Interdisciplinary perspectives in visual media studies

Screening Social Spaces

June 2007
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INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES IN VISUAL MEDIA STUDIES

Screening Social Spaces

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2007

Ouvrage coordonné par Renée DICKASON, Benoît RAULX

Projet ACI « Espace et paroles : terrains et médias audiovisuels »

CRESO / LSA

Maison de la Recherche en Sciences Humaines de Caen
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FOREWORD

Renée DICKASON *
Benoit RAOUUX **

This study is the fruit of a joint venture between disciplines within the Humanities Research Centre (Maison de la Recherche en Sciences Humaines) situated in Caen (Normandy). Two laboratories—one specializing in social geography (CRESO) and the other in Anglo-American media and cultural studies (LSA)—have united to work around the notions of social space(s) and of the depicting of societies/communities through the visual narratives of films, either on the large or the small screen. The constructions of social realities are complex and what is innovative about this venture is the juxtaposition of methods, approaches, theories and practices.

Representing spaces through visual media is stimulating. Painters and, later, photographers paved the way for the “showing” of rural and urban landscapes using various perspectives. Initiatives, techniques, creative strategies and very often a touch of genius have led to the development of schools and the flourishing of artists. Similarly, imitating the “real”, either oral or visual, was the domain of scientific observers from different disciplines (biology, architecture, anthropology, art history and geography, to name but a few). With the natural evolution of technology, new experiences and experimentations have occurred in several fields. Scrutinizing humankind, and more globally life in social contexts, figures among the main preoccupations in our research. The importance of details close to “reality” is thus an everlasting quest.

The “documentary value” of a picture (fixed or animated) is a fascinating challenge facing, for instance, any film whose creator has for principal objective the representation of the “real”. Traditionally, the documentary film, at least if we have in mind early examples such as Nanook of the North (1922) by Robert Flaherty, a founding and referential film about the Canadian Inuit population, or Turkaib by Victor Turin (1929), relating the epic story of the building of the trans-Siberian railway, tends to be set in exotic places. The anthropological gaze is central to the narrative.

* Professor of English Studies, LSA, University of Caen, France.
** Associate Professor in Geography, CRESO - UMR 6590 - CNRS, University of Caen, France.

Cahiers de la MRSIH, n° spécial, juin 2007, p. 7-9
Several years before, a careful scrutiny of gestures, of environments was the object of visual experiments by mine or factory-owners in England, in for example The Story of a Piece of Slate (1904) and The Manchester Ship Canal (1912). Charles Urban, one of the most famous producers of the period, made films such as Through the Microscope (1907), whose title is explicit enough, and Rodents and Their Habits (1908) with the educational motive of visualizing Nature and natural life. Gradually, the documentary film took the form of political and social representation with more or less obvious propaganda objectives as was the case, if we take the example of Great Britain, of The Wonderful Organization of the Royal Army Medical Corps (1916) and of The Battle of the Somme (1916), which became archive masterpieces of reconstructed testimony and collective memory.

Capturing the “Real” and attempting to understand the “Other” motivated many who were eager to discover new “worlds”, either “civilisations” or “communities”. This thirst is far from being quenched as documentarists and/or researchers may consider the notion of space within a very wide perception. It can relate to small groups of people sharing activities within a fairly limited area (daily life at Covent Garden fruit/vegetable market ¹, a London jazz club ², a youth club in Lambeth) ³ or in a less restricted context (a working-class trip to Margate amusements ⁴ or the life of “binners” in Vancouver) ⁵. It can also concern the close observation of the habits of tribes in far away countries. What is certain is that visual and oral perspectives are complementary in the examination of human activities in a particular social space, a space which, with the use of modern technologies, may be virtual as well as real ⁶.

The aspects of the documentary genre tackled in this study are considered more as “art with a social conscience”. Showing the “truth” as regards situations and the “genuine” as regards characters is central to the conception of docudramas though the definition of the terms tends to vary according to periods and filmmakers. Nonetheless, we may wonder what is drama? what is fiction? what is documentary? The interconnections between these “territories” are delicate and reflect the complexity of screening social spaces.

