

# The Rise of the Anti-Hero

by Stephen Garrett

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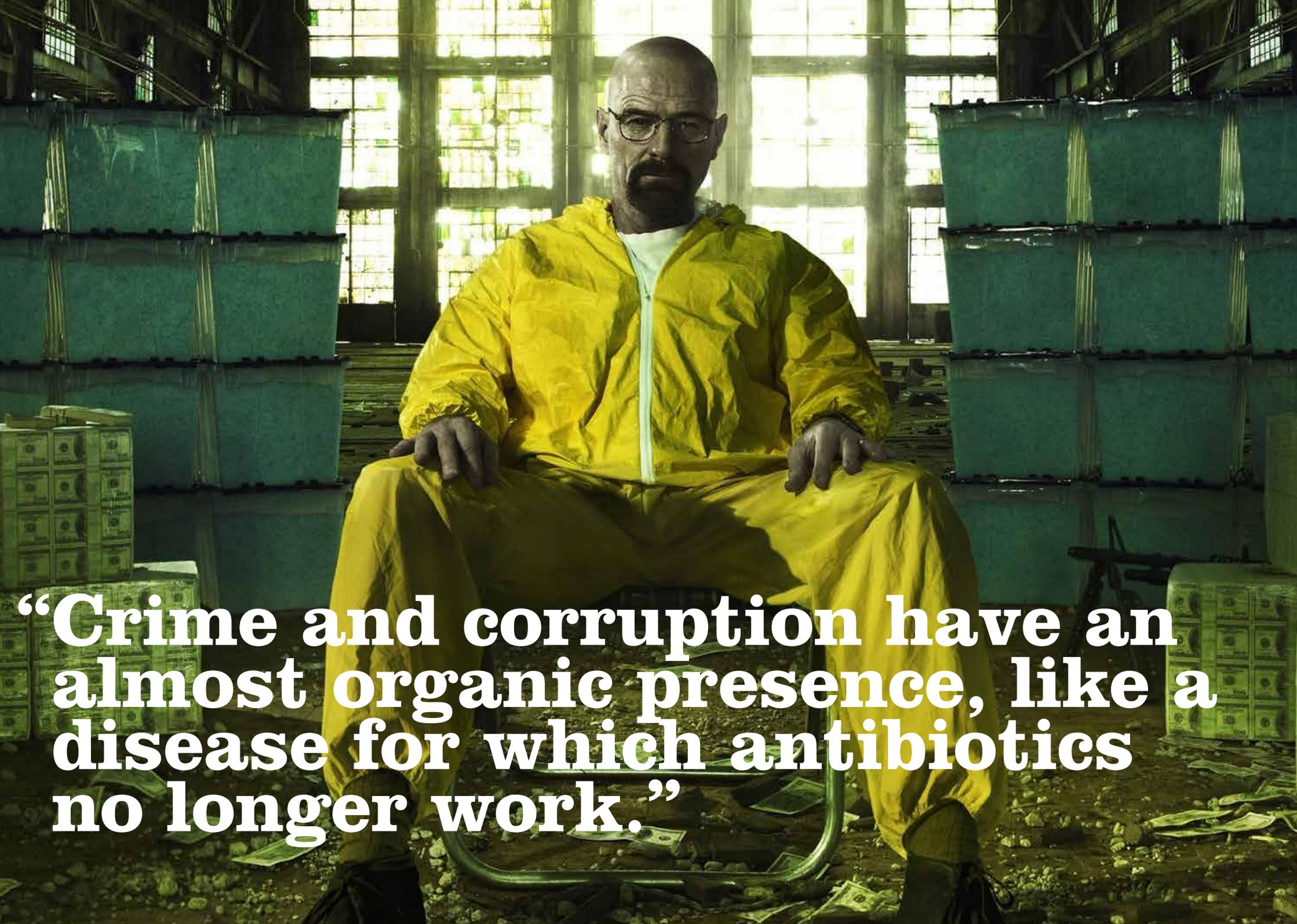
# Preface

**The iconic anti-heroes that have dominated the best recent TV dramas, *The Americans*' Elizabeth and Philip Jennings, *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, the eponymous Luther, *Game of Thrones*' Cersei Lannister, *House of Cards*' Frank Underwood to name just a few, are emphatically 21st century creatures. They hold up a mirror to the century and find in their reflection a universe that is at best broken, at worst rotten.**

Before the revolution of the world wide web, it was too easy to sweep under the carpet anything that ran counter to the perfect image society demanded of its icons. Up until the middle of the '90's, had Christ uttered his famous dictum "let he who has not sinned cast the first stone," many would have stepped forward without a blush. From politicians to pop stars, movie stars to masters of the universe, heroes both real world and imagined presented themselves shamelessly to the world as shiny and unblemished.

Now, in the glaring light of the web, the ubiquity of social media and the triumph of solipsism that is the selfie there is no longer any hiding place. Heroes are flawed. They always have been. Last century we simply didn't notice. Or, at least, preferred not to notice. Now the truth is out. Everyone's a sinner. That includes our so-called heroes. Yet, paradoxically, even knowing what we do about them we love them, all the more so for their failings and sins. The devil, it turns out, does indeed have the best lines and sing the best tunes.



A man with a goatee and glasses, wearing a bright yellow hazmat suit, sits on a metal stool in a large, dimly lit warehouse. The room is filled with stacks of cash, some wrapped in plastic and others scattered on the floor. Large windows in the background let in bright light, creating a high-contrast scene. The man has a serious expression and is looking directly at the camera.

**“Crime and corruption have an almost organic presence, like a disease for which antibiotics no longer work.”**

**He is “the worst man in the world.”  
Why? “Because he sells death and  
destruction, and he laughs.”**



Two of the latest anti-heroes to be embraced by tens of millions of tv viewers around the globe are the creation of a writer who first punched his way into the modern psyche in the early 1960's. John le Carre's, Jonathan Pine, as made flesh by Tom Hiddleston in *The Night Manager* is opaque, tortured, masochistic and will kill in service of his sense of what constitutes "the greater good." Pine is presented as "the good guy." In the same story, Richard Onlow Roper is theroretically "the bad guy." As incarnated by Hugh Laurie's mesmerizing performance, Roper is infused with a disarming mix of charm and wit on the one hand, darkness and terror on the other. When you first meet Roper, at the epicentre of an adoring entourage, all you want to do is join the party, be his friend, sit next to him, make him smile – even though you have already been told by the woman in whose death he has been complicit, that he is "the worst man in the world." Why? "Because he sells death and destruction, and he laughs." In this Roper as at the outer edge of moral ambiguity – not so much "what's not to love?" as "what's not to despise?" Yet Pine, himself frequently on the wrong side of the line that separates right from wrong, and Roper are strangely drawn to one another – and, through their mutual attraction, we, too, to them. In this they are both poster children for that oh-so 21st century morally ambiguous hero. Yet by the time le Carre created them back in the early '90's, this master of spy novelists was already 30 years into a sequence of novels that was revolutionizing fiction – not just in the kinds of stories that were being told, but the kinds of men (and, yes, they were usually men) about whom these stories could be told. Le Carre's world is nuanced, complex, layered, murky and cruel, but above all it is one in which all moral boundaries are consistently and seductively blurred. His fiction, from the standard bearing *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* onwards, compel the reader to root for heroes of sorts who do not do what heroes are supposed to do. Heroes used to be good people who did good things for good reasons. Occasionally, if an author was really messing with the form, they did bad things for the right reasons. But they were still essentially good people. In le Carre's prescient evocation of post-war realpolitik, people you think are good do bad things, often for reasons that are not wholly clear, even to themselves. And so you start to wonder, are these people, people whose morality you have been lured into embracing as your own, truly that good at all?

