

‘What Next, Dwarves?’ Images of Police Culture in *Life on Mars*

Abstract

This article addresses the nature of police television dramas through an in-depth analysis of the characters and plotlines of the BBC show *Life on Mars*. It assesses how the series compares and contrasts with other cop shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Wire* and questions whether the fictional representations of police and society in *Life on Mars* are indicative of what criminologists know about police culture from the 1970s onwards. The article also explores what this complex programme means for the general public with their anxieties about the efficacy of criminal justice agencies in a post-industrial society. The piece then addresses the representations of police occupational cultures depicted during the series (including elements of officer corruption, sexism, racism and homophobia) and how these help us to understand the changes in policing that occurred between 1973 and the 2000s. It suggests that, despite its ambiguities, *Life on Mars* in many ways acts as a paean to 1970s policing by appearing to reject the ‘politically correct’ strictures that surround policing in the twenty-first century.

Key words: police, cultures, media, images, *Life on Mars*

Introduction

Images of Britishness, and especially Englishness, are often bound up with a cosy concept of the ‘bobby’ police officer, but this is not always how the police have been shown in novels, on film or in television programmes (McLaughlin, 2005). The policeman (and it is still predominantly a man) has been portrayed as variously an incompetent working class fool with a chip on his shoulder, a renegade who rejects the formal bureaucracy of his superior officers, someone with full regard of the rule of law, or a community-orientated man who knows the intimate secrets of the criminal and law abiding citizen alike (Leishmann and Mason, 2003; Summerscale, 2008; Sydney-Smith, 2002).

In the UK there is a long history of TV portrayals of the police in all of these guises: from individuals like George Dixon in the *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Inspector Morse*, *Inspector George Gently* and Det Supt Jane Tennison in *Prime Suspect*, to whole policing units in *The Bill*, via *Z Cars* and *Softly, Softly*, *The Sweeney*, *Cops* and *Waking the Dead*. To complement these series, there are programmes where the police play a peripheral role in the detection of crimes (*Silent Witness*, *Wire in the Blood*, *Cracker*, and all varieties of US drama *CSI*), but are still present in the unfolding story. Police dramas, just like portrayals of other institutions, reflect current dominant cultural paradigms of how we conceptualise the criminal justice system and the law and order debate, as well as representing establishment beliefs about society's norms (Sparks, 1992; Hunt, 1999; Sydney-Smith, 2002). As Mawby (2003: 218) suggests: 'policing is an index of the "state of the nation" and the media images of policing have symbolic value as a vehicle for commenting on contemporary society'. Audiences both make sense of the criminal justice system through watching fictionalised accounts of the police and other agencies and have their expectations shaped by the images which are broadcast.

The BBC series *Life on Mars* started airing in January 2006, and at first viewing the programme is a 'retro' police procedural following DCI Gene Hunt, DI Sam Tyler and their colleagues DS Ray Carling, DC Chris Skelton and WPCs Annie Cartwright and Phyllis Dobbs solving crimes in 1973. However, it becomes clear early in the series that there is something more to the plot than a simple cop show. In the first episode, DCI Tyler is hit by a car in contemporary Manchester and is transported, being demoted in the process, to 1973. In the opening credits to subsequent episodes, Tyler questions whether he is 'mad, in a coma or has gone back in time' and the audience is invited to help solve this question with him. The programme becomes a mixture of police procedural with science fiction, psychological thriller and light dramatic comedy; perhaps drawing on a variety of elements which are often only seen singly in other cop shows. If we use television programmes to aid the construction and interpretation of policing, then the confusion over genre and temporal positioning puts the audience in the position of being unable to react to the usual cues of a contemporary police procedural.

The article is an explanatory critique (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) of *Life on Mars*, which is driven by methods of critical discourse analysis. The data is both visual and textual; full episodes of both series of *Life on Mars* were viewed and transcripts of the programme scripts were examined. An 'interdisciplinary analysis of the relations between discursive practice and social practice' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 78) was undertaken, with the researchers focussing on how language used in the programme constitutes the social worlds, identities and relations, as well as considering the practice through which this television police drama may have been created and produced. In its first half, the article assesses how the series compares and contrasts with other cop shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Wire*. It questions whether the fictional representations of police and society in *Life on Mars* are indicative of what criminologists know about police culture from the 1970s onwards as well as trying to understand what this genre-crossing programme means for us, the general public, with our anxieties about the efficacy of criminal justice agencies in a post-industrial society. In its second half, the piece addresses the representations of police occupational cultures depicted during the series (including elements of officer corruption, sexism, racism and homophobia) and how these help us understand the changes in policing that occurred between 1973 and the 2000s. It suggests that, despite its ambiguities, *Life on Mars* in many ways acts as a paean to 1970s policing and, through the character of Sam Tyler, rejects the 'politically correct' strictures that surround policing in the twenty-first century.