1. Lindsay Anderson’s Every Day Except Christmas (1957).
2. Tony Richardson’s Momma Don’t Allow (1956).
3. Karel Reisz’s We Are the Lambeth Boys (1959). The film is remarkable for its spontaneity and realism — the way it captures the essence of the youth it portrayed—in the tradition of Free Cinema.
4. Lindsay Anderson’s O Dreamland (1953).
5. Benoît Raoulx’s Traplines in Vancouver (2003), Service du Film de Recherche Scientifique/ACCAAN (Ateliers cinéma de Normandie), 37 minutes.
6. See Catharine Mason’s ethnopoetic study of a narrative told by Willie Lopez, a Mexican disc jockey, in Les Branch’s Chulas Fronteras and John Miles Foley’s reflexion on oral tradition and internet technology below.
Inspiration is at the core of the documentary as it is of fiction. The challenge of "Life as it is ...and as it is related..." is faced by many filmmakers and the distinctions between fact and fiction are fine especially in the British context where producers brilliantly exploit this contrastive and complementary vein. In the purely fictional sphere, soap operas tend to focalize on the representation of plausible situations set in recognisable and sometimes authentic places. The same happens in certain comic reconstructions developed in sitcoms. The world depicted, in the tragic or comic mode, is revealed with great verisimilitude mainly through the use of true-to-life dialogue and familiar decors. The relation to space and discourse is what captivates an audience anxious to identify regions or localities, rural or urban spaces which surround them every day. This stratagem to seduce the British spectator is equally to be found when politicians campaign for General Elections. Recognizing places, situating oneself relative to events, via the presence of maps in news bulletins, reflects a similar preoccupation. At the same time, building new spaces, planning new urban societies, remapping cities, rethinking architectural models brings about further consideration of the notion of space. In another type of spectacle, the launching of "reality television" programmes, competitions like Blind Date and intrusive spectacles such as Big Brother or Castaway, adds another dimension to the depiction of private and public spaces. It also illustrates the perpetual reflection regarding social life and spatial representations.

NARRATING SPACES:
THE ART OF THE DOCUMENTARY
ART WITH A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE
The origins and early days of drama-documentary in the United Kingdom (1930s-1940s)

Elizabeth De Cacqueray *

The terms “docudrama” or “drama-documentary” are in current usage in English-speaking countries. However, precisely what kind of audio-visual production they refer to, and what the exact characteristics of a docudrama or a drama-documentary are, is not necessarily so clear and universally agreed upon. Our own concern is both with an examination of the origins of the form or forms and with an attempt to clarify what its/their defining characteristics might be: our remarks are limited to the period of production running from the late 1920s to the early 1960s. This study undertakes an analysis of the concept of the docudrama/drama-documentary, beginning with some reflections on the variety of different terms used to name these creations and examining the usefulness of the distinctions between the various productions which these expressions enable us to establish. We will then proceed to outline possible defining characteristics of a drama-documentary, in relation to its content and aesthetic: is it to be understood as a fiction which is anchored in fact, in “real-life” incidents which are dramatised or does a docudrama include productions which are set up simply according to the conventions of realism or naturalism, providing a “drama” which merely looks like “real life”? The various examples of docudramas which we consider, drawing on the history of British cinematographic creation, illustrate the extent to which it is at once difficult to establish the boundaries of the form and interesting to do so, with regard to the aesthetic and ethical implications of mixing, or appearing to mix, “fact” and “fiction”.

Indeed, docudrama, a term generally related to television, is used to talk of a production which, to some degree or other, combines a fictive narrative thread with content of a factual nature or material closely appertaining to a real-life situation. On the whole it is agreed that docudrama is the standard expression in the United States, whilst in the United Kingdom, drama-documentary is preferred1. The term docudrama was actually coined in 1961, in the United States to talk of “a dramatized documentary film” and, according to Fowler’s Modern English Usage,

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* Senior lecturer, University of Toulouse Le Mirail, France.

