

'The Godfather'

Sometimes I think that British popular culture is a little like North Korean propaganda. It is crude, unpleasant and inescapable. If you criticise it, you are taken for an enemy of the people. One should not exaggerate, of course: by inescapable, I mean in certain circumstances. North Korean propaganda, by contrast, is inescapable in all circumstances.

The other day I found myself somewhere in which the nearest pub was the only place within easy reach in which to have dinner. It was in suburban Tudor style, and the first thing one noticed on entering were the flashing lights of fruit machines, closely followed by the numerous large flat screens disposed in such a way that it was almost impossible to escape them. It was as if one had an absolute duty to watch, and as if a malign state had installed them with cameras in order to check that one was being amused.

There was a small mercy, however: at least all the screens were showing the same thing – a football match, football being now a 24-hour activity. I have been in pubs of many screens in which each showed something different and one felt that one's brain was being put through a food mixer.

The smell in the pub was of stale beer and even staler fat in which standard British prolefood had been fried. The atmosphere had so much fat in it that one felt one might become obese merely by breathing it in.

I looked at the grubby menu, a triumph of quantity over

quality. The fish dish was called the 'Codfather,' size trumping taste. Everything came with chips that, in the event, were clearly of the frozen variety.

I sat at the table: sticky and long unwiped. I had soup: packet soup which had not been properly dissolved, so that it had little balls in it that if bitten exploded into a kind of salty dust. My steak which I ordered rare, would have been regarded as incinerated in any other country. The fried mushrooms contained at least their own weight in fat of some type.

The next morning, I woke with a strange and unpleasant taste in my mouth.

During the meal, which wasn't even cheap, the man who had taken my order came over to my table.

'Everything all right?' he asked.

'Yes, very good,' I replied.

The slovenliness, the bad quality, my pusillanimity: voilà the secret of the British economic problem.

First published in