Le Carre was way ahead of the game. The anti-heroes of the great tv fictions of the 21st century all have their roots in his writing. When, decades ago he documented a system of government that was cynically self-serving, one that created a culture for those sucked into its orbit – especially the innocent - that could only corrupt, even destroy, he was anticipating a trend that has only this century become a staple of popular culture. These days, as the song goes, it's hard to be a hero.

# The Rise of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Anti-Hero

**Who are your TV heroes and heroines? Which, if you could have another life, would you want to be? George Clooney's maverick doctor in ER, Martin Sheen's heart-on-sleeve President in The West Wing, or Richard Armitage's intense and unpredictable agent in Spooks?**

They are all pretty much on the side of the angels. But what about another breed of role model from TV drama series? How many of us want to be James Gandolfini's murderous racketeer in The Sopranos, Michael Chiklis's bent detective in The Shield, Glenn Close's ruthless lawyer in Damages or Philip Glenister's homophobic and misogynist Gene Hunt in Life on Mars? Can they even properly be described as heroes at all? And whatever they are, why do we love them so?

If there are any heroes reading, please raise your hand now (and come and see me afterwards). Most of us are not heroes of any kind and never will be - except in our wildest dreams and fantasies. I'm not, for sure. Nor am I a superhero, a local hero, a working class hero, a hero of our time or a have-a-go hero. I am not even a hero-worshiper.

Joseph Campbell got it right in his seminal HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES when he wrote: "the multitude of men and women choose the less adventurous way of the comparatively unconscious civic and tribal routines."

That's me in a nutshell. And, as the Americans are wont to say - no offence - I fear it's very probably you, too.

The word hero or heroic is routinely abused on a daily basis - in the news, in sports reports and in conversation. A politician makes a surprising return from a fall from grace; a tabloid non-entity battles against a drug addiction; a young sub comes on and scores a winning goal in a crunch Premiership game; someone gets me a ticket for a sell-out concert. The "H" word greets them all.

Heroes have been around for a long time - in the bible, myths and stories, as well as in history. From Beowulf to Boudica, Achilles to Alexander the Great, via Henry V, Joan of Arc, Churchill, James Bond, Batman, Samson, Mohammed Ali, Nelson Mandela, Harry Potter, Ghandi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Mother Teresa and John F Kennedy. Classic heroes like these trip off the tongue lightly. Though how many of them stand up to this rigorous definition - again provided by Joseph Campbell:

A hero is someone who "towers in stature...a boon bringer...a personage of not only local but world historical moment...the hero is the man or woman who has managed to battle past his personal and local historical limitations...such a one's visions...are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. The hero has died as a modern man; ...he has been reborn. His second solemn task and deed, therefore...is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed."



**This at least has the virtue of having a classic feel to it. And if we look at the spaces between words we can probably come up with a modest check list.**

**If any of you were seeking hero status earlier, you probably need to tick the majority of these boxes.**

**So, from Campbell:**

1. Be towering in stature - (someone unique and impressive)
2. Be a personage of moment - (in other words, of high social status or visibility)
3. Be someone who has successfully battled the limitations of your past and your environment - (so that you are untroubled by personal demons, you'll need to be confident)
4. Be someone of vision, and not part of the present disintegrating society - (so someone clear-thinking, of moral rectitude, and law-abiding)
5. Be someone perfected, reborn - (someone who's been through the mill, you've learned life's lessons, are life-affirming, idealistic)
6. Be someone who can teach us lessons of a life renewed - (a role model)
7. Someone we can respect and admire

**Then, from scouting some further texts and references on the basic requirements of hero status, a few more boxes to check.**

**If you want to be a hero, you probably also need to be:**

1. Someone we all want to be
2. Tight-lipped about your emotions
3. Probably male
4. Often feeling in some way alienated from the world
5. You have a "divine quality" about you.
6. You "transcend the mundane".
7. You can be a "tragic and lonely figure"?
8. And might even need to "court unpopularity"
9. Heroic status can require sacrifice.
10. There might be "a refusal to dominate" even if you have the means or resources. So, an element of restraint is required. Superman, Spiderman and Batman do this all the time.
11. You will battle for justice
12. You will do the right thing, the right way
13. You may never be able truly to love
14. You make a habit of befriending losers.
15. You are not a team player

**Has anyone changed their mind about their status?**

**For the past couple of thousand years, I'm not sure the criteria have changed significantly. How much did one learn, for example, about a society that had Henry V as a hero, set against one that had Churchill as a hero? Or Nelson Mandela?**

As we enter the second decade of this new millennium, as the century enters its pre-teen years, what does it take **now** to be a hero?

What **today** constitutes a set of heroic qualities? And of what, short of saving the world, might a heroic act or life be comprised?

I suggested in an earlier essay that the 21st century returning TV drama had taken up the mantle occupied by the novel in the 19th and most of the 20th centuries. So I want to look at the heroes of current TV drama series, who they are, what qualities define them as individuals and what their place in our lives tells us about the society, cultures and world of which we are a part.

## **The Rise of the 21st Century Anti-Hero.**

I believe TV drama to be a barometer of sorts for the age that gives birth to it. And I believe the heroes of today are radically different from the heroes of two or three decades ago. They have evolved to represent a dramatically transformed world. They have had no choice.

I'm fascinated by those 21st century characters in TV fiction who have fashioned their own very singular path to spurning Campbell's deathly sounding civic and tribal routines - and why they have had to do it.

So, what has happened to the world to provoke this wholesale re-working of hero DNA?

In the olden days, let's call it, and as recently as the 2nd half of the 20th century, there was in operation a morally clear universe. Coming out of World War 2 - there were never better baddies than the Nazis, and the causes as well as the purposes of the war were crystal clear. There was an almost archetypically monstrous enemy, and we were unequivocally the good guys.



**I**t followed from this that the status quo had been somewhat under threat, and it's hardly surprising to discover that the generation growing up under the shadow of first Nazism, then Communism should continue to champion the status quo, and fashion heroes who battled to preserve it.

Until the mid-20th Century, threats to the status quo were demonstrably threats from mythic monsters, pure evil. But as we moved towards the end of the 20th century and into the 21st, it was no longer so clear that the status quo was worth preserving, nor that threats to it might not be an improvement. It wasn't even that clear what the status quo was. Or is. Or should be.

Because now we're fighting wars - Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, the war on terror - where it's far less clear who the enemy is, whether there is an enemy at all, or even that we are the good guys. In fact, since WW2, most conflicts have had at least an element of moral ambiguity built into them - add to my earlier list Vietnam, Korea, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, and the Cold War...is it any wonder we have become somewhat confused, that the clarity of old separating good from bad, right from wrong, is at best murky - and that as a result, our sense of what a hero might be has undergone something of a sea-change?

