exclusively on weird sexual fetishes (in this case, a woman’s desire to have her body written on—and then to write on other bodies), naked bodies, dead bodies, blackmail, sexual predation, and other such subjects and somehow manage to make the whole thing a snoozer? The film is just over two hours long, but it seems like two weeks. Maybe people who are fetishists of one kind or another themselves—or else who are Japanese calligraphers—would find this picture less boring than I did, but even they, one supposes, must grow impatient with the increasingly improbable story on which a succession of pretty, oriental-style pictures are made to hang.

What music is to *Twin Town* and *Brassed Off*, visual sumptuousness is to *The Pillow Book*—that is, a symbol of ephemeral beauty at the mercy of an appalling and vicious reality. Or “reality.” It is an image that begins to look like the hallmark of late-twentieth-century British art, and, to give Greenaway his due, it has seldom been more perfectly expressed than it is here in the form of the pelt of a dead homosexual prostitute scribbled over with pseudo-profundities in exquisitely traced ideograms. But you can also understand why, if this is “reality,” the film industry outside of Britain is in full flight from it. The playful postmodern who avoids reality altogether may be bor-

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ing in a different way, but at least he doesn’t make you feel like topping yourself.

**A**nd sometimes he creates something that is even worth looking at. The Movie of the Month this month, *The Fifth Element* by Luc Besson, is what every crappy Hollywood po-mo extravaganza would be if it had the wit and the boldness of this Frenchman, author of *La Femme Nikita* and *The Professional*. Someday, if anyone ever bothers to write the history of Hollywood postmodernism, *The Fifth Element* will be seen as one of its true classics. This is not, of course, the same thing as saying it is any good. Not in the way that—say—*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* or *Jules and Jim* is good. But it is the best of its kind, largely because Besson had the guts and the clout to stand up to the money men for the chance to show what a clever Frenchman can do with a Hollywood-sized budget.

Forget the story. The point is that every postmodern fixture is raised to its highest power. The McGuffin is some magic stones which, properly placed in a secret room in an ancient Egyptian tomb, will call down the benevolent forces of the universe and destroy (with the usual laser beams of white light) the evil death star descending on the earth. The action, set in the twenty-third century, involves rival attempts by the evil corporate chieftain Zorg (Gary Oldman) and the largely benevolent authorities of planet earth (this is how you know there is a foreign element in the usual Hollywood mix; a straight Hollywood product would have made the bad guy a member of, if not the head of, the government) to get their hands on the stones.

Zorg is, of course, a lurid caricature of a greedy and ruthless plutocrat, but he is a caricature done with considerable wit and style. At one point he explains his bad-guy philosophy by saying that “Life...comes from disorder, destruction, chaos,” and proceeds to demonstrate by deliberately breaking a tumbler and then watching as a series of specially adapted little robots sweep up the glass, reassemble it into a tumbler, and pour him a drink in it. In the same way, if the evil death star destroys the earth in the process of making him, Zorg, considerably richer, that just means more work for those who’ve got to clean up the mess!

Wonderful! A Keynesian villain! For it was Keynes (“in the long run we’re all dead”) who had the idea to employ one lot of people to dig holes which another lot of people are employed to fill in. This Sisyphean task may be what lies behind fashionable British despair. But the Frenchman puts up against him Korben Dallas (Bruce Willis), a cab driver (the cabs look like flying dodgem cars), assisted by the Supreme Being of the Universe, a gorgeous young woman with orange hair called Leeloo (Milla Jovovich). She is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the *Femme Nikita* theme. The beautiful girl is both all powerful (the bad guys fall before her karate kicks and punches) and vulnerable and in need of the help of the tough but tender Dallas. “This woman is mankind’s most precious possession,” says Cornelius (Ian Holm), the obligatory priest-interpreter and explainer of the sacred symbols. Well, you can see why.

