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Television criticism and the transformation of the archive
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I have always thought that the title of this journal indicated a certain lack of confidence about television, and notice that ‘television’ has disappeared completely in the anniversary invitation to contribute a piece on ‘My Media Studies’. This invitation encourages the programmatic, the manifesto, and the speculative. Instead, I want to employ the anecdotal to reflect in on the way in which technologies of the future (or, actually, in this case, the recent past), affect the ways in which we understand the media – such as television – of the twentieth century in the twenty-first.

I’m interested in some of the ways in which the archive is being transformed in the current period, and the implications of this for critical and historical practices. For on the one hand, there is much to be gained from the new availability of programmes long stored in the vaults, on the other, the new abilities to watch and re-watch at will material made for national real-time broadcast raises new questions for the media scholar, as my anecdote will demonstrate.

The BBC’s 1978 series, *Law and Order* comprises four 85 minute plays (shot on film), written by G.F. Newman, directed by Les Blair and produced by Tony Garnett. The series, which is shot in what Alastair Milne called ‘Garnett’s usual pseudo-realistic style’¹ addresses endemic corruption in the British criminal justice system, focussing on the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of a fictional career criminal, Jack Lynn. Its transmission, on one of the three national broadcast networks, caused

uproar. There were questions in the Houses of Parliament and the prison officers' union resolved to refuse the BBC future filming access. The BBC took the decision, at the highest level, that the series could not be put in the market for export, and for a while decided it could not be repeated, although there was in fact a late night repeat in 1980, shortly after Mrs Thatcher came to power. Since this broadcast, *Law and Order* has been almost impossible to see and is rarely analysed, even in histories of British television².

I was interested in the series as part of a larger project about the history of British television in the 20th Century. A controversial media event when broadcast, the plays were subsequently proved broadly correct about the pervasiveness of corruption in the Metropolitan Police. Formally, they traversed high and low terrains, using British television naturalism and the modernist format of the same story told from different points of view, in one of the most enduring television genres, the police series. They exemplified 20th century television at its best as a broadcast, national, real-time mass art-form.

After I had been working in the British Film Institute (BFI) archives on the 16mm prints of the plays for some time, carefully annotating shot compositions, edits and the changing pace of the different programmes, I learned that the BBC was, in April of 2008, releasing the programmes on DVD³.

So my object of study suddenly changed. Instead of having an existence which was dominated by its historical, nationally specific time of first broadcast, the programmes were set loose from original context, and now wait, in the Amazon warehouse, to be

summoned to play anywhere in the world where people can watch Region 2 discs, or possess multi-standard players. From their dark, post-broadcast shelf-life, these plays can now be marketed between box sets of the most successful British police series of their period, *The Sweeney*, and the cult genre piece of the present, *The Wire*.

Not only can they be marketed in new and sometimes unpredictable company, they can of course also be watched in quite different ways. My hours in the basement of the BFI on a Steenbeck, once the programmes are available on DVD, are rendered a peculiarly old-fashioned scholarship. I needed then to annotate a text so that I had reliable records to which I could refer when it had been returned to the vaults. Now, I can just check the DVD when necessary.

Now obviously, in many ways, this is fantastic. It means many more people can see the programmes, and that anything I write can be a contribution to a broader discussion. But on the other hand, this sudden transformation in the medium of study, affects more than the availability of the study text. It is not just television which is transformed by new media, but also the labours of television scholars. For what I had to do in relation to this text was suddenly also transformed.

The work of the critic was no longer, at least in part, a labour of selective description and reconstruction. The spatially dispersed labour of writing and checking was condensed into my own study. I was no longer primarily trying to give a sense of something forever absent to the reader, in which the skill of the scholar lies in the judgement of how much textual detail is necessary for the reader to understand what you are talking about, and to apprehend something of the text in question, without

drowning in that so often excessive detail lovingly accumulated by the archive scholar. Writing about television that is available is different to writing about the ephemeral and inaccessible.

As the series moves out of the publicly funded national archive onto the shop shelves, there is also the question about the extent to which, analytically, it has also become loosened from its culture of production and social context. As a long-unseen series, the plays were best approached through an investigation of why they were never seen again. This story is a complicated, historically specific, national one, in which the tumultuous political climate of late 1970s Britain and the left-wing politics of many involved in television drama has to be understood in relation to the institutional politics of the BBC and the relationship between the BBC, and particularly the Home Office, the government department responsible for the criminal justice system and most relevantly, the prisons. Unseen, the plays were history. Footloose and fancy-free in their DVD package, they can be watched in any number of ways, and the details of their historical context of production and first broadcast, although illuminating, can also seem like an attempt to tether them down to a restrictive interpretative context. Large parts of the archive are now ‘out there’ – and what will be done with them, and how and where it will be done, are more open questions than when the archive was available only through a series of identifiable, often nationally funded gatekeepers. The problem, as others have noted, is what can be said meaningfully about the exhilarating kaleidoscope of simultaneously accessible material. One strategy is meta-commentary, at either the textual (‘postmodern’) or the economic (‘international trade in formats’) level; another is decontextualised textual

analysis: there are indeed formal and thematic similarities that can be found between *Law and Order* and, say, *The Wire*.

However, in the past, one of the crucial roles of television studies and television history has been to tell national stories, even if not always consciously. It is much less clear what stories will be told about television and how we should interpret and understand its significance when these constitutive connections between medium and nation are more attenuated and given new contours governed by the commercial availability of some, but not other parts of those histories, to much more individuated audiences. In these new circumstances, historically informed interpretative – and evaluative - cultural criticism, is both easier and more difficult to practice, particularly in a manner which is attentive to, but not seduced by, these new conditions.

¹ Alastair Milne, BBC Written Archives Centre, File R78/2,0272/1
Board of Management Minutes, 10/4/1978.

² The only substantial discussion is Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), pps 113-118 and Stephen Lacey, *Tony Garnett* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

³ G.F.Newman's *Law and Order* BBC DVD, BBC Worldwide Ltd, distributed under licence by 2Entertain, 2008.

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