But that's not all. Linked to this crisis of confidence on a global scale, faith in individual democratic processes and the democratically elected leaders they have spawned has been fading fast. We have had a succession of "gates" in the States - Watergate, Irangate, Zippergate, none of which have done the office of President any favours. It turns out, too, that the beloved JFK was a no better man than Clinton (and in many ways probably worse), and this begs the question as to whether the intense media scrutiny of the modern age makes it impossible for anyone to live up to the standards we have traditionally set for heroes.

On the other side of the Atlantic, senior public figures, role models from politics, business, sport and entertainment continue to be caught with a range of appendages where they should not be - feet in mouth, hands in till, and, well....I'll leave the rest to your imaginations and memories. The recent financial crisis followed as it was by the Libor scandal, and the lies that underpinned the Brexit campaign have filled every orifice of public life in the Western world with the stench of rotten-ness and corruption. It's not a pretty picture.

This has presented some challenges to the heroes of old. They really did go from hero to zero. They were no longer fit for purpose. Almost as the new millennium kicked in, they hit their sell-by date. And paved the way for a new kind of fictional hero, who wasn't really a hero at all.

Not in the old, Campbell sense of the word anyway. Which is why I believe us now to be in the age of the 21st century anti-hero, someone for whom the status quo is not necessarily acceptable - or at least whose sense of it is a little more flexible than in days of yore. And they are all over our TV screens.

So, what did the old world look like in classic TV fiction? In the UK, remember, it was Z Cars, Inspector Morse or The Bill. In the US it was Hawaii Five-O, Columbo, The FBI, or The Untouchables. CSI still carries their torch.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the police here were unequivocally heroes - morally upright, untainted by even the whiff of corruption and it went without saying that their own position and notions of absolute justice were as one. In their world, crime never paid, the system always worked and justice was never evaded. Nor did anyone even "take it into their own hands." It was clear who the criminals were and they got their just desserts.

Other mainstream successes tended to the medical. Hospital shows like Casualty or Holby here in the UK and West Wing and Grey's Anatomy in the US have a similarly black and white view of their protagonists. Gorgeous doctors who just want to save lives. And a commensurate predictability of outcome. Which, by the way, is no bad thing.

As the American writer David Foster Wallace said in David Lipsky's "Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself": "the really commercial, really reductive shows that we so love to sneer at, are also tremendously compelling. Because the predictability in popular art, the really formulaic stuff, the stuff that makes no attempt to surprise or do anything artistic, is so profoundly soothing. And even the densest or most tired viewer can see what's coming. And it gives you a sense of order, that everything's going to be alright, that this is a narrative that will take care of you, and won't in any way challenge you. It's like being wrapped in a chamois blanket and nestled against a big, generous tit, you know? And that, artwise, may be not the greatest art. But the function it provides is deep in a certain way....art finds a way to take care of you." So, these kinds of stories, with their heroes plucked from an old world order provide comfort, albeit an artificial one.



Because the new world, as we have seen, isn't like that anymore. It's neither cosy nor comfortable. Assuming, of course, that it ever was. Which is why some shows, and they happen to be among my favourites, plough a very different furrow.

The American academic Douglas L Howard wrote in a collection of essays about TV drama: "If you're looking for justice, don't bother turning on your television...the moral supremacy of the law is no longer...a given...In fact, this fight is not even close."

*And a few years ago, an article in Newsweek bore the headline:*

## TOO MUCH OF A BAD THING.

It went onto argue that because it appears that no one on TV can be truly good or evil anymore, we're suffering from what it called "an anti-hero overload." The article continues: "there has never been a better time to be bad." It's not just drama, but comedy, too. From *The Office* to *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, says the article: "it's starting to seem as if bad guys are the ONLY good guys!"

In an earlier essay I talked about some of the heroes or anti-heroes from earlier days at kudos. At the gentler end are the Robin Hood-like con-men from *Hustle*. We love them because they steal from people worse than themselves, though it's hard to dispute the fact that they are on the face of it bad people who thieve for a living, they're law-breakers on a grand scale. If caught they'd go down for a very long time indeed.

Then there's the copper from life on Mars and *Ashes to Ashes*, Gene Hunt, adored by the viewing public, in spite of being a racist, homophobic, misogynist bigot who is - not to put too fine a point on it - unequivocally bent.

And finally, our Spooks, MI5 agents who in the name of some higher moral calling of their own imagining have cheerfully engaged in torture, extraordinary rendition and treason. Yet, episode in, episode out, they remain heroes for their huge audiences and we cheer them on every step of the way.

In my previous essay I talked about *The Sopranos*. Where in the pantheon of TV heroes does Tony Soprano fit? Tony's a profoundly 21st century creature. He's a businessman, an entrepreneur; he seemed to hit the zeitgeist. But is

Tony, the mobster, the end of the line? Or the first in an emerging order? The crime boss as increasingly legitimate entrepreneur? There can be a ruthlessness about big business - its utter cold lack of concern for the impact on ordinary people of some of its actions - that often seems not so very far removed from the psychopathy of the kind of criminal embodied by the Sopranos.

