

Dumb show

Charlie Brooker

Saturday October 23, 2004

The Guardian

Heady times. The US election draws ever nearer, and while the rest of the world bangs its head against the floorboards screaming "Please God, not Bush!", the candidates clash head to head in a series of live televised debates. It's a bit like American Idol, but with terrifying global ramifications. You've got to laugh.

Or have you? Have you seen the debates? I urge you to do so. The exemplary BBC News website (www.bbc.co.uk/news) hosts unexpurgated streaming footage of all the recent debates, plus clips from previous encounters, through Reagan and Carter, all the way back to Nixon versus JFK.

Watching Bush v Kerry, two things immediately strike you. First, the opening explanation of the rules makes the whole thing feel like a Radio 4 parlour game. And second, George W Bush is... well, he's... Jesus, where do you start?

The internet's a-buzz with speculation that Bush has been wearing a wire, receiving help from some off-stage lackey. Screen grabs appearing to show a mysterious bulge in the centre of his back are being traded like Top Trumps. Prior to seeing the debate footage, I regarded this with healthy scepticism: the whole "wire" scandal was just wishful thinking on behalf of some amateur Michael Moores, I figured. And then I watched the footage.

Quite frankly, the man's either wired or mad. If it's the former, he should be flung out of office: tarred, feathered and kicked in the nuts. And if it's the latter, his behaviour goes beyond strange, and heads toward terrifying. He looks like he's listening to something we can't hear. He blinks, he mumbles, he lets a sentence trail off, starts a new one, then reverts back to whatever he was saying in the first place. Each time he recalls a statistic (either from memory or the voice in his head), he flashes us a dumb little smile, like a toddler proudly showing off its first bowel movement. Forgive me for employing the language of the playground, but the man's a tool.

So I sit there and I watch this and I start scratching my head, because I'm trying to work out why Bush is afforded any kind of credence or respect whatsoever in his native country. His performance is so transparently bizarre, so feeble and stumbling, it's a miracle he wasn't laughed off the stage. And then I start hunting around the internet, looking to see what the US media made of the whole "wire" debate. And they just let it die. They mentioned it in passing, called it a wacko conspiracy theory and moved on.

Yet whether it turns out to be true or not, right now it's certainly plausible - even if you discount the bulge photos and simply watch the president's ridiculous smirking face. Perhaps he isn't wired. Perhaps he's just gone gaga. If you don't ask the questions, you'll never know the truth.

The silence is all the more troubling since in the past the US news media has had no problem at all covering other wacko conspiracy theories, ones with far less evidence to support them. (For infuriating confirmation of this, watch the second part of the must-see documentary series **The Power Of Nightmares** (Wed, 9pm, BBC2) and witness the absurd hounding of Bill Clinton over the Whitewater and Vince Foster non-scandals.)

Throughout the debate, John Kerry, for his part, looks and sounds a bit like a haunted tree. But at least he's not a lying, sniggering, drink-driving, selfish, reckless, ignorant, dangerous, backward, drooling, twitching, blinking, mouse-faced little cheat. And besides, in a fight between a tree and a bush, I know who I'd favour.

On November 2, the entire civilised world will be praying, praying Bush loses. And Sod's law dictates he'll probably win, thereby disproving the existence of God once and for all. The world will endure four more years of idiocy, arrogance and unwarranted bloodshed, with no benevolent deity to watch over and save us. John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, John Hinckley Jr - where are you now that we need you?

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2004

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguide/columnists/story/0,,1333748,00.html>