Reviews

Life on Mars Symposium: A Report

In recent years, a number of key television programmes have taken on significance beyond the fields of television and media studies. These programmes frequently rely on high production values, but are more notable for taking full advantage of both the technical and creative possibilities of contemporary television. Audience engagement is encouraged with new technologies, including DVD releases, which enable uninterrupted repeat viewings, as well as through official and unofficial sites on the Internet. Episodic and seasonal narrative arcs both reward the viewers with a conclusion to a particular episode, and encourage them to keep watching by slowly revealing information about the series' overarching narrative. Thus, programmes such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Mutant Enemy/The WB/UPN, 1997–2003), *Lost* (Bad Robot/ABC, 2004-present), *Battlestar Galactica* (Sky One/Sci-Fi Channel, 2003-present) and *Heroes* (Universal/NBC, 2006-present), among others, have prompted extensive discourse among fans, critics and increasingly, academics. The scope of such narratives has prompted intense interdisciplinary academic discussion, both at dedicated conferences and in print. In this context, the television show serves as both a catalyst for initial dialogue between scholars of different disciplines and methodological backgrounds, and as a common frame of reference, enables participants to follow the ever-evolving analytical and critical discourses.

We can now add *Life on Mars* (Kudos Television/BBC, 2006–7) to that list. The sixteen-part BBC series, which ran for two seasons, received intense academic scrutiny at a dedicated one-day symposium, held on 16 November 2007 at the University of Glamorgan's ATRiuM centre in Cardiff. The symposium, sponsored by University of Glamorgan's School of Creative and Cultural Industries, was organised by Professor Stephen Lacey and Dr. Ruth McElroy. It brought together scholars from across the UK to discuss the critically-lauded and commercially-successful BAFTA award-winning BBC series. The plot of the show revolves around twenty-first century Mancunian police inspector Sam Tyler (John Simm), who is hit in a car accident and suddenly – and inexplicably – finds himself transported back in time (to 1973) and genre (to a very *Sweeney*-like world ruled by the apparently-racist, sexist and homophobic, DCI Gene Hunt [Philip Glenister]).

Inspired by the show's famous title query – 'Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time?' – *Life*

on Mars' fans continuously engage in *Lost*-like speculation about its secrets on several unofficial fan websites and on the pages of the online edition of the *Manchester Evening News.* Now, scholars are interrogating *Life on Mars* in their subtle style (no blackjacks, no bruising abusive language, but lots of questions), and the complex narrative and conceptual world of the programme has begun to open up.

As a television text, *Life on Mars* presents a rich tapestry of topics for analysis. Its unique combination of hybridised genres (police procedural, period drama, science fiction, romance), its persistent contrast between the social relations of the 1970s and the 'noughties', its representations of Manchester and North-West England, its innovative use of music, its intertextual references to 1970's television and the existentialist worldview which informs the series, combine to produce a text whose complexity belies its brief (by serial television standards) 16-hour duration.

Of additional interest to academics are the audiences' discourses around the show, from debates provoked by the representation of social relations, through examples of fan creativity inspired by the programme, to the wide range of reactions to the programme's ambiguous and controversial ending.

Of recent British television programmes, only the revival of *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–1989; 1996; 2005-present) had inspired a similar level of intensity in vernacular and academic discussion. However, the interest in *Doctor Who* stems, to a large extent, from that show's 40-year legacy, and recent academic accounts[1] build on the work started by John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado in 1983,[2] and revisited again by Tulloch in 1995.[3]

In contrast, the *Life on Mars* symposium allowed its participants the exciting possibility of discussing an emergent phenomenon. It set out some of the terms of the relevant debates, as well as working to identify particular areas requiring further analytical attention. At the end of the day, scholars were given a rare opportunity to discuss aspects of the production, meanings and impact of the programme with its producers, Julie Gardner and Claire Parker.

Robin Nelson began our daylong plunge into the world of *Life on Mars* with his keynote, '*Life on Mars*: "Just your regular run-of-the-mill, time-travelling cop show"'. It was a splendid example of the active, multi-faceted style of television investigation, equally attuned to production, authorship and reception, which Nelson has championed for a decade. In the rhetorical style, which others also employed throughout the day, Nelson used his analysis of *Life on Mars* as an introduction to a wider topic. He cited the programme as an example of contemporary nostalgia television, and contrasted its representations of the past, of policing, of regional identity and of gender with ITV's Yorkshire-based 1960s police drama *Heartbeat* (Yorkshire Television/ITV, 1992- present).

In four parallel panels – 'Sam's Stories: Narrative & Genre', 'Producing Audiences for the Past', 'Nostalgia and the Uncanny Media' and 'Locating the 1970s' – almost a dozen papers were presented. In keeping with Nelson's keynote address, presenters engaged in what anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called a 'thick description'[4] of *Life on Mars.* Papers included: investigating generic (Nicola Dobson's '"Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time?" Generic and Narrative Complexity in *Life on Mars*'), industrial (John R. Cook's '"Moonage Daydreams": Industrial and Cultural Memory Contexts of *Life on Mars*'), historical (Andy Willis' 'Memory Banks Failing! *Life on Mars* and the Politics of Re-Imagining the 1970s' and Ross Garner's 'Make Another World: Expressing the Nostalgia Affect in the Diegesis and Narrative of *Life on Mars*'), cultural and aesthetic (Elisa Oliver's 'Longing to Return-Seeing the 1970s. *Life on Mars*: Britain, Nostalgia and Art') and geographical contexts (Teresa Forde's 'Location, Location, Location: What Do the 1970s Look Like?'). Time and again, papers began from the same starting point, but developed in different directions. However, some commonalities soon emerged:

scholars agreed that *Life on Mars* was a distinct moment in television; a series which was not only fully aware of its pop cultural heritage, but one which made intertextuality part of its narrative. Another common theme of the day was representation, which in the context of *Life on Mars* (and perhaps in the context of any representation of recent history) resulted in a tension between nostalgia and authenticity. While much of the show's acclaim might initially be attributed to straightforward nostalgia, its storylines – and especially its conclusion – possess a thematic darkness that suggests a greater complexity in its appeal to audiences than simple nostalgia for the 1970s. Meanwhile, *Life on Mars*' North-West England setting presents not only a striking visual contrast between a sepia-toned 1973 and a metallic grey 2006, but also a conceptual contrast between the traditional industrial and modern corporate environments.

The richness of *Life on Mars*' potential for analysis from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds was further illustrated by Matt Hills' neo-McLuhanian take on the series in 'The Media is the Monster. . .or the Message? Uncanny Test Cards and Interactive OU Lecturers in *Life on Mars*', Angelina Karpovich's application of Émile Durkheim's seminal sociological study of suicide[5] to the series' controversial ending in 'Choosing Not to Choose Life: *Life on Mars* and the Dialectic of Suicide'; and John Curzon's analogy between the series' protagonist and the similarly-liminal figure of the Scholarship Boy from Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*[6] in 'Sam Tyler and the New North'. The standard of scholarship was uniformly high, with a range of sophisticated analyses and responses that situates *Life on Mars* at the centre of wider discussions about contemporary television narrative, representation, nostalgia and ideology. The academic discourses prompted by *Life on Mars* at this symposium should form the basis for excellent future work in television studies and beyond.

David Lavery had the privilege of conducting an afternoon question-and-answer session with two of *Life on Mars*' prime movers: commissioning producer Julie Gardner, head of drama for BBC Wales, and Claire Parker, *Life on Mars*' producer at Kudos Television. In a session which lasted over an hour but could have easily lasted twice that, given the enthusiasm of the symposium participants, many subjects were discussed, from the *Life on Mars* origin myth (the Kudos-financed excursion to Blackpool, organised specifically for the show's writers Ashley Pharoah, Matthew Graham and Tony Jordan, to brainstorm ideas), the show's long period of gestation, the casting of the main characters, *The Sweeney* (Euston Films, 1975–78) and *Get Carter* (Mike Hodges, 1971) as influences, the choice of directors, the perception (among some of the audience) of *Life on Mars* as science fiction, its lack of political correctness, the creative and industrial challenges of television production, the show's many metaphors, alternate endings, the finale (and changes to the finale in post-production). After the colloquy, the audience was given the opportunity to likewise question the guests. The producers answered with humour and what appeared to be a great deal of candour, though one response – that they were unaware of, and largely untroubled by, concerns about *Life on Mars*' ratings or the demographics of their audience – came as a complete surprise, given the speed with which *Life on Mars* attained critical success and permeated the public consciousness in the UK. Both the show and its various spin-offs (DVDs, soundtrack albums, official companion books), quickly achieved commercial popularity. Given the BBC's relative gamble in giving a primetime slot on BBC1 to a high-concept genre-shifting new show, it is difficult to believe that its producers would have remained unaware of the show's reception. Perhaps we can put this puzzling response down to a slight disingenuousness on the part of the producers, a reluctance to reveal all of the show's secrets at once, which would indeed fit with *Life on Mars*' overall premise of keeping the audience guessing. Similarly, questions about the show's spin-off, *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC Wales/Kudos Film and Television/in association with Monastic Productions, 2008-present),

which had yet to premiere at the time, were gently deflected by the producers, so as not to reveal too much of the new show's mysteries.

Of all the subjects introduced at the symposium, questions related to the audience remained under-explored. The topic figured peripherally in a number of presentations, but scholars did not yet seem sufficiently familiar with the show's viewers to be able to incorporate their responses into the academic discourse. Another underdeveloped area was the show's use of music and the musical relationship with both the notion of nostalgia and other kinds of representations of Manchester and the industrial north. Also notably absent, no doubt due to the recent-ness of the broadcast, were considerations of *Life on Mars*' reception outside the UK. Despite some anecdotal evidence of its popularity among the subscribers to the North American cable channels, BBC America and BBC Canada, this is an area warranting further work.

It also remains to be seen how *Life on Mars*' sequel, *Ashes to Ashes*, translates the legacy. The new series has a new protagonist (Keeley Hawes), a new location (London), and has shifted in time from the 1970s to the early 1980s, thus presenting the creators with a difficult task of satisfying existing audience expectations while creating a brand-new central dynamic and a brand-new set of representations. *Ashes to Ashes* has received mixed reviews (and has a second season), but regardless of its own merits, this new show, together with *Life on Mars*' putative US remake, serves to enrich the context originated by *Life on Mars*, giving scholars even more material for analysis.

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Notes

1 David Butler, ed, *Time and Relative Dissertations in Space: Critical Perspectives on Doctor Who*, Manchester University Press, 2007; David Mellor, ed, *New Dimensions of Doctor Who: Exploring Space, Time and Television*, I.B. Tauris, forthcoming 2009.
2 John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado, *Dr Who: The Unfolding Text*, Macmillan, 1983.
3 John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Dr Who and Star Trek*, Routledge, 1995.
4 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, 1973.
5 Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, Routledge, 1970.
6 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments*, Penguin, 1958.

Lesley Henderson, *Social Issues in Television Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007. ISBN 978–0-7486–2532–1.