'Who the Hell are You?': *Life on Mars* in Context

Life on Mars is uncomfortably positioned within the timeline of television police procedural, calling on images of the British bobby prescribed by George Dixon, through the 1970s images of the 'politically reactionary' officer (Reiner, 1981: 209), to the pictures of policing in post-industrial, urban decay in *The Wire*. The programme's lineage is demonstrated early in the first episode, when we see bobbies swirling around on their bicycles in front of the Greater Manchester police buildings in a manner redolent of the mediated golden age of policing from 1950s and 1960s Britain, but also

reminding us that there is a crime 'problem' outside of London, just down the road from Weatherfield (*Coronation Street*) and Newtown (*Z Cars*) where life is real and gritty (Billingham, 2000). *Life on Mars* incorporates elements from the police procedural's 50 years. Seeing Hunt and Tyler tearing round Manchester is possibly no different from catching Dixon clipping naughty children round the ear, or witnessing Carver and Herc standing in the streets of West Baltimore in *The Wire* questioning the use of wiretaps. In these, and the countless police procedurals which have been broadcast in the intervening years, we see the mundane detail of police work; the dull drudgery of community support, paperwork completion and surveillance. These are mediated images of what we *think* the reality of policing is like, and *Life on Mars* is no more, or less, authentic. However, *Life on Mars* sits uncomfortably in the police timeline as it does not always tell contemporary stories of society, 'urban disorder, of violence and drug-taking, of corruption in high places, of the sources of risk and threat, and of our disrupted sense of trust in the safety and habitability of our surroundings' (Sparks, 1993: 87), but like *Heartbeat* and most recently *Inspector George Gently* it relies on our nostalgia with a collectively (mis)remembered history of British society.

The creators of *Life on Mars*, Matthew Graham and Ashley Pharoah, report (Narayan, 2006) that the programme relies most heavily on elements of excitement, corruption, violence, cynicism and sexual tension embodied in 1970s programmes such as *The Sweeney*, rather than the community orientated, paternalism of many earlier policing programmes. Direct comparisons between Hunt and Jack Regan are easy to make. Hunt takes his attitude to policing, criminals, personal relationships and society at large from Regan and, indeed even uses Regan's dialogue. Gene's response to Sam's question about who he is ('Gene Hunt, your DCI, it's 1973, almost dinner time and I'm 'aving hoops' (Series 1, Episode 1)), mirrors Regan's reply to the same question from a criminal whose lapels he is feeling in the first ever episode ('We're the Sweeney, son, and we haven't had any dinner'). Hunt, like Regan, is tough on crime and the criminals, rather than addressing the social issues which may have precipitated the crime in the first instance. He sees that clearing up villains, by whichever

means necessary, is a requirement of keeping a chaotic society in order. Hunt is rarely uncertain of his actions, even when often prompted to by Tyler, who fulfils the traditional role of the sidekick and reluctant buddy in this regard. He does not question them, as his method of policing is uncomplicated in a world (at this point, 1970s Britain) which is becoming more complex. Gene and Ray are unlike the more challenging images of the police that are portrayed from the late 1980s onwards, where we start to encounter programmes and officers who are struggling with the 'criminality...woven into the fabric of daily life' (Rafter, 2006: 109). *Inspector Morse*, *Lewis*, Commander Dalgliesh, Det Supt Tennison, and the Swedish *Wallander*, all struggle with the nature of offences and the offenders who commit them. They question their actions and are often uncertain of the outcomes of investigations and trials; something which rarely concerns Hunt, but does pique the consciences of Tyler, Annie and Chris.

An element which has longevity in policing dramas since the 1960s is the emotionally damaged characters of some of the officers. Although we never go home with Gene, we understand that he has a troubled family life, just as *Inspector Morse* has. Gene and his colleagues, in a tradition developed in *Z Cars*, demonstrate human flaws and clearly are not simply 'playing their uniforms' (Billingham, 2000: 17). Again, despite its confusing genre positioning, *Life on Mars* conforms to the normal devices found in some police dramas.

As well as the personal, professional methods of the characters and images of policing styles are clearly visible in *Life on Mars*. Reiner (1981) notes that police films of the 1960s and 70s can be plotted on an axis of the professional versus the bureaucratic, and law versus order: professionalism is demonstrated by intuitive policing carried out by those involved in operational activities and order is illustrated by an adherence to the rules. Hunt and Tyler's positioning on this axis (Hunt, 'professional order' and Tyler, 'bureaucratic law') is seen most starkly in the first few episodes of series one, with both asserting that they know only one method of policing, although the contrast between the characters becomes increasingly blurred as the series progress. Leishman and Mason (2003: 70-71) identify three officer character traits that are often demonstrated in police

programmes: noble cause corruption; illegitimate rule breaking, and personal and/or ethical rule breaking. All three of these elements are shown in *Life on Mars* and are hinted at in most of the male police officers. Gene Hunt ensures that suspects get their just deserts, but drinks and smokes too much and has a problematic home life. Hunt rails against the bureaucratic systems of the police as well as fighting against the informal rules and fraternal bonds of his superiors and the establishment. *Life on Mars* forces us to question whether Hunt is breaking 1970s or 21st century rules, and whether it matters to the characters and the audience which they are. Perhaps, as long as the bonds of police canteen culture are not broken, and the baddies are always locked up, we should not question this moral ambiguity, as the timeless rules of 'commitment, responsibility and team work' (Evening Standard, 1993 as cited in Leishman and Mason, 2003: 49) are still intact.

Life on Mars asks us to remember an era before the 1981 Scarman Report and the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE), and requires us to compare this with our views of contemporary Britain and associated policing methods. Despite the role of romantic attachments, the programme challenges us to consider Sam's decision to remain in 1970s Britain, with its police corruption and brutality, rejecting a return to the present, with its twin policing 'horrors' of the liberal left and new managerialism (Billingham, 2000). The series is not, though, simply about nostalgia for the time when minorities and senior police officers were put in their place, it is also a pastiche of policing corruption and change of the last 30 years. It requires the audience to be sophisticated enough to get the joke which is being played on us (Billig, 2005; Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 2005).

The blue line between reality and fiction is fine when representing images of the police. The influence of programmes that show real life police officers chasing and bringing to justice real life criminals demonstrate the blurring of the boundaries between art and reality (Leishman and Mason, 2003); a reality which is already '... based on only a partial knowledge' (Clarke, 1992: 239), and is confused by our collective nostalgia for the 1970s: all of which have an impact on how we read the mediated images of the police in 21st century Britain.

