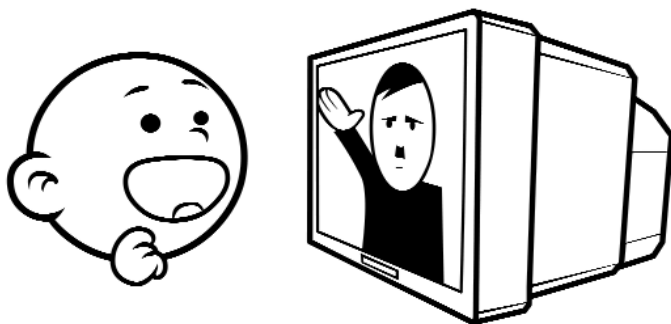


PART THREE 2002

In which Jonathan King takes umbrage, Jack Bauer watches the clock, and Uri Geller eats worms in the jungle.



A Choir of Coughing Rectums [19 January]

Birds do it. Bees do it. Even educated fleas do it. Yes everybody, but everybody goes to the toilet now and again. Even the Queen does, although it's hard to imagine her wooden expression ever changes, even if she's constipated.

But, so the cliché goes, you rarely get to see people going to the toilet on television. You'd never witness, say, Phil from *EastEnders*, sitting resplendent on the throne (although that's probably because when he needs to go he just gets down on all fours in the middle of the street and lets it drop casually out the back, like a horse).

For too long, broadcasters have been afraid to confront the harsh reality of bodily functions head-on, but there's recently been some headway, notably from the Americans – first they set half the action in *Ally McBeal* in a unisex toilet, then followed it up with a truly spectacular open-door bathroom sequence in last week's *Sex and the City*. Now, in the spirit of solidarity, and to show support for this new world order, the British are following suit with *Toilets* (BBC Choice), an entire series about all things lavatorial, hosted by walking seal-of-quality Claudia Winkleman.

Isn't it exciting, living in a renaissance?

This week's edition is concerned with how to go to the toilet. Subsequently, it's jam-packed with information that absolutely everyone on the planet knows already. Here are just a few of the startling revelations uncovered.

Revelation #1: *Men behave strangely at urinals.*

According to the programme's exhaustive research, when having a tinkle, men eschew conversation entirely and concentrate instead on staring dead ahead like unfazed shop-window dummies. It then goes on to explain how peeing alongside one another gives some men the jitters, to the extent they dry up completely and have to stand in silent humiliation until the room empties and emission resumes.

What it fails to say is that, for a sure-fire cure for this kind of urinal stage fright, you have to look to the world of contemporary lit-

erature, specifically Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*, in which the narrator explains how he overcomes his pee-pee nerves by picturing himself urinating on to the face and head of the person standing next to him. The astonishing thing is that this tactic actually works – precisely the kind of useful information this programme could have done with.

Revelation #2: *Men's toilets are dirty; women's toilets are clean.*

Now there's a surprise. Most public gents' look like the aftermath of a water-pistol fight at an incontinence convention. By contrast, women's toilets are kept ultra-clean, generally resembling a cinematic vision of an eerily anodyne future society.

There's the glimmer of some useful information during this section – a writer advises men appalled by the cave-like funk of public conveniences to nip into the disabled loos instead, on the grounds that they're spacious and clean. Plus it's easy to barge past the cripples on your way in.

Revelation #3: *People don't like other people overhearing their 'noises' – so they cough, flush, or run taps loudly in a bid to disguise them.*

Perfectly understandable this, because the moment your backside starts misbehaving loudly, you feel entirely stripped of all nobility – although in my experience, that's a very British trait. The Americans don't seem to suffer from it – on several occasions I've found myself standing in stateside craphouses reeling with amazement as cubicled rows of clean-cut, Gillette-model businessmen nonchalantly unleash a truly thunderous din – a choir of coughing rectums accompanied by the sound of plummeting mud. And as for the French – well, they're currently lobbying the Olympic Committee to make loud, undignified defecation a team sport.

Revelation #4: *People used to wipe their bums on old bits of corn on the cob.*

To give the show its dues, this did come as a genuine surprise.

So there you have it. I can't help thinking there's a good show to be made out of lavatories (perhaps a *Scrapheap Challenge* special), but sadly, this ain't it. Rather than providing any real insight into precisely why we're so anal about our anuses (as *C4's Anatomy of Disgust*

did last year), it seems content to simply reiterate obvious facts, in the manner of a particularly uninformative retrospective 'I Love' nostalgia blast. Perhaps they should have called it 'I Love Going Plop-Plop' instead, and given us a clearer idea of what to expect.

That's it. Now wash your hands.

A Tin of Beans and No Can Opener [26 January]

When the shit hits the fan, you'll wish you'd seen *Ray Mears' Extreme Survival* (BBC2). Sitting in an irradiated wasteland, longing to snare, skin and spit-roast a passing mutant rat – if only you knew how – you'll pause and kick yourself for not having paid attention while Ray was on our screens.

So why didn't you? Answer: because on the evidence of this week's edition, *Ray Mears' Extreme Survival* is actually rather boring, that's why. So if you don't tune in then maybe one day you'll starve to death up a hillside in a tent clutching a tin of beans and no can opener, but at least you enjoyed slightly more entertaining television before death swooped down to snatch you away.

Perhaps I expect too much, but when I see the word 'extreme' in a programme title, extreme is what I want. But this feels decidedly softcore. For starters, Ray looks more like a plump village butcher than a weather-beaten survivalist. I was hoping for more macho excitement – even some brutality perhaps. I wanted to see Ray snap the head off a swan, then use its beak to jemmy open a coconut. But no. Instead he seems to spend half his time trudging around New England, setting up tents and making tedious little fires. That may be survival, but it sure ain't living, and having spent many a miserable, uncomfortable life under canvas myself, I for one would sooner die than ever go camping again.

Still, in case you find yourself stranded in an emergency situation this week – marooned in your living room with the remote control out of reach and Ray Mears on the box – here's some tips on how to survive the programme itself:

1. Drink strong coffee.
2. Sit with your arms folded, staring straight ahead at the screen.
3. When your attention starts to flag,

simply imagine the programme is more exciting – and if that fails, try glancing at a more interesting object in the room for a few minutes (a rolled-up sock or coffee cup should do the trick) until you feel ready to leap back in.

Still thirsting for macho kicks, I was forced to take a look at *Have-a-Go Heroes* (BBC1), a pop-doc blend of real-life stories and psychobabble aimed squarely at the Tony Martin in all of us. The best bits are the almost shamefully unpleasant candid-camera stunts, designed to test the public's willingness to intervene when crimes appear to happen beneath their noses. Early on, two actors feign a road-rage incident in the middle of Primrose Hill, tossing each other around the pavement, swearing and swiping at one another in an increasingly violent manner.

If Ray Mears were in the vicinity he could doubtless fashion an impromptu bow and arrow out of some nearby railings and put an end to the carnage, but sadly he wasn't available. Instead, the fight takes place before an audience of gawping pedestrians, with all but one unwilling to step in. Afterwards, the camera crew nose around asking the inert civilians to justify their apparent cowardice.

'You just stand and watch, don't you?' says a man who did just that, before adding cheerfully that even if he'd lived in Ancient Rome he'd 'still watch the Christians being burnt'.

Once the eye-popping stunt footage has spooled away, impossibly glamorous rent-a-shrink Dr Sandra Scott (as seen on *Big Brother* and – well, pretty much anything else that requires an impossibly glamorous rent-a-shrink) is on hand to provide the analysis, helpfully bothering to explain why passers-by are more likely to come to the aid of a young woman in smart clothing than a dishevelled man clutching a bottle of beer. (Apparently it's because people make snap judgements about a person's appearance – something Dr Sandra Scott, who resembles an icy Bond villainess, should know all about.)

This is an overlong show which runs out of steam about 100 years before the end, so in all likelihood you'll have nodded off before the spectacular finale, in which the genuinely tragic tale of a man who died attempting to defend a stranger is turned into one

of the most jaw-droppingly mawkish pieces of television you're ever likely to see. Do we really need to see staged shots of a murdered man's son climbing a ladder in a bid to catch a glowing star representing his late father? Answer: no – but they went ahead and filmed them anyway. It was a taste crime in progress, and someone should have intervened – but all they did was stand and stare.

Humanoids with Funny Foreheads [2 February]

Q: When is nostalgia not nostalgia? A: When it's set in the future. Which pretty much sums up *Enterprise* (Sky One), the latest mutated offspring of Gene Roddenberry's original *Star Trek* series, boldly going where countless men have gone before.

In the grand tradition of *The Phantom Menace* and, er, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Enterprise* is a 'prequel', set in the days before Captain Kirk hauled his paunch around the galaxy in search of strange new worlds and alien hippy chicks hungry for some Earth-man lovin'.

It's a mixed bag. On the plus side, teleportation devices don't appear to have been invented yet, so there's no preposterous 'beam me up' nonsense on show. Nor is there any high-concept faffing around in a 'holodeck' to confuse matters. Instead the format is more stripped-down, more in tune with the easy-to-grasp original: visit alien planet; discover hostile species; teach them a lesson; kiss and make up; wave goodbye; captain's log; the end.

All sounds good on paper. But there are drawbacks. The retro touches (old-fashioned phaser effects, endearing nods to the 1960s in the spaceship design, a female Spock) feel at odds with the up-to-date production values. And just to further muddy the general sense of what-era-is-this-anyway? they cast *Quantum Leap* time-hopper Scott Bakula in the lead role. Sensors indicate Bakula's Captain Archer contains no character traits whatsoever; he simply walks around looking permanently constipated (presumably he's having trouble producing the captain's log).

Then there are the aliens, who in fine *Trek* tradition seem to be little more than humanoids with funny foreheads (generally

shaped like someone's fired a handful of crab parts into their brow). In these days of CGI dinosaur fun, we deserve better than mere make-up – we want permanent crewmembers with the bodies of spiders and the heads of donkeys, sporting Jamiroquai hats.

And the theme music – Jesus. The worst kind of 1980s soft-metal wanking imaginable; a Gillette commercial from hell. I'm all for rock music in theme tunes – Channel Five's CSI benefits greatly from having the Who play out over the credits, and if I were in charge *Newsnight* would open with an uninterrupted three-minute blast of Motorhead's 'Ace Of Spades'. But the makers of *Enterprise* have commissioned an absolute dirge, whose unironic presence betrays an inherent lack of wit at production level. Sure enough, the programme itself is far too humourless for its own good; overall, it's got the feel of a bland motivational poster on the wall of a software house (you know the kind of thing: a photograph of some dolphins and a greetings-card motto extolling the virtues of teamwork – distract the worker ants with enough of them and you can reduce desktop wrist-slashings by 13 per cent a quarter).

Marginally more successful prequel confusion can be found in *Smallville* (C4) or 'Superman: The Pubic Development Years'. Telling the tale of Clark Kent's teenage existence – a sort of Dawson's Kryptonite, if you like – it's just as confusing as *Enterprise* in that it's set firmly in the present day, when in your head it should all take place on the set of *Happy Days*.

Clark himself looks like a young Rob Lowe, and as befits the future man of steel, he's nauseatingly pleasant. Any normal hyper-powered teenager would be abusing his abilities to pull off super-human *Jackass*-style stunts – tossing live cows onto the roof of the local high school, that kind of thing – but namby-pamby Clark contents himself with tidying up at the speed of light and insipid do-gooding. Boo to that.

The young Lex Luthor is a far more interesting prospect – a slap-headed 19-year-old whose inexplicable baldness hasn't yet turned him bitter and evil. Instead, his wilfully unpleasant father is the Darth Vader of the piece, simultaneously spoiling and corrupting his offspring.

Staying on a retro tip, *Scrubs* (Sky One) is a medical comedy splicing elements of *M*A*S*H* with the stylings of *Ally McBeal*. There are plenty of good lines, but the whole thing's in constant danger of being undermined by the *McBeal* influence – an over-reliance on quickfire 'fantasy' sequences and self-consciously kooky cartoon sound effects.

And for a black comedy, it's not quite black enough – more dark grey with occasional neon flashes. Patients die left, right and centre, but the show tends to chicken out and turn mawkish at the very last moment.

Cuh. Americans.

Arrogant, Unrepentant, Ugly and Rich [9 February]

This week, Channel 4 brings you the tales of two notorious sexual predators whose names have become synonymous with iniquity and manipulation. One was an uncontrollably demented holy man who exerted a dangerous level of influence over the Russian royal family and inadvertently sowed the seeds of revolution. The other recorded 'Una Paloma Blanca'.

The latter is profiled in Jon Ronson's *The Double Life of Jonathan King* (C4). Anyone expecting a kooky Theroux-style stalkathon is likely to be disappointed, since the programme largely consists of sobering talking-head interviews with King's former friends and victims, intercut with grimly comic archive clips illustrating the maestro's oeuvre.

It transpires King used his celebrity status to dazzle a succession of under-age boys, befriending them, showering them with gifts, exhibiting interest in their opinions, and then, just as they began to trust their exciting altruistic chum, spoiled it all by bringing his erect penis into the equation.

Convicted sex offenders don't tend to arouse much sympathy in the general public – particularly when they're arrogant, unrepentant, ugly and rich – but King himself comes across as such a miserable wretch, it's hard not to sense a small mouse of pity gnawing at the edges of your mind. An insecure misfit, who developed his

odious, grating persona specifically to provoke a reaction from an otherwise uninterested world, King's crimes seem motivated more by crushing inferiority – coupled with a deeply misplaced craving for acceptance – than simple tabloid malevolence.

More disturbing is the fact that he got away with it for so long simply because he was famous – despised by huge swathes of the population, but famous nonetheless – and this pathetic glamour hypnotized his victims into returning.

One interviewee, whose relationship with King spanned 18 months, explains how exciting it felt to ride around in a Rolls Royce, accompanying a star.

'But he was only Jonathan King,' remarks Ronson.

'He was the most famous person I knew,' comes the poignant reply.

While wonky mouthed, troll-faced King had to deploy a rainbow-coloured wig and a string of novelty records to impress his prey, mad monk Rasputin had more natural advantages, namely piercing eyes and the apparent ability to heal ailments.

Like many people, my knowledge of Rasputin has to date been based solely on Boney M lyrics – I knew he was 'Russia's greatest love machine', and 'a cat that really was gone', but little else.

Until now. *Masters of Darkness: Rasputin* (C4) is one of the most entertaining historical documentaries I have ever seen, partly because it deals with the nefarious deeds of an absolute shit, and partly because it's brilliantly put together – a genuinely thrilling combination of informative talking-head opinions, archive footage and creepy reconstruction, liberally swathed with horror-movie sheen.

Rather than leaping head first into his most unhinged period, the programme carefully charts Rasputin's evolution from childhood freak (apparently his parents were 'disturbed by his ability to heal horses by touching them' – try finding *that* in 'Parenting for Dummies') to influential lunatic, lending weight and momentum to what could have easily been a gaudy ho-ho at a shagging monk.

As it is, Rasputin's shenanigans were fuelled by warped religious logic. Believing that redemption was the ultimate spiritual experi-

ence, it followed that the only way to garner redemption was to commit sin first – and the bigger the sin, the bigger the redemption that came after. Spiritual bulimia, in other words.

Which is why, in his prime, Rasputin would have sex with anything. Toss a ham sandwich across the room and he'd fuck it twice before it hit the floor. Russian society, gripped by a craze for spiritual weirdness and convinced of his healing abilities, gave him free reign to indulge, even though he stank like a sink full of mouldy fur.

Just like Jonathan King, Rasputin got away with it because of the aura of celebrity surrounding him. Yet both cases took place some time ago – today, we're more fame-obsessed than ever, so I've got no idea what insane acts of depravity our modern A-list stars get up to.