Given British television's reputation for social realism and social-issue drama (a tradition running from *Z Cars* (BBC, 1962–78) through *The Wednesday Play* (BBC, 1964–70) and *Play*

for Today (BBC, 1970–84) to *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982), *Hillsborough* (Granada Television, 1996) and the recent *Boy A* (Cuba Pictures/Film Four/C4, 2007) it seems surprising that there has not yet been a book on the genre. Not that any of these dramas are the subject of *Social Issues in Television Fiction*. In fact the title is really a misnomer, because Lesley Henderson's main focus is television soap opera, and anyone expecting the book to discuss social-issue drama generally will be disappointed. Henderson states early on her intention to focus 'mainly but not exclusively on television serial drama and in particular on the role of soap opera' (p. 4) and she does this through three case studies which form chapters three to five, where she considers representations of sexual violence, breast cancer and mental distress in *Brookside* (Mersey TV/C4, 1982–2003), *Coronation Street* (Granada/ITV, 1960-present), *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985-present) and *Emmerdale* (Yorkshire/ITV, 1972-present).

The opening chapter, 'Television Fiction in Context: Education and Entertainment', establishes Henderson's approach as that of an empirical sociology of the media. In mapping the field her references are many and wide-ranging, yet here and throughout Henderson's allegiance to a tradition of media sociology associated with writers such as Philip Elliot, Graham Murdock, Greg Philo and Philip Schlesinger is evident from the number of references to their work. That this book emerges out of Henderson's extensive research into the portrayal of health issues in the media, and soap opera in particular, is evident from the 11 articles, chapters and reports, some of them co-authored, listed in the bibliography. Some of this research has been published in medical and health journals, such as the *British Medical Journal* and *Sociology of Health and Illness*, giving an indication of the sociological nature of Henderson's research. Yet one of the most useful and original aspects of the research undertaken for this book, ensuring it has an interest beyond a medical fraternity, are the interviews Henderson has conducted with writers, producers and story editors of serial drama.

Some of this empirical research is introduced in chapter two, 'Making "Good" Television: Creative Philosophies, Professionalism and Production Values', which reads rather like a beginners' guide to British soap opera. While some overseas readers may not be familiar with the programmes listed here (although in the field of television studies this seems unlikely) much of this chapter will be familiar to British television scholars, as will news events such as the murder of James Bulger, which Henderson mentions in relation to a contemporaneous abduction story in *EastEnders*, referring to 'a child named James Bulger' (p. 48), as though readers might be unfamiliar with the Bulger story.

There is, however, some useful information gleaned from producers in chapter two, as there is in the case study chapters that follow. In discussing a child abuse storyline in *Emmerdale*, Henderson gives an example of how controversial storylines may not necessarily arise because a particular writer wants to deal with an issue, but can stem from management pressure to increase the audience demographic for a programme. As one (unnamed) *Emmerdale* 'production source' told Henderson: 'The remit was to try to change that audience. To try to get a younger audience, a bigger audience if possible, but a younger audience and an A, B, C audience which had a greater following in London and the south east' (p. 62). Noting how Yorkshire Television had 'engaged *Brookside* executive producer Phil Redmond as programme consultant to help inject some controversy into the programme and increase public interest', Henderson goes on to quote from another anonymous interviewee who explains how, 'That [child abuse] storyline came about very specifically because the head of programmes at YTV said that he wanted three controversial story lines' (p. 62). The imperative for introducing a social issue storyline into *Emmerdale* was not, therefore, writer-led or even producer-led, but management-led. In a footnote to chapter three, Henderson gives an example of a similar ratings manoeuvre in *Brookside*, when producer Mal Young was reported by Dorothy Hobson

(in her book, *Soap Opera*[1]) 'as saying that the team did not plan for Beth to be a lesbian character and that the decision had been made in order to maintain audience interest while Trevor's body lay undiscovered' (p. 75, n.15). Henderson does not, however, pursue this with Young, although he is one of the producers interviewed as part of her research.

As one might expect, *Brookside* features prominently in *Social Issues in Television Fiction*, with storylines from the serial discussed in each of Henderson's case study chapters. *Brookside*'s famous domestic violence storyline, introduced in 1993, featuring Mandy Jordache (Sandra Maitland) and her abusive husband Trevor (Bryan Murray), is cited as a prime example of a social-issue storyline, played out over a long period of time, involving not only the issues of domestic violence and child sexual abuse but also mental distress. However, as Henderson points out in relation to Carmel's (played by Catherine Cusack) obsession with Martin Platt (Sean Wilson) in *Coronation Street*, mental distress tends not to be treated as seriously as other social-issue storylines: 'Breast cancer and child sexual abuse were perceived by production team members as topics deserving of serious commitment . . . mental distress (in this case erotic obsession and stalking) formed the basis of a gripping plot designed to drive the narrative pace, rather than performing any social education function' (p. 170). The same could be said of the portrayal of Trevor as a 'pantomime villain' in *Brookside*, a representation drawing on 'popular stereotypes of behaviour associated with the unpredictable psychopath':

> The panto syndrome, in which viewers know more than characters, is a well-tested convention and although it is apparent in all of the storylines under discussion, it was maximised in the characterisations of Carmel and Trevor in particular ways and with specific purpose. . . . These characterisations provide powerful illustrations of how the conventions of soap opera may work against positive and more challenging portrayals of acute mental illness (p. 106).

What Henderson does not consider in discussing the *Brookside* domestic violence/sexual abuse storyline, perhaps surprisingly in view of the consideration she gives elsewhere to how channel controllers can demand the development of controversial storylines in order to increase ratings, is whether the change in Channel 4's funding, following the 1990 Broadcasting Act, influenced the development of a storyline designed not only to attract new and younger viewers (through the characters of Beth [Anna Friel] and Rachel Jordache [Tiffany Chapman]) but to maximise and retain viewers through the introduction of a doubly-controversial storyline (domestic violence *and* child sexual abuse) which could be maintained for a long period of time, in this case well over two years. Mal Young's suggestion that a decision was made to make Beth a lesbian 'in order to maintain audience interest while Trevor's body lay undiscovered' illustrates how ratings were beginning to determine the nature of the social issues dealt with by *Brookside* in the 1990s, in a gradual drift towards more 'sensational' storylines.

Following the case studies, Henderson includes a more general chapter on 'Social Issues, Production and Genre' in which she departs from the remit of the book to consider the representation of mental distress in other genres, notably documentary and reality television (where she considers the case of Shahbaz in *Big Brother*). While this detour is not uninteresting, it is not entirely clear why she feels the need to stray from the 'television fictions' remit of her title. Indeed the brief discussion of representations of mental distress in *Casualty* (BBC, 1986-present) and *Taking Over the Asylum* (BBC Scotland, 1994) in this chapter might have been expanded and included in the previous chapter, as contrasting examples of mental distress to those in *Coronation Street* and *Brookside*.

In chapter seven, Henderson shifts the focus from production to reception by discussing the findings of audience research conducted with various focus groups. While many of these findings seem predictable Henderson does uncover an interesting contrast in responses to the sexual abuse storyline in *Brookside* between viewers with experience of sexual abuse, who found the storyline realistic, whereas viewers without experience of sexual abuse tended to question its authenticity. On the whole, however, this section is less developed than the analysis of production contexts and the results of the audience research are limited.

In the final chapter Henderson attempts to draw some conclusions from both the production and audience research and it is here that the value of her empirical methodology becomes apparent. Her research into the production of social-issue storylines for different soap operas leads her to conclude that 'producers do sometimes "take sides" and can, despite their best efforts, appear didactic in handling social issue stories' (p. 176). In other words, there is a 'preferred meaning' with social-issues storylines which audiences are invited to take up. Having conducted audience research on a storyline (the sexual abuse one in *Brookside*) that she has already discussed in relation to its production context, Henderson is able to assess the extent to which audiences take up the 'preferred meaning' intended by the producers. She concludes that, while viewers respond in different ways to social-issue storylines, this does not mean they produce different 'meanings', as theorists such as John Fiske and Dorothy Hobson have suggested. Rather, Henderson suggests, viewers produce 'different responses to the *same* meaning' (p. 177). The difference between how viewers with and without experience of sexual abuse responded to the *Brookside* storyline provides one illustration of this.

Social Issues in Television Fiction demonstrates the value in adopting an empirical research methodology for studying social-issue storylines in television soap opera. With this approach, Lesley Henderson has attempted to be more systematic, and more precise, about how such storylines are encoded and decoded. As she says in her conclusion: 'It should be possible to integrate the valuable insights from studies of media consumption and production in fruitful ways' (p. 178). In this respect, *Social Issues in Television Fiction* provides a model for analysing television programmes, which might usefully be taken up with different social issues and other television fictions.

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Note

1 Dorothy Hobson, *Soap Opera*, Polity Press, 1992.

Thomas Austin, *Watching the World: Screen Documentary and Audiences.* Manchester University Press, 2007. ISBN 978–0-7190–7689–3 (hardback only).

What do viewers of documentary film and television get from what they see and hear? How are they positioned cognitively and emotionally by their viewing experience? In what ways if at all can it be said to 'change' them? These questions have an historical, a contemporary and a prospective character. For example, just how much propagandist affirmation did audiences take from the classic British films of the 1930s and wartime? Are the forms of 'reality television' significantly modifying public perceptions of the generic identity and

status of documentary programming? What approaches might work best both to engage popular audiences and provide serious, perhaps radical, perspectives on the world?

Of course, getting clear answers here faces a number of difficulties, not least the sheer variety of the 'audience', its character as a range of often very different subjectivities comprised of distinct hopes, fears, cultural tastes and pre-positionings within the national (and international) knowledge economy. Secondly, there is the problem of getting useful evidence about just what the experience *was* and what the responses *were*, most obviously by interview, respondent discussion or questionnaire.

Thomas Austin's book is a very welcome attempt to make some progress on the audience-side of the documentary relationship by gathering data about viewing that can be placed alongside those speculations that follow from critical attention to documentary texts. He is right to note that audience-side studies are relatively rare in the field, as they are in film studies more generally. Despite some notable work, film studies has not had an 'audience turn' in the emphatic way that marked television studies in the 1980s (a 'turn' that now shows some general loss of energy and direction but continues promisingly in the work, to take one example, of Annette Hill[1] on 'reality television' and on generic change). It has not had this primarily because feature films have been regarded as aesthetic works inviting academic engagement through intensive discussion of form and meaning in the manner of literature, drama and fine art criticism, rather than being 'checked out' sociologically for their public throughput of meanings. Feature documentary has, in one sense, simply extended the critical range without seeming to require any significant change of approach. Television, as a medium to a degree socially defined by the anxieties that surround it, has, in contrast, generated studies of 'influence and impact' since its inception, connecting with the later 'reception studies' into news, soap operas and now, rather belatedly, into a wider range of factual television, all conducted within varying frameworks of theory and method.