Cahiers de la MRSJ, n° spécial, juin 2007, p. 13-30
“it has since spread into British English”

2. The spelling of drama-documentary varies according to different sources, being either hyphenated or not, though it is unclear whether hyphenating introduces any subtle difference in significance.

Closer examination suggests that treating docudrama and drama-documentary as synonyms is not entirely justified as cultural differences mean that what the Americans understand by docudrama may not be identical to what the British consider as drama-documentary. Nevertheless, the term docudrama is used by British authors, with reference to audio-visual productions originating in the United Kingdom or elsewhere.

These are far from being the only variations in terms. Although one generally sees the word docudrama, the elements may be inverted to obtain “dramadoc”, as the title of Derek Paget’s book, No Other Way to Tell It: Dramadoc/Docudrama on Television, makes plain. Similarly, in the realm of British television one can find the terms of “dramatised documentary” and “documentary drama” being used.

These inversions are not purely arbitrary: they are used in order to point out where the main emphasis has been placed, or what the dominant component is, in a production mixing fact and fiction. In dramatised documentary the point of departure would be the documentary basis, to which a dramatised framework has been added, whilst in documentary drama the start of the project would be a written script, to which documentary material has been added to create a realist effect. Thus, the play on terms gives the viewer some indication of the relationship of the final production to reality and to the fictional. The same principle may be seen to underlie the inversions of docudrama, with its emphasis on the fictive and dramadoc, which stresses the dominance of the documentary, although, in practice “dramadoc” is seldom encountered!

In addition to these variations and inversions a number of other terms have been coined to refer to hybrid, documentary/fiction creations, such as “docu-fiction”, similar in meaning to docudrama, but less often encountered, although its popularity in usage is increasing. According to Wikipedia this “is the name given to pieces of fiction that are based in historical truth”.

The entry for the film Shakespeare Wallah, in the Oxford Companion to Shakespeare, classes the work as “a meta-

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8. 1965, dir. Ismail Merchant and James Ivory.
dramatic docu-fiction". The BBC uses the term to talk, for example, of the film *Floating Over Kolkata*. Interestingly the latter is actually classified as "documentary", whilst the commentary on it employs the term docu-fiction: it uses "real situations", "real street children" and "a grainy film look" but builds a "story" around one female character.

Also to be found is the term "faction". The *Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* defines this word as "a term coined in 1970 to describe fiction based on and mingled with fact, at first applied particularly to American works of fiction, such as *In Cold Blood* (1966) by Capote and *The Armies of the Night*, 1968, by Mailer". The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* gives a similar definition but adds that it was a "short-lived portmanteau word". Indeed, one encounters it less often than docudrama perhaps because it lends to confusion with other very different meanings of the word faction. Both dictionaries relate the term at once to written and cinematic fictions. The term "docu-soap" (or docusap) also exists, coined in 1990, according to Fowler. *BBC Learning English* has picked the term up and included it in the "Keep your English up to date" notes. It is defined as "another one of these blend-words, where two words have come together to make a third one. In this particular case [...] a TV genre, which mixes a documentary programme and a soap [...] these are particularly fly-on-the-wall documentaries we are talking about now, where people are carrying on their everyday lives, doing their ordinary things and yet being televised or radio recorded at the same time".

Other terms related to the mixing of fact and fiction are: "infotainment", "docutainment" and "mockumentary". Their characteristics are perhaps slightly further away from those of a docudrama and are, therefore, less likely to refer to quite the same kinds of creation. "Mockumentary" is obviously related to the documentary but it is linked to the parodying or satirising of the subject tackled in the film: *The Oxford Dictionary of English* defines it as "a television programme or film which takes the form of a serious documentary in order to satirize its subject". The narrative thread may therefore be of lesser importance.