Although if *you* have, and you fancy drawing me an accurate picture (in crayon), send it in, care of the 'Guide'. Most repulsive example wins a pack of bourbon creams and a shoe. Promise.

'I didn't "get away" with it' [2 March]

After his dissatisfying (and overlong) encounter with the Hamiltons, Bridget Jones pin-up Louis Theroux does himself no favours whatsoever in *When Louis Met Anne Widdecombe* (BBC2) pestering her about her virginity (or lack of it) in a downright unpleasant manner within the first few minutes. And when she objects – having consented to the documentary on the understanding that her sex life (or lack of it) would not be discussed – her gruff complaints to the offscreen producer are left in the edit, thereby making her appear guarded and unreasonable.

Theroux is at his best when pitching his blatant insincerity against that of an equally insincere subject – fighting fire with fire – but, unfortunately for him, Widdecombe doesn't appear insincere in the slightest. A distant, stunted control freak with a face like a haunted cave in Poland who espouses depressing political views, maybe – but so are half of the pricks in the House of Commons. And aside from her ghost-train looks, Widdecombe has little that is strange or weird about her. The end result is an uncomfortably

sneery hour-long amble in the company of someone who doesn't warrant the effort of a sneer in the first place.

Speaking of which, no advance tapes of *Being Victoria Beckham* (ITV1) are available, presumably on the basis that the programme's content is so universe-poppingly mind-blowing, its release must be cautiously timed and controlled, lest epochs start shattering around our quaking ankles. Therefore, in a fit of nihilistic despair, I opted for *Michael Landy: The Man Who Destroyed Everything* (BBC2) instead. Landy hit the headlines in 2001 when he spent a fortnight systematically dismantling and shredding his every possession in a deserted C&A store in the middle of Oxford Street. Everything was torn apart and mangled, from the big (his Saab car) to the small (a pen he stole from a friend's house). A detailed roster of all the destroyed items is all that remains – a list of 7,226 deceased belongings.

This documentary follows him in the weeks immediately afterwards, as he stumbles around, trying to make sense of his actions and gingerly making his first post-shredding purchases. There's also background information on Landy himself, and comments from dealers, critics, relatives and artists.

Ah, artists. They're always good value for money, and there's plenty of them here. Hilariously, some cantankerous old auto-destructive artist named Gustav, actually wearing a beret and pointedly sitting with his back to the camera (because he 'shuns all publicity'), explains that 'Landy demonstrated the artist should not be the centre of attention'. He's saying this to a crew making a documentary on artist Michael Landy, the man who destroyed everything, and you don't get much more centre-of-attention than that.

So why did Landy do it? Take your pick: it was either a brilliant attack on consumerism or a brilliant piece of self-promotion. Either way, a brilliant spectacle, and an unexpectedly touching piece of television.

Finally, an aside: a few weeks ago, writing about the Jon Ronson documentary on Jonathan King, I foolishly – and to be honest, somewhat lazily – invited readers to send in crayon sketches of A-list celebrities engaged in hypothetical wanton exploits. The

response was disappointing. In fact, only one person bothered entering: Jonathan King himself.

Using prison notepaper, Belmarsh inmate FF8782 drew a stick man sitting at a desk, captioned 'Charlie Brooker at word-processor (A-list star in act of modern depravity)'.

He's a one.

'I didn't "get away with it" because of the aura of celebrity surrounding me,' he writes, 'I got away with it because I didn't do it – a terribly boring explanation, although true.'

He also takes issues with my describing him as 'ugly' ('very handsome, as your picture showed') and 'insecure' ('I don't feel the slightest bit insecure – in fact, at the moment, rather too secure,' before going on to mildly berate me for not describing him as an 'easy target' or the victim of 'delusions, exaggerations, compensation [or] false allegations'.

Quite an amusing letter, as it goes, and had you received it you'd probably find it hard not to warm to him – unless, of course, you were one of the under-age kids he once waved his dick at. Ah well. What a wonderful world.

A Sure-Fire Recipe for Chuckles [9 March]

Jesus pole-vaulting Christ, you absolutely **MUST** watch *All About Me* (BBC1). There are no words in the English language to adequately describe it, so I'll have to invent one: flabbertrocious. That's a combination of 'flabbergasting' and 'atrocious', and it's as close as I can get to conveying the programme's perverse car-crash appeal without resorting to wild gesticulations, donkey noises or daubing a six-foot illustration of a weeping swan on your living-room wall.

This is that most unlikely of things: a joint Jasper Carrott/Meera Syal vehicle, in which they play a multi-racial couple with children from previous marriages, one of whom is severely disabled. A sure-fire recipe for chuckles if ever there was one.

I'm extremely fond of tortoise-headed Jasper Carrott, largely on the basis of warm teenage memories of his stand-up routines – but

a versatile actor he ain't, and his performance here single-handedly redefines awkwardness. He spends the entire half-hour looking about as comfortable as a horse trying to balance in the middle of a see-saw. Your heart goes out to him, and indeed to everyone else in the cast – thoroughly decent sorts who've found themselves unexpectedly shipwrecked on the rocks of Bumwipe Island.

Bad sitcoms are ten-a-penny, but *All About Me* transcends them all. It's not just the shoddy jokes (half-hearted gags that lie around like dying soldiers on a battleground; sample exchange: 'Does your son like football?' 'No – he supports Man United!'), but the inclusion of frankly astonishing 'poignant' interludes that render the programme unique. The final five minutes of this week's episode – a belief-beggaring laugh-free sequence in which Jasper Carrott revisits his childhood home, has a flashback, and leaves in tears – constitute the most awesomely misjudged piece of television I've seen in years. As I said at the start, words can't do it justice, and with every cell in my body I urge you to tune in and witness the mangle for yourself.

Speaking of incommunicable spectacle, after weeks of being urged by friends, I finally got round to catching *Club Reps* (ITV1), and – well, what is there to say? It's like staring at footage of a football hooligan spinning round on a plastic sheet, dribbling and soiling themselves while 'Sex Bomb' plays in the background. I felt like dressing up as Travis Bickle and wandering onscreen to dispense a little smoking-barrel justice.

Why, precisely, are they filming these ugly, self-aggrandising, slack-jawed, leering, drunken, pointless buffoons? Answer: so we can all have a good cathartic sneer. And naturally, the cynical gambit works – but lest we forget, you could create an equally effective Bickle-baiting hatefest by training the cameras on the kind of snide, boneheaded, bellowing, drug-pumped, upper-middle-class scum who populate the media and consider this kind of programme a worthwhile addition to the tapestry of contemporary culture. Morons filming morons for the benefit of morons: it's one big imbecilic circle-jerk.

Do I sound bad-tempered? It's not all hatred and despair. Thank

the Lord for 24 (BBC2) – utterly preposterous and impossible to leave alone. The big gimmick actually works. Each episode takes place in ‘real time’, tracing the events of a single hour in one chaotic day, slowly building, in the style of a weekly Marshall-Cavendish part work, into one 24-hour, 24-episode whole. The sense of rising momentum and increasingly clammy claustrophobia has me hopelessly gripped, even though on reflection it all seems about as realistic as Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory. I’m already looking forward to the end of the series, at which point some enterprising cable channel can run the entire shebang in its full, improbable 24-hour glory.

And Kiefer Sutherland: bloody hell, he’s good. His famously buttock-shaped cheeks have diminished in size, so it’s now possible to concentrate on what an assured performer he is without worrying whether his mouth is about to break wind. Mind you, I’m slightly worried about his character, a counter-terrorist troubleshooter who spends approximately 70 per cent of his screen time blabbing on his mobile to anyone who’ll listen.

He’s so cellphone-dependent, he’ll have to have spent the whole of episode eight recharging the damn thing – assuming, of course, he hasn’t been finished off by a microwave-induced brain tumour by then.

Casualty on a Cliffside [23 March]

Quivering fool that I am, I’m petrified of heights – or, more specifically, tumbling off them. Perfectly rational really: if there’s one thing the human body wasn’t designed to do, it’s plummeting.

Benevolently enough, my anxiety also extends to cover other people. I can’t bear to watch builders standing on rooftops or window cleaners sitting on window ledges (it’s only a smudged window for God’s sake – get back inside and stop risking your life in the name of transparency). Rock climbers are the worst. In the suicidal stakes, clambering up a mountainside is an activity on a par with licking plug sockets or goading Mike Tyson with a brightly coloured stick (now there’s an idea for a televised sporting event).

All things considered, I was expecting to sit through the BBC's new mountain rescue drama *Rockface* (BBC1) with one hand over my eyes and the other unscrewing a bottle of tranquillisers. Imagine my dismay when in this week's episode (the first I've seen), no one topples off anything resembling a perilous drop. There's no yawning-chasm action whatsoever: just a couple of kids trapped on a small rock in the middle of a disappointingly placid river, who get rescued in the most laidback way imaginable. Boo to that.

Presumably, *Rockface* is supposed to be 'Casualty on a Cliffside', but the setting seems a little too self-limiting. At least in *Casualty* there's a certain random variety to the injuries – one minute you're watching someone trying to prise the lid off a jam jar with a butter knife, and the next their arm's dangling from a single tendon. Where, precisely, is the diversity going to spring from in *Rockface*? Once you've covered plunging rock climbers and mislaid hikers, what else can happen? Someone choking to death on a mint cake? After six weeks, it's all going to seem as predictable as a programme called 'Frisbee Retrieval Unit' ('OK, team, we've got a Frisbee lodged up a tree in the park – let's be careful out there.') *Rockface*'s answer seems to be to take the *Holby City* route and ramp up the soap opera element until the mountain-rescue element becomes almost incidental, so we get to see more of the team's personal lives than is entirely healthy. Trouble is, not only are their personal lives altogether pedestrian (with nary a paedophile nor psychopath amongst them to spice things up), but since half the cast consists of vague celebrity lookalikes it's easy to get confused. There's one who looks like Robbie Williams, another who resembles Brad Pitt with dark hair, and a girl who could double for Sophie Ellis Bextor in a dimly lit nightclub. And the ones who couldn't open supermarkets for a living just look weird: there's a rugged bloke with fascinatingly tiny eyes (about the size of a bat's), and a balding guy who looks a bit like a cheerful potato.

Still, maybe I'm missing the point: perhaps the real appeal of *Rockface* is supposed to lie in the glorious scenery – although if that's the case they should just broadcast a still shot of *The Haywain* instead and have done with it.

The 'What the Fuck?' Factor [30 March]

This week on BBC1: hardcore pornography! Hardcore BESTIAL pornography! And it's all pre-watershed, where the kiddies can see it! Quelle horreur!

But don't panic. We're not talking about a special edition of *East-Enders* where Phil falls off the wagon and violates a dog in the middle of the Square (although I'm lobbying hard for that storyline, ideally during this year's Christmas Special). No. The raw sex in question occurs throughout *Weird Nature* (BBC1), which this week pokes a lens at the bizarre world of animal copulation.

Fascinating stuff, of course, unless like me you've been recently singled, in which case it'll only serve as a ghastly reminder that there are wart-encrusted toads out there in the world enjoying more fulfilling sex lives than you.

It's a cunning programme, *Weird Nature*. The producers have latched on to what viewers enjoy most about nature shows – namely, the 'what the fuck?' factor – and decided to provide nothing but. Consequently, there's no breathy Attenborough commentary, lingering shots of majestic fjords or diagrammatic explanations of the way cormorant's beaks work – just one juicy piece of oddness after another, accompanied by as little background information as possible. It's the natural-history equivalent of binge snacking.

Human sexuality may be a garbled mish-mash of perversions (and I once read about a man who could only achieve orgasm by swinging a live chicken around so its panicked wings brushed the tip of his penis, so I know what I'm talking about), but we've got nothing on the average beastie. *Weird Nature* brings us a tiny rodent that literally shags itself to death, a female fish that turns itself into a male and a downright disturbing sequence in which a male praying mantis continues thrusting despite being decapitated mid-coitus (a tiny brain in his rear end keeps him going – look for a similar sequence in the next series of *Club Rept*s).

Filthiest of all is the humble sea flare, which has a male front end and a female back end, thereby enabling unlimited orgies in which aroused passers-by latch on to whichever end is closest. They're

even shown forming a snug sexual daisy chain at the bottom of the sea, each simultaneously humping the other like a pornographic synchronised-swimming team. So be humbled, fetish club regulars: next time you're congratulating yourself on your latest bacchanalian sexual encounter, bear in mind there's tiny slug-like monsters who can effortlessly outdo you – and *they* don't have to spend a fortune on clockwork bum machines in order to reach nirvana.

Anyway, back to the insanely addictive *24* (BBC2). Those of you who've missed it thus far have a chance to catch up tonight, when BBC2 screens the first four episodes back to back, prior to the fifth instalment on Sunday (helpful BBC scheduling for a quality US import – what the hell's going on? Progress?).

It's now 4–5 a.m., and finally someone actually goes to sleep (a minor character, admittedly, but at least it's a vague nod in the direction of realism). For some reason, the Noble Senator seems to think he'll be able to function on the most important day of his political career without enjoying a moment's shut-eye the night before. Didn't he see *Touch the Truck*? Assassination will be the least of his worries once sleep deprivation kicks in and he starts swatting invisible demons in the middle of a pre-election press conference.

Meanwhile Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) continues his ongoing quest to get himself sacked. In week one, he shot a superior in the leg with a tranquilliser gun, and then blackmailed him. In last Sunday's episode, he thumped an FBI agent in the guts and got a police officer killed. Having thus torn up the rulebook, this week he proceeds to piss on the tattered remains by trying to organise a jail-break.

All this in the space of a few hours. By 7 p.m. he'll be constructing a death ray and threatening to demolish what's left of Manhattan.

The Relentless Tick of the Clock [6 April]

Assuming you bothered to read my jabberings last week, apologies for the déjà vu, but I'm still hopelessly fixated with *24* (BBC2), the

'real-time' assassination drama that's single-handedly transformed Kiefer Sutherland from a Droopy-a-like brat pack also-ran into a sturdy action hero, and is currently the best populist drama on television by a good six-metre stretch.

Somehow, the relentless tick of the clock distracts you from pondering the show's more ludicrous elements – at least while you're watching it. After each episode I can't help shaking my head in disbelief at what I've just witnessed, as though awakening from a distinctly implausible dream that seemed convincing at the time. Therefore, in a bid to retain my grip on reality, I'm compiling a list of the most absurd elements, which I present here as a public service.

1) Jack Bauer's Anti-Terrorist HQ

What's with this place? Frosted glass, chrome railings, tasteful lighting, glamorous employees draped in Armani – it looks more like the offices of a Hoxton-based fashion magazine than a top-secret quasi-military nerve centre. I keep checking the background, half-expecting to see Sophie Dahl eating a punnet of sushi, or someone in a pair of low-slung jeans slipping an imported DJ Shadow CD onto the office stereo. It doesn't help that no one present, aside from Action Jack himself of course, appears to be doing any work whatsoever: look closely and you'll see they're simply wandering calmly hither and thither, occasionally stopping to shuffle bits of paper around or gawp at a monitor (doubtless in order to languidly check their Hotmail or log on to 'Friends Reunited'). They're supposed to be thwarting an assassination attempt, fer Chrissakes! They should be running around chain-smoking and barking orders at subordinates, or at the very least rolling their sleeves up and sweating like hillbillies.

Actually, there is one exception to the no-sweat-in-the-workplace rule and that's . . .