‘Is My Name Coco?’: The Use of Humour in *Life on Mars*

Moskos (2009), when talking about his two years researching *The Wire* on the streets of East Baltimore, said ‘I miss the crude jokes and infantile behaviour that comes of being a police officer in a politically correct environment’, and Holdaway (1988) illustrates that both storytelling and joking are essential elements of the maintenance of team camaraderie amongst the ‘rank and file’ of the British police. Humour is a significant element of the ‘real’ occupational culture, and laughing and joking about the job, the villains and each other are present in a number of British police series. PC Brummell in *The Cops* jokes about the paperwork he has been saved by buying a young, male prostitute breakfast rather than taking him down the nick (Billingham, 2000) and in *The Sweeney* we know that Regan is better than the violent thug because he demonstrates a sense of humour while arresting him (Clarke, 1992).

Humour consolidates team work, relieves pressure from anxious situations, and exaggerates the excitement of the routine activities of everyday policing; it fulfils an instrumental need (Kuipers, 2008). Poking fun at colleagues, suggests Holdaway (1988), is a tool for reinforcing pockets of informal power in teams. This can be seen throughout *Life on Mars*, with Gene expressing his dislike of his superior officers, Annie ribbing Sam about his behavioural traits and Phyllis questioning the sexual practices of Hunt’s mother. Simply, *Life on Mars* practises many of the sociological explanations for laughing and humour ‘which can be a threat as well as a contribution to the social order: cohesion, control, relief but also the expression of conflict, inciting resistance, insulting, ridiculing or satirizing others’ (Kuipers, 2008: 367) and includes the tools consistent in comedy, such as the ‘wise fool’ portrayed by Chris Skelton (Mintz, 2008: 287).

What is interesting about this programme is that we can read its humour in as many ways as we can the drama and police procedural elements. We may understand Gene’s racist, sexist and homophobic outpourings as a satire of 1970s cultural acceptability, but possibly also as the ‘amusing’ insults as they are meant. The writers and directors of *Life on Mars* were acutely aware of this with the development of Hunt’s character. They were keen to give him some one-liners which

were funny, probably for the social embarrassment which they cause to the 21st century viewer, and which we could conceive were socially acceptable in the 1970s. However, they did not want him to be rejected by the audience, and we do not want Hunt to be viewed as an officer who would go to a police social event hosted by a racist comedian and join in the ridicule of black officers in the room (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 2005). Hunt's unacceptable jibes are often commented upon and are understood by the audience to be a pastiche. It is Ray Carling who is the tool for expressing a humourless social commentary of 1970s Britain and policing.

Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005) recount that social maxims surrounding the telling of jokes require us to acknowledge that we have 'got the joke', and thus responding in a socially unacceptable manner, with anger or a complaint, is not allowed. With jokes, we cannot react negatively to things which we find socially unacceptable. Sam and Annie are the two characters who are required to challenge the acceptability of jokes made by Gene, and often do this by either countering with another joke or by a non-verbal indication of disgust. During the run of *Life on Mars* the teaching union, the NASUWT, complained about the use of homophobic language and reported the use of Hunt's phrases as playground insults (Garner, 2007). Educating young children not to use homophobic language is clearly socially desirable, but blaming the comedic ramblings of a fictional, 1970s police officer is clearly an indication of 'not getting the joke', or so the BBC thought. The Advertising Standards Authority were of the same opinion after receiving around 100 complaints about the use of sexist language by a version of Gene Hunt played by Philip Glenister in the Marks and Spencer 2009 Christmas advertising campaign (Sweeney, 2009). The BBC and the ASA acknowledge that Hunt's character makes flippant, tongue-in-cheek comments and that the audience is sophisticated enough to understand the character, the storyline and the social context, which is an acknowledgement of the research on the impact of media outputs on audience behaviour (see, for example Carrabine, 2008). The mock up of a Labour Party campaign poster with David Cameron, leader of the Conservative Party, as Hunt with the phrase 'Don't let him take Britain back to the 1980s' (Labour Party, 2010) was also seen as another example of the liberal-left not

getting the joke. Hunt is a caricature whose utterances should be taken entirely lightly (Garner, 2007) and whose 'gags reference significant social issues' (Mintz, 2008: 293). Perhaps he simply embodies 'a multi-dimensional icon of English national identity' (McLaughlin, 2005: 12), and we should accept him as being a part of our anti-intellectual, conservative history.

'He's Not so Different from You': Law and Order Then and Now

McMillan (2009: 50) suggests that the police procedural is dominated by 'an essentially Platonic moral framework', which demands visible heroes. In *Life on Mars*, the heroes are flawed and display very human characteristics. Hunt is recognisable, understandable, refracts our views of policing and the police (Clarke, 1986), and displays Sparks' (1992) moral economy of the police officer. Hunt puts away the baddies, does not mind bending the rules as long as it is for the right cause, does not break the ethical code of being a police officer, and is ultimately a working-class hero who represents the anti-establishment challenges to bureaucracy, form-filling and managerialism. He is no different from mediated images of the British bobby since the Victorian period (Emsley, 1992), or indeed cops in US television series and films (King, 1999), and he displays conventionally accepted characteristics ascribed to everyday heroes.