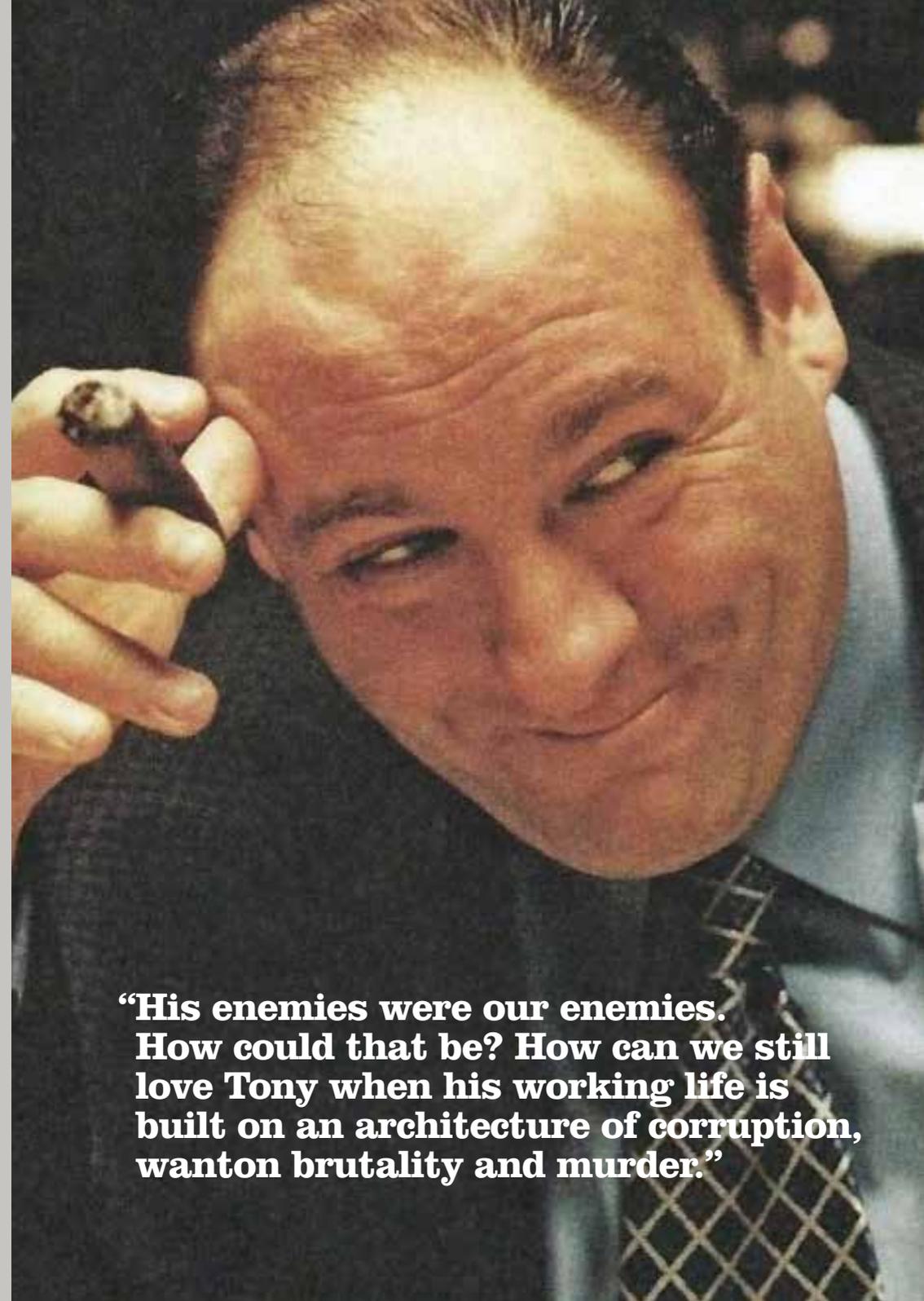
Some of Tony's business ventures are quintessentially 21st century. Waste management, his front, may have something of the Victorian about it, but when he sets up new income streams through property deals or fake internet companies, he is not so much the war lord of old, as innovative and commercially savvy business man of the here and now. You might say, he's the first dot-com don.

And who, you might ask, does more damage to America and ordinary American people - Tony's mob or Enron?

What heroic qualities does this violent, foul-mouthed, murdering, philandering mob boss possess? A man as self-destructive as he is destructive to his twin families of blood and crime. How did he become a "hero" of 21st century TV fiction? Is he one of Joseph Campbell's "boon bringers"? a man whose visions ...are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn." Or is he more like this? Campbell's words again: "He is the monster avid for the greedy rights of 'me and mine'. The havoc wrought by him is described in mythology and fairy tale as being universal throughout his domain. This may be no more than his household, his own tortured psyche, or the lives that he blights with the touch of his friendship and assistance...The inflated ego of the tyrant is a curse to himself and his world - no matter how his affairs may seem to prosper. Self- terrorised, fear-haunted, alert at every hand to battle back the anticipated aggressions of his environment... Wherever he sets his hand there is a cry (if not from the housetops, then - more miserably - within every heart): a cry for the redeeming hero, the carrier of the shining blade, whose blow, whose touch, whose existence will liberate the land."

That's not actually a description of Tony Soprano, nor is it about Donald Trump, though it could be. It's Joseph Campbell's portrait of the archetypal "tyrant-monster" - which is probably about as bad as you can get.

**Long before Tony blazed a trail into the world in 1999, Joseph Campbell pretty much had him to a tee. The only problem? We the audience LOVED Tony from episode 1, season 1, and never stopped.**



**“His enemies were our enemies. How could that be? How can we still love Tony when his working life is built on an architecture of corruption, wanton brutality and murder.”**

**“No man  
can wear  
one face to  
himself and  
another  
to the  
multitude  
without  
finally  
getting  
bewildered  
as to which  
may be  
true.”**

**M**ore disturbingly, we came to evince a sympathy for this devil, sometimes so strongly that we wanted to BE him. And there was no cry for the redeeming hero to take him out. He was the redeeming hero - or at least as close to one as 5 seasons of *The Sopranos* was ever going to get. His enemies were our enemies. How could that be? How can we still love Tony when his working life is built on an architecture of corruption, wanton brutality and murder.

In one famously disturbing episode he drives his daughter Meadow to look around some prospective colleges and while she's touring one campus, he nips off to garrotte someone he happened to spot earlier on his travels who a few months back had turned state's evidence against him. The killing is shockingly violent and cold-blooded. This was the 5th episode in the first series. Up to this point we the audience know Tony to be a mob boss not afraid to get blood on his hands, but he had never killed. Most importantly there was no precedent for the lead protagonist in any TV series to behave like this and retain any sympathy with the audience.

HBO feared that audiences would leave the show in their droves. As the episode was being prepared, HBO co-president Richard Plepler, recalls a conversation he had with *Sopranos* creator David Chase: "We called David in and said 'We can't have the hero commit a brutal murder this early in the series. Are you nuts?' He said, 'That's what it is, that's the show I'm making.' We thought about it for a while and said: 'OK, you're right. That is the show you're making.'" By definition they were saying, as I talked about in my earlier essay - fine, break rules. Let's see what happens.

This is about creators pursuing their own vision, and being allowed to. IN fact, Chase thought they'd lose viewers if Tony DIDN'T kill.

OK, he's a tad economical with the truth, but he is not just the capo of a Mafia family. Instead, he is a warm, loving family man. And here's the glorious contradiction. As *Sopranos* scholar Bruce Plourde has it, *Soprano* is on the one hand "a latter-day Satan...a manipulator, sociopath, a crook" yet on the other, just like us. Plourde again: "a family man who nurtures ducks in his pond...raises teenagers...seems like a regular, reasonable guy."

There's a glorious scene later in the same episode in which Tony Soprano is sitting in the corridor of a college while Meadow is being shown around. Above his head he sees a quotation from the college's most distinguished alumnus, Nathaniel Hawthorne. It reads:

NO MAN CAN WEAR ONE FACE TO HIMSELF AND ANOTHER TO THE MULTITUDE WITHOUT FINALLY GETTING BEWILDERED AS TO WHICH MAY BE TRUE.

**N**ow, we already know that Tony is very bewildered, because right at the beginning of the first episode we see him suffering so acutely from dizzy spells and panic attacks that he is forced to take himself into therapy. Hardly surprising, given the multiple contradictions in his life. Those of you who were here last week will remember his therapist Jennifer Melfi. He is literally torn between his two families - one, the mob by any other name, is effectively his very 21st century business: murderous, corrupt, amoral; the other a classic bond of blood, love and obligation, spanning wife, children, mother and a host of other relatives, many of whom, like Tony straddle the two worlds. His power is initially shared somewhat awkwardly with his Uncle Junior, in a living embodiment of the aphorism describing partnership as "the setting aside of mutual loathing for financial gain." Tony is nihilist and nurturer rolled into one.