2) Shifty Beppe Guy

You know the one: the patently sinister computer expert who's banging Jack's ex-mistress, and has a miniscule hint of black goatee beneath his bottom lip, like a Hitler moustache that's accidentally slipped down his face. His job seems to consist solely of demand-

ing to know 'what's going on' every thirteen seconds, being outwardly confrontational with his boss (i.e. Jack), and peering suspiciously at anyone within a five-metre radius. He's like a dark twenty-first-century 're-imagining' of the McDonald's Hamburglar, and as such it's hard to comprehend why the hell they employed him in the first place.

3) Bill and Ted's bogus kidnapping

Bill and Ted, who appear to have undergone a startling transformation of attitude during their years away from the limelight, have kidnapped Jack's daughter at the behest of the terrorists. Quite why a ruthless cabal of ultra-organised killers would entrust such a hazardous scheme to a pair of loafing, nu-metal stoners has yet to be explained. Perhaps it's a work-experience thing.

4) Mandy the oversexed, overkilling plane bomber

And while we're on the subject of the terrorists, what the hell's up with Mandy? Her task in episode one: to steal a photographer's press pass. Does she break into his apartment and rifle through the drawers? Does she pick his pocket on the subway? No: she seduces him on a passenger jet, screws his brains out in the toilet, steals the pass, and then covers her tracks by blowing up the plane in mid-air and parachuting into the middle of the Mojave Desert. Perhaps I'm oversensitive, but to me that smacks of overkill. Never one to do anything by halves, she opened episode two by stripping naked in the desert and spices up episode three with a French kiss for her Alanis Morissette girlfriend. By episode nine she'll be doing that trick with the ping-pong balls. Probably as part of the assassination.

5) Jack's car

Jack's car is a thing of wonder. Not only is it capable of travelling to any location in under five minutes (pretty handy in a real-time show), it's also positively laden with handy gizmos. This week he makes use of a fingerprint scanner which seems to have been installed *specifically* to identify thumbs he's recently severed from dead assailants. It's like the Innovations catalogue on wheels: next week, expect him to spend ten minutes operating a dashboard-mounted air de-ioniser before opening the boot to reveal a combination rotating tie rack/GPS satellite system.

I could go on, but space won't permit me. Send your own twenty-four implausibilities in and I'll add them to the roster. But hurry: the clock's ticking.

Frowning with Added Vigour [13 April]

He's a toff. She's a pleb. Together they're a crime-fighting force to be reckoned with. I speak, of course, of Lynley and Havers, currently solving *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries* (BBC1).

It's all creaky bunkum of the highest order, but curiously entertaining nonetheless. I can't put my finger on precisely where the appeal lies, but it's got something to do with Inspector Lynley himself – the least congenial law enforcement officer since Harvey Keitel in *Bad Lieutenant*.

Not only is he an absolute crashing posho (fourteenth in line to the throne, raised on a diet of fox chunks in pauper's tears, etc., etc.), he's also devoid of humour and physically incapable of performing any facial expression more complex than his standard three: 1) annoyed, 2) annoyed and frowning, 3) *very* annoyed and *really* frowning.

I'm not joking: his face never changes. Lynley seems to have taken the traditional British principle of maintaining a 'stiff upper lip' and applied it to his entire head. You could spend an afternoon flicking rice in his eyes and he wouldn't blink or flinch once. He doubtless maintains the same rigid appearance even at the point of orgasm, although it's as hard to envisage Lynley reaching a climax as it is to picture, say, Peter Sissons in a similar situation.

(Speaking of which, when are they going to give Peter Sissons his own detective series? Can you *possibly imagine* how great that would be? They could simply call it 'Sissons', cast Jenny Powell as his glamorous sidekick, and boom: instant ratings magic.)

Anyway, back to the Lynley Show. Two episodes in, and a pattern has already developed. Despite the fact that he's a *Metropolitan* police officer, and should really be spending his time picking incriminating fibres from heroin-soaked cadavers in the capital's gutters, each week Lynley is summoned to an archetypal British

location (last week a public school, this week a whopping-great mansion) deep in the glorious countryside. He must be part of the Met's new Picturesque Murder Division. Having arrived in the middle of *The Haywain* to frown at a collection of absurdly shifty suspects (each with more skeletons in the cupboard than Ed Gein), he encounters an old friend who becomes enraged by his insistence on following basic procedure by questioning them. Meanwhile, common old Havers puffs along behind him, repeatedly bemoaning Lynley's personal involvement in the case or making barbed comments about the class system, while failing to uncover the faintest shred of evidence herself. Midway through the investigation, a second victim buys the farm, right under the collective nose of the local police force. This annoys Lynley immensely, causing him to spend the rest of the episode frowning with added vigour. In fact it messes his face up completely – by the time the killer (easily identifiable as the character with the least amount of screen time) is unmasked, Lynley's eyebrows are knitted together in a tangled snarl, like a man halfway through a werewolf transformation.

In other words, you know what you're getting with *The Inspector Lynley Mysteries*: the same story, week after week, with few troublesome facial expressions to interrupt your viewing pleasure. Its function is not to provide any genuine mystery, but something altogether familiar and comforting: the TV equivalent of a flask of warm cocoa and a big slice of Battenberg.

Oops: little space to discuss *24* (BBC2). I'm swamped by your e-mails regarding the mounting implausibilities, from the glaringly obvious (Jack's repeated cellphone use in the hospital, the terrorist's preposterous hijacking of every CCTV system in the world, Kim's astonishing grave-digging skills) to the insanely specific ('Jack's phone is a Nokia 7110e. After dialing a number, it takes around seven seconds to be connected, whereas Jack gets an instant connection,' writes Drew Jagger). And five of you questioned the decision to cast Cherie Blair as Nina.

As for me, I'm busy mourning poor Janet York, who in the space of seven hours got seduced, deceived, kidnapped, assaulted, injected with heroin, hunted, run over, revived, and finally mur-

dered in her hospital bed. Still, at least she never learnt that her dad had been murdered, mutilated, stuffed in a trunk and replaced by a psychotic impostor.

Every cloud, etc.

Leaving South London [20 April]

I'm going to kill myself. Don't try to stop me. It's all planned out. Just as Nicolas Cage drank himself to death in *Leaving Las Vegas*, I intend to commit slow-motion suicide by eating nothing but jumbo sausage rolls from Gregg's the Bakers on Battersea Park Road. Leaving South London, if you like. Come July my arteries will be so clogged, my heart will start knocking on my chest and demand to be let out for some air.

Still, I can expire safe in the knowledge that by stuffing my face with low-glamour lard I'm going against the grain. This week's *Food Junkies* (BBC2) examines how supermarkets have altered our eating habits, replacing the traditional notion of buying what you want to eat with an altogether more aspirational purchasing strategy.

The programme opens with a Waitrose honcho visiting Portugal to inspect some 'horned melon' – a bland fruit whose desirability is dictated by its out-of-this-world appearance: it looks like a triffid's testicle. More a talking point than a taste experience, it's doomed to nestle in the fruit bowls of smug colour-supplement Joneses, intent on expressing their sophistication by filling their po-faced homes with self-consciously refined crap. It's the latest hateful twist in a revolution that's seen traditional grocers (with their cheery overpricing and quaint rotting produce) usurped by out-of-town supermarket motherships (hawking snooty olive oil and frosty triffid bollocks).

No shots were fired, but it's still been a ruthless coup. Supermarkets have tried everything, from squeezing food producers until they snap, to engaging in demented price wars (the show covers the Baked Bean War, when rival supermarkets slashed prices to 3p a can – and kept going, in one case actually paying customers to take them away).

The current tactic is to hire a celebrity chef. Sainsbury's has Roy Hattersley Jr (Jamie Oliver), Waitrose plumped for Raymond Blanc. Just about the only TV pan-slinger without a deal is Antony Worrall Thompson, who claims he's not really interested in that kind of thing (which is good news for the trade – who'd want to shop in a supermarket recommended by the warrior dwarf from *Fellowship of the Ring*?).

Further entrepreneurial spirit in *Cannabis Cafes UK* (BBC2), which follows scouser Jimmy as he tries to open a Dutch-style 'coffee house' in Bournemouth – a plan only mildly hindered by the fact that it's against the law.

Stupid, really. All drugs should be legal, with the possible exception of Pro-Plus, and aside from the paranoia, memory loss, apathy, psychological dependency and disorientation, marijuana has few ill effects. Quite why any self-respecting stoner would bother venturing outside (as opposed to sitting at home in the dark playing 'Super Magic Rhino Party' on a Sony Wowbox 4) is beyond me, but, hey, if someone wants to pay good money to visit a New Age bongo shack and sit opposite some prick with a chillum, for God's sake let them.

Interesting stuff, but having sat through *Food Junkies*, it's hard to shake the suspicion that in five years' time Jimmy will be heading a national chain of out-of-town spliff bars, replete with designer hash and a saturation ad campaign starring celebrity toker Howard Marks.

So You Think You Want a Hand the Size of a Cymbal? [27 April]

It's not often you discover the truth behind a myth, but it happened to me today. I'd heard of radio DJs receiving crateloads of freebies whenever they 'inadvertently' mutter a brandname, but always dismissed such tales as cynical fable. Until now. Last week, I wrote of my life-endangering addiction to the 'jumbo' sausage rolls available from a certain high-street baker's, and lo and behold, four days later, an unsolicited assignment of piping-hot savouries

arrives at my workplace, as though scattered by a benevolent god.

Do I feel corrupted? No. Just ill. I've never eaten so much mashed pig in one sitting. I can already sense the ingested calories preparing to distort my body in new and exciting ways. Soon I'll be the proud owner of a mighty set of man-tits: those wobbly little melted pyramids of flab that nestle above the planetoid guts of the nation's masculine fatties.

To prepare myself for the inevitable, I cocked an eye at *So You Think You Want Bigger Boobs?* (C4), an epoch-shattering 'TV experiment' charting the progress of a flat-chested Liverpool hairdresser (eerily enough, also named Charlie) as she dons a set of fake breasts for a week in order to ascertain whether top-heaviness will improve her life. In the opening half, Charlie is sent to Shepperton Studios, where special-effects artists take a mould of her existing chest and set about creating a decoy bust to drape over the top. So far, so good – but as soon as the fruits of their labour are revealed, it's clear the project will fail.

What they have produced is perhaps the largest and most unconvincing pair of breasts you'll see this side of a fairground hall of mirrors: two mammoth swellings lolling in opposite directions, each topped off with a nipple the size of a cork. The moment Charlie hauls them on, she looks like one of those inept Internet fakes purporting to depict a topless starlet – the porno equivalent of Frankenstein's monster, only slightly less arousing.

Before long, Charlie's complaining that they're 'heavy', that they 'get in the way' and, least surprising of all, that people are 'staring' at them. Of *course* they are – you look like you've got a Ford Ka reversing out of your ribcage, for Christ's sake.

Consequently, the programme tells you nothing, save the obvious: being an aberration of nature ain't exactly a barrel of laughs. Still, it's inspired a range of follow-up programmes that I intend to start pitching tomorrow: 'So You Think You Want a Hand the Size of a Cymbal?', 'So You Think You Want Moss for a Beard?', and most promising of all, 'So You Think You Want to Walk down Oxford Street with a Dick Grafted onto Your Forehead?'

The big TV event of the week is the return of *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*

(BBC1), something I'm unqualified to comment on with any degree of authority, having been too young to appreciate the original ITV series, which at the time seemed to consist entirely of slightly frightening men standing in a Portakabin, bellowing at one another in a dialect I didn't understand. (Having just read that description back, I realise I've made it sound like the sort of thing avant-garde toffs pay £640 to see at the Royal Court Theatre, but never mind).

What to make of this twenty-first-century respray? Well, it's early days, but to this newbie it feels sturdy enough. For one thing, it's refreshing to see a cast composed of unsightly, unglamorous blokes (or 'blerks'). Jimmy Nail in particular looks like an identikit photo assembled by Picasso using nothing but close-ups of knuckles and spuds. You know you're deep within a true jungle of ugliness when Kevin Whately's the best-looking man on screen by a wide margin.

As for the programme, it's a slyly jumbled concoction: a cosily predictable cartoon about loveable rogues, interspersed with flashes of grit (one's dead, one's got a terminal illness, and another's been reduced to driving a drug dealer around local schools to make ends meet). I suspect fans of the original may scream blue murder (that's their job), but I'm sufficiently interested to turn up for episode two.

Oh, and in case any other PR agencies fancy following the marvellous example set by Gregg's the Bakers, I'd just like to mention Blaupunkt, Sony, Agent Provocateur, Virgin Atlantic, Budgens, Walkers French Fries (any flavour), Ikea and the Nintendo Gamecube.

No one sent me a fucking thing.

The Most Sour-Faced Person on Television [25 May]

What an appalling time this is for non-voyeuristic, unpatriotic, football-hating Britons. First the screens get clogged up with the World Cup and *Big Brother*, and then the Queen's Golden Jubilee comes along to really piss on your chips.

Unless you're Jennie Bond or a gee-whiz American tourist, it's

hard to understand why you should care less about old Mrs Monarch. Consider the evidence. Has she ever done anything even faintly amusing? No. Is she a wonderful orator? No. Can she fly or shoot lightning from the tips of her fingers? Don't be ridiculous.

The Queen doesn't even look like she enjoys being queen – a state of affairs that might save the day by rendering her slightly pitiful and endearing, if it weren't for the leaden sulkiness she tends to radiate as a result. Now that Victor Meldrew's been killed off, Her Majesty is the most consistently sour-faced person on television, perpetually wearing an expression like someone's just cracked open a packet of shitbiscuits directly under her nose.

The annual Yuletide speech is a case in point – fifty years of practice, and she's still bloody hopeless at addressing the nation. Steely gaze, stilted delivery, surly awkwardness . . . come on! You're the Queen, for God's sake! You spend the rest of the year flopping about in outrageous opulence, so if we ask you to turn up on TV for a ten-minute chinwag once a year, couldn't you at least *pretend* to enjoy it? Honestly: the face she wears, you'd have thought she'd been asked to squat on a pine cone at gunpoint. Come to think of it, that would be a Christmas broadcast worth watching.

Yet despite all this evidence to the contrary, some of Great Britain's dimmest lightbulbs insist on behaving as though HRH Grumpybones is in some way special or interesting, and our TV stations are happy to accommodate their delusion – this week's one-off special, *The People's Queen* (BBC1), being a prime example.

Tune in and here's what you'll find: acres of amateur footage of Liz Windsor turning up at public events to smile and wave at her minions, interspersed with interviews with the enthusiastic patriots holding the cameras, and a select few fortunate enough to shake hands with her.

Their recollections aren't especially illuminating. 'She had such great skin and her teeth were gorgeous,' recalls a woman who met the big Q at a Silver Jubilee bash in Bootle. Of course she had great skin, thicko – she's spent a lifetime reclining in gold-plated baths dousing herself with the most expensive balms known to man, and at your bloody expense.

Whenever the proles' searing insight threatens to falter, the programme whisks the simpering interviewees back to the location of their epoch-shattering encounter, so they can relive the moment all over again – minus trifling ingredients such as crowds, bunting, fanfares, and the immediate presence of Her Majesty the Queen of England. Call me a cynic, but it's hard to relate to the genuine excitement some participants must have felt at the time when you're watching some old goon standing in a street circa 2002, muttering, 'There was a flag over there,' and 'I was standing here,' and 'The Queen's car slowed down round about there,' ad nauseam, until you feel like slamming his head against the pavement.

Absurdities aside, there are a few genuinely interesting clips on offer – footage of the Queen as a gurgling five-year-old, and a fascinating sequence in which Her 20-year-old Majesty runs around on the deck of a ship, flirting with sailors (remarkable for two reasons: 1) Hey, she's quite foxy, actually, and 2) It's just about the only time I've seen her smiling without looking forced).