In usual police procedurals (ones where elements of time travel or comparisons to an afterlife are excluded) different views on policing techniques are simply ascribed to one character or another. What is interesting about *Life on Mars* is how attitudes are aligned with periods of time and how these temporal, professional and moral boundaries are shifting and inconsistent. Hunt (1999: 134) suggests that 'the maverick blossoms into a more populist figure' but in *Life on Mars* we are constantly being asked to question who the maverick is, and whether the populist figure is socially acceptable. We are asked to support the hero and maverick, Gene, who is the embodiment of illiberal, populist, anti-intellectualism, in the fight against crime and disorder. Gene's actions are rarely questioned by those in positions of power within the Greater Manchester police; the liberal, managerial elitism is offered by Sam, not by more senior officers, as is usually the case in police

procedurals (Leishman and Mason, 2003), again reinforcing the suggestion that 21st century policing causes discordance and is unsettling for the viewer. This adds to our positive, sentimental nostalgia for the 1970s, rather than being an accurate portrayal of conflict between criminals and the police, society and the state, or within the police hierarchy itself that we regularly saw on our screens at that time.

During the 1970s the response to anxiety that crime rates were out of control was the law and order agenda popularised by the Conservative party, and Brunsdon (2000: 195-196) suggests that 'television crime fiction ... and particularly the police series ... has been a privileged site for the staging of the trauma of the breaking up of the post-war settlement'. Television fiction in the 1950s and 60s demonstrated that community policing was the way to address these issues (Clarke, 1986). This was followed by the macho, thief-taking methods of the 1970s (Mawby, 2003) and then a more sophisticated interaction of characteristics, personal traits and ethical codes from the 1990s onwards. Tyler is the personification of our anxiety about modern society; about our safety and security, our attitudes towards the people who share the streets and our concerns about how efficiently we deal with the 'others'. *Life on Mars* 'works over and worries at anxieties and exclusions of contemporary citizenship, of being British and living here, now' (Brunsdon, 2000: 197). Gene Hunt shows us that the lines between good and bad are blurred, and sometimes morally and ethically ambiguous, but we must also understand that it is acceptable to laugh at sophisticated social niceties, especially when they are portrayed through the mediated lens of the police procedural. The way that we often do this in *Life on Mars* is through sympathising with Tyler's own values and moral predicaments, and it is to a discussion of the dilemmas that his character faced when transported into an alien, 1970s police culture, that this article now turns.

Police Culture in *Life on Mars*

Sam's time travelling in *Life on Mars* provides him with unique insights into the policing methods of the 1970s that are informed by the values of the more 'diversity aware' police officer of thirty years

later. In many episodes his progressive and liberal policing philosophies place him in contradistinction with his male colleagues' prejudiced values that were so dominant in a 1970s police workplace in which 'unacceptable attitudes and behaviour were going unchallenged and ethnic minority officers, women and gay officers were tokenized, isolated and extremely vulnerable' (McLaughlin, 2007: 146).

Moreover, it is this difference in police working cultures that is the cause of many of the clashes between Sam's idea of policing and that of his colleagues in A Division. It is also something that causes the viewer to constantly question which side of the policing 'fence' they are on. First, though, it is important to briefly outline what is meant by 'police culture', and a good place to start is Loftus's (2008: 757) assertion that:

The notion of 'police culture' has been widely utilized to understand the inner world of the police and broadly refers to a set of shared informal norms, beliefs and values that underpins and informs police outlooks and behaviour towards people.

Often used in conjunction with analyses of the workings of junior ranks of officers, the concept of police culture is a useful tool for assessing the values that inform their day-to-day practices. While it is acknowledged that police culture is neither monolithic nor unchanging, and can vary from location to location or between the different occupations and roles within the service (Westmarland, 2008), there are nevertheless a number of core characteristics that can broadly be identified. Reiner (2000), for example, describes its 'mission' element (with officers viewing policing as an important occupation with a valued role and purpose); its 'action' aspect (with officers involved in the thrill of pursuing the 'bad guys'), and also its careworn, cynical mindset and the tendency for officers to view themselves as a 'put upon' minority socially isolated and unappreciated by a largely uncaring or hostile public.

All of these aspects are evidenced within *Life on Mars* and will be touched upon. However, it is some of the other negative sides of police culture that will be discussed in the following section, including

its aversion to change coupled with entrenched scepticism about, and intolerance of, liberal attitudes and beliefs. As Reiner (2000) mentions, this perspective can often contain elements of racism and homophobia, and these are illustrated in the views and actions of Gene and Ray. Also, the male-dominated nature of policing, epitomised by deeply-embedded sexism, sexual boasting, 'horseplay' and heavy drinking, forms a central part of the portrayal of 1970s policing in *Life on Mars* and thus provides another way of reinforcing Sam's estrangement from his 1970s colleagues.

Police Racism in Life on Mars

The history of relations between the police service and minority ethnic communities has been marred by mutual mistrust, suspicion and hostility (Rowe, 2007). On one 'side', there has been the feeling among officers that certain minority ethnic groups are prone to criminal behaviour, while on the other a perception within minority ethnic communities that they have been aggressively policed by a service mired in racist policies and procedures and populated by prejudiced officers. There has also been the feeling that this over-zealous policing unfairly targeted certain groups for stop and search procedures, for example, while ignoring or misunderstanding the impact of the racist harassment that these communities were suffering (Crane and Hall, 2009).

There have been a number of 'watersheds' in this history, most noticeably the Scarman Report (that investigated the disorders in Brixton in 1981), which identified the presence of racism among junior officers involved in policing London (Scarman, 1981), and the Macpherson Report (that followed the botched police investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993), which labelled the Metropolitan Police Service 'institutionally racist' (Macpherson, 1999). Both of these reports recommended a series of steps that, for example, encouraged minority ethnic people to join the service while challenging racist subcultures within it.

