



On Poppies

David Mitchell

Have you noticed those special sparkly poppies that some people on television have taken to wearing instead of the normal ones? I don't know when they first cropped up – it feels like about two years ago, which usually means it's roughly 10. It took them a while to get on my nerves, but now they have.

I don't know why I was initially fine with them. That's not like me. Maybe it's because of the context. The X Factor, where I first noticed them, is such a hellish environment, such a horrendous, screaming, Klingon parliament of a space, that even those glittery whored-up symbols of remembrance seemed to have an incongruous innocent simplicity about them, rather like the original poppies which grew out of the cordite-wrecked soil of the western front.

But then Louis Walsh changed my mind. I was flicking through the channels when, like a moth drawn to the flame, like an addict returning to the needle, like an early 20th-century emperor lured into a conflict he will be able neither to control nor comprehend, I paused to watch some hopeless hopefuls forgettably finish singing a song and then line up to hear it described as unforgettable.

Walsh, his very presence a more devastating refutation of the principle of the sanctity of human life than Verdun, was repeating a platitude that had been expressed seconds earlier by someone else – only altering the word order slightly so that it didn't quite make sense. His mouth was opening and closing, his ears were wagging, his voice was straining to be heard over the screeches of audience approval which his empty praise was generating, and my eyes, drawn to the screen yet repelled by his face, lighted on the blinged-up poppy on his fucking shirt. I saw it clearly for the first time.

How dare television designers adapt this token of remembrance to blend in with their trashy aesthetic? How dare they make it twinkly? The poppy is an incredibly moving symbol. This flower somehow flourished on battlefields smashed by the world's first experience of industrialised war – a war of unprecedented carnage which became almost as terrifying to the statesmen who had let it start as it was to the millions of soldiers who were killed or wounded by it.

Such was the international shock that, even after our side had won, no one could bring themselves to remember it with anything other than unalloyed sorrow. Not with victory arches or triumphal parades, but with the plain, mournful Cenotaph and a tradition of wearing paper versions of the flowers that had grown among the dead, the petals with which nature had rebuked the murderousness of men. That's why, while I understand the point they're trying to make, I disagree with those who eschew the red poppy but wear a white one for peace. To me, the poppy is already a pacifist rather than a martial symbol – a sign that war should be rejected at almost all costs.

The poppy represents the consensus that existed after the armistice – not a military or political consensus, but an emotional one: an overwhelming sense that the indiscriminate bloodletting of total war was too terrible ever to be forgotten, that only in solemn remembrance can any sense be made of those millions of deaths. On that simple point, almost everyone was, and continues to be, agreed. And for the symbol to be powerful and meaningful, I think it needs to be uniform – as uniform as the franchise. We should all wear the same type of poppy or it's like some of us saying "I'm Spartacus" in a funny voice. By encouraging the sparkly poppy, TV producers almost literally gild the lily. And literally glamorise war.

However, this broad consensus is only powerful if it's genuine, and genuinely voluntary. So people were rightly outraged by the wrongful outrage provoked by ITV News presenter Charlene White's decision not to wear a poppy on TV. This included a fair bit of racist and misogynistic abuse, much of it emanating from rightwing extremists up in arms at the disrespect they claimed she'd shown to soldiers who'd died fighting against rightwing extremists.

In a way, Charlene White is fortunate that her detractors came mainly from organisations like the English Defence League, because it's not unknown for more respectable members of the community to have a pop at poppy-absence – and their censure is harder to shake off. The Mirror generated some negative publicity for the BBC out of the fact that some viewers complained about a lack of poppies on the Halloween-themed edition of Strictly Come Dancing, broadcast more than a week before Remembrance Sunday. And Labour MP Gerry Sutcliffe wasn't too busy to criticise Google for sporting too small a poppy on its homepage, saying: "Around Remembrance Day it is demeaning not to have something that is spectacular." Something more like the artillery barrage which started the Battle of the Somme, perhaps.

The effect of these criticisms is corrosive. It means that people on TV, and appearing in public in general, will come to wear poppies primarily to avoid disapproval – in fact, they're undoubtedly doing so already. Privately they may buy and wear poppies as an act of respect or remembrance, or they may not, but publicly they'll just wear them for a quiet life. "Lest We Forget" will be reduced to the level of remembering to check your flies are done up. That's not a meaningful consensus any more – that's just bland conformity.

If this development goes unchallenged, the next stage

in the story of the poppy is inevitable: if people have to wear them to be deemed respectable, then gradually more people will start refusing as a gesture of rebellion against the establishment. The poppy will cease to be a symbol of the horror of war and of soldiers' sacrifice and it will become a political badge of the status quo – the Unknown Soldier will be displaced by George Osborne. The fallen will be forgotten as a direct result of the efforts of those who wish to enforce their remembrance.

It's wonderfully humane and moving if everyone wears a poppy – but only if they don't feel they have to, and wouldn't fear not to. Otherwise, we really might as well doll up our poppies with sequins, because they'll have stopped meaning anything at all.

Taken from *Thinking About It Only Makes It Worse* by David Mitchell.