As a final aside, I'd recommend *Spooks* (BBC1), if only because any drama series that's prepared to build Lisa Faulkner up as a major character, then shove her head first and screaming into a deep fat fryer . . . and *then* blow her brains out . . . and put all this unexpectedly in episode *two* – deserves brownie points for sheer balls-out nerve alone. What next? Introduce Charlotte Church, then toss her in a threshing machine? At least she'd scream more harmoniously than poor Ms Faulkner, which might limit the number of furious complaints a bit.

Voice of an angel, you know.

It's not a 'Beautiful Game' [22 June]

Think of something you don't like. Not necessarily something you hate, but something you're ambivalent about. For the sake of argument, let's say you're thinking about country-and-western music.

Now, picture a world in which country and western has become inexplicably popular. It's everywhere. It spills from every radio. When you buy a newspaper, a third of it is devoted to country and

western (news, reviews, sales statistics, whopping great photographs of Garth Brooks picking his bum, etc.). Pubs overflow with people in ten-gallon hats watching country-and-western concerts on a big screen, jubilantly yee-hawing along with every flick of the steel guitar. Taxi drivers insist on discussing classic Johnny Cash albums with you, even after you've told them you're not keen on the man. Television is filled with footage of cowboys and people eating 'grits' (whatever the heck they are), interspersed with professional analysis of their grit-eating technique and billion-dollar commercials for the latest tasselled shirts. And when Billy Ray Cyrus trips over a mike stand and sprains his ankle, fans riot through the centre of town, smashing up buildings with their fists and feet.

How would you feel? Alienated? Resentful? Furious? Probably all three. You'd also have some measure of how I (and the thousands of football-averse citizens like me) feel during the World Bloody Cup (BBC1/ITV).

It's not a 'beautiful game', all right? It's just 'a game'.

The matches themselves I could probably withstand were it not for the dull circle-jerk of punditry that surrounds and envelops them. It's like being locked in the greyest room in Boredom Hell, the air thick with sweat and violent aftershave, while paunchy sales reps stand around monotonously discussing sales figures.

I can't understand the need for such exhaustive analysis. Oh, I've asked people about it. People who care about football. They *love* the analysis. 'ITV's the best,' said one, 'it's like being in a pub, listening to some blokes talk about football, except they're genuine experts.'

Really? To me they're just nerds (all football fans are nerds). And if there's anything worse than personally encountering a football nerd, blathering on until you can practically sense your lifetime joy supply being permanently depleted, it's watching an entire panel of them on television, day after day after mindbending day.

IT'S A GAME INVOLVING CHANCE, YOU IMBECILES! IT'S GOT A BALL IN IT, AND BALLS BOUNCE! THERE'S A HUGE RANDOM ELEMENT RIGHT THERE! STOP BLOODY SCRUTINISING! SHUT UP!

But no matter how hard I bellow, they simply don't stop. On and on they blurt, boring for Britain: Bobby Robson, Ian Wright, Gary Neville, Martin O'Neill (the sourest man on television – he has the demeanour of a man who's just spent the last hour being spoon-fed earwax), Ray Winstone (Terry Venables) and, worst of all, Gazza.

Ah, Gazza. Perpetually gurning like a Cabbage Patch Kid that's just found a lollipop behind a mulberry bush, he slurs not just words but entire sentences, into one long incomprehensible gurgle. Analysis you can't even hear: genius.

Here's a typical exchange:

LYNAM: Well, the match ended five hours ago but there's still plenty for us to dissect, and mark my words we will, at punishing length . . . Paul Gascoigne, what did you make of it?

GASCOIGNE: Zwozzerbrilyntsnurtenfurten.

VIEWER: What?

GASCOIGNE: Izfluckederbelldunnersayedunnitsgonninnagull.

VIEWER: WHAT???

You're watching the English dictionary melt before your very eyes.

The players (and they *are* players, not 'lions' or 'heroes' or anything else – just men who are quite good at kicking balls around, like little children do in parks) aren't much better. So little of interest spills from their mouths (aside from the odd spectacular salvo of phlegm) it's hardly surprising there's been so much attention paid to their haircuts. Beckham's in particular is hideous. He looks like a damp osprey. It's only marginally better than David Seaman's 'fairground worker' abomination (at least that's *funny*).

Still, there is hope. I'm writing this prior to the England-Brazil match, which I sincerely hope we've lost by the time you read this. Maybe once we're out we can get back to normal. The nauseating football-centric commercials will become less omnipresent (is there a single player who doesn't routinely slurp corporate sch-long?). Coverage will peter out. And best of all, it'll be possible to switch the TV on again without getting bored to death by a pundit's dribbling gob.

Especially one you can't even understand.

Crapping in Outhouses and Strangling Chickens

[6 July]

Dontcha just love Americans? They're so cute, with their pudgy faces and their pudgy brains, whooping waving their flags, firing their guns, hauling their elephantine behinds into chain hamburger shacks to plug their hollerin' mouths with grease and mashed-up cow flesh. Ain't they the *neatest*?

That's mindless racism, of course. In my experience, Americans are among the nicest people on earth. It's not their fault they're governed by an eerie, apocalyptic dormouse – they didn't even vote for him, after all. Yes, there are plenty of lunatics and dickheads in the States, but before chastising them for that, I suggest you try walking around Britain with your eyes and your ears open for a few minutes, to build a clearer sense of our own scum-to-genius ratio.

Anti-Yank prejudice is often motivated by jealousy of course, because right now they're the most pampered folk on earth. But it wasn't always so, as this week's *The Frontier House* (C4) demonstrates. A stateside spin off of *The 1900 House* (a surprise hit over there), *Frontier House* takes the same surviving-the-past principle and relocates it to the US. Three families have agreed to ditch their all-American dream homes in exchange for four months fending off the elements in Montana, playing the role of pioneers in the Wild West circa 1883. Cue much hilarity as they sit around eating tastebud-punishing combinations of flour and cornmeal, crapping in outhouses and strangling chickens.

But that's the idea anyway. But historical authenticity isn't the main draw – the fun lies with the almighty personality clash between the two main families, the Glenns and the Clunes. The Glenns are likeable, earthy, liberal types. The Clunes are a bunch of pricks. Heading up the Clune clan are husband Bordon and wife Adrienne. He's president of a manufacturing company, she's a pampered LA housewife. They live in a Californian mansion. Why participate? Gordon wants quality time with his kids. Ahhhh.

But hang on: Gordon's idea of 'quality time' consists of macho fantasies in which he and junior bond over firearms in the

untamed West, and the moment he discovers that the programme's dedication to historical authenticity doesn't extend to overturning federal hunting laws – i.e. that he can't simply run around blasting every creature in sight – he turns into Michael Douglas in *Falling Down*.

'I'm very disappointed in how little this part of the wWst is going to be emphasised in this programme,' he mutters bitterly. Presumably he was also looking forward to forming lynch mobs, raping slaves and getting scalped by Comanches.

Even the provision of a genuine, loaded firearm (for shooting coyotes which might attack their livestock) fails to cheer him up. It's been made in Russia, and that really sticks in Gordon's craw, particularly since he's bought his own antique shotgun along to give his kids, and can't wait to show it to us.

'This gun was made in 1886,' he says, huffing with a scary combination of anger and excitement as he fingers his beloved weapon. 'Look at this engraving: pictures of rabbits and squirrels. This is a kid's gun. Kids in the West had guns. But what they've given us is something you'd better not do a close-up on, because it's *embarrassing*.'

Adrienne, meanwhile, is upset by a similarly outrageous infringement of her human rights – the ban on make-up, which quickly drives her into a flub or nigh-on suicidal tears. With any luck she'll find Gordon's shotgun and give herself a full cranial makeover before the series is over.

Amazingly, all the self-centred griping occurs during the initial preparation stage, before they've even moved into their 'frontier cabin'. As if to prove the existence of karma, the Clunes' luck continues to falter as the families set out via wagon for their new homes.

Some of the horses go nutzoid; Adrienne is almost trampled underfoot, while their eight-year-old son Conor gets thrown from the wagon, narrowly escaping death.

God alone knows what kind of indemnity forms the producers made them sign up before taking part, but it's clear that genuine risk of life and limb is seen as being all part of the fun – good news

for the viewer, bad news for the luckless Conor, who is later mauled by a dog.

Personally, I can't wait for next week, by which time everyone's shouting or in tears, and Gordon's threatening to use his cherished shotgun for real. Oh, and Conor gets eaten by a buffalo. Probably.

Like Tipping Your Hat to a Prostitute [13 July]

Hello. My name is Charlie Brooker and I'm a hypocritical snob. Like millions of other hypocritical snobs, I like nothing better than settling down to a Sunday roast in the local pub, flipping through the papers with a mouthful of undercooked parsnip. Like millions of other hypocritical snobs, I buy two different papers – a broadsheet (in my case – the *Observer*), and a gaudy tabloid (the *News of the World* – the grubgasm of choice for any serious voyeur).

The broadsheet provides serious news, profiles of unheard-of sculptors, reviews of books I'll never read and jazz CD's I'll never buy, aspirational recipes and interminable think-pieces on male-female relations or parenting or a host of other things I really couldn't give a sun-blushed shit about. The tabloid provides scandal and photographs of celebrities with their chests out, both of which I pretend not to be interested in.

Why bother buying the broadsheet? Because it makes buying the tabloid feel somehow less shameful. It provides a veneer of civility, like tipping your hat to a prostitute. See: hypocritical snob. There are millions of us. Close down the Sunday tabloids and their broadsheet companions would collapse overnight – they'd be no point in buying them any more.

I bring this up in the light of *My Worst Week* (BBC1), a new series looking at the 'story behind the scandal', which opens with an exhaustive raking-over George Michael's 1998 'toilet incident', and which, by interviewing tabloid editors, paparazzi and fans, seeks to hover somewhere above the grubbiness of it all, while simultaneously taking its shoes off to a wade thigh-deep into the bog.

Let's get one thing clear – when I refer to 'grubbiness', I don't mean Mr Michael's rather endearing indiscretion. I've never com-

mitted a lewd act in front of a policeman (adjusting my crotch during an episode of *The Bill* notwithstanding), but it sounds quite fun, and certainly far less grubby than paying to ogle bum-shots of Britney spears taken by an overweight photographer hiding in a tree, before turning the page to tut-tut at the 'sordid' antics of somebody – anybody other than myself.

Anyway back to *My Worst Week*. Naturally, since there's nothing to say about a teensy bit of rudeness that took place four years ago, the show takes half an hour to do so, padding the time with blurry, impossible-to-watch 'reconstructions' of the incident, interspersed with talking heads from paparazzi perverts (who, hilariously, don't want their identities revealed) and assorted tabloid prickerati (Piers Morgan, editor of the newly principled *Daily Mirror*, chastises the 'rank hypocrisy' of the public, before saying his gut instinct was to 'get as much salacious detail as you possibly can' on his good pal George, whose rubbish 'Shoot the Dog' single Morgan's paper recently touted as the pinnacle of genius).

Does the programme pick him up on this? Does it say, 'Hang on a sec – which is more perverted: waving your goolies around in a loo, or spending six days camped outside the home of a man who waved his goolies around in a loo?' No. Come the end there's no opinion, no conclusion – in short, no point.

It's just there, bunging a hole on the schedule, just one more tiny monument to celeb-obsessed needlessness. So why bother writing about it? Because I'm a hypocrite. And why slag it off? Because I'm a snob. But I told you that at the start so don't act surprised.

On to *Believe Nothing* (ITV1), Rik Mayall's new vehicle (and I'll leave a pause here for you to insert the quad-bike/vehicle joke of your choosing), which I rather enjoyed, even though (judging by episode one) it's not particularly funny. It's heartening to see a new, mainstream sitcom so completely hell-bent on being just plain silly.

Mayall, who now closely resembles Sven Goran Eriksson (who in turn resembles Professor Yaffle from *Bagpuss*), plays an egotistical professor called Adonis Cnut (the most brazen 'comedy' name since Kenny Everett's Cupid Stunt) entangled in a succession of

absurd conspiracy theories. Utter pantomime, and nothing to do with real life whatsoever, but when it comes to sitcoms, I'd rather have Rik Mayall (a hero during my adolescence, even if his recent forays into anti-euro rhetoric have made him look like a genuine cnut) bellowing his way through surreal whimsy than a cast of interchangeable twenty-somethings with dating dilemmas.

In short: it may be a poor man's *Blackadder*, but at least it's not a poor man's *Friends*. And right now, that's something.

The Sleep-Deprived Mind of Jack Bauer [20 July]

If you've ever had to stay up all night, then go into work the next day, you'll know there comes a point around lunchtime when everything turns surreal, leaving you on the brink of nervous hysteria, prone to demented thought patterns. Before you know it, you're assigning an individual name to every pixel on your monitor or finding the concept of staplers inexplicably hilarious. You've lost your mind.

And this is what's been happening in *24* (BBC Choice). My new theory: the entire show is an avant-garde experimental drama, representing events as filtered through the sleep-deprived mind of Jack Bauer. Or maybe it's more *Vanilla Sky* than that: Jack has gone the whole hog and fallen asleep. Regular viewers may recall he nodded off for a few moments in a building-site Portakabin at around 11 a.m. I don't think he ever woke up.

Since that point it's all been random and disjointed, yet you're able to follow it, just like a dream. Characters appear and vanish without explanation, just like a dream. There are even recurring events – such as Senator Palmer's noble chinwags with his son Keith, a scene that replays itself every 25 minutes, like something out of *Groundhog Day*.

(Incidentally, while Palmer's trust in his wife dwindles, how come he hasn't asked her the most glaringly obvious question concerning their marriage – why his 'son' Keith is clearly of a different racial origin?)

My 'dream theory' even accounts for the latest development in

Jack Bauer's world: the appearance of familiar faces. Previously, his dreamscape was invaded by pop-culture doppelgangers (witness Kimberley steadily morphing into Jen from *Dawson's Creek* or the unexpected arrival of the late Michael Hutchence as a ruthless Serbian terrorist, who cheerfully emulated his lookalike by meeting an untimely end in a hotel room). Now, as Jack accelerates into REM sleep, in stroll a bunch of bona fide celebrities from Kiefer Sutherland's undistinguished movie career, back to haunt him.

Take this week's episode: first, exploding onto your screens, it's Lou Diamond Philips! Hooray! A chance for him and Kiefer to recreate the onscreen chemistry that made *Young Guns* one of the foremost cinematic achievements of the twentieth century. And then, before your excitement chips have finished processing this stunning development . . . look, it's Dennis Hopper!

Dennis Hopper: the rent-a-psycho with a face like a chunk of pumice stone the Incredible Hulk's just used to remove the rough skin from his feet.

Dennis Hopper: who starred alongside Kiefer in the 1990 movie *Flashback*, in which – get this – Hopper's a prisoner and Kiefer's an FBI agent named John Buckner.

John Buckner, Jack Bauer, John Buckner, Jack Bauer. I think it's part of the dream. Next week: the entire cast of *The Lost Boys* battle on the set of *Flatliners*. Most exciting of all, since it's now a dream, literally anything can happen, and the finale will consist of Jack being chased round a funfair by a visibly erect Honey Monster.

Anyway, there's more fractured reality elsewhere in the schedules take *Headf**ck* (Sci-Fi), a self-consciously 'weird' programme apparently aimed at heavily stoned twenty-somethings – a collage of horror-movie clips, surreal shots and the occasional close-up of a lizard or something else equally 'mind-boggling'. The big draw here is meant to be David Icke, who pops in to babble about UFOs, although the most interesting thing this week is the woefully lame video for the latest Prodigy single: topless go-go dancers milking cows and being beaten with sticks while Keith bellows 'We love Rohypnol! She love Rohypnol!' for the benefit of *Daily Mail* readers who need their shocks spelt out.