Fascinatingly, through the character of Tyler and his ability to 'travel back in time', *Life on Mars* straddled not only the pre- and post-Macpherson eras but also the pre- and post-Scarman eras. It juxtaposed the liberal values of a twenty-first century fully 'diversified' police officer, such as Sam,

with those of his 1970s equivalents, whose attitudes represent a police culture as yet untouched by the more progressive, equality-driven initiatives instigated in the wake of the Macpherson Report. Tyler is repeatedly seen to confront the ideas of his 1970s colleagues that offend his (and the 21st century viewers') more nuanced understanding of racism and its impacts, typified by this exchange with Ray Carling (Series 2, Episode 6):

Ray Carling (RC): [Of an Asian male running from a crime scene]: 'When I got there, another one of them was running out the back, but I couldn't catch him.'

Sam Tyler (ST): 'Did you not get a description?'

RC [bewildered]: 'Yeah, I told you – it was a Paki. Come on [Sam joins in, mocking Ray], they all look the same.'

Later in this episode the same two characters clash again, with Sam trying to get Ray and his colleagues to see that an assault on an Asian male may have been racially motivated:

ST: 'He could have been killed because he's an immigrant. You only have to look at Ray to see the prejudice.'

RC: 'Hey! I've got nothing against gungadins.'

Ray's ignorance and confusion are shared by Hunt, for whom the possibility that the attack could have been racist is an anathema and for whom the concept of 'hate crime' is alien. Instead, he is much more concerned about the lack of progress in the investigation, prompting the following dialogue:

Gene Hunt (GH): 'The dealers are all so scared we're more likely to get Helen Keller to talk. The Paki in a coma is about as lively as Liberace's dick when he's looking at a naked woman. All in all, this investigation's going at the speed of a spastic in a magnet factory.'

[ST looks aghast at GH]

GH: 'What?'

ST: 'I think you might've missed out the Jews.'

GH: 'What?'

ST: 'I think we need to explore whether this attempted murder was a hate crime.'

GH: 'What, as opposed to one of those "I-really-really-like-you" sort of murders?'

The altercation is revealing. Gene's summary of the case is littered with elements of disablism (the 'jokes' about the 'spastic' and also about trying to get the deaf and mute political activist Helen Keller to speak), homophobia (the reference to openly gay entertainer Liberace) and racism (the use of the pejorative term 'Paki'). Sam's shocked reaction to a senior officer uttering such words reveals his astonishment at hearing sentiments which clash with his post-Macpherson ideals of how minority communities should be spoken of in a workplace situation.

Again, though, humour is used as a device to make the attitudes of 1970s police officers more palatable to a contemporary viewing public. As mentioned earlier, the writers of the series admit that they watered down Gene's views on 'race', as they did not want viewers to find his character totally abhorrent (BBC, 2009). This is not to say that Gene does not occasionally cross the line into blatant offensiveness. For instance, in the same episode cited above, he reacts to Sam's admittance that he had had a relationship with an Asian woman by asking: 'A bit kinky in the sack, are they? The Karma Sutra? 1,001 nights? 57 varieties?' He then responds to the news that a white woman is pregnant by an Asian male with the line: 'Chocolate bun in the oven, eh?'

It is acknowledged here, though, that while the characters of Ray, Gene and Sam are used to illustrate the perception of marked differences between the police cultures, these differences are, in reality, somewhat blurred and less clear cut than the series portrays. As Reiner (2010: 201) argues, such a stark contrast between a supposedly more thuggish, less scientific and less 'PC' past and the more rule-bound, 'diversity aware' but somehow less human face of contemporary policing excludes 'the continuing prevalence of police racism, sexism, violence, and rule-breaking today, and the Dixonesque cosy community constable icons of the pre-*Sweeney* past.' The present still has some of

the cruder, more unpleasant aspects of the cultures and behaviours of thirty years ago while the past was not entirely characterised by brutality, racism and corruption. Even in the post-Lawrence climate, the longstanding organisational norms and expected behaviours of officers have proved difficult to eradicate, partly because new recruits have not wanted to appear 'abnormal' by challenging existing values held by more experienced officers (Kingshott, 2009) in the way that Sam does in *Life on Mars*.

Notwithstanding this, the views of Gene are nevertheless used to illustrate the more overt racist culture of policing in 1973, while Sam's anti-racist beliefs reinforce his post-Macpherson, post-PACE position as an outsider among his colleagues. His more progressive ideas on 'race' are perhaps best illustrated by his relationships with two African Caribbean characters; Nelson, landlord of the officers' favourite pub the *Railway Arms*, and PC Glen Fletcher, with whom Sam has a complex relationship.

Sam unthinkingly treats Nelson with respect; as someone to trust and confide in, in a way that his colleagues do not appear to do, and Nelson reciprocates this friendship. In the very first episode, it appears that Nelson talks to Sam (out of earshot of the others) in a Mancunian accent and not in his usual Jamaican dialect. He urges Sam to 'Keep it to yourself, eh? Folks just seem happier with the other Nelson', thereby revealing that, while he trusts Sam to relate to him without prejudice, he knows that Sam's colleagues would find this hard, and thus he puts on a front to fulfil the racial stereotype that they expect of him.

More revealing, though, is Sam's relationship with Glen Fletcher. Early in Episode 6 of Series 2 viewers are informed that Glen was Sam's senior officer and mentor in the twenty-first century, and that Sam looked up to him. Sam is therefore astounded to find that one day in 1973 Glen, as a junior and inexperienced officer, appears in the offices of A Division on secondment from his usual station. As he enters, Sam welcomes him by shaking his hand but then looks at his own hand, astonished at being able to touch someone from the 'future'. To Sam's horror Glen misinterprets this action, and states: 'Don't worry, it don't rub off', thereby making himself the butt of his own racist 'joke'. Then,

while Chris and Annie greet Glen warmly and seemingly without prejudice, Ray, who did not react well to the recent appointment of a woman (Annie) to the team, refuses to shake his hand in an open display of hostility. The dialogue continues thus:

RC: 'First women, then a coloured. What's coming next, dwarves? ... You here to do the spadework then? Only it can get a bit cold round here. It's not like being back home'.