Austin's chief case-study examples here, *Etre et Avoir* (Nicolas Philibert, 2002), *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003) and *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2003) were successes in the cinema, so it is primarily as 'film' that documentary appears in his book, although consideration of television does occur, particularly in a perceptive chapter on wildlife programming. It is also interesting, and could have stood a little more attention in the book's discussion, that the main case-study films, though various in structure, are not *propositional*, that is to say they do not involve explicit arguments made to the viewer about how they might use the 'evidence' before their eyes. There is little, if any, direct claims-making. We watch a mountaineering accident and its aftermath unfold in a splendid but harsh environment, we watch the integrity of the village schoolteacher working with his pupils within the rhythms of rural France, we watch the bizarre dysfunctionalism of the Friedman's develop, in a narrative drawing extensively on self-documentation. This makes the films very different ways of 'watching the world' when compared with other strands both of film and television documentary internationally, including documentary journalism. It would, for instance, have been interesting to see a study of how *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), with its emphatic polemical message accompanying its invitation to look, went down with different members of the British audience.

That said, what is provided here is a thoughtful and engaging exploration of how 'ordinary viewers' made sense of what they saw and imported its meanings into their own, various, lives. At several points, including within a chapter of a more reflective kind on the author's own interpretative practice, the question of social class arises, particularly the relationship between documentary culture and the middle class in Britain. This relationship might be thought to have become transformed into broader, more inclusive, connections

since the arrival of the new reality formats, but 'core documentary' continues to work within an identifiable range of social subjectivity for its 'core audience'. It is a demographic tendency difficult to break away from though not impossible to expand (as the best television continues to do, despite the challenge of working against the other channel choices and as, I suspect, *Fahrenheit 9/11* did too, in its cinematic, televisual or DVD delivery).

Austin is excellent on the 'risks and opportunities' of conducting audience research, discussing frankly the surprises and the disappointments of his study in the context of selective reference to work in this field, one in which intensive theoretical discussion has unfortunately exceeded attempts at having a go. His 'methodological appendix' is a far livelier read than its title might suggest. For me, his approach could usefully be extended further into examining the localised processes of interpretation (e.g. best scene, worst scene, a focus on opening, closing and 'shock' sequences) as a complement to the netting of more generalised responses and evaluations. Within questionnaire-based surveys, without the opportunity of scene replay and questioning, there is an inevitable drift away from the actual workings of the film towards its broader placing within the respondent's value system and life-world. This is important to know about but it often leaves one guessing about the actual symbolic transactions that have occurred to achieve this positioning (I have the same reservations about quite a lot of television reception studies, particularly in full-on ethnographic mode). Sometimes, of course, getting closer would be difficult. For instance, *Touching the Void* is a 'true life story' (the category of 'documentary' was scrupulously avoided in its publicity and trailer) that essentially works metaphorically, as Austin finds that wildlife programmes often do, though in a very different way. It beams the localised story of a mountaineering accident, and a possible moment of personal betrayal, up to the level of a thrilling and potentially inspiring allegory about facing adversity and winning through. It is not therefore at all surprising that it is 'read' quite directly at this general level of implied values. Strictly speaking, there is nothing to agree or disagree with, although there are emotions to be gone through, 'sides' to take (as there certainly are in *Capturing the Friedmans*, a film with far more moral complexity and discomfort for the viewer) and degrees of trust or suspicion to be invested in the integrity of the reconstruction and the testimony. Austin brings out this kind of responsive context with illuminating clarity and relates it to his scholarly engagement with the construction and character of the films themselves, but it would be useful to see his methods working with texts that might allow the tracing of more intimate linkages between given sequences and modes of engagement, between aesthetics, pleasure and knowledge as an incremental, time-based *experience*. This would really cut into the critical debate about documentary textuality with a new edge, giving the very idea of 'watching' a distinct and instructive dynamic. Taking things in this direction would be a challenge, certainly, and Austin is clearly aware of the issues around the specificity-generality spectrum that would have to be addressed in doing so, generously citing my own work in his reflections.

Finally, it is a measure of the book's success and originality of conception that it opens out on research possibilities yet to be followed through. Austin finishes by emphasising his sense of documentary, despite a changed audio-visual economy, as holding continuing possibilities for stimulating the public imagination and countering complacency. Many readers will want to want to say 'amen' to that.

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Note

1 Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*, Routledge, 2005.

Rosie White, *Violent* Femmes*: Women as Spies in Popular Culture.* Routledge, 2007. ISBN 978–0-415–37078–3.

While a fairly substantial body of scholarly work exists on the female action hero (as mentioned in Rosie White's introduction) as well as on the female detective, an examination of the female spy is a new departure, related on several points to these other representations (perhaps most clearly in terms of violence and professionalism). As White suggests in her introduction, fictions featuring spying are inevitably about personal and national identity, thus the figure of the spy understandably engages with identity politics. Spying involves performance, going undercover, as well as deception and subterfuge, strategies often associated, White notes, with femininity (p. 2). The notion of spies as agents, and debates about the level of their agency, means that such fictions also lend themselves to a gender studies perspective. *Violent Femmes: Women as Spies in Popular Culture* is part of the 'Transformations: Thinking through Feminism' series and, as such, it reads the figure of the female spy as a cultural indicator of social change regarding gender roles. White effectively maps ways in which representations of female spies embody contradictory discourses about women.

The first chapter deals, perhaps unexpectedly, with male spies in fiction from the Scarlet Pimpernel to James Bond and the characters of John le Carré. White notes that these fictions focus on 'fragmentation, foreignness and femininity' (p. 11) and initiate debates about spies in the early twentieth century (debates later mapped onto female spies), as well as demonstrating that masculinity has also undergone substantial changes in representation over the last century. Moving into the subject matter proper, chapter two examines real women spies and their representation in the media. The Mata Hari story epitomises the female spy as *femme fatale* and the interrelation of gender, race and class in representation. While historical female spies during both World Wars might seem to indicate growing independence for women, White emphasises that both 'factual' and fictional representations hinge on idealised notions of women and femininity, as with fictions about nurse Edith Cavell.

Female spies in the 1960s are the focus of chapter three. Spies in general were key figures in the pop cultural landscape of that decade, and White's discussion contrasts the male protagonists of well-known television shows like *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* (Arena Productions/MGM Television, 1964–68) and *The Prisoner* (Everyman Films ITC/ITV, 1967–68) with female agents in *The Avengers* (ABC Weekend Television, 1961–69), among others. Some useful context is offered here to position these characters within the framework of the 1960s US and UK television industries, for those unfamiliar with television history, but White also goes on to compare television representations with those in other forms of popular fiction. Modesty Blaise, who appeared in comics, novels, films and graphic novels, is a key figure here, but while the extent of her canon might add depth to her character, she still embodies significant contradictions within the female spy, especially in relation to femininity and (hetero)sexuality (an issue that White does not always return to in later chapters). This chapter concludes with a brief analysis of Mrs Pollifax, a Miss Marple-style spy, and an isolated example of an older female spy character.

Slowing down the chronological survey, chapter four discusses two spy shows from the 1970s, *The New Avengers* (The Avengers Enterprise/ITV, 1976–77) and *The Bionic Woman* (Harve Bennett Productions/Universal TV, 1976–78) at more length. The female protagonists of these shows can appear to exemplify the new woman at this time, independent and competent, yet they remain 'framed within a masculine economy' (p. 82), as do later representations. White suggests that such characters demonstrate the marketability of the

independent female in the 1970s, related in her discussion to advertising, situating Jaime Sommers (Lindsay Wagner) and Purdey (Joanna Lumley) as commodities in the television market. The interrelation of other constructions of identity is revisited here with an examination of class and femininity in the character of Purdey and actor Lumley (p. 100). A little more on how notions of class and the 'lady' fit into the landscape of British television drama, especially for export, might have enhanced this discussion further, but White chooses instead to keep the focus on fashion and commodities. She argues that the self-conscious parody in Purdey's character, as well as the combination of independence and conventional femininity, place her rather ahead of her time and more in step with 1980s representations.

The next two chapters move into yet more detailed analysis that focuses on two representations. The first, *Nikita*, spans film and television across several countries. Two film versions are discussed: *Nikita*, the French original, directed by Luc Besson, 1990, and a Hollywood remake from 1993, *Assassin*, a.k.a. *The Point of No Return*, directed by John Badham, before moving onto the US television show that followed, *La Femme Nikita* (Baton/CTV Television Network, 1997–2001). Here the key issues in relation to gender are bureaucracy, capitalism, morality and government power – in what White refers to as the New Economy, the conservative climate of the 1980s. Nikita's 'story of capture, reform and incorporation' (p. 105) seems less than positive but, as has been argued about female detectives in fiction, independent female agents working for law and order tend to become complicit in patriarchal structures, ultimately upholding the status quo.[1] Some acknowledgement that this debate has taken place in relation to female action heroes and female detectives might have been useful for readers, but the tighter focus on one representation does mean more detailed analysis than in previous chapters, making this (and the next) section perhaps the most potentially useful for research rather then survey teaching.

An examination of *Alias* (Touchstone Television/Bad Robot, 2001–6) concludes the book, and this most recent representation is described as the most 'hyperbolic' (p. 126). Placed in the context of quality television drama, it is not too surprising that the show combines action and melodrama and appeals to a middle-class professional audience in that it deals with issues surrounding middle-class professional life. The tension between personal and professional is still evident for female characters, however, and White reads the conclusion of the show rather pessimistically. *Violent Femmes* was probably written concurrently with the recent edited collection, *Investigating Alias: Secrets and Spies*,[2] and this chapter could potentially complement more specific readings found there.

Violent Femmes debates femininity, power, sexuality and national identity, as the back cover blurb promises, by examining representation via different media (non-fiction, film, television, comic strip) and in different national contexts (France and Hong Kong are mentioned, though the focus is on US and UK material). In this way it broadens its appeal to several possible audiences and could be useful to a range of disciplines. The historical range takes in most of the twentieth-century and while this means some parts of the discussion are more detailed than others the chronology effectively structures a more general argument about cultural negotiation of gender. White makes a useful contribution to the ongoing debate about female protagonists, feminism and femininity, and the book is accessible and easy to read. She also examines less familiar characters and texts that inform other representations, as 'fact' informs fiction. At times it is slightly frustrating that although some chapters sketch in a television or film industry context the examination of different media means this context does not remain constant and is therefore rather undeveloped. However, given that the book is probably more likely to be dipped in and out of, rather than read from cover to cover, this may not be a disadvantage for most readers.

More significant, given that the main argument deals with a subgenre, there is little explicit acknowledgement that genre and gender are in tension here, as in other popular fictions featuring female protagonists. White seems to agree with Kathleen Gregory Klein (writing on private eye fictions), that 'the conventional . . . formula inevitably achieves primacy over feminist ideology',[3] but this is not really a key focus. Indeed, the lack of any definite conclusion makes for a rather abrupt end to a fairly structured argument: the book simply stops with *Alias*. Even a brief afterword would have been useful to reiterate the main points of the discussion and point to ways in which it might be developed.

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Notes

1 See Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled and High Heeled: the Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, Routledge, 2004; Teresa Ebert, 'Detecting the Phallus: Authority, Ideology and the Production of Patriarchal Authority in Detective Fiction,' *Rethinking Marxism*, 5, 3, 1992, 6–28.
2 Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown, eds, *Investigating Alias: Secrets and Spies*, I.B. Tauris, 2007.
3 Kathleen Gregory Klein, quoted in Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones, eds, *Detective Agency: Women Rewriting the Hard-Boiled Tradition*, University of California Press, 1999.

