

expose—as an Eastern bloc under socialism grows more and more fungus on its mouldering social edifices, and as a competitive West looks ever brasher in its radical chic.

To visit East Germany, a West German recently told me, is rather like visiting a genteel maiden aunt who is slowly fading away. “Once poverty is well distributed”, the Foreign Minister of Viet Nam recently remarked, “there is no social injustice. If there is no social injustice, there is stability.” That is the official Communist view. Communism spreads poverty out thin, like sour margarine. Competition, by contrast, works to abolish it.

All competition except competition among labourers, as Mill sagely remarked in the *Principles* of 1848, “is for the benefit of the labourers, by cheapening the articles they consume” (IV.vii.7). By now ordinary men and women on both sides of the Iron Curtain have noticed Mill’s point. They have seen that our political philosophies of Left and Right are wildly misdescribed, that their contents differ strikingly from their labels: and if the real liberals of Anglo-America allow

others to filch credit for the undoubted social triumphs of competitive enterprise, past and to come, then they will fail as liberal democrats and deserve to fail. That, more or less, is what happened to Walter Mondale’s disastrous bid for the American Presidency in 1984.

COMPETITION is a fundamentally anti-conservative idea, as much as ever. It is not just that competitive enterprise has its radical aspects: it is radical altogether; there is nothing about it that is not radical. That truth is history and prediction all at once: the spirit of Adam Smith has already, over the past century and more, transformed the traditional social patterns of Western Europe and North America, as it will surely continue to transform them. But it is also a truth for the present age—and one fit to dismiss into limbo the flimsy constructs of a tradition of political thought, at once socialist and anti-socialist, that it has taken political philosophers over a century of painful theorising to erect.

Antenatal

i
No trace of gills,
but not yet human,
the preposterous miracle
nods a massive head,
dark-veined, glowing.
Blunt, translucent fingers
fanned like seaweed fronds
confer a blessing.

ii
This grey and white sketch
of sectioned torso,
the monstrous uterus
an opaque, sack-like,
usurping presence,
is a lost Magritte
provisionally entitled
My Secret Life.

iii
The child in the chicken-brick
sleeps, unaware
that the lifted lid—
umbilically hinged,
cradling placenta—
is an artist’s fiction:
the real way out
will prove more hazardous.

iv
These squirming babies,
freshly delivered,
held out in huge hands,
slit-eyed and slippery-wet,
are like refugees
recently scooped
from the South China Sea,
mercifully alive.

Peter Norman

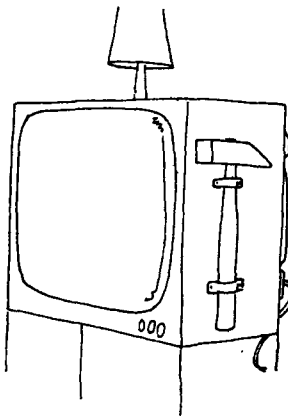
MEDIA

Embattled Images

By Herb Greer

"... a state of affairs where every reporter is assumed to be a disembodied seraph free from any political influence within the state or society. ..."

The Annan Report (1977)



IT IS ONE THING to write about the pretensions and sins of the media seraphs; trying to approach these creatures directly is another sort of experience. One feels like Owen Glendower calling spirits from the vasty deep—the answers which come back are sometimes very curious indeed. When the Irangate affair was getting under way I was struck by an item on Channel 4 News. It covered a press conference at the White House and said that

American reporters were giving the President credit for his performance. This remark was illustrated by a general shot of TV reporters on the White House lawn, reading their copy to various cameras. There followed a close-up bit of commentary from Sam Donaldson of ABC, a notoriously corrosive reporter who has on more than one occasion made his loathing of Ronald Reagan very clear. His on-camera lucubration was in the usual vein, sneering at the President, and sourly implying with choice phrases such as “He learned his lines” that the President had staged a phoney theatrical show for the media. What attracted my attention was that this totally contradicted the editorial statement. Was this Channel 4 irony?

I rang Stewart Purvis, Editor of Channel 4 News. He would not speak to me. The rule was: questions in writing. I complied. Why had Purvis chosen for the item a reporter who was obviously hostile to Reagan and contradicted Channel 4's commentary? Did this reflect an editorial slant? I mentioned other pointers in this direction: the medical amateur employed to diagnose senility in Reagan, while sitting in a London studio 3,000 miles away and basing his analysis on a slip of the tongue in a high-pressure debate. Then there was that report from CBS's *60 Minutes*, a cooked-up montage

of TV- and film-clips which purported to prove, nothing less, that the President could not tell reality from fantasy. Evidence? He quoted film lines in his speeches. In America, where journalistic arrogance can achieve a sort of self-ordained apotheosis,¹ viewers' common sense will discount such partisan rubbish as cheapshot entertainment. Why drag it across the Atlantic and present it in Britain as a serious item of news? Did this betoken anti-Presidential (or even anti-American) policy at Channel 4?

Stewart Purvis's letter of reply stonewalled my query, accusing me of selecting isolated incidents to prove a point; after all, Donaldson had been hostile to President Carter too. Furthermore, signs of Reagan's senility or “his grasp on reality” were live election issues. Senility had, indeed, been discussed during the Reagan-Mondale election (invariably on the same superficial level as the Channel 4 item), but outside the United States the more alarming accusation—not “gauging” Reagan's grasp on reality, but denying it altogether—had not been aired during the election campaign. Was Purvis being disingenuous? Surely not. (Perhaps a slip of the pen? a sign of editorial senility?)

His letter affirmed that the policy of Channel 4 News is to “report on events in Washington with the same objective and impartial approach which characterises our coverage on major issues all over the world”. That explained much. One had only to recall the heavily anti-American coverage of Nicaragua, and the caveats attached to broadcasts from South Africa (never to items from the Third World or the Eastern Bloc, where censorship is often more severe). Q.E.D., and thanks for the explanation.

THE MILLS OF the BBC's News and Current Affairs are slow but inexorable. When Norman Tebbit had ventured to suggest that BBC reportage on the US attack against Libya was slanted against the Americans, there was great and furious protesting; and their reporter Kate Adie was immediately given an award for her Libyan broadcasts. The BBC issued a detailed rebuttal of Tebbit's charges, arguing that everything in the reportage was true, except for one mistake which everybody else had made, connecting the attack with a terrorist attempt at Heathrow. Tebbit submitted the BBC's detailed apology to an independent barrister, and the Queen's Counsel read it with a cold eye:

“... overall the response fails. It is itself cheap and glib in many places. More important, it fails to meet the substantial charge: that the ordering of themes, stories, paragraphs and sentences, and the colouring of the language, can and did turn even a broadcast which makes no untrue statements into a slanted, confrontational and fundamentally political or “editorialising” *prise de position* or taking a line.”

The BBC's riposte arrived a little late, billed as a retrospective television report on the Libyan attack. In fact it was a prosecutory TV brief which did not try to hide its anti-Americanism. Tom Bower, the BBC presenter, used quantities of hearsay and speculation (mingled, naturally, with the occasional hard fact), and later described this *mélange* as “63

¹ An intra-office editorial memo in my possession, from Boston's *Atlantic Monthly*, says: “We aspire to a ‘God-like’ ... stance.”