Glen Fletcher (GF): 'What, Burnage?'

ST: 'You'll have to excuse DS Carling, he's our resident Neanderthal.'

GF: 'No, good point though. When that heatwave hit last month I thought Enoch Powell would have me deported.'

[Prompts laughter from all others present bar Sam and Annie].

GF: 'Don't worry, if there's a power cut I'll roll my eyes and you can follow me out the exits!'

[more laughter]

Sam tells Glen that he does not have to 'play the Uncle Tom' to fit in at A Division, but the amused reaction of his colleagues to Glen's 'comic turn' suggests otherwise. The whole scene also vividly illustrates the general intolerance of anyone who challenges the white, male occupational hegemony. It also shows the way that minority officers felt that they had to use self-deprecatory humour in an attempt to be accepted into such a hostile environment (Whitfield, 2004).

Other Aspects of Cop Culture in Life on Mars

In contrast to the more subtle coverage of police racism in *Life on Mars* the portrayal of homophobia is more explicit. Use of homophobic language is commonplace among all of the main male characters, with the exception of Sam, and some of this is delivered under the guise of humour, with the following exchange between Gene and Sam, regarding the sexuality of a gangland boss, typical of attitudes towards gay people:

GH: [The club owner is] 'a bum bandit ... A poof. A fairy. A queer. A queen. Fudge packer. Uphill gardener. Fruit-picking sodomite'.

ST [astonished]: 'He's gay?'

GH: 'As a bloody Christmas tree'.

The ambiguities and cleverness of the writing are highlighted as, once more, the viewer is simultaneously appalled by Gene's values and yet amused by his conversations with Sam. Are we laughing ironically at Hunt's lack of cultural sophistication? Or are we laughing because characters are saying things which we actually agree with but do not dare say so in a world of 'political correctness'? In any case, the routine nature of much of the homophobic banter in *Life on Mars* mirrors the values of seventies officers, with Gene, Chris and Ray employing such epithets on a regular basis, with almost the last words of the second series being 'Oh shut up you noncey-arsed fairy boy' (Series 2, Episode 8) as Gene admonishes Sam. Even the policing methods championed by Sam, such as the preservation of crime scenes, fingertip searches or the use of forensic techniques, are considered effeminate. In Episode 4 of Series 2 Sam tries to convince Gene that the use of surveillance would be of benefit to their investigation:

GH: 'Doesn't sound very manly.'

ST [confused]: 'Manly?'

GH: 'Well, it's not proper police work, is it, spying on people?'

Gene's inherent scepticism about the 'manly worth' of new policing techniques that employ 'brain' over 'brawn' are typical of the cynical and conservative nature of much policing culture, both in the 1970s and indeed in the twenty-first century (Westmarland, 2008). In an earlier episode, when Sam's scientific techniques defy the rest of the team's ridicule and scepticism (Series 1, Episode 3), he knowingly chides them with 'You see, "gay boy" science has its place', reflecting his insight into the reasons behind his colleagues' innate reluctance to consider anything new or 'different'.

Indeed, Gene's relish of the 'action' side of policing is in keeping with the macho flavour of broader police culture (Reiner, 2000). As McLaughlin (2007: 142) suggests, 'this culture is constituted within situated work practices that produce and sustain the core discourses and symbolic categorisations of the imagined police community.' In other words, the physical and aggressive aspects of policing so valued by Gene are in his eyes 'part and parcel' of the working practices integral to success. Hence, whenever Gene feels that Sam is becoming too 'touchy feely' he chides him with the use of female names, such as 'Gladys' or 'Dorothy', and when Sam fears that Ray Carling may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder after being caught in a bomb blast, Gene responds with: 'The man's a bloody hero and you're accusing him of having the clap ... He's a police officer, not a fairy' (Series 2, Episode 3).

Gene, Ray and Chris are also shown to be less intellectually capable than Sam, being rooted in a 'blokish', boorish masculine culture soaked through with drinking, typified by the following dialogue (Series 2, Episode 4):

RC [talking to Chris, who has a date]: 'Take my advice. Get a pint of Pernod and black down her - do what you like to her after that.'

GH: 'What are you hoping for: upstairs inside?'

Chris Skelton (CS): 'Don't really know, guv.'

RC: 'It's gotta be inside downstairs, guv.'

GH: 'On a first date? She's not a prossie ... is she?'

Once again, the device of humour is used by the writers to dilute the impact of officers' less palatable opinions while tempting the viewer to laugh at something 'naughty'. In this case, horseplay and banter, often linked with male officers, form part of a broader sexist police culture typified by archaic male attitudes towards female colleagues (Westmarland, 2001). For example, Annie Cartwright is shut out of conversations that are deemed above her ('man talk', 'grown-ups talking'), routinely the subject of jibes regarding her appearance, referred to as 'petal', 'love' or 'Miss Marple'

and only seen fit for the more 'feminine' police roles to which female officers have historically been consigned (Westmarland, 2008).

The sexist harassment of Annie, that only Sam finds upsetting, is shown as a routine part of her daily working life. She is repeatedly objectified and not taken seriously, and even news that she has a degree in psychology is greeted with ridicule by Ray: 'Forget the mind-reading act, let's get down to the striptease' (Series 1, Episode 1). When she protests to Hunt that she's had no firearms training (Series 2, Episode 2), he scolds her with:

'You see, this is why birds and CID don't mix. You give a bloke a gun it's a dream come true. You give a girl one and she moans it doesn't go with her dress. Now start behaving like a detective and show some balls!'