There's also the unmissable unfolding nightmare of *The Frontier House* (C4). Having whinged about everything from razors to the quality of tealeaves, gun-lovin' Gordon Clune has a new gripe: he ain't getting' any.

Wife Adrienne, it seems, just isn't putting out. It's now surely only a matter of time before Gordon strips naked, smears mud on his face and runs through the village, firing at invisible communists.

Meanwhile, his luckless son Conor, who's already survived dog maulings and high-speed wagon smashes, now has starvation to contend with. And boy, did I chuckle as the tears rolled down his gaunt little face. Biggest laugh of the week, in fact. Altogether now: ho, ho, Conor. Ho ho ho.

Outrage for Dummies [27 July]

Picture someone stupid. Really impossibly stupid. Like, literally going 'durrrrr' out loud, grinning, dribbling, clapping their hands together like a seal and wearing one of those little beanie caps with a propeller on top.

Keep that image in your mind's eye for the next 10 minutes, because unattractive though this notional moron is, he seems to be the kind of viewer ITV is courting shamelessly these days, as it sets off, USS *Enterprise*-fashion, to explore the furthest reaches of a strange new universe of dimwittedness, beaming back transmissions which seek to provide an authoritative televisual definition of the word 'brainless' – out-and-out dunce-casts that don't so much insult your intelligence as bypass it completely.

First we had the ghastly *Elimidate*, in which Kerry Katona's stunt knockers bobble around a beach or shopping centre encouraging dunderheads to feel each other up; now, hot on its heels, comes *Wudja? Cudja?*, the show that by its own admission seeks to 'test the limits of taste, greed and self respect' by offering the public wads of banknotes in exchange for performing humiliating challenges.

Now, I'm all for watching people debase themselves, particularly if they're younger and better-looking than myself (a demographic

that grows by the nanosecond), but *Wudja? Cudja?*, transparently misanthropic though it is, entirely fails to capitalise on its premise by displaying a downright offensive lack of imagination. The ‘challenges’ are predictable Club 18–30 shenanigans – like snogging as many strangers as possible, or letting a mob of baying lads lick ice cream from your bosom, or, at its very worst, simply flashing your bum for five pence. It’s like flicking through a copy of ‘Outrage for Dummies’.

Look, if you’re going to get people to demean both themselves and the whole of humanity, do it properly. Have some balls. Here, off the top of my head, is a list of five challenges that *Wudja? Cudja?* shoulda hadtha nervta feacha:

- 1 Cut the end of your nose off with scissors (£500)
- 2 Crush a live dormouse in your fist, and then eat it (£80)
- 3 Squat in the street, pooing into a big bowl of flour, while a bloke dances around playing the accordion (£50)
- 4 Penetrate a sea cow (£20)
- 5 Break your elbows with a mallet, then riverdance in a tray full of sick until you lose consciousness (£400).

There. Put those on air and I’ll tune in every week. In fact, sod that: I’ll turn up and spectate, provided I’m allowed to bring firearms and dispatch the contestants at the end of each stunt. Bang: one less moron. Bang: one less moron. Bang bang bang bang bang: wee hee! You’d need a bulldozer to tidy the corpses away.

Come to think of it, why bother handing out money? Why not simply scour the alleyways in search of heroin addicts, getting them to flash their privates on camera in exchange for vials of smack? After all, testing the limits of ‘taste, greed and self respect’ is our aim, right? Think I’m being harsh? Think again: I’m displaying no more contempt for the public than the ding-dongs who nodded this through. Difference is, I’ve got the decency to be honest about it.

Aaaaanyway, if *Wudja? Cudja?* doesn’t satiate your need for knuckle-dragging antics, there’s always *Sex BC*, an in-depth investigation into the mating habits of our cave-dwelling ancestors – who were, the programme claims, far more sophisticated than we give them credit for.

Rather than sitting about all day grunting and poking their pre-historic genitalia in the direction of anything vaguely hole-shaped, there's evidence cave folk preferred to form loving relationships with one another. Women were afforded respect and played an active role in hunter-gatherer activities. In fact the main way they seem to differ from us present-day bozos is that infidelity was punished with a skewer through the penis of the offending cheater – which would live up the Ricki Lake show no end.

Obviously, the makers of *Sex BC* have a slight problem regarding the lack of decent video footage shot during the Stone Age which might support their findings, but they've made up for it by getting modern-day actors to strip completely naked, then circle round filming them for ages and ages and ages. Which is clever of them. In fact, alongside *Wudja? Cudja?*, this makes two opportunities in a single week to watch cavemen getting their bums out.

Now that's progress.

Sick and Wrong, or Wrong and Sick? [10 August]

Attention, *Daily Mail* headline writers: on no account should you miss *Teenage Kicks: Drugs Are Us (C4)*, because it provides countless opportunities to flex those outrage muscles to the very limit. In fact your only dilemma will be which line to take: is the programme sick and wrong, or wrong and sick? Should you gnash with fury, or shake your head with world-weary dismay? Questions, questions. It's a pity they couldn't have thrown in a few asylum seekers for good measure – but you can probably work out a roundabout means of blaming them nevertheless, and I don't want to tell you how to do your job because, let's face it, you already know how everything in the world should be done anyway.

In case you hadn't guessed, this is one of those scandalous documentaries in which something approaching everyday reality is portrayed in non-judgemental terms, thereby appalling Middle Englanders who'd prefer it if the world would just bloody well sit still and behave.

It focuses on three drug-guzzlin' teenagers: Johnny, 16, who puffs

his way through more cannabis than an entire hall of residence on a daily basis; 17-year-old Sam, who spends his weekends navigating an obstacle course of Ecstasy, speed and ketamine; and Ashleigh, also 17, a disarmingly nonchalant Geordie girl with a penchant for garish blue eyeshadow. Oh, and heroin.

None of them slots neatly into a pre-determined pigeonhole: Sam, for instance, is a fresh-faced and articulate public schoolboy who, when he's not grinding his teeth to powder in a strobe-lit jiggle hut and using drugs as a chemical joystick to control his every mood, croons hits for Jesus in the local church choir; stoner Johnny's a good-natured Scot who disapproves of heroin (it's 'stupid') and cheerfully decides to temporarily curb his Cheech and Chong lifestyle to sit his exams.

They'll both be fine, particularly once they realise the grim truth about drugs: that their main purpose is to provide you with something fun to grow out of, and that people who go on about them are really boring.

Ashleigh's the one to worry about, because she's entirely blasé about her heroin addiction, discussing it as though recounting events from a particularly dull episode of *Holby City*, unconcerned that it's clearly going to blight her existence until she drops dead or kicks the habit.

And the parents? Irresponsible? Nope. They're all admirably realistic about the situation, begrudgingly accepting that they'd rather know what their kids get up to than simply bellow disapproval and force them to do it in secret. Ashleigh's mum Maureen is especially heartbreaking, balancing pragmatism with parental love as she deals with three teenage daughters who routinely steal from her to pay for their five-quid bags of smack.

Ashleigh, if you're reading this – which you aren't – for God's sake, give yourself a kick up the arse and do something, anything, to wean yourself off that life-crushing muck, because your mum deserves a breather. Oh, and ditch the blue eyeshadow; it makes you look like a smackhead or something.

Further follies of youth are on display in *Classmates* (C4), which is basically nothing more than the 'Friends Reunited' website (the

online nostalgia site where you get to discover precisely how many of your school friends now work in IT – i.e. all of them) transferred to television, but curiously life-affirming nonetheless. In this edition – the first – a group of pupils from a vaguely bohemian mixed-sex boarding school in Surrey meet up after 12 years apart to compare jowls and job descriptions, and it's all rather sweet: teenage sweethearts are reunited, the school wallflower turns out to be a super-confident glamourpuss and the troubled wide boy enjoys an amiable chinwag with the headmaster who expelled him.

The arrival of school heart-throb Adam Donald is especially gratifying, since in his youth he had the uncannily handsome looks of a Hollywood superstar, but now resembles a slightly cheeky potato (and is infinitely more likeable as a result).

By the end of the programme I was on the verge of boo-hooing like a baby, mind, simply on account of the soundtrack, which to my ears sounded almost contemporary until I realised it consisted of music from 12 years ago – Screamadefica-era Primal Scream et al. – thereby proving I'm officially old.

And if that isn't a *valid* reason to start knocking your brains out with pills and spliffs and smack, then I don't know what is.

Teenagers: they don't know they're born.

Ethically Right? [31 August]

In the good old days (you know, back when we all lived in fear of nuclear extinction and greed and bigotry were rife, utterly unlike the present era), there were only three or four channels, so it was easy to keep tabs on what was showing where. Kelly Monteith on BBC1, snooker on BBC2, Cannon and Ball's 'Madcap Snooker Chucklehouse' on ITV, or subtitled 'Disabled Lesbian Snooker with Extra Pubic Hair' on Channel 4. Simple.

Today there are 1,500,000 channels, growing at an exponential rate, and you can't flip open the 'Guide' without noticing a new addition to their ranks: one minute there's an Open University programme about hills on BBC2, and the next there's the Discovery

Hill Channel (documentaries about hills), Hill 24 (24-hour hill news), The Txt-a-Hill Network (teenagers communicating via text message captions superimposed over footage of hills), and Fantasy Hill X Super Hardcore Plus (fat men having sex with hills).

It's bedlam out there. Hence the trend for 'Ronseal' programme titles – shows that explain exactly what they do right there on the tin, with names like 'Britain's Scariest'. The idea is that they stand out in the listings, so you're more likely to tune in. Why name your programme *A Touch of Frost* (which could be mistaken for a documentary on winter mornings), if you can call it 'The Shortarse Detective' instead?

ITV has honed this practice to such a fine art, you don't even need to watch the programmes any more, just read the titles: *Britain's Sexiest Builders*, *It Shouldn't Happen to a Game Show Host*, *To Kill and Kill Again*, and now the latest example, *I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here!* (ITV1), in which a bunch of vaguely famous people have been dumped in the Australian outback in order to suffer for Ant and Dec's amusement.

OK, so the use of the word 'celebrity' contravenes the Trades Descriptions Act, but the programme itself is a guilty pleasure, and everyone who's wearily grumbled about the bile-scooping tackiness of it all is wasting their time: this *is* vastly entertaining stuff; no amount of hand-wringing is going to change that. And I can sum up the appeal in two words: Uri Geller.

See, the big surprise about *I'm a Celebrity* is that most of the 'stars' seem quite nice: Tony Blackburn, Tara Palmer-Tomkinson, Nell McAndrew, and Rhona Cameron. Heck, even Christine Hamilton's grown on me. Nigel Benn you can keep, and Darren Day could annoy me just by breathing in and out, but Uri Geller . . . CHRIST.

Don't know about you, but I always assumed that behind closed doors, once the cameras had been put away and he'd finished spoonbending for the day, Geller magically transformed himself into a normal person – but no. For him it's a lifetime gig. I wouldn't be able to stand in the same room as him for five minutes without feigning a fatal brain haemorrhage, just to make him stop banging

on about spirituality and his psychic bloody powers, which he's not going to use on this expedition because 'it wouldn't be ethically right'.

Ethically right? *I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here!* may be many things, but a noble contest of far-reaching import it is not. Sod ethics, Uri – prove your abilities. Go on. I dare you. Bend us a spoon. Float in the air or something.

I'll even watch you squatting on the outdoor toilet, curling out a turd in a supernatural trance. That beats ethical restraint any day. And if you can't do that, at least spill some Michael Jackson gossip. You must know loads, particularly since you can probably read his mind as well. But no. Uri's content to simply weird everyone out. The sequence in which he slimed around the camp attempting to ingratiate himself with the women (by patronising them) has to rank as the creepiest thing I've seen all year. Spoons are one thing, but this man has an innate ability to bend minds, and not in a good way; I'm guessing – hoping, praying – that by the time you read this, the public will have revolted en masse, and voted him into a whirlpool of misery.

And with any luck, next year we'll have a series called 'I'm a Celebrity – Get This Out of Me!' in which members of the public phone in to vote on which unwieldy object gets shoved up whose famous backside. I'm setting my telephone to speed-dial Uri's number already.

Footballers' Wives for Sociopaths [21–7 September]

Wahey! The trailers say it all: action is back on ITV! And it's courtesy of *Ultimate Force* (ITV1) – *The Sweeney* with a hard-on.

Set in a parallel universe in which the SAS are called in to sort out problems at the drop of a hat, *Ultimate Force* is about guns and machismo and very little else. And we're talking gallons of machismo – the smug kind, the kind that shoots first and doesn't bother asking questions later, safe in the knowledge that anyone wringing their hands over the nastiness of it is simply Missing the Point.

In fact, describing this as an 'action' series is misleading. It's

pornography, plain and simple, pandering to the fantasies of tire-some British bloke creatures – that wretched breed of style-free thickos who drive too fast and spend the weekend starting fights outside dismal nightclubs. With any luck, one glimpse of the gun-play in *Ultimate Force* and they'll all succumb to a Pavlovian urge to masturbate before bedtime, thereby reducing their risk of impregnating their girlfriends and spawning yet another generation of insolent heirs – and if in 20 years down the line that means one less bellowing imbecile in the Friday night minicab queue, it'll all have been worth it. In fact, if ITV broadcast a new episode every night for a couple of decades, we might see the national average IQ treble in size by the year 2033.

So yes, it's macho and daft, but when you're dealing with a series starring Grant Mitchell, what else would you expect? Quaker Academy? Harpist Squad?

Of course not. We're talking about Ross Kemp here – ITV's stellar signing, who's thrashed around in search of a decent vehicle for so long it was in danger of becoming embarrassing. The sigh of relief is almost audible over the gunfire: finally they've hit upon the ideal showcase for him – something in which his ability to act is secondary to his ability to stand around looking vicious.

Thing is, Kemp's never been a convincing hard man – he's more of a try-too-hard man. Bona fide toughnuts don't need to pull such obviously menacing facial expressions, at least not all the time.

Honestly, what's with all the furious glares? The moment Kemp walks onscreen he enters onto a demented staring competition with everyone else in the room, including the viewers at home (if glowering ever becomes an Olympic sport, he's a dead cert for the gold – he could out-stare a man with two glass eyes). Presumably, Kemp maintains this unique wide-eyed frown because when his face is at rest it's actually rather baby-like and friendly, but the result is disturbing; he looks like a version of Nookie Bear that's had its fur shaved off and isn't happy about it.

Thankfully, there's more to the Kemp repertoire than mere scowling. He's mastered nodding as well, which is why every line is

delivered with his trademark bob of the head, like a man auditioning for the part of a nodding dog in 'Toy Story 3: Playthings of Fury'. Squint and he starts to resemble a testicle bobbing in a bathtub. And a particularly hairless one at that.

Apart from Staring Nodding Man, what else does *Ultimate Force* have to offer?

Bloodshed. Taking their cue from the recent trend for graphically violent combat in films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Black Hawk Down*, the special-effects team has raised the splatter quotient well above the televisual norm. Hence a shoot-out in a suburban bank ends up resembling something out of *Dawn of the Dead*, with shot-off bits of scalp dangling from the lampshades and flambéed kidneys squelching underfoot.

But while the aforementioned movies all used shocking gore to hammer home the sheer hideousness of violence, *Ultimate Force* simply uses it to titillate, in the manner of a 1980s video nasty.

Regular readers will know I've got nothing against that, but I do think if you're going to dish up gore for gore's sake, you might as well go the whole nine yards and make it absurdly, unrealistically gory. Since *Ultimate Force* doesn't seem to convey any message besides 'The SAS are hard', let's see them ripping the bad guys' ribcages out with claw hammers, please.