**Soprano also fears change. We all do.  
Classic heroes are - like Tony - essentially  
conservative, fighting, as they usually are,  
to preserve and protect the status quo.**

Tony's rage and madness is as much as anything else to do with a profound sense of an old world order slipping from his grasp. But self-help and gangsterdom do not walk hand-in-hand, especially if the chosen form of self-help - therapy - involves confiding to a law-abiding stranger what it is you do. And herein is the way to making him sympathetic. The difficulty with TV or film heroes, especially the strong, silent types of old is how do you get inside their heads. Think of actors like Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Cagney and John Wayne, lone wolves all, men against the machine, pioneers and iconoclasts. (Tony Sopranos' favourite film, by the way, is *Public Enemy*, starring Jimmy Cagney, which relates the story of a young man's rise in the criminal underworld in prohibition-era urban America. It's famous for a scene in which Cagney's character hits his girlfriend in the face with a grapefruit).

As critic Joanna di Mattia writes "the ideal American man is one in control of his emotions: stoic, silent, disengaged and not prone to moments of self-disclosure." Think of the sort of man Clint Eastwood used to play in the spaghetti westerns and you won't be far off the gold standard. It was almost as if the less he said, the more obvious it was what was going on inside his head.

That was still a time when actions spoke louder than words, when men were men - men in this instance being defined as having the emotional complexity of an amoeba. (Very different from now, obviously). Remember the checklist? They tend not to have any friends, they don't fall in love, so they basically have no one in whom to confide. How do you get to know their innermost thoughts, sympathies and concerns so that you can start to care about them?

This is one great advantage the novel continues to have over visual story-telling media. Want to know what's going on inside your protagonist's head? The omniscient 1st or 3rd person narrator at the disposal of the novelist just tells you. In novels, people walk around doing a lot of thinking, with the novelist handily recounting each thought to us as it unfolds. Literary critic James Woods describes this as: "the classic post-Flaubertian novelistic activity." I'll take his word for it.

In film or TV, you have recourse only to internal voiceover, which often feels lazy, because it often is, or meaningful looks. For good old-fashioned heroes, these furrowed brows, portentous squints and impassive stares tended to suffice. They suggested a steely strength and doughty resolve. More importantly they efficiently masked the fact that little was going on behind the eyes and that if you found yourself stuck next to one of these types at a dinner you would swiftly discover that strong and silent was a euphemism for "really quite dull." But you liked them anyway because they "did good." Rescued damsels in distress, plucked small children from floodwater and generally saved the world. Whatever.

But in a morally complex universe mediated by the likes of Tony Soprano? We have no chance of sympathising with him unless he can talk to us. Judge him by his actions (in his case, murder, extortion, family betrayal and random acts of brutality) and there really isn't terribly much to admire.

An extraordinarily handy enhancement of this predicament for 21st century drama is the introduction of the therapist. The strong silent type need be silent no longer. The problem for someone like Tony Soprano, though, is that as soon as he ceases to be silent he can no longer be strong or in control.

Hardly surprising it's a delicate subject. This deep neurosis of his is of course one of the factors that makes Tony Soprano such a quintessentially 21st century man.

If you'll forgive the language, he might use to describe himself, it is his very "fucked up-ness" that allows him to be a hero of our time. It humanises him. And without that essential humanity he would stand no chance of engaging our affections or respect.

Because he's a man with baggage, stuff on his conscience that he's been bottling up for decades. He's also a Catholic. Before therapists emerged on the scene, you just went to your priest. Well, if you were an Italian mob boss, that is. And as Campbell has observed, the need for therapy rises in proportion to the decline of faith and spirituality. He wrote: "it may very well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid". Therapy and confession are one and the same - "both offer relief from guilt and stress, the root causes of Tony Soprano's problems." Which is plainly what he needs. As Bruno Bettelheim wrote in the Uses of Enchantment: "psychoanalysis itself is viewed as having the purpose of making life easy - but this is not what its founder intended. Psychoanalysis was created to enable man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it, or giving in to escapism. Freud's prescription is that only by struggling courageously against what seem like overwhelming odds can man succeed in wringing meaning out of his existence."

Tony's not looking for meaning. He just wants to become a more fulfilled philanderer and a more powerful mafia boss. The consequences of therapy actually working here will have no beneficial effect for the planet. Probably not what Freud had in mind either.

This is endorsed to blackly comic effect in the 4th season of The Sopranos when Tony himself attacks psychiatry as American self-indulgence. Melfi rebuts this, saying it provides the opportunity to "delve into sources of emotional and spiritual pain, and to search for truth." Soprano's reply? "Pain and truth!?... C'mon, I'm a fat fuckin' crook from New Jersey!"

But crucially, it is through therapy that, like Tony's shrink Dr Melfi, we are charmed and seduced by him. It's a redemptive process of sorts. And through it we discover his heroic qualities.

I mentioned earlier the actor Gary Cooper as an archetypal American hero. Tony in fact refers to him in the very first episode of the show. In therapy, he makes clear to Dr. Melfi his profound discomfort about any kind of emotional openness or honesty: "Whatever happened to Gary Cooper?" he wonders. "The strong, silent type? That was an America. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He did just what he had to do." So, Gary Cooper is not so much a hero to him, as someone against whom to measure his own weakness in seeking help through therapy. His childhood heroes, his role models would not be in therapy. In a later episode, Tony recalls this moment: "Remember the first time I came in here? I said the kind of man I admire is Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type, and how all Americans, all they're doing is crying and confessing and complaining - a bunch of fuckin' pussies. Fuck 'em! And now I'm one of 'em - a patient!"

Tony is a man with feelings, frustrations in his work (albeit crime), problems with colleagues (OK, they want to kill him, and one of them's his uncle, the other his mother), challenges in his family life (he's cheating on his wife and setting an appalling example to his children). His troubles, to some extent, are just like ours. OK, maybe a little more complicated. His Uncle Junior wants to kill him, because Tony has been spreading rumours about Junior's fondness for a sexual practise apparently regarded as unmanly in the Italian/American community; and his mother wants to kill him because she is angry that Tony sold her house. Oh, and he put her in a home when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Both regard his recourse to therapy as akin to betrayal.

The satirical sweep of The Sopranos is broad. It's a satire on the world of corporate culture (or any culture in which great power is wielded); it's a satire on the "family values" espoused by politicians and social commentators; and it's a scabrous attack, as well, on the crutch that is the American dependence on therapy and psychobabble. How ironic that it should be a psycho babbling it!

But the babble weaves an insidious web. We are slowly, gently but inexorably lured into embracing the logic of Tony Soprano's moral framework.. Much of what unfolds through Tony's eyes and ears is barely ambiguous. (And make no mistake, this man - the most unreliable of narrators - essentially represents our point of view). This is moral relativism at its furthest edge. Take the role of the police in The Sopranos, for example. As Douglas Howard argues in his excellent essay, Tasting Brylcreem, "at best, these feds are just another competing family." Cops have become not just a rival family, but rival businessmen as well (similarly seeking a return on investment - how many cop shows on TV today are preoccupied as much as anything else with the cost of an investigation?). There's always a deal to be done. On both sides of the law. As Maurice Yacowar observes in The Sopranos on the Couch, the police are effectively just a gang like Tony's" - though neither "as effective or smart."