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"Doctainment"\textsuperscript{16} is defined as "entertainment provided by movies or other presentations that include documentary materials, intended both to inform and to entertain"\textsuperscript{17}. "Infotainment" is picked up by a variety of dictionaries in the English-speaking world and is defined along similar lines in each as: "broadcast material which is intended both to entertain and inform" \textsuperscript{18}. As in the case of mockumentary, the mixing of entertainment and information does not necessarily mean that the entertainment includes or follows a narrative, which is significant as, in our opinion, it is the presence of a narrative thread which is a necessary distinguishing characteristic of docudrama.

This overview may seem excessively detailed, but we wished to try to trace, and to relate to each other, all these portmanteau words, which may or may not be referring to the same object, and whose official definitions are not always easily available. Most ordinary English language dictionaries go no further than the inclusion of docudrama. Frank Beaver's specialised, and very useful, Dictionary of Film Terms includes a fairly long entry mentioning that: "this form of filmmaking is also sometimes referred to as 'infotainment', 'faction' and 'real fiction'. However, he offers no further definitions of these latter terms, nor does he include docufiction\textsuperscript{19}. It has therefore proved useful to consult a variety of sources of different kinds in order to obtain recognized definitions. Oxford reference online provides access to a large number of dictionaries, including those specialising in literary terms and those covering usage in the English-speaking world as a whole. More recent terms or those better known only within the world of media or popular culture are picked up by Wikipedia. The BBC Learning English site is very up to date and includes more recently coined words.

Following this appraisal of related terms, this article adopts, from now on, that of drama-documentary, on the grounds that the object of the study is an examination of the origins and development of the form in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that docudrama and drama-documentary are not absolute synonyms. Like Fowler's Modern English Usage, but with a somewhat later date of the 1970s, American film theorist, James Monaco, traces the origin of the form to the United States. In Monaco's opinion, at this time, television networks were suffering from a dearth of suitable Hollywood feature films to schedule and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Said by Pocket Fowler's English Usage to have been coined in 1983; Robert Allen (ed.), \textit{op.cit.}.
\item The New Oxford American Dictionary in English, <http://www.oxfordreference online.com>, 26 December 2005. The most complete definition is to be found in this dictionary but The Oxford Dictionary of English (2nd edition revised) offers a definition similar in content.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Art with a Social Conscience

producers decided to turn to making their own films. He argues that, unlike the Hollywood products screened up until then, the casts of these “made-for-television” films “were not supported by massive publicity”, which reduced their popular appeal. He sees the docudrama as having evolved out of this economic dilemma: “Trading on the striking identity between fiction and reality that characterizes the television experience, program executives developed the ‘docudrama’, a made-for-television-film based more or less loosely on current events and history, dealing with subjects already well-known to viewers and thus in a sense pre-sold” 20. This definition suggests that the origins of the form are relatively recent and that it emerged from economic conditions specific to the United States in the 1970s. We argue, however, that, the origins in the United Kingdom are different, deriving from earlier audio-visual productions and related to other filmic forms, rather than having appeared in immediate and exclusive association with television. It is perhaps therefore desirable to limit the term docudrama to the United States and to adopt the terms drama-documentary and documentary drama when referring to a British context. The advantage in this approach is that it enables some discussion of the characteristics of the content of a drama-documentary and the motivations behind the adoption of the form. Are the subjects tackled automatically “already well-known to viewers”? Is the film necessarily “based more or less loosely on current events and history”? Is the main reason for adopting this hybrid form to be found in the ease with which it can be sold because it tackles familiar ground? With regard to these questions Frank Beaver seems to agree with James Monaco, saying that a docudrama is a “film drama based on historical, news-inspired actuality” with “a dependence on audience knowledge of the event being treated”. He also mentions that docudramas introduce a degree of the melodramatic, noting that “the script often develops well-known incidents of a news-familiar story to emotional crescendos [...].” 21.

Further points of theory need to be broached. Intentionally, we have so far used the term “form”, when referring to the drama-documentary, rather than “genre”. Indeed, it is considered that the drama-documentary does not constitute, in itself, a specific genre. If the drama-documentary were a specific genre, this would imply that each film would meet a certain number of pre-defined characteristics, but, as John Corner underlines, the classification of drama-documentary points to “a very wide range of mixtures” 22. Evidence of this range of mixtures is immediately apparent when one begins to examine the origins of the form.