I could go on at length about the cleverness and the wit with which Besson has imagined his amusingly preposterous future, but you will just have to go see the movie. You should do so for the same reason that, if you were alive in late-seventeenth-century London you should have gone to see the plays of William Congreve. They may be utterly decadent, but they’re the best thing your era has got to show. ❁

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# Drew's New Washington

## Whatever It Takes: The Real Struggle for Political Power in America

Elizabeth Drew

Viking / 294 pages / \$24.95

REVIEWED BY

John H. Fund

Every four years intrepid reporters follow the footsteps of Teddy White, that legendary chronicler of campaigns (*The Making of the President*), and turn out a ponderous tome on "what it all meant." But Elizabeth Drew, sensing that the race for the White House would turn out to be the vapid and bloodless slog it was, decided in early 1996 to write about the battle for control of the House of Representatives. *Whatever It Takes* not only manages to tell a good story but also illuminates the current realities of political power in Washington.

Drew, a veteran of campaign reporting, tells the story of the 1996 election through the activities of seven players: Grover Norquist, the energetic head of Americans for Tax Reform and a columnist for this magazine; Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition; Marc Nettle, a consultant to the National Federation of Independent Business; Tanya Metaksa of the National Rifle Association; David Rehr of the National Beer Wholesalers Association; Steve Rosenthal, the political director of the AFL-CIO; and Dick Morris, the architect of Clinton's stunningly successful election-year scramble to the center. Three vulnerable GOP congressmen who were targeted by the AFL-CIO are also featured: Rep. Randy Tate, a firebrand freshman from Seattle

and the youngest House Member; Peter Torkildsen, a cautious Massachusetts moderate and the Republican incumbent who came closest to losing in 1994; and Greg Ganske, a plastic surgeon turned Iowa congressman who ran against a Democratic former TV anchorwoman.

With this cast of characters, Drew tells the story of the 1996 House races, which began early in the year with conservative activists increasingly anxious that the Republican primaries would produce a wounded, exhausted nominee. While Pat Buchanan appealed to many at a gut level, they recognized his nomination would be disastrous for races further down the ballot. When Bob Dole finally emerged with the nomination in hand he had little money, and his failure to seize the initiative allowed Clinton to define him as old and out of touch. Both parties held successful conventions over the summer with Republicans temporarily energized by the selection of Jack Kemp as Dole's running mate and Democrats pleased that they tamped down liberal criticism of President Clinton's signing of the welfare reform bill.

By mid-September, President Clinton felt confident enough about his own reelection that he became intent on helping Democrats regain control of one or both Houses. "The one word reason his advisers gave privately was 'Whitewater,'" writes Drew. "This was code for hearings not just on Whitewater but also the bevy of Clinton scandals, past and perhaps future. And if the independent counsel, Kenneth Starr, brought damaging charges, a Clinton adviser said, it would be more comfortable to have a Democratic Congress." In other words, at some point in the fall of 1996 Clinton shifted his emphasis from winning a second term to ensuring that term didn't end in a scandalous Nixon-like *Götterdämmerung*. On September 17 President Clinton met with Democratic leaders and agreed to transfer funds from

the DNC to the congressional campaign committees and hold three unity fundraisers for them. Drew reports that a grateful congressional Democrat "realized he might have Kenneth Starr to thank."

The next day, conservative activists gathered in a basement room in the Capitol to meet with Speaker Newt Gingrich. Before Gingrich's pep talk the group heard a downbeat report on the results of Washington State's "jungle" primary, in which candidates from both parties appear on a single ballot. In 1994 the results had forecast the defeat of then-Speaker Tom Foley and several other Democrats. But this time they showed Randy Tate trailing his Democratic opponent by two points, and four other GOP freshmen hovering just over 50 percent.

As it became clear that the sputtering Dole campaign was creating a drag on Republican congressional candidates, the GOP Congress began trying to pass legislation to burnish its image with swing voters. Dole campaign manager Scott Reed said he considered himself "at war" with the leadership over their efforts to stem illegal immigration. Senator Alan Simpson asked Reed for a meeting to protest Dole's efforts to kill the immigration bill. Simpson told Reed it was wrong for him to stop the bill and that as an American he should be for it. He then said: "This is the most incompetently run campaign in American history." Reed replied: "F--- off. I'm not a statesman. I'm not a legislator. I'm a campaign manager and it doesn't help Bob Dole if you continue to send Clinton bills to sign."

The tension between conservatives both in and out of Congress and the Dole campaign intensified. In the last two weeks of the campaign, they persuaded RNC Chairman Haley Barbour to focus party energies on keeping the House at the expense of Bob Dole.

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