Needless to say, despite all my griping, I rather enjoyed it. It's got a camp appeal, like Footballers' Wives for sociopaths. The trailers say it all: action is back on ITV! Wahey!

Reality Jokers [28 September]

Today, fame is power and everyone wants to be a celebrity. It's become as ubiquitous a human requirement as the need for air, water and a decent pair of socks, which is why the world is full of bewildered people doing misguided and humiliating things in a bid for fame. Things that would make you or me curl up and wither to a desiccated husk of embarrassment, like singing Bodyform jingles, or having sex with geese on the Internet, or performing onstage with the Stereophonics.

Pathetic sights, the lot of them, but none is as truly heartrending as the sight of a Reality Joker basking in his moment of glory.

A what?

A Reality Joker – it's a new phrase I've just coined, which refers to the type of person who turns up at the auditions for programmes like *Model Behaviour* (C4), knowing full well that a) they don't stand a serious chance, and also b) the production team won't be able to resist plastering their mugs all over the screen for a few moments, so we can all have a good laugh at their expense.

Hence the judges in *Model Behaviour* – a programme designed to pick out tomorrow's male and female supermodels – occasionally find themselves stifling smirks in front of some chubzoid clown (generally a fat moron named Barry, or something similarly Woolworths) who comically insists he's got the making of a cover star.

Blimey! He's bonkers! Barry is bonkers! Of course he won't be chosen – he's obese and disgusting! Har har har!

The judges are happy, because they look like good sports, the production team are happy because they've got a few more easy moments of sneersome air time under their belts, but most of all Barry's happy because his mates will see him on the telly and roll around guffawing at how downright daffy BONKERS!!!! he is. Well, hooray hooray. Enjoy your 1.5 nanoseconds of fame, Barry – then shove off back to Doncaster so we can concentrate on the meat of the programme: encouraging teenagers nationwide to work on their eating disorders.

This second series of *Model Behaviour* has clearly been taking notes – or more accurately photocopying instructions – from *Popstars* (a show which has not one, but *two* Reality Jokers, in the form of the 'touch my bum' girls). As a result, it seeks to pressurise and degrade its participants at every turn – 'cos that's good telly, innit? Jettisoned wannabes aren't just gently informed that they're no longer required – no. Despite already having been picked from the line-up and ordered to parade around in skimpy underwear for our titillation, they haven't been puppeteered enough. So they're separated into groups.

You, you and you – stand on the pink carpet. The rest of you, stand on the blue.

Drum roll, please. Let the maximum tension build – we want to see anguished looks on faces, please. OK. Now then. Pink carpet. Congratulations, you're through to the next round. The rest of you: your dream is over. Go on, shoo. And try to cry into the lens on your way out.

Still, there's a case for arguing that the spoiled little yelpers who turn up to undergo this sort of humiliation deserve everything they get. Particularly when you compare them to the dashing breed of old-school celebrities profiled in the engrossing *Showbiz Set* (C4); bona-fide stars who secured lasting fame the old-fashioned way: by actually being good at something.

Oh, except Simon Dee – the here-today, gone-tomorrow 1960s chat-show host whose sudden disappearance from the nation's screens is often referred to as a complete and utter mystery, although interviewee Jimmy Tarbuck's explanation of the reason for his downfall – 'Well, he was crap wasn't he?' – sounds plausible enough to me.

Good programme this, although in some ways it's enough to make you weep, outlining as it does an age when Britain's TV stations were unafraid to court controversy for a reason other than empty controversy itself. In its own way, the 1960s BBC was a veritable punkfest, unapologetically delivering shock after shock – the establishment-baiting of *That Was the Week That Was*, black comedy in *Steptoe and Son*, outrageous social satire in *Till Death Us Do Part*.

Where are their counterparts now? Answer: nowhere. Unless the imminent *Fame Academy* (BBC1) turns out to be a piece of coruscating satire in disguise.

Which it won't, of course. Pass the napalm.

Steamy Lesbian Romps [5 October]

Before the tragic death of England's Rose (and that's Princess Diana I'm talking about, not Roy Kinnear), I'd had an idea for a short

story, which went something like this: two demented pranksters kidnap the Princess of Hearts, then contact Scotland Yard and announce their 'ransom'. She will be released unharmed, provided Terry Wogan goes on live television and has full sexual intercourse with a sow. The act must be broadcast in blistering close-up on all five terrestrial channels, uninterrupted and entirely unexpurgated. Cue plenty of soul-searching for Wogan as the deadline draws ever nearer. Finally, after much pressure from the tabloids, he gives in. The horrendous act is broadcast live, the Princess is released, and the nation's television is never quite the same again: the bar for what's acceptable onscreen has been raised to unthinkable levels; Wogan's career has been revitalised – the ratings were so good, he repeats his performance on a weekly basis. At teatime. And everyone's happy.

See, I've often thought that if something like that were to actually happen, no one could ever complain about programmes like *Tipping the Velvet* (BBC2) again. You've probably heard about it already – according to the tabloids, it's set to 'shock' viewers with 'steamy' scenes of lesbian 'romps'. 'The most explicit sex sequences ever broadcast!' they screamed. Graphic! X-rated! Adults only!

Is it bollocks. Speaking as someone who recently watched a video entitled 'Strap-On Sally: Face Dildo Frenzy' (not mine, I hasten to add, and it belonged to a lady, so that absolves me of all blame twice over, OK?) I can quite confidently state that the sex scenes in *Tipping the Velvet* are not 'explicit'.

Good-natured and charming maybe, but not explicit, and if they involved a heterosexual couple no one would raise an eyebrow. Instead, *Tipping the Velvet* is a light, fluffy and fairly disposable romance; stylised in the *Moulin Rouge* mould with a vaguely Christmassy air (the scenes backstage at the music hall have the feel of one of those trailers promising 'a feast of entertainment' over the Yuletide season). The lesbian imagery is laid on in a coy, tongue in (cough) cheek manner; the very first shot is of a young girl slowly prising open an oyster, and the filthiest exchange goes like this: 'You smell.' 'I know! Like a herring!' Although I've quoted that out of context.

That's this week's sex quotient out of the way, so for violence we have to flip channels and locate *The Shield* (C5), an excellent US import starring Michael Chiklis as Vic Mackey: a cop who doesn't play by the rules of basic human decency.

Yes, he's corrupt, but it doesn't end there: he's merely the rottenest apple in a whole barrel of bad 'uns – a sort of Bad Lieutenant Squad. The show delights in confounding the audience with a tangled maze of moral dilemmas: the pilot showed Mackey beating a confession from an arrogant paedophile (ah, so he's bad but he gets results), passing bribe money to a hooker so she can buy her son some toys (he's bad but he's got a heart), then coldly shooting dead one of his own officers (oh – he's just bad). It's relentlessly brutal throughout – the sort of programme where everyone greets each other by saying 'Hey, asshole' instead of 'Hello', and even the 'nice' cop (a nerdy homicide detective) is shown commenting favourably on the breasts of a murder victim – with violent action sequences (of which there are plenty) cut in time to an angry nu-metal soundtrack for added hard-on value.

The main distraction is that Chiklis resembles both Mitchell brothers crossed with Bruce Willis; often he manages to look precisely like all three of them at the same time (no wonder he won an Emmy).

What with this and CSI, Five is rapidly becoming a plausible competitor to Channel 4, at least in the populist stakes. Consider the similarities: quality US drama, quirky home-made products, a daily *TFI Friday* clone and a selection of mainstream-baiting movies (they've broadcast *Natural Born Killers*, *Boogie Nights* and last week they even showed Harmony Korine's rubbish and unwatchable *Gummo*, fer Chrissakes, and films don't get much more Channel 4 than that).

All Five needs to do now is commission several hundred documentaries on the 'history' of porn and they'll be as indistinguishable from Channel 4 as Michael Chiklis is from Willis and the Mitchells.

Or how about a look at the 'history' of lesbianism? 'The Real Tippling the Velvet', anyone? I give it three months.

Strawberries and Bream [12 October]

He's orange. She's Mancunian. Together they're a force to be reckoned with.

I speak, of course, of Des O'Connor and Melanie Sykes, united at last in *Today with Des and Mel* (ITV1) – either the best new daytime TV show since *This Morning* or a nightmare of ghoulish obscenity, depending on your point of view.

Like its obvious inspiration, the successful US daytime show *Regis and Kathy Lee*, *Today with Des and Mel* is a blend of aimless waffle and obsequious celebrity chat (so obsequious, it should really be called 'Toady with Des and Mel'). But while their American counterparts have genuine chemistry, Des and Mel go together like strawberries and bream – and the resulting awkwardness feels a bit like the forced, polite bonhomie between a parent and their offspring's latest sexual partner during a Christmas dinner.

Nevertheless the sheer banality of it all is quite appealing – it's akin to eavesdropping on the thoughts racing through the mind of a doily, particularly during the pre-guest banter when Des babbles away like a man in a fever (the other day he actually referred to his backside as his 'bimbo bumbo'). His anecdotes never reach a conclusion, but simply wander around looking lost and confused for a while before mutating into an anecdote on an unrelated subject.

Mel's even better. While Des uses his anecdotes as a platform for endearingly corny gags, Mel butts in with conversational cul-de-sacs; observations so crashingly pedestrian, they're either intended as a sly satire on the mundanity of daytime television or part of an ominous one-woman quest to redefine insipidness.

It certainly stops Des in his tracks. Here's a genuine, typical Mel interjection, during a jovial discussion about cars: 'My husband always shouts at me when I take the car to the car wash, because apparently they can get scratched. He always says, "You should go and get it done properly." [Pause.] So I do.' That's it: no point, no punchline. Just a short, awkward silence, until Des changes the subject and starts prattling away again.

Today with Des and Mel is so trite, it feels genuinely cutting-edge; it'll be a cult student hit by the end of the year, guaranteed – as will *The Psychic Show* (ITV1), which directly follows it. *The Psychic Show* is, to put it bluntly, aimed at idiotic women (and before anyone writes in to complain, consider this: we men might be arrogant, war-mongering rapists-in-waiting, but you'd never catch us dialling a premium-rate astrology phone line).

The opening sequence depicts a gigantic rotating healing crystal – enough to ward off all but the most gullible dunderheads, which is just as well since things go downhill from there, as we enter a rationality-free zone of horoscopes, dream analysis, palm reading and all the preposterous bummery that goes with it. It's ideal subject matter for a cut-price daytime show, of course, since anyone who believes in astrology is a fool by default, so the producers don't have to try too hard to keep the audience happy.

The best part is a segment in which the resident 'psychic' fondles an object belonging to an unseen member of the audience and makes a few vague predictions about them. They then bound onstage and shake their head in amazement at his remarkable supernatural powers. Me, I'm amazed by the shamelessly generic nature of his proclamations – favourites include 'This is someone who lacks self-confidence' (obviously, or why else would they bother asking a prick like you for advice?), 'I'm tempted to say this is a man' (while handling a large, manly piece of jewellery), and 'If I burble enough hazy generalisations about this person, some of them should stick' (of course he didn't actually say that last one – I just read his mind). You see, I've got incredible powers of my own – and I'll demonstrate them now.

If you're a regular viewer of *The Psychic Show*, simply place your palm firmly on the opposite page, and I'll give you a personality reading *and* predict your future into the bargain. Ready? Here I go.

Right, I'm getting something. I can tell this is a gullible person, a scared and stupid individual, terrified by the notion of a random, godless universe – someone who desperately wants to believe there's more to this life than daytime TV and celebrity gossip magazines, although sadly in their case, there isn't.

And the future? That's easy. They're going to spend the next five minutes rubbing ink off their palm. Magic.

Human Nature is Inherently Rotten [19 October]

Our basic human instincts get a terrible press. They stand accused of causing everything that's wrong with the world: pollution, corruption, obesity, sexually transmitted diseases, football hooliganism, racism, war and Dunstable. Mention the words 'human instinct' and even the world's biggest optimist weeps bittersweet tears (you can prove this in a laboratory, especially if you squirt lemon juice in their eyes as you say it).

Captain Kirk was regularly sentenced to death by egghead aliens who'd studied footage of the Second World War and decided human nature was inherently rotten (thank God their space transmitters never picked up *Jim Davidson's Generation Game*, or they'd have come down and kicked us all to death). Earthbound thinkers agree that our very humanity is our downfall.

Kurt Vonnegut's oeuvre deals with little else, and after decades of research no less an authority than Gary Clail and the On-U Sound System concurred that there was indeed 'something wrong with human nature'. Thus it was I slid my review copy of Dr Robert Winston's high-profile investigation into *Human Instinct* (BBC1) inside my VCR with a sense of clammy trepidation. And almost immediately, I breathed a sigh of relief: this isn't a despair-inducing trawl through the inescapable cruddiness that lurks within us all – it's cheery knockabout edutainment, plain and simple. Fashioned in the achingly slick style of a megabudget commercial for a global corporation, *Human Instinct* is a snack-science programme that, unlike 90 per cent of the TV schedules, provides something to think about.

This week's instalment deals with our survival instincts – the set of hard-wired subconscious responses that lead us to recoil from the smell of something potentially hazardous, cause lifelong cowards to heroically toss the infirm behind them when running from charging tigers, and can provide an 8-stone mother with the

strength to lift a 10-tonne truck off her baby's head, once she's finished laughing.

Speaking of finding joy in the misfortunes of children, there's an immensely entertaining section in which Dr Winston demonstrates our inbuilt aversion to unpleasant tastes by spoon-feeding globs of offensive mush to a baby until it cries itself insensible. Elsewhere, we're informed that a baby's incessant wailing can equal the din created by a pneumatic drill penetrating concrete – although the programme inexplicably fails to mention that if you place the baby beneath the drill, the noise from both is diminished.

Of particular interest to me was the segment on spiders and snakes. As an unashamed arachnophobe I've had to endure years of spider apologists informing me that: 1) Spiders won't hurt you; 2) Spiders are more frightened of me than I am of them; and 3) You're only scared of spiders because you learned to fear them during childhood.

Now, thanks to kindly Dr Winston, that all-round good guy with the face of an approachable Stalin; Dr Winston, the cuddlesome uncle who could play the lead in 'Santa Claus: The Early Years', I now have televisual proof of what I've always suspected: we arachnophobes are simply slaves to an obsolete, uncontrollable primal instinct to run like funk whenever something creepy crawls near. Now, next time some gurglesome joker cups a spider in their hands and chases me round a table with it, I can gouge their stupid eyes out safe in the knowledge that no jury could reasonably convict me – I was only acting on instinct. People who are afraid of snakes, though, they're just wussy.

There's a hilarious archive clip in *Fame, Set and Match – Breakfast TV* (BBC2), in which Jeremy Beadle attempts to brighten the morning of several million *TV-am* viewers with his 'Today's the Day' slot. 'America's worst nightclub fire erupted in Boston on this day in 1942,' he chirps. 'People were literally beaten to death in the fight for the exits.'

Ah, those wacky survival instincts.

She's the Queen Mum of Telly and Blah Blah Blah

[26 October]

Blind Date (ITV1) has been running for ages, if not longer. In fact, it's been on our screens for so long, the original contestants have long since withered and died, leaving grieving offspring in their wake. 'So romantic, how they met,' sniff the children at their parents' graveside. 'Mother asked Father how he'd break the ice on their first date, and Father said "Darling, I'm so hot the ice'll melt the moment you see me."' Then he did a Bobby Ball impression and pulled a moonie. The audience loved him. And so, after several drinks, did Mother.' With that, our imaginary mourners hold hands and walk sombrely through the churchyard gates, brittle autumn leaves swirling at their feet.

So much for the sepia-tinted days of yore. Now *Blind Date's* been given a twenty-first-century makeover. Its previous format, for years considered the height of lows, simply wasn't shabby or cruel enough to keep a modern audience's attention.