The fundamental feature is, of course, that of the drama-documentary combination of “drama”, implying a fictional, imaginary content, with

“documentary”, suggesting verifiable factual content. For this reason one might wonder whether a drama-documentary is distinguishable from a historical narrative film, since the latter also combines historical fact with some degree of interpretation of events. We would argue that the two cinematographic forms are rather different. While the historical narrative declares itself to be a reconstruction of a past event or of a known public figure, with the spectator being aware that he/she is watching a reconstruction, a drama-documentary tends to pass its content off as actual footage filmed “from life”. The spectator may thus not be aware that there is a reconstruction. For this reason drama-documentary has sometimes been strongly criticized for its apparent, or over-apparent, manipulation of the spectator and of the filmic subject. As we shall see there are, among drama-documentaries, a variety of ways and degrees of mixing and the confusion between reality and reconstruction can be disturbing.

If, in the United States, theorists trace docudrama to the 1960s and/or 1970s, Dave Rolinson offers the contrary opinion that drama-documentary finds its origins in the early productions of the British documentary film movement 23. John Corner traces “documentarisation” of drama to “a number of British films made in the Second World War”, which “set their fictional occurrences within a very firm context of documentary-style footage” 24. These latter films, in fact, equally point back to the documentary film movement, as the filmmakers concerned were, in many cases, the same as those who produced the World War Two documentary-style films Corner is talking of.

This raises a series of new issues. Firstly, what exactly is to be expected of a documentary? To what extent does it present a “reliable” version of genuine events or people? To what extent is it not, in any case, itself a form of fiction? As a prolongation of this query we might ask whether early British documentaries have any specific characteristics which make them different from present-day documentary films. It is easy to agree on what a documentary is not, i.e. a totally imagined story. But when one begins to say it is based on the “real”, on “lived” stories, etc., counter-arguments immediately appear. A documentary is not newsreel footage as it has to be structured, in order for its material to be moulded to the filmmaker’s vision/interpretation of “reality”. It is not possible to transfer reality or real life directly onto the screen, and therefore one is always confronted with a version or fiction of what reality is about. However, certain boundaries can perhaps be drawn, as Grierson 25 suggested. He laid down some defining characteristics of the documentary as he saw it:

25. For more details on John Grierson, see the following article by Susannah O’Carroll.
First principles. (1) We believe that the cinema's capacity for getting around, for observing and selecting from life itself, can be exploited in a new and vital art form [...] documentary would photograph the living scene and the living story. (2) We believe that the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to screen interpretation of the modern world. They give cinema a greater fund of material. They give it power over a million and one images. They give it power of interpretation over more complex and astonishing happenings in the real world than the studio mind can conjure up or the studio mechanician recreate. (3) We believe that the materials and the stories thus taken from the raw can be finer (more real in the philosophic sense) than the acted article. Spontaneous gesture has a special value on the screen [...] 26.

Thus, determining characteristics of a documentary would be that it is the result of observation and selection from a genuinely lived situation, that the people filmed are those directly involved and that they and their activities are not acted but, presumably, correspond to their own authentic ways of life.

Closer examination shows however that Grierson has chosen his words with care because at least some of the early documentaries he is talking about and actively supported, can be questioned according to the strict letter of these first principles he lays down. Indeed, Man of Aran 27, a film which Robert Flaherty was invited to make by Grierson, appears to offer a factual account of the lives of the inhabitants of one of the Aran Islands, more particularly the lives of one family. Flaherty constructs a narrative thread around this group, with the additional appearances of other fishermen and islanders. The young son fishes off a cliff and, after spotting a basking shark close to the shore, clammers down to inspect it at close quarters. The father and his companions set off and spend several days and nights hunting the sharks, whilst the mother tends the baby, anxiously keeps watch and collects seaweed to fertilize the soil. There are several moments of climax. Near to the beginning of the film the father returns by boat, with his companion fishermen and whilst the group are carrying the boat to dry land the precious fishing net is forgotten and nearly lost to the waves. A great struggle ensues as the family and other fishermen fight against the waves to retrieve the net. Finally the group succeeds and the family members go off together, carrying the net. At the end of the film the fishermen are shown caught out at sea, in a bad storm and they have to try to land their little craft, against almost impossible odds: they narrowly escape a watery end whilst the boat itself is dashed onto the rocky coast. This time it is impossible to save the boat and the group watch it being smashed to pieces: the family manage to retrieve a length of rope and an oar with which they set off home. The film thus comes full circle, starting with a battle against the waves and a walk home in a family group and ending with a similar scene. The circular structure underlines the permanence of man's struggle against the sea.