Family is an emotive word and it's one used with mischievous effect by Chase and his team. Everyone knows the family is sacred. It is the glue that holds people and societies together. Any man who will do anything do defend and protect his family is a hero. That's Tony. Anyone who threatens the family? They're the bad guys. And in this case, that's the police. So, when they're watching him, phone-tapping him, searching his home or place of work, we share his sense of - wait for it - injustice. His privacy and that of his loved ones is being violated. And so the moral order of old is utterly subverted.



**“You come at the king,  
you best not miss.”**

It follows from this that our empathy for Tony ensures that his contempt for the law rubs of on us, the audience. So, too, as I mentioned in my previous essay, in the aftermath of the rape of his therapist, contempt for anything passing for justice. We see the world through Tony's eyes. Going back to the hero checklist, who do we want to be? Him or them? Who do we identify with? The forces of law and order? Or a murdering, racketeering, gangster. It's nothing like as clear-cut as it should be. Or rather, it is clear cut, and it's an unusual mirror we find ourselves standing in front of.

“The real drama,” argues Howard, “lies not with the ‘perfect, incorruptible hero’, but with the imperfect villain who struggles with human choices and falls prey to human desires....The Sopranos thus caters to this fascination with the criminal and his humanity, and to this belief in the failure of the system.”

As with *The Wire*, which I will be examining in a moment, the issues are bigger, societal. Crime and corruption have an almost organic presence, like a disease for which antibiotics no longer work. Organisations like the one at which Tony Soprano is the head are superbugs. The New Jersey of *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*'s Baltimore are equally infected. At best the balance between the forces of good, whatever that may be, and evil can only be an uneasy compromise. It's not even clear what solution anyone might want. Nothing is clear. This moral ambiguity is oddly satisfying for us, because it so clearly reflects the world of which we are a part. And it is a world in which there cannot, by definition, be clear-cut heroes. These 4 essays are all, one way or another, in praise of ambiguity. I don't believe there is a great TV drama series today that does not have a hero who is at least ambiguous, or an anti-hero at its centre.

**It follows from stories engaging us in the lives of anti-heroes that something must be happening to villains, too. That this blurring of right and wrong cannot just be happening to the people formerly known as the good guys. It must be happening to the bad guys, too. And it is.**

Which is why we don't just have the 21st century anti-hero. We have the 21st century anti-villain as well. Villains, in other words, who similarly reflect the morally murky pool in which they swim. Yes, they do bad things (but, remember, so do the good guys), but there's context for it. And in the best shows, that context emerges from writing of extraordinary subtlety and empathy - a combination of nuance, edge, detailed observation and resonant background that renders clear moral judgements impossible. The more you know about someone - the more raw data you have at your disposal to understand why they do what they do - the harder it is to pigeon-hole them. The show that excels in this kind of writing, that drowns its audience in a sea of rich and salty detail is, like *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*, also a child of HBO. It's called *The Wire*. Each series, we follow a team of cops who have a separate group of what the former President Bush would deem "evildoers" under surveillance. It should be clear who the guys good and bad are. But it's not.

*The Wire* was apparently Obama's favourite show. That's not so strange. It's the cool show du jour (like *The Sopranos*, it's on every list of top shows of the decade or all time) and anyone who claims it as their favourite can be sure to win a bag full of brownie points among the chattering classes on both sides of the political spectrum. Slightly more unexpected is Obama's choice of favourite character - gay stick-up man Omar Little, though the President was quick to explain: "that's not an endorsement. He's not my favourite person, but he's a fascinating character." Indeed he is.

Why is *The Wire* such a hit with politicians on both sides of the Atlantic? Well, it is apart from anything else "A panoramic, multi-layered analysis of the causes of the social problems that affect all inner cities". So writes Andrew Pettie in the *Daily Telegraph*. But does its documentary veracity necessarily mean that it is great drama?

*Wire* creator David Simon started life as a journalist and slipped into TV writing when the book he wrote about a year he spent living and working with a division of Baltimore homicide cops became a successful drama series. Called *Homicide*, it gave him a strong sense of how the world really worked. Or, rather, didn't work. As Simon himself put it: "I pitched *The Wire* to HBO as the anti-cop show, a rebellion of sorts against the horse-shit police procedurals afflicting American television." In a memo to HBO chief Chris Albrecht, Simon argued his case for a series that would reveal the fact that - in his words: "police work is at times marginal or incompetent. Criminals are neither stupid nor cartoonish, and neither are they sociopathic." Most importantly he wanted to create a series that would reveal the basic law enforcement model as

"calcified, cynical and unworkable." That in following just one case through a single series would "ultimately bring viewers from wondering in cop-show expectation whether the bad guys will get caught, to wondering instead who the bad guys are and whether catching them means anything at all."

Like the drama series I alluded to in my earlier piece, *The Wire* was a serial rule-breaker from the outset. As Anthony Walton wrote in his essay *The Rules of the Game: The Wire* brings us into a world "where those charged to serve and protect are often more concerned with career advancement and bureaucratic number-crunching than with any conventional notions of justice." And he goes on: "our ragtag band of hero cops are flawed far beyond the threshold of easy sympathy. " And as for the so-called bad guys, Walton describes them as being "so deeply, at times poignantly, circumscribed by the mean streets to which they themselves contribute meanness that easy hatred of them is likewise difficult."

You've heard of method-acting. Well, *The Wire* characterises a school of David Mamet-influenced "method-writing". Like Mamet in the theatre or David Foster Wallace in contemporary American fiction, *The Wire* has probably done more than any other TV fiction to properly and accurately reflect the multi-layered complexity of life as it is lived on the street. This is how we get to know our anti-heroes and anti-villains so well that our ability to pass simple judgements upon them evaporates.

To do that, to show life as it is lived, your characters have to speak language as it is spoken. This is not always elegant, writerly language. On the contrary, it can be ungrammatical, repetitive, unclear, boring, even downright ugly. As David Woods writes in *How Fiction Works*: "in order to evoke a debased language (the debased language your character might use), you must be willing to represent that mangled language in your text; and perhaps thoroughly debase your own language." This is another of the earlier essay's "broken rules".

*The Sopranos* by contrast - more like Mamet - invents its own poetry of the street, with characters sometimes talking in a vocabulary that cannot really be their own. It has a grandiosity and pomp perfectly suited to Tony Soprano's court. Interestingly, Chase later renounced the "cunnilingus and psychiatry" line you heard in the earlier clip as being too self-consciously writerly, but he loved it and couldn't resist leaving it in. That would never happen in *The Wire*.

This is Woods writing about David Foster Wallace, but he might just as well be referring to David Simon: "his fiction prosecutes an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America, and he is not afraid to decompose - often discompose - his own style in the interests of making us live through this linguistic America with him." Simon goes even further, perhaps even following Auden's

strictures that - unlike a poet - a novelist needs to discover how to be "plain and awkward" in order to (Auden again) "become the whole of boredom." The danger, of course, with this particular ploy is that the search for authenticity leads, like life, to a set of encounters, conversations and experiences that can in essence turn out to be undramatic. In other words, actually boring. And don't we watch TV to get away from the banality of our own daily routines?

By having opted for this risky path, flirting with dullness, it can allow much of the action to unfold almost in real time - not the artificial real time of 24 which brilliantly conjures the illusion of an impossible number of events (actually, not events so much as feats) squeezing themselves into a day. (24's hours are to real days what Dr Who's Tardis is to a phone box.) And once you start to do this, you can fill your drama with those telling, micro-details that are the stuff of life, and not necessarily the stuff of "drama" at all. And yet, in being so life-like, it achieves a different kind of drama.