Stephen Lacey, *Tony Garnett*. Manchester University Press, 2007. ISBN 978–0-7190–6628–3 (hardback only).

In 1999 Philip Simpson wrote a review of three books for *Screen*, all of which examined the work of Dennis Potter. Simpson's final paragraph was typically laconic:

> Is it not time for more about television writers like David Mercer, Alan Plater, Kay Mellor and Jim Allen, and producers like Tony Garnett and Philip Saville. Or are we about to embark on another Great Tradition which will canonize another red-haired genius/writer, the son of a miner, with a tendency to fall out with his friends, hold odd views about women, and give way to the occasional rant? I hope not.[1]

Tony Garnett's inclusion in this pantheon is merited on grounds established merely by citing some of his key works as producer: in film, *Kes* (Ken Loach, 1969); in television, *Up the Junction* (BBC, 1965), *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966), *The Big Flame* (BBC, 1969), *The Spongers* (BBC, 1978); and as executive producer: *Between the Lines* (BBC, 1992–94), *Cardiac Arrest* (BBC, 1994–96), *This Life* (BBC, 1996–97) and *The Cops* (BBC, 1998–2001). Stephen Lacey's book on Garnett, in the light of Simpson's remarks, provides a welcome and long-overdue addition to single works on practitioners such as Andrew Davies, Troy Kennedy Martin and Alan Clarke. It is the first published study of Garnett that explores, particularly and at length, his contribution to British television drama.

Of equal significance is Lacey's chronological approach that embraces a number of contexts – institutional, political, cultural – which are skilfully woven into an account of Garnett's work. The latter is informed by an eclectic methodology comprising primary

analysis, both archive research and interviews, supported by illuminating discussion and some close textual analysis. This approach to almost 50 years of production inevitably concerns itself with a history of British television drama, which in turn overlaps with a history of the medium more generally, and the cultural works produced within and for it. Refracted through Garnett's work and practice, Lacey incorporates a number of key strands beyond the central focus on Garnett as producer.

The problem, for example, of the authorship of television drama is tackled by treating it 'as an institutional space, to be filled by a variety of practitioners . . . [it] is also a process that begins before commissioning and carries on after the programme has been aired' (p. 4). A further strand is Garnett's realist politics and aesthetics. Lacey, for example, argues that Garnett has 'pursued the realist project across the developing forms of television drama' (p. 5). 'Realism', though, is a problematic concept, as Lacey recognises both explicitly ('contested', p. 5) and implicitly in the multiplicity of prefixes ('analytical', 'social' and even 'cynical') that he uses. In consequence, a more detailed unravelling of realism's multifaceted and key characteristics might have been forthcoming, with the proviso that depth of analysis of Garnett's realism is perhaps inversely proportional to its salience for the general reader.

The notion of truth and the way Garnett tells it is another conceptual minefield, to some extent skirted by Lacey. The Introduction, subtitled 'telling the truth', begins with a Garnett quote:

> There's only one serious obligation that we have to the audience: that is to tell the truth. All the other obligations depend upon skill, ability and so on, but what the audience has a right to expect from us is that we should tell the truth. Of course, only God, should He or She exist, knows *the* truth, but we have an obligation to tell *our* truth . . . If you present *your* truth, but make people aware there are other potential 'truths', you're giving them the opportunity, the encouragement and the confidence to examine *their* truths (p. 1).

Lacey then states that Garnett has been 'telling his truths for over forty years'. But even the notion of personal 'truth telling', when applied to Garnett's realist stance, might provoke a more critical response. Garnett's favoured documentary style raises the issue of 'truthfulness' in fictional works given the illusion of factuality. His own remarks are important, as they acknowledge that truths (artistic or sociological) are frequently in conflict. A tension between them can, and at times does, exist in Garnett productions.

Artistic truths, in demonstrating personal truth, clearly form part of a different, non-evidential language-game from that occupied by sociological truths, assuming the latter notion has some sort of coherence. So early plays such as *Up the Junction* and *Cathy Come Home*, both of which receive lengthy discussion by Lacey, seemingly offer both types of truth, almost inducing the audience to enter into a virtual reality. Such works, as dramatic artefacts, are constructs that represent not *the* truth, but a very particular perspective on the social world. What Lacey does not fully examine here are Garnett's intentions to manoeuvre the audience into a position ripe for conversion – for accepting *his* truth whilst sidelining 'other potential "truths" '. So convinced is Garnett of a particular truth, he is prepared to facilitate every formal, aesthetic and narrative strategy to make that truth as compelling as possible. Such strategies are thus a *re*-presenting of *his* truth. These tensions, central as they are to Garnett's work and in fact raised at the outset by Lacey, could perhaps have formed part of a critique which less readily let Garnett off this particular 'hook'.

Nevertheless, Lacey's writing provides a refreshingly accessible and detailed exposition of

Garnett's contribution to television drama, including his early acting career. This period is seldom discussed and yet as an experience clearly proved formative, as he moved from one side of the camera to the other. Unsurprisingly, with the BBC as Garnett's primary broadcasting base, much of Lacey's writing focuses on the Corporation, contextualising the production of drama and, more specifically, the organisation's continued confidence in Garnett's ability to deliver. In this way Lacey illuminates the BBC's workings and illustrates how Garnett has adapted and modified his own presentation and practice to maintain a foothold in broadcasting.

Productions beyond the BBC are also examined, including discontinuities such as the 1970s, when Garnett entered the commercial sector at London Weekend Television (LWT), and the period in the 1980s, when he elected to work wholly in film from a US base. This double departure, both from the UK and the small screen, is dealt with astutely by Lacey in his analysis of Garnett's motivation, exemplified in the discussion of *Handgun* (Tony Garnett, 1982) and *Shadowmakers* (US: *Fat Man and Little Boy*, Roland Joffé, 1989). More recent World Productions series such as *Buried*, for Channel Four in 2003, is perceptively explored by Lacey and used as a contemporary example of Garnett's continued 'high risk strategy' of seeking the popular audience 'the hard way' (p. 157).

Lacey warns the reader that close textual analysis might not be as prevalent in this book as one might expect: 'Whilst the producer's role is an authorial one . . . and close textual analysis is important to this kind of analysis, there is probably less of it than there would be if Garnett were a director or writer' (p. 9). In fact, Lacey skilfully infiltrates textual analysis into much of the main discussion: all of Garnett's seminal works are dissected, as too are some of the neglected pieces, for example, the devised works with Les Blair, Brian Parker and Mike Leigh and the 1980s film *Prostitute*.

Lacey's writing frequently moves from the expanded canvas into the text itself and, as a consequence, greater understanding of the production is achieved through avoiding a wholly text-centred approach. Instead, Lacey appropriates a wider socio-historical frame of reference.

Philip Simpson's anxiety over too few practitioners rising to the published surface is assuaged in works such as Lacey's *Tony Garnett*. More broadly, Lacey is a significant figure in promoting television studies and especially the study of television drama. He offers insight into five decades of broadcasting that will engage not only the reader interested in Garnett productions, but those wanting an understanding of television drama in particular and British television in general. This, combined with its highly accessible style, makes the book eminently recommendable to all students of British television.

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Note

1 Philip Simpson review: Humphrey Carpenter, *Dennis Potter: a biography*, Faber and Faber, 1998; John R. Cook, *Dennis Potter: A Life on Screen*, Second Edition, Manchester University Press, 1998; Glen Creeber, *Dennis Potter: Between Two Worlds, A Critical Reassessment*, Macmillan, 1998, in *Screen*, 40, 2, Summer 1999, 223–28.

Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities.* Routledge, 2007. ISBN-0415–16878–3.

This book is long overdue. It fills a long-standing yawning chasm at the heart of scholarship on English popular culture, but also it is literally long overdue, as Andy Medhurst ruefully acknowledges; its epic gestation period giving it something of a mythic status in cultural studies texts. This critical void is a mystery on many levels. Why are there not more books that trace the significance of comedy on national identities in general and Englishness in particular? After all, popular discourse often acknowledges humour as a defining motif of Englishness. Comedy on film and television, and for live audiences, is still big business and often (as in discussions over, say, *Little Britain* [BBC, 2003-present]) comedy is used as a measure of where we are as a society. Yet despite all this, little of significance has been written on popular comedy at all since Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik's *Popular Film and Television Comedy* in 1990[1] and even further back the BFI's dossier on *Television Sitcom* in 1982[2]. There has been fine analysis of individual works, such as Ben Walters' BFI TV classic on *The Office*,[3] but the very infrequent overviews have tended to disappoint.

Most of the best scholarly work on comedy in the UK that has appeared during the last 25 years has come from Medhurst. Often he has ploughed a lonely furrow in making comedy a serious academic subject and he has not always had an easy time in doing so. Medhurst is an inspiring figure to me, and not just because he champions the worth of comic works I also find rich and exciting. I believe he is also significant because of the way he sees his role as an academic – instead of separating himself from the world beyond the academy he constantly tries to take critical debate to the widest possible audience, engaging with people and considering their hopes, fears and pleasures. One of the strengths of this book is that he does not seek to hide his subjective view – as he says 'far too much writing about comedy sets itself the stern, intrusive, pseudo-objective task of studying what Other people laugh at and why Other people laugh' (p. 8). This makes the book provocative, occasionally infuriatingly partial (an emphatic rejection of Steve Coogan and a largely uncritical embrace of Mike Leigh raised my hackles), but it also makes it fun, avoiding the trap of excessive sobriety when talking about the comic while remaining full of scholarly rigour.

The reasons for the critical neglect of popular comedy are various and tackled with characteristic vigour in the book. One reason is snobbery – the belief that because it is funny and popular it cannot be taken seriously, or that examining the popular exposes the academy to criticism. These fears are not without foundation – right-wing commentator Roger Kimball recently decried the real pernicious legacy of 1968 as being the study of television sitcoms in universities[4] – but the case needs to be made that comedy is important and is worthy of critical scrutiny. This should not be hard. Not only is comedy popular, and therefore of a social significance that needs interpretation, but comic work is frequently of considerable merit. To mention just a few examples that Medhurst does not have room to discuss, how about the social critique of *The Office* (BBC Comedy North, 2001–3), the structural brilliance and respect for ordinary lives of *One Foot in the Grave* (BBC, 1990–2000), the comic timing and subversion of authority in the work of Will Hay, or Peter Kay's handling of his audience, tapping into the well of shared experience. The exclusion of comedy from critical debate damages media studies and *A National Joke* at the very least offers a corrective to this.