Hence the changes: OUT goes 'Our Graham' (the announcer who always referred to Cilla as 'Cilla Blaaaaaaah'), IN comes 'Ditch or Date', a new gimmick which allows contestants to change their mind once the partition goes back, thereby making a mockery of the title and robbing the show of whatever tension it once had. Brilliant.

One thing that hasn't changed, of course, is Cilla. Oh, the audience adores her and she's the Queen Mum of telly and blah blah blah. Ahem: pardon me for spitting in the punchbowl, but she's always annoyed the cogs off me, and the situation isn't improving as we both get older. For one thing, she's synonymous with barrel-scraping gaudiness: *Surprise Surprise, Moment of Truth, Blind Date* . . . For God's sake, the woman would *have* to be 'well-loved' or she'd have been lynched years ago.

Not that even the most demented angry mob would want to meet her in the flesh: either there's something wrong with my reception or she's starting to resemble the result of a unholy union between Ronald McDonald and a blow-dried guinea pig.

And that voice: Christ. The singing was bad enough – she sound-

ed like an angry wasp trapped in a shoebox, butchering melodies with the ghoulish efficiency of Jeffrey Dahmer – but even though she no longer bursts into song, her incessant piercing squawk is still enough to make me want to slice my ears off and hurl them into another dimension.

Then we have the contestants. *Blind Date* has always attracted the very worst scrapings from mankind's Petri dish – it works in the same way as one of those sticky-floored cockroach traps – but for the new series they've gone one better by inviting 'celebrities' to take part in the dates. Not proper celebs you understand (you won't see Ralph Fiennes riding a jet ski round Ibiza with Karen from Bracknell, more's the pity), but the boy band Blue – a group whose core audience consists almost exclusively of easily impressed foetuses.

At the risk of sounding like a wizened old prude, when I was a whippersnapper, the only musical act aimed exclusively at children was the Wombles, and I can't imagine *them* singing 'Baby when we're grinding, I get so excited / You're making it hard for me', like the Blue boys did a full three hours before the watershed last Saturday. Ironically, I suspect any one of the Wombles would actually prove a far better shag. Those protruding orange snouts could perform sexual tricks Blue can only sing about.

Still, at least compared with the sort of gurning farmhands the show usually features, Blue are good-looking – well, all except one, who's got a face like a kneecap soaked in vinegar. He didn't get chosen: that honour went to the sexily named Duncan, who's a bit like Brad Pitt minus the talent and charm.

Tonight we'll get to see how the date went: £10,000 says the wuss doesn't utter a single disapproving word. In summary, then: the new *Blind Date* – you'll need Rohypnol to get through it. How very twenty-first-century.

A Pissload of Spaghetti [2 November]

Loathed. Reviled. Pilloried. Ridiculed. And for what? For being a dopey-faced, fat-tongued TV chef. Say what you like about Jamie

Oliver, in the light of recent allegations regarding other TV personalities, there's no denying he's ultimately harmless. His idea of a 'coke-fuelled threesome' is a glass of cola followed by a bacon, brie and avocado sandwich, and the only time you hear him growling 'You know you want it' is when he's holding a hunk of steaming roast lamb up to camera.

Yet huge swathes of the population despise him. Well, it's time for me to 'fess up: I don't. Oh, I grind my teeth at the supermarket commercials just like everyone else, but I can't get furious with him personally for the same reason I can't wholeheartedly despise Alan Titchmarsh. Commercial whoredom and irritating tics aside both possess genuine skill and are capable of communicating it. Titchmarsh and Oliver are responsible for inspiring thousands of people to actually get up and do something that improves their lives. It's all very well to sit there and sneer, but when was the last time *you* inspired anyone, huh? Well? Oliver's clearly been stung by the sheer volume of animosity he generates, which is probably why his new series *Jamie's Kitchen* (C4) feels almost like an apology, an attempt to make the public at large reassess their hatred for the Roy Hattersley lookalike-in-waiting. It's a reality show in which he sets about establishing a non-profit restaurant staffed by underprivileged youngsters, largely funded with Oliver's own cash. They should've called it 'Jamie's Penance'.

And that's not all: aware that the only people who actually think he's 'cool' are the sort of home-counties women who think Dawn French is cutting-edge, Jamie sets about alienating them with calculating efficiency.

His secret weapon: bad language. Fifteen seconds in, every Middle England mum's favourite cheeky chappie opens his mouth and starts spitting out a wasps' nest.

'Fuckin' shit,' he blurts, tossing a burnt slice of toast across the kitchen. 'I've fucked it up. Fuckin' bollocks.' The air remains blue throughout the programme: I counted six uses of the f-word, several 'shits' and 'bollocks', and a solitary, yet heartfelt, 'wanker'.

See? He's human! I can picture the spin-off recipe book – 'Jamie's Fuckin' Kitchen'. 'Here's a recipe I call "Shit-Hot Spag Bol" – 11b

minced cow bollocks, 2 onions, garlic, a tin of fucking tomatoes and a pissload of spaghetti. And if you don't like it, you're a c***.'

Once you've got over the swearing, the next surprise is the way the show tackles Oliver's public perception head-on: included is a sequence in which he visits Xfm to be jovially humiliated by breakfast host Christian O'Connell.

'He's absolutely loaded,' O'Connell tells his audience. 'He's come in here today wearing gold lame trainers and trousers made from poor people's skin.'

Next week in 'Jamie's Penance': the pudgy chef dons sackcloth and flagellates himself with a piece of knotted rope while shouting 'I'm a stupid c***' over and over again. Probably.

My Growing Obsession with Davina McCall

[9 November]

Remember *Manimal*? It was an enjoyably appalling 1980s action series starring Simon MacCorkindale as an explorer-adventurer blessed with the peculiar ability to mutate himself into various animals at will, largely notable for its *American Werewolf*-inspired transformation scenes, in which MacCorkindale's flesh would unconvincingly contort itself into exotic zoological shapes. A ludicrous premise, of course, and as the series went on, the writers clearly became desperate to shoehorn in the animal action: in one sequence a woman fell in some quicksand, prompting Manimal to transform into a snake and allow himself to be used as a length of rope in order to drag her out. *I, Claudius* it wasn't.

I only bring it up because of *Popstars: The Rivals* (ITV1), and more specifically my growing obsession with Davina McCall, who appears to have been halted midway through a Manimal-style transformation into a crow. Or maybe it's a raven. So far I'm not sure, but with any luck she'll have completed the transition by the end of the series, and will introduce the finale perched atop a telephone wire, ruffling her feathers and dropping silvery crap on the stage (entirely fitting, since the *Popstars* stage is the nation's premier showcase for silvery crap).

In case you think I'm merely being fanciful, tune in and consider the evidence for yourself: the makings of a beak are clearly visible, rudimentary black plumage seems to be emerging from her scalp and, most damning of all, her voice patterns are starting to closely imitate an insistent, grating caw.

Speaking of which, is there a single more annoying racket than Davina's nasal caw (apart from the singers themselves, that is)? It doesn't help that ITV appears to employ some kind of secret CIA sound-compression technology throughout the entire Saturday evening schedule, which turns every noise into a white-hot shard of solidified tinnitus. Listen to a burst of applause and it's like having a rapid-fire nailgun unloaded into your ear, and when Davina starts SHOUTING, which is something she does at the end OF EVERY SENTENCE, it starts to sound less like an ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMME and more like a bizarre torture method straight out of THE IPCRESS FILE.

Her technique is to speak quickly and quietly, then suddenly break into a caustic bellow – the audible equivalent of someone using capitals and multiple EXCLAMATION MARKS!!!! in a humorous e-mail in a desperate bid to underline their point.

'Welcome to another edition of *Popstars*. *THE RIVALS!!!!*' (Decibel level: Concorde crashing into a saucepan factory).

'Singing live on stage . . . IT'S JAVINE!!!!' (Decibel level: Jupiter exploding above a foghorn convention).

Well, enough is enough. It's time for us to have a whip-round and buy Davina a gag. A nice Burberry one with comfortable flock lining, because we wouldn't want her to suffer. We can have it delivered to her nest in time for Christmas; all she has to do is peck through the gift wrapping and get someone with hands instead of wings to help tie it in place. And BINGO!!!! Peace on earth.

Next, we should organise a Yuletide boycott of the *Popstars* singles, on the grounds that It Simply Won't Do for our nation's grand pop heritage to be repeatedly violated in this manner. With the *Popstars* and *Fame Academy* singles jostling for position, this year's Christmas Top 10 is going to look and feel like a musical interpretation of the Argos catalogue.

Where's our Culture Minister when we need him? Nailing proclamations to the walls of the Tate Modern, you say? Quick: someone phone Lemmy and get him to re-release 'Ace of Spades' so we can buy it in protest and have a decent Christmas No. 1 for a change.

In fact, phone anyone: I'd rather see 'Star Trekkin' back in the top slot then have to digest another load of this oleaginous crap along with my turkey and stuffing.

There's still time. There's still hope. Together, we *can* save Christmas.

Judge John Grumpybones [16 November]

DVDs are good, aren't they? Not if you've only got a video recorder, obviously, but if you're that much of a Luddite you can always entertain yourself with spinning tops or lutes or something while the rest of us enjoy slam-bang entertainment in pin-sharp digital crikeyvision.

As a medium, DVD is ideally suited to the nimble repackaging of hulking great TV series. In the sepia-tinted VHS era, if you bought a box-set containing the entire series of *The World at War*, you'd walk out of the shop looking like someone lugging a coffin around in a carrier bag. Now you can fit it in the palm of a slightly exaggerated hand. It's intrinsically satisfying.

In fact, buying entire series on DVD is so addictive, I can't pass a megastore without picking up a 200-episode epic. I already have more digitised footage than I can possibly watch in my lifetime: some good (*Band of Brothers*, *Our Friends in the North*, *Reggie Perrin*), some variable (*Sapphire and Steel*, *Tales of the Unexpected*), and some plain dull (*I, Claudius*).

I'll buy anything. I've currently got my eye on a compilation called 'The Complete Ceefax'; it's got an 18-year running time, Dolby surround, a director's commentary and 500 deleted scenes (including a hilarious incident in which 'John Selwyn-Gummer' was mis-spelt as 'John Winky-Bumpoo').

Anyway, the ultimate proof of the new format's victory over VHS arrived this week: my review copy of *Judge John Deed* (BBC1) came

on DVD. All well and good, but it also means I can't tape over it, and in this case that's a disadvantage.

Judge John Deed? Judge John Grumpybones, more like: he spends so much time frowning, you'd think he was doing it on commission. I thought he was supposed to be 'the fun judge', the womanising wildman of the judicial arena, but on this tedious evidence, his gavel's gone limp. And in the absence of a compelling storyline, there's nothing left to do but marvel at the way the crystal-clear DVD image emphasises the tininess of Martin Shaw's eyes: I swear each one's a single pixel in size.

One thing the BBC wouldn't send me was a preview tape, disc, or zoetrope strip of the *Robbie Williams Show* (BBC1), which is a terrible shame because I was looking forward to heaving a copy into a gigantic burning bin, thereby doing my bit for the overall advancement of mankind.

Williams appears to be doing Elvis's career in reverse: first he got fat, then he went through his Vegas period (courtesy of his odious Albert Hall extravaganza, also broadcast by the BBC), and now he appears to be tackling the 1968 comeback special. With any luck this means he's about to be usurped by some cheeky young lads from Liverpool, but somehow I doubt The Coral are up to it (if they can ditch the 'unlistenablely awful' shtick, they might be in with a chance).

Lord Potato Dauphinoise of Grand Guffawing Castle

[23 November]

Corsets. Repression. Whopping-great stately homes. Yes, the costume drama season is upon us again: time for the annual heavy snowfall of royalty cheques onto Andrew 'Adaptation' Davies' doormat. And this year he's going to need a snowplough to clear them away: he's already banged out *Tipping the Velvet* for BBC2, and this weekend he's got two new epics leaving the starting gate – *Doctor Zhivago* (ITV1) and *Daniel Deronda* (BBC1). I'm all in favour of encouraging good writing, but really, that's just taking the piss.

And I don't know about you, but I find it impossible to get excit-

ed at the prospect of yet another sumptuously adapted classic. At the risk of sounding like a furrow-browed philistine, aren't they all the bloody same? Boy meets girl and struggles with stiff social mannerisms – then in episode three he rips his shirt off and everyone thinks he's a sex king. A bit of fainting, ruffled ballgowns and pleasant scenery, a quick burst of tragedy, and a nice happy ending. The average episode of *Quincy* is less predictable.

Daniel Deronda in particular ticks all the usual boxes.

1 Brattish heroine? Check: she's a spoilt heartbreaker called Gwendolyn who has toffs crawling over themselves just to touch the hem of her ballgown.

2 Handsome young gent? Check: Daniel Deronda himself, who's essentially just a posho Nathan bumming about on a gap year. 'I want to find my own way in the world,' he explains to Edward Fox. 'I want to travel . . . find out how other people live, understand their philosophies' – probably quite an original move in the 1860s, but today he'd simply be following in the footsteps of 10 billion other overprivileged Barnabys who've spent an idle summer smoking dope on Thai beaches or photographing kneeless beggars in Calcutta (then hotmailing the snaps to the Tobys and Susannahs back home) before settling down to university and a lifelong career in frictionless boredom.

3 Cold-hearted bastard with designs on aforementioned heroine? Check: he's called Henleigh Grandcourt, which is just about the poshest name anyone could possibly have, short of Lord Potato Dauphinoise of Grand Guffawing Castle. His chat-up lines may come straight from John Leslie ('Do you like danger?' 'Yes.' 'Good.'), but do people like this ever actually have sex? I only ask because I once overheard a pair of poshos going at it hammer and tongs in a hotel bedroom, and it was hilariously funny, particularly when she shouted 'Oh, Gerald!' at the moment of climax – I can't imagine anyone being able to shout 'Oh, Henleigh!' without immediately putting themselves off. Or throwing up. Or both.

Anyway, back to the subject at hand: *Daniel Deronda*. Don't get me wrong. There are surprises along the way – not least the remarkable Mr Lush, Henleigh's sinister assistant, who closely

resembles Lemmy from Motorhead and therefore doesn't look quite right in a boater – and it IS undeniably entertaining, but . . . well. Isn't it time we called a five-year sabbatical on costume dramas and spent the money on more contemporary offerings? Oh, and *please* don't anyone argue that *Daniel Deronda* is 'still relevant to a modern audience' – you can bang on about that till you're blue in the face: fact is, he's still wearing a waistcoat and prancing through ballrooms.

Yes, less of that and more modern drama please. The money saved on costumes alone could fund a few extra hours of the next *Our Friends in the North*. And – ahem – let's not just concentrate on grisly crime epics either (*Waking the Dead*, *Silent Witness*, *Wire in the Blood* . . . how many more lives?).

What we want is surprise. And there's little surprise in a corset. No, really.

It isn't impossible. There's a new series of the BBC's excellent secret-service shocker *Spooks* currently in production – that's more like it. Now all we need is our own *West Wing*. One that, for once, isn't set in the west wing of Tossington Hall.

'This is not something we can test' [30 November]

Last year he proved under laboratory conditions that Jesus Christ had the face of a Crimewatch e-fit. Now, Jeremy Bowen turns his attentions to *Moses* (BBC1) and embarks on another quest for truth.

Of course, Moses doesn't quite warrant an entire series on his own – he simply wasn't as cool as Jesus. Nonetheless, he had the decency to do a reasonable number of interesting things, like floating down the river in a basket and holding conversations with flaming bushes, so there's just enough for Bowen to investigate in an hour-long special. Thank you, God.