That said, you can choke on too much detail. It can be "fetishised" to the point where it is self-conscious, over-stylised, blurring the distinction between character and creator. And it raises the question, "who's seeing this, really?"

This is "the cult of detail." Go too far, and it's not the stuff of really great TV drama. As Woods puts it, this "necklace of noticings...is sometimes an obstruction to seeing, not an aid." *The Wire* just stays on the right side of the line.

And what it means, for us as an audience, is that like the cops (or a future jury should any of this work actually lead to a court case) we struggle to find our own personal meaning and understanding in this mess and we don't all come to anything like the same conclusions.

There's a scene from the second series in which Frank Sobotka, a corrupt union boss opens up to Beatrice, a port officer he had been friendly with, who was working with the police:

Frank has been arrested on corruption charges, after a major police operation. His son has been arrested and charged with murder and his nephew is wanted by the police for an assault. His world, which he's worked hard to build, is crumbling. In this scene Beatrice offers him a helping hand following Frank's admission that "I knew I was wrong but I thought I was wrong for the right reasons..."

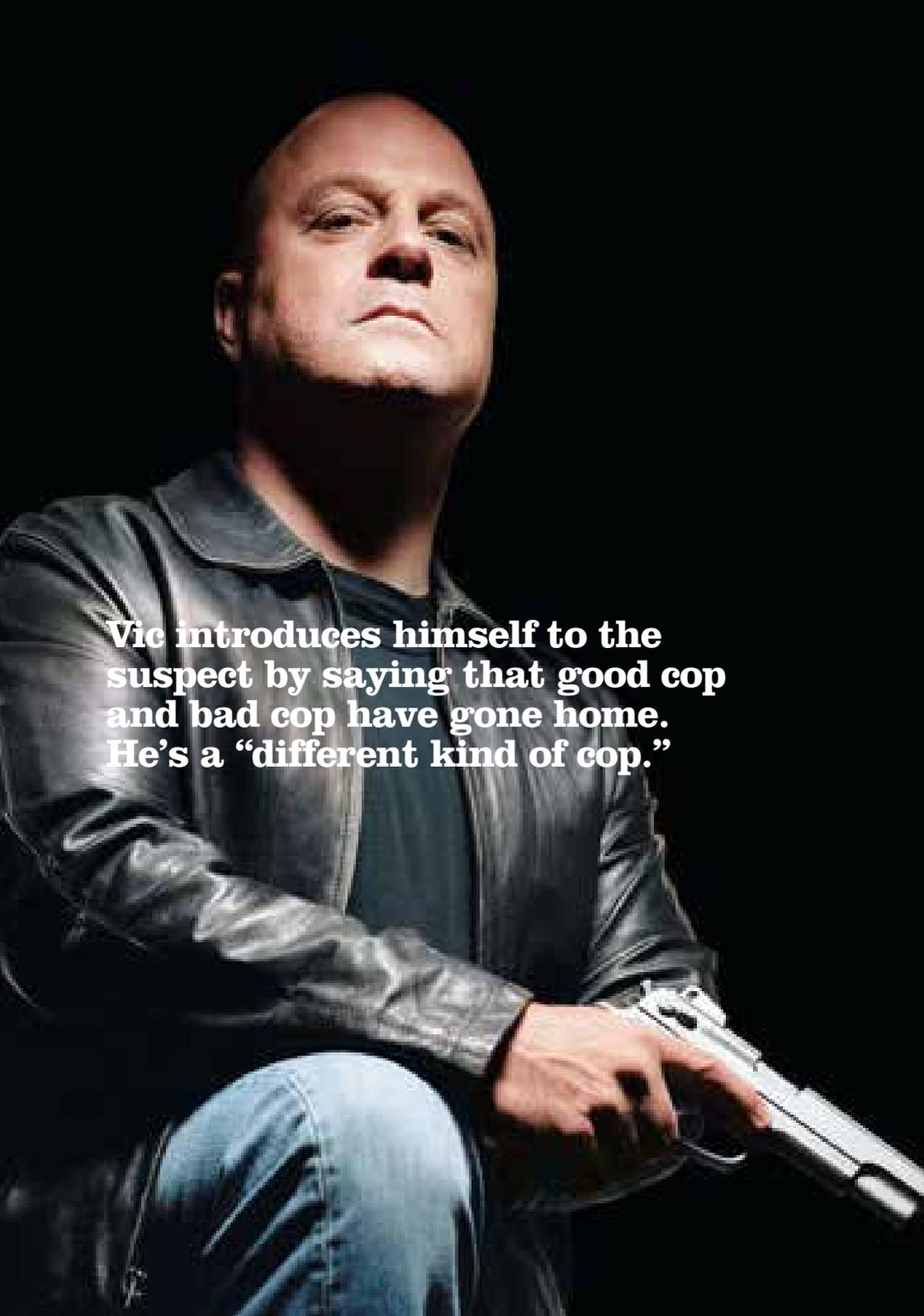


### **That phrase "wrong for the right reasons" sums up the behaviour of many of the characters - criminals and cops - in both *The Wire* and other dramas that tread morally complex paths.**

Beatrice says to Sobotka "you're better than them you got in bed with." Not an excuse, perhaps, but a kind of mitigation. As Simon himself put it, "have criminals ever been allowed this kind of sadness or complexity on a network show?"

In his view, this whole series was less a crime story, more about - as he put it - "the death of work and the betrayal of the American working class." A group of people he described as having become "excess Americans." It oozes humanity and moral ambiguity from every pore. In any conventional drama Sobotka would have been the bad guy. It's not so simple here. He's a profoundly sympathetic anti-villain, pursued by a group of not always wholly sympathetic anti-heroes. As Walton writes in his essay on *The Wire*: "there is no abstract principle of justice operating in this world, only real people." And he continues: "actions do have consequences: lives are broken, shattered, lost, or saved in a game that has no end." So in art as in life. These words are equally true of what is happening in Syria or as a result of the financial crisis. No classic heroes there either.

If *The Sopranos*, and its parent company HBO, introduced the world of TV drama series to a new kind of hero, the baton was feverishly picked up in the world of basic cable in general, and by FX in particular. HBO, as I discussed in an earlier essay, is a premium channel for which its audience pays a hefty annual subscription. In return for this, they get no ads. It means, naturally, that HBO's audience tends towards the wealthy, the middle class and the well-educated.



**Vic introduces himself to the suspect by saying that good cop and bad cop have gone home. He's a "different kind of cop."**

**B**asic cable is free to its viewers, but supported by advertising. It has a much broader demographic. Compared with the established networks like ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox, basic cable channels like FX and AMC were the new kids on the block, and they were looking for a way in which they could prize some commercially valuable eyeballs away from their better-heeled rivals. To do that, they simply had to find a way to differentiate themselves- especially in drama series.

Their inspiration came in the form of Tony Soprano. As my colleague, the American writer Frank Spotnitz, told me: in shows like CSI, Law and Order, ER and The West Wing, "the networks stood for the hero, the stuff of all their drama offerings. How better for the basic cable channels to define counter-programming than to take their heroes from a counter-culture?"