Police Powers and Corruption

Gene's association of Sam's less 'macho' ideas of policing practice with homosexuality or femininity is typical of the attitudes displayed by his male colleagues and indeed not atypical of those found in contemporary policing cultures (Loftus, 2008). While there are times when Gene can see the value of Sam's intelligence- and evidence-led approaches, on the whole he finds his colleague's ideas of policing frustrating and obstructive to the team's goal of achieving a 'collar'. This is exemplified by the following dialogue (Series 2, Episode 8):

GH: 'Grab 'em by the balls and their hearts and minds will surely follow. That is policing'.

ST: 'Our definitions of policing may vary marginally.'

GH: 'And yours is?'

ST: 'Serve the public trust, protect the innocent, uphold the law ... You can't uphold the law by breaking it.'

Gene sees nothing wrong in 'bending the rules' to apprehend a suspect in the same way as other officers in 1970s cop shows such as *The Sweeney* justified a 'rough round the edges' policing style in

order to catch the guilty (Mawby, 2002; Reiner 2008). This 'noble cause corruption' manifests itself on a number of occasions, including the intimidation of suspects (as in the case of Graham Bathurst (Series 2, Episode 5)), and physical violence directed against those who Gene or Ray are convinced are guilty (such as the beating of an Irish detainee in Series 2, Episode 3). Suspects are interviewed in the lost property office, because, as Gene puts it, the room has 'thick walls' that muffle the sound of shouting and screaming (Series 1, Episode 1). In this era, prior to PACE, which protects the rights of suspects in police custody, the use of violence and intimidation against those being questioned was not uncommon but which led, on a number of occasions such as the Guildford Four or Birmingham Six cases (or in that of the fictional Graham Bathurst), to wrongful convictions and miscarriages of justice.

Indeed, in Episode 2 of Series 1 Gene admits he has 'never fitted anyone up who hasn't deserved it' and justifies his methods by explaining that:

'We pull in someone from the "We don't like you" list, we put their dabs on the hammer, charge 'em and whip 'em past the beak. Loads of scum out there deserve another spell inside ... The world's getting tough and the police have to match it. People want the job done but they don't want to know how.'

These sentiments are shown to clash repeatedly with Sam's post-PACE conviction that policing should be done 'by the book'. Gene's approach, shared by the rest of his team, is an ongoing source of frustration for Sam, who not only disapproves of such methods but knows, from his own historical knowledge of 1970s policing, just how corrupt many stations were.

On other occasions, though, a more unsavoury side to Gene's 'rule-bending' is revealed, as he admits to taking 'backhanders' (Series 2, Episode 7) and is seen to be in a corrupt relationship with a nightclub owner (Series 1, Episode 4). He also turns a blind eye to the use of extreme violence against those he feels are suspects or for whom he has no regard (Series 2, Episode 6). Sam's opposition to such methods reinforces his 'outsider' status as someone who is not 'part of the team',

and when he opposes his superior officer's more unpalatable methods he is labelled a 'self-righteous prick' who needs to 'grow up' (Series 1, Episode 4).

This situation is starkly illustrated when Sam investigates the death of a suspect in police custody that occurred when both he and Gene were absent from the station (Series 1 Episode 7), only to find that his team closes rank against him. Reflecting Loftus's (2010: 13) suggestion that police solidarity can involve lying, secrecy and the covering up of infringements, Sam comes up against a 'wall of silence' from his colleagues, tinged with outright hostility, with Ray, Chris, Annie and Phyllis (the Custody Officer) hiding what happened through a series of lies and false testimonies approved by Gene. When the truth emerges, Sam decides that Ray's punishment (for precipitating the suspect's death) of demotion is inadequate, and take a tape recording of what happened to Superintendent Rathbone. However, rather than acting upon the evidence, Rathbone destroys the tape, to Sam's horror and disgust. As he leaves Rathbone's office in a distraught state, Sam bumps into Gene, who is waiting for him. Their conversation is revealing:

GH: He didn't do anything, did he? Way of the world.

ST: A world which creates coppers like Ray, awash with institutionalised corruption. You know, people like Rathbone need to be surgically removed from the force.

GH: You can't change this world, Sam; only learn how to survive in it.

ST: I don't give up that easily.

GH (admiringly): Good.

Gene is portrayed as an officer that may turn a blind eye of acts of 'noble cause corruption', and indeed may participate in the occasional illicit activity, but who also possesses a strong moral code and disapproves of those who cross it. His first instinct in this episode is to protect his team from Sam's 'snooping', although in reality he is pleased with Sam's perseverance with his investigation and uncovering the unpleasant truth.

This episode also illustrates how, throughout the series, Gene's 'unconventional' methods are rarely challenged by his superior officers, who instead either turn a blind eye to them or, in the case of Rathbone, are more ruthlessly corrupt than he is. Unlike other 1970s police procedurals, in which policies and procedures are seen to constrain maverick rule-breaking officers, *Life on Mars* rarely takes that line. Instead, others, team members and superior officers adopt Gene's methods to get a 'result'. Hunt is sometimes chided for his actions and warned about his approach, it is only towards the end of Series 2, and the appearance of the 'outsider', DCI Frank Morgan from C Division, Hyde, that another senior officer actively tries to 'destroy' Hunt. Loyalty, in the guise of malpractice, rule bending and lack of procedural integrity, that Sam demonstrates to Gene in this struggle is fascinating.

