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Review of: *The UK Gold*, directed by Mark Donne, UK, 2013
Author: Elliott Morsia
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Elliott Morsia

The UK Gold, directed by Mark Donne, UK, 2013

During a short introductory speech given prior to the East End Film Festival's opening-night screening of *The UK Gold*, director Mark Donne discussed the location of the Troxy in Limehouse, which hosted the event. He touched upon the harsh socioeconomic realities of Limehouse and its London borough, Tower Hamlets, which is representative of the east end in continuing to register among the very poorest boroughs in London.¹ Positioning his film in relation to the spotlight placed upon Stratford and the east end by the recent 'summer of glory', the London 2012 Olympic Games, Donne challenged his audience to question the legacy of recession-hit Britain and to ask, what does it really *mean* to back Britain and the UK gold? The Troxy is stationed on Commercial Road, and Donne highlighted the significance of this historic route connecting the former banking centre of London to the west, and the East and West India Trading Docks to the east; high symbols of imperial Britain—the eerie relevance of which was later apparent.

Donne's stark yet electric documentary opens with Hackney vicar Reverend William Taylor and his quest for political transparency in the City of London. Standing on the issue of tax avoidance, he is running for election into one of the twenty-five wards which together comprise the City of London Corporation. We begin following the Reverend's journeys on the 149 bus, from his church door in Hackney to the doorsteps of the Bank of England. Narrated by *The Wire*'s Dominic West and with music by Radiohead's Thom Yorke (among others), the film soon unravels into deeper questions about the full extent of the UK's financial chicanery.

Developing through a spliced series of interviews with esteemed politicians, hedge fund managers, investigative journalists (as well as Channel 4 News presenter John Snow and UN adviser on economics, Professor Jeffrey Sachs) the film gradually exposes a vast network of global tax avoidance, as well as revealing the fundamental role played by the City of London in this process. By retaining sovereignty over a number of overseas states, pillaged during the UK's colonial past—like the Cayman Islands, whose Ugland House houses 19,000 corporate entities—the UK has, through its mastery of the tax haven, gone on to facilitate the world's new (corporate) economic colonisers. Even more shocking, perhaps, is the documentary's tax-related dénouement, which details how just as established UK tax havens are 'politely asked to show the world some leg on transparency' (following the global financial crisis of the past decade), 'City UK', with its unparalleled expertise in the ways of the offshore world, is busily setting up a new 'global financial centre' in Nairobi, Kenya.² The film closes on a personal note, as the Reverend William Taylor discovers his run for election into the City of London Corporation has ended unsuccessfully; defeated by an appointee business executive. In the final shot, the Reverend slowly descends into Bank station.

A distinction can be made between, on the one hand, the genre of the exposé, and on the other, the ethical values which are at stake in the matter of tax avoidance (and the increasingly corporate nature of the UK's landscape). Had

¹London's Poverty Profile < www.londonspovertyprofile.org.uk > [accessed 20 July 2013]

²Mark Donne, "Tax havens are here to stay, thanks to "City UK"", *The Guardian*, 25 June 2013.

< www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jun/25/tax-havens-here-to-stay-city-uk > [accessed 20 July 2013] (para. 4 of 13)

the filmmaker shied away from the integral ethical issues, the important work undertaken by *The UK Gold* would slide into the conspiratorial sensationalism that undercuts much journalist work. In this regard though, *The UK Gold* is a resolute example of both courageous and visionary filmmaking. Stuffy interviews with political economists are juxtaposed with still long-shots of London, in which the city pulses with golden lights. And though a central thread in the narrative exposes a scandalous global network of tax avoidance, another follows the journey of a local vicar, who himself notes: 'I feel I'm out of my depth here. We're all out of our depth. And this is deep. We're in a deep bit of lagoon here, and we need to be careful as we cross it'.

Beneath the fleeting shock value which surrounds and attracts the castigation of figureheads for governmental corporate machines (see the status of George Osborne in the UK press), there are solid and disturbingly vast networks of digitised data and correspondingly vast computerised, bureaucratic machines assimilating information, all of which encompass national tax operations. What is at stake here hangs on whether we are listening to an individual voice whose messages we can therefore locate. It is easy to forget that a corporation is not an individual: it is a revenue machine; particularly when it speaks an unerringly familiar language. In his recent novel, *The Pale King*, which considers tax in the U.S.A, David Foster Wallace notes that 'corporations are getting better and better at seducing us into thinking the way they think—of profits as the *telos* and responsibility as something to be enshrined in symbol and evaded in reality.'³

An injunction which was central to the iconography of the London 2012 Olympic Games was to: 'inspire a generation'. The truly sweeping development in situ to the Olympic site in Stratford signals the most significant change to the landscape in the east end of London for many a generation. This includes the building of Stratford City Bus Station, Stratford International Train Station, a high-rise housing development project and, most strikingly, the Westfield shopping centre, a 1.9 million square foot retail and leisure destination, the billboards besides which announce: 'gateway to London's Olympic Park / over 300 dynamic brands / welcome to the next generation'.

If we turn to the history of the Troxy itself we can also detect an ominous circularity to such developments:

Troxy originally opened as a grand cinema in 1933 and was designed to seat an audience of 3520 people. Erected on the site of an old brewery, it cost £250,000 to build.

The cinema had luxurious seating areas and mirror-lined restaurants and all the staff wore evening dress. It seemed like Hollywood had come to Commercial Road in all its glory.⁴

The UK Gold is an independently micro-budgeted film that questions the UK's disorientating culture of tax (or accountability) avoidance. It currently has no UK distributors. As was outlined by Festival Director Alison Poltock, the East End Film Festival has no corporate sponsors. It too is an independent celebration, supported by its local borough, Tower Hamlets.

³David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (Penguin Books: London, 2012), p.132-133.

⁴'Home to Astonishing Events', <http://www.troxy.co.uk/troxy_history/> [accessed 20 July 2013] (para. 1-2 of 8)