Seeing the success of The Sopranos, a former HBO executive at FX called Peter Liguri said why don't we become the HBO of basic cable? There was clearly a huge audience out there looking for adult, edgy programming who didn't necessarily want to pay a premium for it. There was no point doing conventional cop and doc shows. That was the preserve of the networks. But what if you took the clothing of cops and docs, using the format as a kind of familiar Trojan Horse for a mass audience, and injected into them some very badly behaved policemen and doctors? It was against a background of this thinking that a speculative script called The Barn by a writer called Sean Ryan became The Shield.

There's a scene from the first episode. In which the team investigating the disappearance of a little girl, suspect that a paedophile has her hidden somewhere. The paedophile is not co-operating. So the team summon Vic Mackey, the Shield's central character. Vic has his own idiosyncratic approach to interrogation.

Vic introduces himself to the suspect by saying that good cop and bad cop have gone home. He's a "different kind of cop." Vic gives the paedophile one last chance to tell him where he's hidden the little girl, but he doesn't ask nicely, he's graphic with his language. And when the suspect doesn't cooperate Vic moves on to his next tactic – extreme violence.

That became the defining scene in the opening episode. That line - "I'm a different kind of cop" was a spit in the coffee cup of network police procedurals, and established instantly a different kind of cop show. The casting of Michael Chiklis as Vic Mackey was every bit as inspired as that of James Gandolfini for Tony Soprano. Just as audiences were able to connect with Tony because he was a family guy, so audiences connected with Vic because he was demonstrably good at his job, a great cop - in his own way, absolutely the guy

you'd want to be there for you if the chips were down. As FX's President of Programming Nick Grad told me, "likeability is a very nebulous thing," but you really like Vic. And that's every bit as troubling as our empathy for Tony Soprano. Vic did, after all in that same opening episode, shoot a fellow cop in the face, and then spend the rest of each series covering it up. For the audience it sets up a lasting tension for the duration of *The Shield's* life. If he can do that, is there anything he isn't capable of? As in all good drama, this moment triggers a journey for Vic. Something as profound as that creates a karma. You can't not be changed, not be affected forever.

In bad drama, there are rarely such consequences.

As in sitcoms, characters and their worlds are unchanged from one episode to the next. What binds these anti-heroes together is that, like the dramas of which they are a part, they break rules. Not such strange behaviour for a gangster like Tony Soprano, but when a cop like Vic Mackey breaks rules our empathy for him becomes intoxicatingly subversive.

FX's Grad believes that these shows work, because for an hour each week, their morally ambiguous protagonists become our avatars. They do things we fantasise about and largely repress, but the shows are thrilling fairground rides of the imaginations for their audiences. They allow us to behave badly with impunity, to break rules without fear or consequences. Living as we do in societies where rules don't work and are routinely flouted, here's how we get our own back.

Except, of course, that in life, as in good art, there are consequences. As Vic discovered in the final episode of the final series. He confesses his crimes and gives evidence against close colleagues in exchange for immunity. But he's also taken off the streets that are his life-blood and sentenced to a desk job.

You'd never get 3 minutes of silence on network television. So bold - both in execution and performance. You just have to look in his eyes to be certain that for a man of action, death would be preferable to the permanent hell of desk-bound paper-shuffling. A stunningly ambiguous climax for a TV drama, worthy of a great novel or a great movie.

*The Shield's* Vic Mackey, has much in common with *The Wire's* anti-hero, the cop McNulty and anti-villain, the murderer D'Angelo both of whom, in the words of Anthony Walton, "rage in various ways, both suffer, against the strictures of the hierarchies in which they find themselves, but both lack any real power to effect change," and he goes on, "both are ultimately horrified by the changes they do effect, the trail of wreckage and bodies in their wake." It is in this way that they



win our sympathy, even our empathy. To be a real baddie all you need is just to care. And to be a badly behaved, but ultimately card-carrying anti-hero, like a good Catholic, you may sin just so long as you confess and repent. Or at least appear to be burdened by a deeply troubled soul.

They have been joined in the cable universe by FX's own anti-doctors in *Nip/Tuck*, and AMC's *Mad Men*, where Don Draper plays fast and loose with the truth in his professional life and then goes home and lies to his loved ones. Then there's Nurse Jackie, starring Edie Falco, as a heavily medicated, dysfunctional nurse. Or *Dexter*, the serial killer who's OK because he kills...serial killers.

These 21st century anti-heroes have also travelled beyond cable into the mainstream. Both *24* and *House* have at their core men behaving badly. *24's* Jack Bauer is as much torturer as tortured - in body and soul equally. Yet we excuse him. (It's worth mentioning that there are those who have criticised the series because its artificial urgency - the eponymous ticking clock - tips the moral scale in favour of torture as an acceptable last resort. Necessity here being the mother of the flouting of convention).

And in Hugh Laurie's *Gregory House*, the misanthropic drug addict at the heart of the show that bears his name, should be unforgiveable, but instead is universally adored and admired.



Both House and Bauer are rule-breakers, yet both appear to be good people doing bad things for good reasons. Cable TV's Soprano, McNulty and Mackey are more interesting, perhaps more resonant of the zeitgeist, because they are not necessarily good people, they are undeniably doing bad things, and it is by no means clear that their ends justify these means.

I talked in an earlier essay of TV drama series assuming the mantle of fairy tales for grown-ups. We need stories like these - to communicate to one another human experience beyond our own. And to learn from them. Audiences are now more aware, more sophisticated than they have ever been.

**To continue to nourish us, these stories have to reflect the way the world is. Their heroes, too.**



David Simon, the Wire's creator damned the kind of network doc, cop and legal shows that are the cannon fodder of the networks as - his words now: "shaped by huge corporate entities to reassure viewers that their world and their future are better and brighter than they in fact are.

"It was part of a myth being peddled, as he saw it, that in addition to those who are encouraged to thrive in a free market economy, there will always be a place for those who try hard, but do not necessarily succeed to be good citizens - people who behave well, work hard and do their best to look after their family. "It is no longer possible to describe this as a myth", Simon wrote, "It is no longer possible even to remain polite on the subject. It is," he concluded, "a lie."

I believe he speaks for all the dramas I have been celebrating in this cluster of essays. These are stories that occupy a morally ambiguous hinterland, peopled as they are by a new kind of anti-hero and, their corollary, the anti-villain.

**I will close on Simon's words:**

**“We are bored with good and evil. We renounce the theme. With the exception of saints and sociopaths, few in this world are anything but a confused and corrupted combination of personal motivations, most of them selfish, some of them hilarious. Character is the essence of all good drama; and plotting is just as fundamental.**

**But ultimately, the story-telling that speaks to our current condition, that grapples with the basic realities and contradictions of our immediate world - these are stories that, in the end, have a small chance of presenting a social, and even a political argument.**

**And, to be perfectly honest, we are not only trying to tell a good story or two. We are trying, in our own way, to pick a fight.”**

**I think he and his fellow scribes have done that, and television drama, with its heroes now fit for purpose, has just got a whole lot more interesting as a result.**