The Ambiguities of Sam Tyler's Character

A defining feature of Sam's is his integrity; he is portrayed as a principled officer who believes in fair and transparent policing. This integrity is often held in contrast to his colleagues' more dubious methods policing, and is used to underline Sam's status as an outsider within A Division; placing him apart from his colleagues in a conservative profession that values togetherness and internal solidarity (Chan with Devery and Doran, 2003).

However, as *Life on Mars* progresses Sam's character is gradually revealed as being more complex than this initial reading. From the first episode of the first series Sam is placed in positions in which he takes action, compromising his ideals. In that episode, for instance, Sam disposes of a crucial piece of evidence to help the investigation. Hunt rather ominously responds to this with: 'Welcome to the team'. In an episode where Sam lies to the Regional Crime Squad (RCS) about the location of some guns, a brawl breaks out between the members of A Division and the RCS. Sam pitches into the fight wholeheartedly, displaying his credentials as a reliable member of the team. This episode ends with Sam and Gene opening a tin of Watney's Party Seven beer in an illustration of the drinking culture which features prominently in almost every episode.

These aspects of A Division's values – the emphasis on team solidarity and bonding, and a strong drinking culture – have long been a feature of policing (Chan, 1996). Sam's participation is probably a reflection of the writers' desire to show him indulging in aspects of policing that, while compromising his more liberal and 'metrosexual' values would, nevertheless, be more palatable to a contemporary audience than if he were to share his colleagues' sexist or racist inclinations.

At other times, a darker side to Sam's character is revealed. He is not beyond the use of unnecessary violence against suspects (Series 1, Episode 5) or indeed when he simply takes against. In Series 2, Episode 1, Sam is shown to use intimidating methods that directly contradict not only his own personal values but also those of post-PACE policing. He does this by denying a suspect, Tony Crane, access to legal representation and attempts to scare him by yelling: 'What do you think we are, the boy scouts? We're the *police*, we can have you serving life so fast your feet won't touch the ground!' Later in the same episode, Sam tries to convince Crane's partner to plant evidence on him, and justifies it by claiming: 'I would never fit anybody up who didn't ... who didn't deserve it', in a chilling echo of Gene's identical justification of his own dubious methods.

Conclusion

Since its first screening in 2006 *Life on Mars* has been something of an enigma, which was played out until the end of the follow up *Ashes to Ashes*. As we have discussed above, it can be viewed in a number of ways: as a standard police procedural with similarities to and differences from any number of successful cop shows; as a time-travelling comedy-drama; a psychological thriller; or a paranormal, self-help programme with added nostalgia for a different, less 'politically correct' era. Perhaps it is just a programme that uses the vehicle of the police procedural 'to engage in knowing reference to previous films and existing conventions, merrily mixing, matching and juxtaposing them in a playful and ironic way' (Yar, 2010:76). But, in *Life on Mars* we do see the mediated struggle for dominance of occupational police cultures. We do see the challenges to policing methods from both pre-Scarman and post-Macpherson agencies being played out on the screen, and we are asked to try

and understand this struggle in the light of all the things that we *think* we know about the police learnt from a lifetime of watching the television and reading detective stories.

Despite the fact that the 1970s was a relatively short time ago and that many of us have memories of widespread industrial action and electricity cuts, repeats of *Camberwick Green*, the lure of spacehoppers, and the anxiety of the oil crisis, *Life on Mars* is bathed in a glow of nostalgia for a time when people could say what they thought and were a part of an identifiable and supportive community. Because of this, the programme might, rather than being read through the normal lens of mediated policing images, become akin to viewing Edwardian, rural England (*Larkrise to Candleford*) or 1960s swinging, Metropolitan New York (*Mad Men*). This relationship between the media, mediated images of the police and the viewing population is under researched and complex (O'Sullivan, 2005). The complexity of the relationship might only be made all the more so in *Life on Mars* by sophisticated methods of storytelling, misleading plot devices and well-developed, morally ambiguous characters.

It is unclear what behaviour we are supposed to agree with and who we are supposed to. Sam is initially rigid and obsessed with formal rules and bureaucracy; the embodiment of humourless, left-wing liberalism and new managerialism who stops 'proper' police work from being done (Billingham, 2000). He is not a hero in this guise, rather the tool through which we can play out our own anxieties about what we should believe in and how we should behave in a post-industrial and post-modern society. We are not certain what we can challenge and how we should relate to other people whose views and behaviour we find problematic. Until Sam starts to take on those characteristics of a previously rejected pre-Scarman copper, his methods are questioned, teased and vilified, and his character is assassinated. Tyler has to choose which person he wants to be and which version of policing he finds more acceptable. While his choice is seemingly influenced by the developing romance with Annie and the elements of a supportive community which are often highlighted in the programme, Sam makes the decision to return to the 1970s from the 21st century during a particularly tedious meeting when he is unable to feel the stab of the metal file clip that is pressing

into his thumb. Remembering Nelson's words about not caring about something when you are unable to feel, Sam makes the choice about what he wants and believes in dramatically and decisively in the last episode. Sam cannot make an emotional connection to the policing of the 21st century because he can no longer feel the affect of his work on his being.

DCI Hunt, however, is certainly a hero, whose working-class voice has been lost in the liberal chatter of new policing methods and post-Blair British society. He is a force who can deal with the ungovernable and chaotic society of 1970s Britain (Tulloch, 1990 as cited in Hunt, 1999). If he is able to deal with scum in the 1970s, we are reassured that this 'overweight, over-the-hill, nicotine-stained, borderline-alcoholic homophobe with a superiority complex and an unhealthy obsession with male bonding' (Series 1, Episode 8), will certainly deal with our 21st century anxieties about anti-social behaviour, incivility and crime. Read in this manner, *Life on Mars* is a challenge to post-Macpherson, New Labour policing.

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