The book is structured in two parts. The first tackles debates around concepts that inform the book's premise: if we are reading a book about English national comedy, what is comedy? How is the national constructed? On what terms are we defining Englishness? This section does

occasionally get a little incoherent, not helped by a reference style that rather clutters the page, unhelpful when Medhurst is zipping through theorists by the dozen. An unfortunate long reverie on his reaction to an offensive joke about Dawn French also puts the book off course. However there are points of great insight and tough, persuasive argument. Medhurst is typically eloquent in defending the notion of 'belonging' and refreshingly makes it clear that 'this book is not an exercise in exorcising guilt; I see no need to be apologetic about Englishnesses' (p. 60), the plural indicating an awareness of the complexities of belonging. He presents convincing cases for that belonging, in a positive sense, being dependent on humour, on shared sources of comic understanding, and is brave (and right) to distinguish English from British and to suggest that English humour has a direct relationship to a specific English identity.

It is in the second part that the book really delivers on its long-held expectations when Medhurst looks at certain tendencies within English humour through specific performers or programmes. The analysis here is insightful and challenging, illuminating some areas of popular culture that have had little critical engagement or that were popular in a particular time and place. The section on Hylda Baker is an impressive case in point. It is in this kind of analysis that Medhurst's talent for engaging, accessible argument excels. His 17 year-old analysis of 1950s television personality Gilbert Harding, 'Every Wart and Pustule'[5], remains an exemplar of great popular culture criticism and there is comparable material here, identifying why people and texts resonate with audiences and why that is important. At last we have decent critical writing on Victoria Wood, for instance, and some idea why she taps into such a varied fanbase (not to mention recognition at last of the genius of *dinnerladies* [BBC, 1998–2000], the last great sitcom with a studio audience). He touches on some areas familiar from his writing over the last few years, but with a reappraisal where appropriate. He is not blind to the limitations of Roy 'Chubby' Brown but does not hide from the fact of his great comic timing, no matter how problematic he may be. He looks again at the *Carry On* (1958–78) series, which he has occasionally appeared to champion, to cast a more baleful eye over its influence. He is equally adept at analysing comedy that has a higher cultural cachet, from Alan Bennett to *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (BBC, 1973–4). I have just completed a study of this greatest of English sitcoms and am relieved his book came out in time for me to refer to his analysis of the 'homosocial' angst that informs our reading of Bob Ferris (Rodney Bewes) and Terry Collier (James Bolam).[6]

So it is a relief that this book is finally published. At last there is an engaging but serious study of what makes English comedy both English and funny. And it is right and fitting that Andy Medhurst, who has done so much to avoid popular comedy being airbrushed from critical debate, gets to set out the framework for future discussion.

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Notes

1 Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, Routledge, 1990.
2 Jim Cook, ed, *Television Sitcom*, bfi Publishing, 1982.
3 Ben Walters, *The Office*, bfi Publishing, 2005.
4 'Tariq Ali: Fool of '68, Roger's Rules, 24 March 2008, http://pajamasmedia.com/rogerkimball/2008/03/24/tariq_ali_fool_of_68/, accessed 29 July 2008.
5 Andy Medhurst, 'Every Wart and Pustule: Gilbert Harding and Television Stardom,' in John Corner, ed, *Popular Television in Britain*, bfi Publishing, 1991.
6 Phil Wickham, *The Likely Lads*, bfi Publishing, 2008.

Kara McKechnie, *Alan Bennett*. Manchester University Press, 2007. ISBN 978–0-7190–6806–5.

Alan Bennett occupies a singular place in the contemporary canon of television dramatists. Despite having achieved a public recognition far surpassing most of his contemporaries and having gained, in the eyes of many commentators, the status of a 'national treasure', his status, in the world of television professionals, is complex. There is something about the early Northern plays and the *Talking Heads* (BBC, 1988; 1998) series which generates unease. Unlike many other writers who have chosen this territory, it is not accompanied by a sense of crusading social justice or a well defined political stance. This sets him apart, and goes some way in explaining, why he is so often left out of the lists that go to make up the 'canon'. There has often been the slight possibility in many people's minds that he is somehow subtly mocking the people he is writing about and this is compounded by the extremely intricate ways he has chosen to present himself and his views in his non dramatic work to his public. He has also, allied to this, adopted a fairly fierce approach of non co-operation with the writers of books about him, preferring instead, when he has something to publicise, to give interviews to selected journalists and, above all, to write about the work himself. This has been noted by Daphne Turner[1] and Joseph H. O'Mealy[2] in their studies of Bennett, and chronicled in detail in Alexander Games' biography,[3] but McKechnie reaches slightly new heights of waspishness in complaining about Bennett's lack of admiration for academics. She writes, 'Anyone researching Bennett's works for academic purposes, writing a review of a book or play, or writing a biography, will have to take account that he or she is regarded as superfluous and essentially a parasite' (p. 104).

McKechnie is, of course, compared to the aforementioned writers of former studies, labouring under a slight disadvantage. Bennett is not only a television dramatist, in fact one could say that this aspect of his work (now, he declares, well behind him) is, especially if you exclude *Talking Heads*, his least known attribute. The hugely successful publication of his autobiographical writing, mostly first written for the *London Review of Books*, coupled with his stage plays, would surely come first to people's minds. Then there is the complex interplay between stage and screen (film and television) versions of his work. That said, McKechnie has delved deep into certain aspects of his work and made some interesting observations. I liked the idea she puts forward of Bennett occupying a liminal space, one in which he can travel between genres and exclude himself from their rules. This is certainly one of the most significant things about his work. She rightly points out that his use of form and genre is highly individual. His use of monologue, the way he injects autobiographical content and the way he tackles the genre of the 'history play' and the 'biopic' are especially well discussed. It is also true, as she points out, that the audience's and the television critics' reception were generally far more focused on the performances of the array of brilliant actors in the pieces, rather than on the innovative way he treated the dramatic form of the monologue.

Bennett's convoluted way of representing the self, playing a version of himself in various guises for public consumption, is explored in depth, but where McKechnie slightly reveals her status as a drama rather than a television researcher, is when she deals with aspects of television history. There are some rather strange assertions at the beginning of the book about single plays at the BBC being 'facilitated' by the trainee scheme. There is, perhaps, a confusion here between writers and directors, especially as in the very early days of television drama, people sometimes did both (as they do again now). Bennett, of course, though he has dabbled in directing and producing, is the writer/performer par excellence, as

opposed to David Hare or Stephen Poliakoff. There is also confusion (largely historical) about writers collaborating with each other on serials. In the period she is writing about, there was a sharp division between serial/series writers and single play writers, though some later jumped the divide. Bennett was not unique in this. David Mercer did not do it, neither did Dennis Potter. Even when Potter wrote serials, he never collaborated with other writers.

I would also take issue with the notion that the cultural status of television has 'changed considerably' (p. 11) since 1984 (for the better). It may be consumed more and has certainly expanded in a variety of ways, but, if anything, its cultural status has declined. Witness the recent decision of several serious newspapers to stop reviewing television programmes and confining themselves to previewing them. McKechnie tells us that Alan Bennett 'did not grow up with television' (p. 11). Well, before 1953 and well beyond that in many households, mine included, nobody grew up with television. It is purely a factor of his age, not because he came from Leeds. He chose to work in TV, she suggests, because it was less intimidating, but actually, I would suggest, because that is where the major opportunities were.

That said, one only has to look at the range of Bennett's work across all media to understand why he rightly deserves his success. Leaving aside the monologues etc., the trio of *An Englishman Abroad* (BBC, 1983), *The Insurance Man* (BBC, 1986), and *102 Boulevard Haussmann* (BBC, 1991) would alone ensure Bennett's place amongst the very best of television writers. Add to that plays such as *The Lady in the Van* (1999), *The Madness of King George III* (1991) and *The History Boys* (2004) (the latter two subsequently filmed) and his oeuvre is colossal. So, that is why, despite all the difficulties in dealing with him, it is important that his work is celebrated and analysed and that he is not left out of the canon of important contemporary writers. This book is a contribution to that analysis and I welcome it on that basis.

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Notes

1 Daphne Turner, *Alan Bennett: In a Manner of Speaking*, Faber, 1997.
2 Alexander Games, *Backing Into The Limelight: The Biography of Alan Bennett*, Headline, 2001.
3 Joseph H. O'Mealy, *Alan Bennett: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, 2001.

Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, eds, *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. I.B. Tauris, 2007. ISBN 978–1–84511–511–1.
Robin Nelson, *State of Play: Contemporary "High-End" TV Drama*. Manchester University Press, 2007. ISBN 978–0–7190–7311–3.

These two books offer state-of-the-art discussions of issues and debates surrounding that old bugbear of media/cultural studies and TV studies – 'quality TV'. Though they share this much, they are also very different creatures – one, an edited collection, offers up a variety of voices and arguments, not really cohering or even necessarily trying to, and usefully uniting scholars with arts journalists and TV production personnel. The other, as a sole-authored

book, offers a consistent, coherent scholarly perspective. Swings and roundabouts; apples and pears; multistranded, multivocal soap opera or the single name, authored teleplay, perhaps (though even that analogy comes loaded with problems of cultural value). In any case, were this review to offer an evaluation of the 'quality' of these titles it would undoubtedly be guilty of bringing together two very different genres of writing under one banner. Assuming any such monolithic evaluation would, in fact, arguably replay some of the problems that the field itself has faced.

Instead, then, I want to approach these titles as two very different performances and stagings of the ongoing 'quality TV' debate. *Quality TV*, the book, emerges from 'Quality American TV: an International Conference' held at Trinity College, Dublin, in 2004, and even incorporates a journalistic review of the conference from *The Irish Times*, as well as a Preface from Robert J. Thompson. Whilst this Preface playfully notes that the 'precise definition of "quality TV" was elusive right from the start, though we knew it when we saw it' (p. xix), it takes Karen Fricker's journalistic nerve to ask 'shouldn't we really be talking about the "other" major television trend – reality TV?' (p. 16).

Quality TV includes thoughtful, theorised contributions from major academic figures in TV studies such as Jonathan Bignell, Jane Feuer, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, and *State of Play*'s author Robin Nelson. Major proponents of 'TVIII', Jimmie L. Reeves, Mark C. Rogers and Michael M. Epstein also develop their influential arguments via a case study of *The Daily Show* (Mad Cow Productions/Comedy Central, 1996-present). And it features contributions from those inside the industry, whether as professional TV critics/journalists (David Bianculli), writer/producers (Peter Dunne) or buyers (Dermot Horan), along with interview pieces involving the likes of *Sopranos auteur* David Chase and *thirtysomething*/*The West Wing* composer, W.G. 'Snuffy' Walden. There are also explorations of 'quality' TV in specific national contexts (Geoff Lealand on the case of New Zealand) and investigations into the transnational flow of US quality TV (Ian Goode on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* [Jerry Bruckheimer Television/CBS, 2000-present]).