The show opens, hilariously, with our Jeremy wandering through a CGI recreation of the parting of the Red Sea and asking whether any of this actually happened. He then wisely switches focus and starts tackling the easiest questions first – such as did Moses really get lobbed in a basket and bunged in the Nile?

Apparently, yes. Well, OK, maybe. Academics and theologians are on hand to explain that people often did rid themselves of unwanted offspring by sending them down the river. It must have looked like an infant armada – if you were a bit of a bastard, you could amuse yourself by standing on the banks of the river trying to sink passing baskets with rocks.

And was Moses rescued and raised by a Pharaoh's wife? Possibly. That could happen, argue the experts. Not very likely, argue the sceptics. Shhh, reply the experts.

Having 'established' that these things might have happened, the programme hits shakier ground as it examines the claims regarding Moses' adult life. Take the whole 'burning bush' incident, in which God spoke to Moses via a flaming shrubbery, and told him to set his people free. Helpfully, Jeremy points out that 'this is not something we can test', before explaining that loners wandering around the desert often undergo strange religious experiences, so hey, it could've happened. What he fails to mention is that hearing the voice of God isn't an experience confined to ancient loners in the desert – he's also been known to tell Bradford lorry drivers to kill prostitutes. Whoever this God guy is, he's clearly got a penchant for mischievous prank calls.

The programme goes on, explaining how the biblical plagues might have happened, and skirting around the whole parting-of-an-ocean issue by pointing out that it's based on a mistranslation – he actually led his people across a Reed Sea, not the Red Sea. As in a sea of reeds. As in a swamp. Not quite as impressive, but it's feasible.

Ultimately, Jeremy decides that whether you believe the story of Moses is true or not comes down to a question of faith, thereby rendering the entire investigative process somewhat redundant.

Still, it passes the time, and if the BBC wants to give me a load of money, I'm quite prepared to travel the world trying to discover whether Sherlock Holmes really wore those hats or if 'Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory' was a documentary.

Sleigh Bells A-Shinking [7 December]

Christmas is coming. The shops are full of gibberish and you can hear sleigh bells a-shinking in the background of every commercial on television. Even the ones for Anusol.

And, in TV land, they're doubtless putting the finishing touches to the traditional 'feast of entertainment' we've come to expect: even as we speak, somewhere in a Soho edit suite, someone's checking shots of French and Saunders pulling funny faces in a *Tipping the Velvet* spoof. The BBC will have shot special 'Yuletide' versions of those 'dancing' continuity links (my money's on a troupe of snowmen pirouetting round a Christmas tree), ITV should be dusting down their copy of *Die Hard 2*, and Channel 4 will have taken delivery of a set of Mark Kermode intros to a mini-season of Mexican wrestling movies.

In fact, everyone in television is so busy concentrating on the annual climax, they've neglected to fill this week's schedules with anything approaching decent programming. Take a look through this week's 'Guide' and you'll see what I mean – it's like gazing at the shelves of a particularly threadbare Poundshop, one that sells nothing but bootleg 'Bobb the Bilder' toys and *Pop Idol* wrapping paper.

Here's the highlights: *Alistair MacGowan's Christmas Big Christmas Impression At Christmas* (BBC1) – a repeat from last year; *Time Flyers* (BBC2) – that's a bunch of archaeologists sitting in a helicopter looking at the ground; *The World's Greatest Oil Rigs* (C5) – does exactly what it says on the tin; *Scalpel Safari* (C5) – people travelling to South Africa for plastic surgery followed by, yes, a safari; and *Extreme Ironing* (C4), a documentary which purports to follow 'the progress of the UK team at the Extreme Ironing World Championship in Munich' but, disappointingly, turns out to be a none-too-hilarious joke stretched out for an entire hour.

Then there's the awards ceremonies: *Sports Personality of the Year* (BBC1) – generally about as much fun as eating a handful of dried yeast; the truly loathsome *Record of the Year 2002* (ITV1) in which Dr Fox congratulates whichever soulless bunch of Tupper-

ware automata have appealed to the largest number of idiots this year; *The Turner Prize (C4)* – the pseudo-intellectual's equivalent of the above; and *FHM High Street Honeys: The Winners* (Sky One) – essentially the TV equivalent of a dirty old man masturbating at a bus stop.

These celebrations of nothingness reach their peak with *Kylie Entirely*, a 90-minute brown-tonguing of Britain's 'best-loved entertainer' cluttering up the schedules of the UK's number-one 'alternative' broadcaster: further proof that Channel 4 have long since abandoned an imaginative agenda and are now committed to pursuing the lowest common denominator with all the dignity of a man with his trousers round his ankles chasing a Thai prostitute round and round a sofa.

Still, *Kylie Entirely* would be just about justifiable had they managed to secure an interview with Ms Minogue herself, but no: instead it's yet another *mélange* of archive clips and talking heads. *Kylie Entirely* reaches its nadir with a full 10-minute dissection of the Minogue arse, which unfortunately isn't carried out by Dr Bodyworlds, but a gaggle of pundits including – AAAARRRGHHH – Paul Ross, the Ghost of Rubbish Past, who talks soundbites in his sleep and indeed does so here, in a series of unflattering shots which make him look like a melted Benny Hill. Any show desperate enough to resort to Ross soundbites really shouldn't be on television at all – it should be out in the street, wearing an 'UNCLEAN' sign and ringing a bell. In fact I shouldn't even be writing about it – but there's *nothing else on*.

Still, everyone in the media will be out at their Yuletide parties, so what do they care? Come to think of it, I'll be out too – getting into the festive spirit by sitting in a skip at the end of my road, drinking meths till I bleed. And since it's Christmas, you're all welcome to join me.

Slam it in a Filing Cabinet [14 December]

Last week I bemoaned the state of the schedules in the run-up to Christmas.

A week later, and guess what? Zero improvement. The main difference: instead of *The World's Greatest Oil Rigs*, this week Channel Five (oh, all right, 'five') brings us *The World's Greatest Cranes* – I confess I didn't bother ordering a preview tape since I suspect even the mightiest industrial hoist in existence couldn't raise my enthusiasm for the subject matter. Particularly when said programme is hosted by Tiff 'Quick, Turn Over' Needell.

So, barren viewing: what's to do? Obviously, writing for an upstanding publication such as the *Guardian* means I would never encourage readers to flout international copyright law by scouring the Internet for downloadable episodes of the next series of 24 (which I also wouldn't suggest are easily available, particularly if you hunt for them using a peer-to-peer file-sharing program like Kazaa or WinMX, and I *certainly* wouldn't suggest they're as nail-biting as the previous series and therefore well worth the lengthy download time – no siree).

Instead, I draw your attention to *Vain Men* (C4), a documentary examining the increasingly methodical preening regimes of the British male.

Speaking as a man whose idea of sophisticated grooming involves dipping a sock in the toilet to swab his armpits each morning, it all came as a bit of a shock.

For starters, according to the voice-over, 'the average man now moisturises daily'. What, really? Where was that survey held? Pussyland? The Kingdom of Nivea? Nope: right here on earth apparently – and to prove it, the researchers have rustled up a collection of image-conscious males who blow far too much time and money on manicures, spray-on tans, diets, masochistic work-out routines and even 'pectoral implant surgery' (that's a tit-job to you and me) in a desperate bid to resemble the exalted male ideal. Look, I'm no expert on the rules of attraction, but I do know this: any man who spends half his life agonising in front of a mirror simply doesn't *deserve* to get laid. Not by a human at any rate, although I'd queue round the block to watch them take it from an undemanding Dobermann. I mean honestly. Lighten up and weather-beat yourself like the rest of us, you idiots: we're practically drowning in ladies here in Slobsville.

Still, *Vain Men* does provide the hands-down 'water-cooler' moment of the week: a cornea-warping close-up of a maniac having his bumcrack and testicles waxed with terrifying efficiency by a nonchalant beautician.

The scrotum is a sensitive area at the best of times. Tap it lightly with a pen and your eyes can water for an entire weekend; actively volunteering to have it stripped bare is demented. The accompanying noise would be excruciating enough (the sound of all those wispy hairs being uprooted en masse is like someone wearing Velcro gloves tearing a rice cake in half), but the aftermath is worse: the scrotum emerges crimson and raw, like a napalmed dormouse. If this is what it takes to be considered handsome these days, I hereby retire from the mating game. In fact, I can only think of five more painful things you could do with your scrotal sack, which I'll list for the hell of it: 1) Slam it in a filing cabinet. 2) Catch it on a lathe. 3) Place it inside a George Foreman Lean Mean Grilling Machine and repeatedly wallop the lid with your fists. 4) Tie one end of a tow cable round the Marble Arch monument, the other round your egg basket, leap onto a motorbike and see how close you can get to Hyde Park Corner before losing consciousness. 5) Declare it part of the 'axis of evil' and convince the Americans to wage a five-week bombing campaign against it (don't wax it first – it'll help your case if it's already wearing a beard).

Anyway, enough of this balls. Next week, the Yuletide broadcasting onslaught begins in earnest. Which means yet more painful bollocks on the telly.

An Appalling but True Story [21 December]

Here's an appalling but true story. I was in a taxi on the day the John Leslie story finally broke. The cabbie, who'd caught talk of 'a mystery presenter' on the radio, without actually hearing the golden name itself, spotted my copy of the *Evening Standard*, and asked me who the culprit was. 'Says here it's John Leslie,' I replied.

'John Leslie,' he muttered, then ruminated for a moment before delivering his verdict: 'The lucky sod.' The Leslie debacle summed

up our confusion over celebrity – the year’s overriding televisual theme. Exalted one minute, tortured the next – we simply don’t know what to do with our famous people. Watching Leslie blank-eye his way through a standard edition of *This Morning*, aware he was the subject of frenzied Popbitch speculation, but unaware *The Wright Stuff* had inadvertently fingered him hours earlier, was the year’s most haunting image.

Of course, Leslie wasn’t the only ‘lucky sod’ this year. So many TV careers were derailed by scandal you needed a metal umbrella to avoid being brained by falling stars, and when they hit the ground we tore into them like the confused, rage-fuelled zombies from *28 Days Later*. Angus Deayton discovered no amount of nonchalant smirking would prevent the tabloids from crucifying him, while Barrymore’s career was as dead as the man in his swimming pool, even though he was cleared of any involvement: proof, if any were truly needed, that light entertainment and corpses don’t mix. (The exception to this rule is Professor Scaryhat Bodyworlds, the walking Hammer Horror character who performed an autopsy for Channel 4 – I’d have loved to see him turn up on the now mercifully cancelled *Generation Game*, giving grandmothers from Preston marks out of 10 for the way they sawed a ribcage open – especially if said ribcage belonged to Jim Davidson, and he was still alive, and his feet were kicking about and everything.) The torturing of famous people never let up. Hit of the year was *I’m A Celebrity – Get Me Out Of Here!* in which we were treated to the sight of Uri Geller scoffing live grubs and Christine Hamilton falling down a waterfall and blacking her eye. No sooner had that finished (granting Tony Blackburn an additional 15 seconds of adulation before we all got bored of him again) than *Celebrity Big Brother* took up the gauntlet, affording viewers an opportunity to sneer at Anne Diamond’s weight problem and publicly debate whether Les Dennis was going to commit suicide. And on BBC2, *The Entertainers* painted a sorry picture of Leo Sayer; oh how we cackled, even though his life to date has been 10,000 times more exciting than that of the average couch potato. Don’t forget, this man sold millions of records, travelled the world and performed live in front of thousands of

screaming fans. And what have *you* done? You've sat there, inert on your sofa, laughing about what a joke you think he is. So who's the tragic figure in this equation?

The end result is that celebrity has never seemed so second-rate. With all mystery removed, the cachet of fame is plunging so rapidly, by this time next year it'll actually be cooler to work down your local newsagent than to appear on telly.

Perhaps that's why, in a desperate bid to boost the dwindling ranks of the famous, TV companies pulled out all the stops attempting to transform regular Joes into megastars – *Pop Idol*, *Popstars: The Rivals*, *Model Ambition*, *Fame Academy*, all of them acting as gigantic blandness sieves, ruthlessly weeding out anyone of interest; art defined by committee. Even the very public implosion of Hear'Say – last year celebrated in an hour-long prime time special, this year spat at in the streets – didn't hamper the process.

The *Popstars* panel of judges pre-defined just how bland the end product would be: Louis Walsh, a squashed omelette of a man who wouldn't recognise soulful singing if it crooned at him from a deathbed; the curiously self-righteous Pete Waterman and gushing Geri Halliwell, a national joke who has to wear her heart on her sleeve because there's no room left for it in her sunken Belsen-chic chest any more. The end result is that, what with the combined cast of *Popstars* and *Fame Academy* AND Will and Gareth all releasing watery-bollocked singles in the space of a few weeks, we're left with the worst Christmas Top 10 since records began – a situation so dire, even the producer of *Top of the Pops* started publicly complaining. Which makes him my hero of the year: after all, he's the poor bastard who has to try to make this shit look interesting. And where were all our proper pop stars while this was happening? Liam got his teeth kicked out and Jarvis spent the year doing *Stars In Their Eyes* and dangling off lamp posts in a BT commercial.

The tragedy of it all is that while we amused ourselves watching mallrat crooners burst into tears and Rhona Cameron inspecting Uri Geller's pubic hair for lice, the Americans were creating some of the finest TV drama ever made – a veritable renaissance, in fact. In addition to the continued artistic successes of the *West Wing*, *Oz*,

The Sopranos and *Sex and the City*, they brought us *Six Feet Under*, *CSI*, *The Shield* and my favourite show of the year, *24*.

Ah, *24*: preposterous, over-stylised and occasionally schmaltzy it may have been, but it was also the single most tense television drama series ever made, insanely addictive once you got caught up in its unstoppable march toward midnight. It even provided a gutsy, unconventional ending: Jack Bauer, our hero, cradling the body of his pregnant wife, shot through the stomach by his traitorous ex-lover. The second series, already running in the US, hits our screens in February: I've seen the first six and incredibly, it's better.

The closest we've come to emulating the gritty new wave of American dramas is the BBC's spy drama *Spooks*, which demonstrated astonishing nerve by signing Lisa Faulkner as a regular character, then killing her off in spectacularly grisly fashion in episode two. The moment her head was forced into the deep-fat fryer, viewers reared on the formulaic, it'll-be-alright-in-the-end blandness of cookie-cutter populist dramas like *Casualty* and *Merseybeat* sat up and blinked in disbelief: here was a major BBC drama series that actually had the nerve to confound expectation. Perhaps the failure of ITV's *Doctor Zhivago* and the BBC's *Daniel Deronda* to set the world alight means my dream of a five-year moratorium on costume dramas will become reality – if we get more programmes like *Spooks* in their place, then heaven be praised.

So what else happened? Comedy rose in popularity, thanks to the likes of *Black Books*, *Phoenix Nights*, *The Office* and *I'm Alan Partridge*, all on their second series. The latter two suffered from 'difficult second album' syndrome, but were still head and shoulders above the likes of *TLC* (essentially the Chuckle Brothers for morons).

The funniest show of the year, however, was unscripted and American, although it starred a British family. I'm talking about *The Osbournes*, of course – a real one-off success that simply can't be replicated (although God knows TV producers will try). A celebrity reality show that didn't invite us to sneer, it provided more laugh-out-loud moments than it had any right to.

So. That's the year in a nutshell. Now turn to the listings and plan your Yuletide viewing. Speaking of which, there's just time for my prediction regarding next year's Christmas TV – an Aardman animated version of *Only Fools and Horses*. Go on, picture it – I swear to God it'll happen one day. Oh, and merry Christmas. Unless you're a Pop Idol, in which case you can piss off. Quietly.