The book is divided into three main parts. These cover 'Critical Judgements and Debates', 'Industry, Policy and Competitive Markets' and 'Aesthetics, Form, Content'. This major, tripartite division follows a five-five-six chapter formation, although the sixth entry in Part Three, David Lavery's 'Read Any Good TV Lately?' could perhaps have been slotted into the closing 'Afterthoughts' which contains just a single chapter from Roberta Pearson. This final piece tackles *Lost* (Bad Robot/ABC/Touchstone Television, 2004-present) and the significance of cultish 'post-television' multi-platforming and merchandising, a topic which certainly resonates with Lavery's analysis of 'Television Companion Books'. It seems a shame to me that Lavery and Pearson's essays were not placed more obviously side-by-side in the same endgame section, as reading them together prompts greater recognition of the fact that old media such as tie-in books are still very much a part of the brave new media, multi-platformed world. And an 'Afterthoughts' section dealing with 'post-television' in the guise of the iPod, or bit-torrenting, or even older-school DVD and other merchandising, strikes me as such a good and important idea that I certainly would have liked to see more work here rather than just the lone chapter.

What fascinates me about this edited-collection heteroglossia industriously encircling 'quality' is the impression it generates of a singular interpretive community. For a moment, it seems as though journalists, scholars and TV producers are united in championing and interrogating 'quality'. Though it should be noted that in the face of this apparent unity, audience voices go missing slightly – there is undoubtedly more industry and textual study contained herein than audience studies work, reinforcing a sense that 'quality' is either a

matter of industrially-situated creativity, or is 'there' in the texts celebrated via 'quality' discourses. Both, of course, might amount to implicit naturalisations of 'quality' – 'special' TV created via the 'special' agency of specific Creatives. And if there is less audience study than I suspect the topic of 'quality TV' merits, there is also perhaps an under-developed emphasis on the cultural gendering of quality discourses. Having said that, Ashley Sayeau's chapter 'As Seen on TV: Women's Rights and Quality Television' usefully argues that 'dismissing TV as mere entertainment can be seen as a way of dismissing women's issues more generally' (p. 59), but I still would have favoured more frequent gender analysis across the book as to how 'quality' discourses are often premised on feminised others such as soap and reality TV.

The seemingly singular (seemingly culturally masculinised) interpretive community for 'quality' thus generated, with academics talking to producers – see especially chapter 13 from Maíre Messenger Davies – might itself be analysed as a 'field' in Bourdieuian terms. It should, after all, not prove surprising that of all the topics in TV studies which might attract interested industry participation, 'quality' presses the right buttons. By participating, those in the industry find their work 'consecrated' by scholarly attention, just as the academics participating find themselves touched by the shimmering 'media capital' of industry insiders. The tactical commingling of differently situated cultural workers thereby offers the possibility of enhancing the specific capitals of each group; industry cred for scholars, artistic-academic recognition for producers. In a sense, then, this process could be analysed as a capital-conferring tactic which mutually reinforces the status of variant cultural élites, and though Pierre Bourdieu was notoriously scathing about media/cultural studies, television and journalism, I still wonder exactly how he would have written about Quality TV conferences and the like.

A more positive reading would, however, note the moments of tension which belie any such grand, unified, tactical interpretive community. My favourite chapters in *Quality TV* are precisely those which retain a keen focus on the discursive powers and problems of 'quality', and which continue to worry away at the term rather than collapsing into a celebratory and (to my mind) more-or-less implicitly naturalising stance. Amongst these I would non-exhaustively count McCabe and Akass on the swearing and cursing presented within specific HBO shows, and Jane Feuer's wonderful 'HBO and the Concept of Quality TV'. Each of these analyses is premised upon *the discursive and relational existence of quality*, i.e. that it requires specific others against which it can be constructed. These others include 'network TV' *tout court* and its cultural/economic need for respectability (p. 66–7) against which HBO can discursively assert creative autonomy. And these 'others' can also, at a more micro level, be specific genres of TV, or more properly, specific genre hybrids such as, of course, reality TV (p. 156–7). As Feuer states: 'To the interpretive community that *writes* about TV, and who share a field of reference with those who create quality TV but not reality TV, only certain [genre] re-combinations matter' (p. 157). Here, Feuer speaks back to the semblance of a unified interpretive community of and for 'quality TV', strongly guiding us to see that such a thing can only be premised on exclusion and on the exercise of discursive power. Likewise, McCabe and Akass cite Michel Foucault on 'spirals of power and pleasure' (p. 66) through which HBO and moral guardians can mutually reinforce one another's claims to (aesthetic/moral) legitimacy.

Elsewhere among the many voices of *Quality TV*, this anti-naturalising and discursive sense of 'quality' seems to flicker like a rogue cathode ray tube. Sarah Cardwell's chapter, to take only one example among others, appears to link 'quality' TV as a set of textual attributes to 'good' TV (implying an engaged stance on the part of audiences), all of this largely

hinging on the '*stylistic integrity*' of the texts concerned (p. 30; original emphasis). Such analysis of textual integrity seems to almost take us back to a pre-structuralist or Leavisite organicism where 'organic unity' is the *sine qua non* of quality. This restoration of a specific concept of aesthetics seems to indicate a rather wide sweep of the scholarly pendulum, in my view, taking us a few steps back in the aesthetics debate rather than a few steps forward. There is seemingly little or no sense of quality's discursive, relational others here and hence little sense of quality as an exclusionary, othering discourse. And there is a highly attenuated sense of competing, conflicting audience discourses of 'quality'; if Cardwell or I can argue that a specific text possesses old-school 'stylistic integrity' and is therefore an instance of 'quality TV', then have audiences using different criteria for 'quality' missed the point? Are they in need of expert tutoring? Or is an expert reading discerning textual integrity itself just one discourse of 'quality' based on an age-old concept of aesthetics, and a discourse which excludes specific modes and types of TV at that? Can soaps display or attain 'stylistic integrity', for instance? Can reality TV? Or telefantasy?

Whilst *Quality TV* performatively enacts and represents a 'quality TV' interpretive community which specific theorists simultaneously seek to discursively contest, *State of Play* is less ambivalent or less centrally structured-through-contradiction. And just as Cardwell seeks to complicate the 'Quality' debate by adding in the notion of 'good' TV, so too does Nelson refer to 'high-end' TV drama. Neither conceptual distinction puts an end to the problems of 'quality TV' (nor does it avoid associated conceptual difficulties), but these shifts do seem to testify to a shared weariness with established positions in the debate.

Robin Nelson's coinage of 'high-end' TV drama takes its 'primary definition . . . from the industry' and thus indicates 'big budgets and the high production values associated with them, along with a "prime-time" position in the schedule of a major channel' (p. 2). Despite this apparent commonsensical view, Nelson does immediately note that 'the concept is more elastic than it at first appears' (ibid). It shades into the industry term 'high concept', but also potentially works differently in US and UK contexts, as well as being differentially operationalised through links to subscription services or public service TV. 'High-end' might discursively get us away from 'quality' *per se*, but it still consistently begs the question of what it leaves in its wake as 'low-end' television. And can a TV show be 'high-end' but still be made rather conspicuously on the cheap, perhaps being largely based in a single small set, and perhaps being very dialogue-heavy? Where are all these 'fine lines' to be drawn (p. 2)?

Nelson is also keen to reflexively analyse his own investments in quality TV (pp. 4–5), noting that he writes more as 'a scholar than a fan' (p. 5), and also that the book contains 'a significant, though by no means exclusive, strain . . . advocating the value of social realism . . . as a mode of both providing engaging TV drama and social critique' (p. 170). As a result, Nelson sets out his stall against what is discursively constructed as mere 'feel-good-factor' drama 'allied to individualist consumerism' (p. 171). Here, then, is both a powerful othering and a self-reflexive engagement with the cultural politics of TV drama. Does 'good' political TV hinge on 'bad' feelgood, consumerist TV as its other, or is this binary open to partial deconstruction? Nelson does offer up a reading of *Sex and the City* (Sex and the City Productions/HBO, 1998–2002) which comes close to undoing such distinctions (pp. 93–5), as along with its positive, empowering potential as a version of gendered and classed 'social realism' (p. 93), it is also read critically for its occlusion of economic questions (p. 95). It is to Nelson's credit that he does not always collapse texts back into a suffocating either/or of social realism versus consumerist individualism. Nelson's work also reads 'American Quality TV' alongside and through the differing traditions of 'British Quality TV', reminding us at

a time when the US strain is perhaps uppermost in scholarly and TV fan identifications of 'quality' that the UK TV industry competes with totemic discourses of US quality product. Hence the book's title is very deliberately shared with Paul Abbott's (BBC, 2003) political thriller starring David Morrissey and John Simm, which is the final text to be analysed by Nelson (*The Sopranos* being the first; p. 27).

As a British scholar, perhaps I share a consumption context with Nelson (though unlike him, I am as much a fan as a scholar), but whether as an outcome of my specific cultural context or wider debates in the field, his readings of *Shameless* (Company Pictures, 2001-present), *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4/Red Productions, 1999–2000), *Spooks* (BBC, 2002-present) and *Casanova* (Red Productions/BBC, 2005) are highly welcome. From experience, I would anecdotally observe that the students I teach at Cardiff University are likely to choose *The Sopranos* (Chase Films/HBO, 1999–2007) or *The Wire* (Blown Deadline Productions/HBO, 2002-present) to analyse as instances of 'quality TV', yet are relatively unlikely to have ever seen *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1986), *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985), or even *Queer as Folk*. For these youth audiences, 'quality' TV is marked as contemporary, and contemporary quality TV means a remarkably limited range of US TV shows. Nelson's work goes further beyond this contemporary HBO canon than *Quality TV* (despite the promise of its subtitle), and is valuable for its balanced, transatlantic reach. It also offers a pretty wide range of generic examples given its predilection for social realism, including the telefantasy of *Carnivàle* (HBO, 2003–5). However, Nelson does still focus on the work of Russell T. Davies (OBE) via *Queer as Folk* and *Casanova* rather than via the 'quality pop' of *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–1989; 1996; 2005-present) (p. 2). Obviously no single book can be exhaustive, and hence all such interrogations of 'quality TV' must be exclusionary in a banal sense (as well as raising questions of discursive power through exclusionary moves). Given that US telefantasy is productively represented within the pages of *State of Play*, I think – as both a scholar and a fan – that the opportunity to address UK developments, and especially *Doctor Who*'s post-2005 re-emergence as a textual space for progressive, critical and mainstream 'flagship' TV, should not have been passed over or placed on the other side of discriminatory fine lines.

In any case, whilst *Quality TV* is especially useful for the number of different voices it represents, *State of Play* is equally useful for its consistent position-taking and its generous analysis of UK and US 'high-end' television. Nelson does not naturalise 'quality', but instead argues for the articulation of this discourse to progressive politics of representation. And though his work dances deftly around associated binaries, these do occasionally creep back in at the margins, e.g. 'high-end' TV is assumed to challenge audiences via the 'pleasures of ontological insecurity', whereas more formulaic TV is said to offer ontological security through the 'familiarity of the form and its ritual viewing slot' (p. 19). And the example of 'non-high-end' TV? Of course, it's 'the melodrama of soap opera' (p. 18–19). Old others die hard, it might plausibly be suggested, something which takes us back to the basic sentiments of Jane Feuer's salutary argument in *Quality TV*.

To conclude, I suspect that building a singular interpretive community around 'quality TV' is a problematic ambition, but you can't fault *Quality TV* for being as ambitious in range and scope as it is. Nor can *State of Play* be faulted for its specific political commitments and its timeliness. Both these books will undoubtedly become major texts in TV studies, and Nelson has written a worthy follow-up to *TV Drama in Transition*,[1] especially since a sub-subtitle to *State of Play* might just as well have been 'TV Drama Still in Transition'. On the whole, these two books move 'quality' debates on, as well as containing some side-steps and, perhaps, occasional backward steps in terms of concepts of aesthetics or otherings of supposedly 'non-quality' TV. Nevertheless, what they both remind us is that

market forces and 'quality' discourses can no longer be inherently contrasted, if indeed they ever could be.

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Note

1 Robin Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition*, Macmillan, 1997.

Peter Goddard, John Corner and Kay Richardson, *Public Issue Television: World in Action, 1963–98*. Manchester University Press, 2007. ISBN 978–0–7190–6256–8.

Although it has played a central role in the history of UK television, 'current affairs' has, from its earliest days, been an uneasy genre. As a journalist-led form it has been subject to political and economic pressures as well as to the complex demands of a popular medium. Practically, the genre has been marked out by the long histories of its major series: the BBC's *Panorama* (1953-present), ITV's *This Week* (1956–92), launched in the first months of the new commercial network, and *World in Action* (1963–98), produced by Granada, the ITV company with the franchise for the northern region. Over the decades of their existence, these three together maintained a space for respected journalism on British television. They were compared and contrasted by television critics, scrutinised by politicians and others in positions of influence, and generally seen as defining the possibilities of the current affairs genre. *Public Issue Television* traces the history of the youngest and most combative of the three, *World in Action*, from its tempestuous early days through to its final fading away in 1998.

The book contains insights into the work of the major figures who shaped the series and helped to shape UK television itself: David Boulton, Ray Fitzwalter, Leslie Woodhead, Ian McBride and many others. As well as first hand reports, the authors have gathered a rich harvest from the archives, including those of the regulatory bodies (ITA, IBA) and of Granada itself. From these personal memos we get a glimpse of the *process* of programme making: proposals, evaluations, moments of anxiety or irritation, as well as heated confrontations and disagreements. Unlike *This Week*'s producing company, Associated-Rediffusion, which in its early days prioritised entertainment, Granada saw itself as committed to quality and the public interest. Its founder and first chairman, Sidney Bernstein, promoted its 'social mission', while its joint managing director, Denis Foreman, gave strong backing to its factual programming (pp. 10–11). In the 1950s and 1960s Granada was at the forefront of ITV's innovative thinking.

Having looked closely at the history of *This Week*, I found the parallels fascinating.[1] *Public Issue Television* characterises 1967–75 as *World in Action*'s 'classic period', and this was exactly the decade *This Week*'s journalists described as its 'golden age'. By the early 1980s it was said that *World in Action* had 'lost its innovative edge' (p. 89) and at the same time the less confrontational *TVEye* temporarily replaced *This Week*. Both series ended in the 1990s. Although the death of *World in Action* was some years after that of *This Week*, the authors of *Public Issue Television* ascribe it to similar causes – the institutional changes brought about by the 1990 Broadcasting Act together with increased commercial pressure. As the heading of chapter five declares, current affairs became a commodity. Granada's management

changed and *World in Action* was no longer seen as a jewel in the crown but a 'weak point in the schedule' (p. 112).

Back in 1963 *World in Action's* first editor was the energetic journalist, Tim Hewat. He had edited the predecessor series, *Searchlight*, which aimed for 'a strong feeling of j'accuse', and wanted *World in Action* to have a similar critical approach (p. 13). Hewat personally wrote every commentary for those early editions, all very much at the last minute, so that the films had to be completed in a hectic rush. 'The tradition of three days without sleep will be maintained' declared a later memo (p. 143). Between 1965 and 1967 *World in Action* was replaced by an international current affairs series, with input from bureaux across the world, but when the title was re-launched it announced itself as 'young, radical and untamed' (p. 47).

The team developed a group of specialist units, of which perhaps most important was the investigative unit, intended to 'harden the series journalistically' (p. 64). Backed by a supportive management, the unit was able to follow a number of themes over a considerable length of time – such as the 10-year strand seeking out Nazi criminals. Many innovative formats were pioneered. Some, like 'Seven Up' (1964) and 'Neighbours from Hell' (1996) gave rise to their own series, while others prefigured the social experiment mode which was to evolve into 'reality television' (Conservative MP Matthew Parris lived on benefits for a week [1984]; Adam Holloway lived rough on the London streets [1992]). Another spin-off was a drama-documentary unit, whose work is, sadly, outside the remit of this book. However, there is discussion of the programme which convinced the team that this, too, had journalistic importance. 'Who Bombed Birmingham' (1990) dramatised *World in Action's* own persistent investigation into the wrongful conviction of six Irishmen of a terrorist attack in 1974.

World in Action remained proud of its reputation for anti-establishment, fearless reporting. Despite its mainstream position it kept its reputation as radical, oppositional and challenging. A 1977 list of 'programme ingredients' concluded: 'we should aim to transmit at least one outrageous and improbable programme each year' (p. 79). This attitude led to accusations of 'a persistent left-wing bias' and 'an undue proportion of communist, Marxist, and anti-democratic sentiment' from the regulator of the day (p. 197). There were a number of high-profile conflicts with the regulator which played an important part in the programme's history and which have a chapter devoted to them. The ITV network had been set up as a strictly regulated part of a public service television system, in which journalism was required to be balanced and impartial. In the early days, the Independent Television Authority (ITA) interpreted this requirement very rigidly and *World in Action* proved a constant challenge. At one point the Authority took to counting the lines in a script to assess bias for or against a particular argument. At another it demanded that all *World in Action* programmes should be vetted in advance (p. 189). Although the heavy handed criticism of the early years was later moderated, investigative reporting continued to be a concern, especially when it involved undercover filming or Northern Ireland, and there were increasingly serious problems with libel actions, especially when commercial companies were the subject of an investigation.

However, despite the conflicts, as later events were to demonstrate, *World in Action*, like *This Week*, owed its long existence to protection from the regulator. In 1967, nervous that the launch of the new half-hour-long, *News at Ten*, would tempt ITV to shunt its factual series to the edges of the schedules, the ITA 'mandated' that certain programmes should remain in peak viewing times, including *World in Action* on Mondays and *This Week* on Thursdays. The lifting of this requirement by the 1990 Broadcasting Act was an important factor in the shrinkage of current affairs in the late 1990s. It is an aspect of the relationship

between *World in Action* and the regulator, which, in my view, could have been given greater prominence here.

Public Issue Television is the work of three authors, and, possibly for this reason, its structure is rather confusing. It is divided into two parts, a chronological account, followed by analytical chapters, which cover production culture, current affairs formats and case studies of disputes with the regulator. This proves to be a rather artificial split, since, in the first historical section, we follow the producers, journalists and executives as they deal with the very questions posed in the second section. Separating the debates and pressures from the history of the programmes does not fully convey that history as it was lived through by the participants.

Both *This Week* and *World in Action* are gone, but the current affairs project on UK television has not come to an end. Across the terrestrial channels there are new formats and innovative seasons. But, if its history can be seen as a series of crises, the present crisis is perhaps the most serious. *Public Issue Television* appears at a time when Granada has lost its distinctive identity and, in the context of de-regulation and intense commercial competition, there is no serious current affairs strand on ITV. This book reminds us of the strength, and democratic importance, of a long-running series, backed up by a committed management, run by a regular team with the security of a regular slot and the ability to build on its own history and expertise.

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Note

1 Patricia Holland, *The Angry Buzz: 'This Week' and Current Affairs Television*, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

Rob Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture: Britain and the Transformation of Modernity*. I.B. Tauris, 2007. ISBN 978–1–84511–079–6.

As the big flat, HD enabled, interactive digital screen in the corner of the living room mutates apace, and as newspapers and magazines find it more and more difficult to encompass the full range of a day's TV programming schedule in their pages, the history of television in Britain is rightly, if somewhat belatedly, receiving systematic analysis. Perversely, as the 1990s have given way to the 'noughties', it is as if the immediate post-war development, institutionalisation, 'look' and place of TV, from a vantage point of some 60 years, has at last begun to be recognised as a legitimate subject for respectable historical scholarship. Perhaps it is a generational matter.

In this readable and well-organised study, Turnock presents a careful analysis motivated by three key, inter-related questions. First, what was the impact of the expansion of television on television itself – how did television change? Second, what significance or impact did the social and cultural contexts of Britain in the 1950s and 1960s have on the expansion of television? And finally, how, and in what terms, did television produce social and cultural change in that period?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, the book works through six carefully delineated chapters. The first of these deals with *rationalisation*; arguing that the arrival of ITV services

in 1955 triggered a radical expansion of the television institution, necessitating a rational, industrialised mode of television production and this entailed an increasingly centralised form of national provision. *Centralisation* is taken up as the key theme in the next chapter, which argues that in spite of organisational tendencies towards regionalism and nationalism, and through the emergence of mixed programming, which attempted to recognise and appeal to a diverse audience, nonetheless, television in its organisation and its coverage of 'national events' in this period played a part in endorsing a London-centric, metropolitan focus. The third chapter examines *technologies*, in particular, the crucial emergence of recording technologies which allowed a move from the theatrical to the televisual, together with the commercial considerations of repeat and import-export economies. Chapter four concerns *spaces*, documenting those into which the television became accommodated – especially new estates and suburban developments – but also examining the rise of television as a 'translocational' medium, in its growing ability to connect the home with much wider global and public places. The final two chapters concern the relationships between television and consumer culture, looking initially at the ways in which television endorsed and promoted consumerism, most obviously through advertising, but in less apparent ways as well. Turnock's analysis indicates that not only did television enable the visibility of new commodities, but that through the developments in new, mixed programming it also provided the basis for key forms of distinction and distaste to become established. This theme is explored in the final chapter that looks at consuming television, in particular in the context of the rise of quiz and game shows, and the emergence of television celebrities and personalities.

In general terms, the book firmly locates television within the key shifts and changes taking place in the late 1950s and early 1960s, doubly implicated in the consumer 'boom' of the times and the demographic and suburban changes in progress. It attends to key changes in the mode of television production – 'the programme factory' – and to the range and types of programmes which were produced as a result – epitomised by the series and other standardised formats. Drawing on John Ellis' influential notion of 'witness',[1] Turnock also demonstrates that the expansion of British TV in the period gave rise to a regime of 'new visibility' and also became an arena for a diversity of tastes which disrupted earlier, established forms of 'top-down' consensus. In his concluding assessment of the impact and significance of the rise and expansion of television culture in this period, Turnock suggests – applying Nick Couldry's argument[2] – that television was responsible for a new phase of 'ritualized sociability' and the creation of key categories, most obviously in the emergence of the explicit distinction between a television personality and a non-television personality, or in the sense that if something is *on television* it must be important. In this fundamental period of early expansion, television developed this ability to reach into, and to influence, the social categories through which people define and classify their social world and experience. And for Turnock, it is this that defines the key intersection of the period and the medium:

> (T)he social and cultural change that television in Britain *produces* in the 1950s and 1960s is the sense that *television itself* has the cultural legitimacy to define and shape cultural values and social experience. In the history of television and the media in Britain, it is in this period that television confidently asserts cultural and symbolic power for the first time. (p. 207; original emphasis).

This necessarily brief account of the book has not been able to do justice to the many detailed insights and asides that it contains. It should find its way onto reading lists and

become a highly recommended reference on courses that deal with the history of television in Britain – often to undergraduate audiences who are sometimes almost as highly resistant to the study of history as they are to mathematics. In my view, the chapters dealing with 'Technologies' (chapter three) and 'Spaces' (chapter four) are the most interesting. In other areas of the book, there are uneasy relationships occasionally between empirical detail and interpretative or theoretical frameworks. The book is also perhaps, in places, more at home in dealing with matters concerning ITV developments than those related to television as a whole (and this should not be taken as part of the cultural/critical 'disdain' for ITV discussed early in the introduction).

What would strengthen the book? In my view, three things come to mind. First, I would have liked to see more in-depth analysis of the actual schedules of television programmes offered by ITV and BBC channels between 1955–64; how they developed, expanded and transformed in the period. Second, more might have been made of the rise of the viewing culture in the period, the domestication of TV and its entry into the textures and routines of everyday life, culture and generational memory. Finally, I thought the chapter on technologies missed the opportunity to consider the mass production of television sets, which in a direct, material way fuelled and mobilised the expansion; how sets were retailed, their design development and advertising. However, it is a measure of this book's valuable contribution to the field that it has stimulated and forced these nagging final thoughts and questions. In this way, it will undoubtedly serve as a productive and timely catalyst for further scholarship.

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Notes

1 John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, I.B. Tauris, 1999, pp. 6–16.
2 Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, Routledge, 2002.

Greg M. Smith, *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of Ally McBeal.* University of Texas Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-292-71643-8.

Greg M. Smith opens *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of Ally McBeal* with a question: 'Why read a book about a television series that is no longer being aired?' (p. 1). It is a pertinent one. For it highlights one of the key issues for television scholarship: namely, what kinds of programmes are we choosing to remember? Smith makes the point that the very nature of television, with its voracious 'hunger for the new' (p. 1), contributes to what eventually, in a sense, remains *visible.* Some shows can be rediscovered as 'classic', to live on forever in syndication, others find a cult audience who keep particular texts alive, and many more either 'become fodder for filling twenty-four-hour cable programming grids or disappear' (p. 1).

Smith takes issue with how the study of television mimics popular culture, which he argues follows similar practices, either by focusing on the latest 'hot' series or on 'the historical artefacts' (p. 1). Behind such an observation lurks an even deeper concern. For he believes that scholars place far too much emphasis on the now-ness of television, treating

'the medium as being worthy of study *because* of its contemporary popularity' (p. 2). Rather than dissecting the complexity of narrative or the artfulness of aesthetic constructions TV scholarship, for him at least, appears far more concerned with television's direct social relevancy – what it has to say about our culture, our identities, ourselves. Unintentionally articulated in such a broadly sociological approach is a defensiveness, a sense of inferiority, a sense that television is *only* worth talking about if it has something important to tell us about society.

Judging that scholarship dismisses the text in its preoccupation with social and cultural forces Smith advocates that we should study the formal qualities of television in order to 'unpack the complicated, elegant, artful construction of a single television series as it both makes explicitly political arguments and creates beautiful television' (p. 5). The series he has chosen to analyse is *Ally McBeal* (20th Century Fox Television/David E. Kelley Productions, 1997-2002), the primetime 'dramedy' about a waifish Bostonian attorney looking for love and life fulfilment. The reasons for his choice are a need to broaden what we study as well as reclaim 'explicitly middlebrow works as a way to combat the notion of television as bad object (p. 6), to prolong critical scrutiny of the 'complexities and elegant narrative techniques' using a series that does not 'instantly leap to mind as "quality television" ' (p. 9), and because of the way in which *Ally McBeal* pushed 'the boundaries of television style and expressivity' (ibid).

Taking his cue from 'a rich set of theoretical assumptions articulated by the Russian Formalists of the 1920s' (ibid),[1] Smith begins his discussion of *Ally McBeal*'s aesthetics by relying on theories more readily associated with film studies.[2] Formalists aimed to deconstruct 'how artworks use various "devices" [editing, camerawork] to achieve particular "functions" [to construct the narrative, to elicit particular emotional responses]' (p. 9). Armed with this Formalist framework he systematically sets to work deconstructing the entire *Ally McBeal* series, first by identifying how particular 'devices' have certain 'functions', and then by examining how that formal system constitutes a fictional world *on its own terms*.

He starts with the music and its use to blur 'boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic, interior and exterior, real and imaginary' (p. 19). Different musical techniques – amateur performance, the musical voice belonging to Vonda Shepard, the appropriation of musical rhythms in speech, the appearance of professionals like Barry White and Al Green – give powerful voice to characters navigating complex discourses related to sex and love, sexuality and gender politics. Flashbacks, special effects, voiceover and fantasy sequences are explored next, as the author suggests how 'the series integrates these techniques into a system that creates a distinctive world' (p. 69). Not only do these techniques shape audience identification with key characters, but also 'broaden the expressive capacity of television itself' (ibid).

Part two, Narration and Argument, identifies narrative components before exploring how these formal elements are marshalled to make visible the highly idiosyncratic world of *Ally McBeal*. It begins with a consideration of what is involved in sustaining a long-running TV series/serial: how any show must endlessly negotiate 'between the real-world business constraints of producing a series and the continuing narrative that is being told about the diegetic characters' (p. 80); how *Ally McBeal* formally constructs its values; how its ensemble cast of characters evolve (or not) in relation to making visible those values; and it is in and through the titular character, played by Calista Flockhart – her relationships, her actions, her eccentricities (fantasies, personal thoughts) – that the show advocates its eccentric worldview and structures our sympathies. How the narrative uses guest stars and the theme of eccentricity is studied in chapter four. For while guest stars introduce weekly con-

flict, they also function to generate debate on difference, eccentricity and tolerance, which, in turn, allows *Ally McBeal* to 'weave . . . complicated issue-oriented arguments' (p. 176). Chapter five draws this second part to a close, as it investigates how the narrative techniques allow the series to fully articulate (political) debates dealing with gender and sexual politics. Identifying instances of sexual harassment, and tracking how that issue is handled in court and in the workplace, Smith argues that the longer series narrative allows for a more complex and nuanced debate to be rehearsed on the nature of sexual harassment, 'read as both a discourse of its specific time and an argument concerning broader conceptions of the law' (p. 180). Put another way it is *only* through studying an entire series, dissecting how it deals with every twist and turn of an argument, that we learn just how complicated and complex that debate really is. Contradiction here emerges less as about communicating real social debate, than about the possibilities sanctioned by the continuities of a series to articulate argument. And for me this is where the strength of the book really lies.

Smith offers a smart and sophisticated reading of the television medium in his exacting criticism of the formal and aesthetic properties of *Ally McBeal.* This study belongs to a burgeoning television scholarship that is working hard to combine rigorous textual analysis with theoretical inquiry,[3] and Smith is not alone in desiring to dissect the specificity of the medium.[4] His book thus highlights the difficulties and pleasures contemporary scholarship faces as it endeavours to theorise popular television.

But the kind of analysis presented here can *only* be performed if the archive is available in the first place. It also requires an ability to pause, fast-forward and rewind, to stop and reflect. This book appears at a moment when the archive is becoming ever more accessible and collectable, through syndication, Internet downloads and DVD box sets (*Ally McBeal*'s entire back catalogue is now available). Such changes must certainly modify the way we watch, understand and make sense of a television text, but also will give us new opportunities to access more television to analyse.

Identified by Smith as a reason for why television studies traditionally shied away from textual analysis is its institutional history. Distinguishing itself from its parent discipline of film studies, with its ahistorical focus on textual aesthetics, TV studies 'did so by carving out a very different approach' (p. 4). It long trained attention on the complex sociological-based engagement between viewers and the text. An explicitly political discourse thus framed thinking, which, in turn, profoundly shaped the way in which the field came into being – the (sometimes unconscious) rules that defined what could and could not be said; and *what* was known was overwhelmingly determined by the *way* it was known. It is in this context that Smith pleads for a return to the text.

No doubt the reluctance to take on such a challenge relates to the vastness of an individual television text. *Ally McBeal*, for example, is 111 hours of television. (And indeed, the book often suffers from having to deal with so much narrative, trying to corral it within strict word limits.) TV series/serials are not as easily containable as, say, a film, theatrical production or novel, as they play out over numerous weeks, and as one season gives way to another.[5] Only by studying an entire series can we truly understand its aesthetic and narrative value, argues Smith. His point is not without merit. But for me there are implications for studying television – how do we remember and what is forgotten, not only while the series is running but also after it has finished? Television scholarship is keenly aware of how easily a text can be lost, its significance misremembered or forgotten entirely;[6] far from being dazzled by a 'hot' series, criticism can often have an important archival function as it documents how a particular series, through its representational and textual strategies, articulates its debates, captures (and even shapes) the *zeitgeist* – and how audiences made sense of this.

My point is that we must not forget the vibrant debates, which incited communities,[7] defined particular moments (a vibrancy which can be too easily lost), but instead let the different forms of criticism speak to each other, a dialogue that can build a discourse of a single series.

I absolutely agree with Smith that we should interrogate our motives for the choices that we make, push ourselves to find new ways for talking about and understanding television *differently*. The value of this book for me undoubtedly lies with the questions it raises about how we talk and write about television. The gauntlet is down as Smith pushes us into new directions.

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Notes

1 Herbert Eagle, ed, and trans, *Russian Formalist Film Theory*, University of Michigan Press, 1981.
2 Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the Glass Armor: Neoformalist Film Analysis*, Princeton University Press, 1988.
3 Merri Lisa Johnson, ed, *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane Puts it in a Box*, I.B. Tauris, 2007; Steven Peacock, ed, *Reading 24: Television Against the Clock*, I.B. Tauris, 2007. There is also the 'TV Milestones Series' from Wayne State University Press, which has the explicit agenda to situate a particular television show within (to quote the marketing blurb) 'the context of the history of television and broader cultural history'.
4 Sarah Cardwell, 'Television Aesthetics', *Critical Studies in Television*, 1, 1, 2006, 72-80; Glen Creeber, 'The Joy of the Text? Television and Textual Analysis,' *ibid*, 81-88.
5 Michele Hilmes makes a similar point in her 'reflections' piece for this issue.
6 Christopher Sharrett makes a similar case for *The Rifleman*, an ABC series that aired between 1958-63, almost entirely lost from view. Sharrett, *The Rifleman*, Wayne State University Press, 2005.
7 Contributors, including Sarah Warn, Diane Anderson-Minshall, Paul Graham, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, attempt to make sense of the initial significance of *The L Word* (Anonymous Content/Dufferin Gate Productions/Showtime/Viacom Productions, 2004-present) when it first aired; see, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, eds, *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*, I.B. Tauris, 2006.