The impression given, thanks to the filmic style, is that we are watching exactly what Grierson recommended for this new form of cinema – "the original actor", "the living scene", "the living story", "the materials taken from the raw [...] finer than the acted article". However, a little delving into the background of the film reveals that the family which is portrayed is not a family at all: mother, father and son were "selected from the locals because of their photogenic appearance" 28, which gives the lie to the notion of the "original" actor. However, it is true that Grierson adds the alternative "native" to "original" when referring to actor or scene and furthermore, he uses the term "actor" rather than "participant", for example. Thus, perhaps, Grierson implies that as long as we are watching a genuine Aran Island fisherman the fact that he is not really father and husband in this particular family is not important: he is a native of this place, he could be member of a similar family. Indeed, there is a little hint as to the fictive nature of the participants since the film credits present them as "the characters". As to the "living scene" or "the living story", at the time when Flaherty filmed the islanders they no longer hunted basking sharks in the manner shown: what we see is a re-enactment of the fishing methods previously used, performed at Flaherty's request. Furthermore, if we may suppose that the fishermen do indeed put their lives at risk when they go to sea, it is clear that they would have avoided venturing out in the sort of conditions in which Flaherty portrays them at the end of the film.

When Flaherty encountered the Aran islanders he considered that they represented a way of life that was going to disappear and he wished to establish a record of it. He therefore "recreates the patterns of life as they might have existed in an earlier age" 29. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this, except that one wonders whether one is not in fact witnessing an acted article, something the documentary would reject, according to Grierson’s own principles. Therefore, one is led to further reflect upon the prerequisites of the documentary and to read with greater care what Grierson actually seems to be saying. He describes the people and events of the "real" world as offering a "fund of material" which gives cinema a "power of interpretation over" more complex situations than fiction can invent. In the end, he does seem to be describing something which closely resembles the idea of drama-documentary, a mixture of genuine situations and the people who experience these kinds of situations which/who provide material, mixed with added fictive components, the end product being a "screen interpretation of the modern world". Until coming to write the present article our evaluation of Man of Aran was that it corresponded to the early days of the documentary when the determining characteristics of the genre were still being established, but that Flaherty had taken

29. Idem.
some poetic licence with what we now consider to be the characteristics of the documentary genre. It seemed to us that documentary filmmakers nowadays, wishing to record a way of life which was threatened with disappearance, might indeed ask for a re-enactment of basking shark hunting but that they would include in the inter titles or in the spoken text an explanation that this was a reconstructed demonstration. The factual and fictional boundaries would be made clear. However, when considering the film in terms of drama-documentary, one could argue that it is an early example of this form, which is just one of the versions of documentary which were subsequently developed. Indeed, we shall see that the film was followed by, or was contemporaneous with, other works of the documentary film movement, not all of which correspond exactly to the Man of Aran drama-documentary “model”, although each of the following examples blurs the boundaries between the factual and the non factual.

If, for example, we examine Coal Face and Night Mail 30 they both constitute cases of films that mix genuine situations and people with various forms of reconstruction of events and with material which is not exclusively factual in nature. Coal Face was made up of footage of diverse origins put together by the editor to form a coherent whole. No indication is given of where exactly the miners or workers we see really come from: a map of Britain situates the coal mines in general but gives no more specific details about which mine(s) and miners are actually involved. Nowadays, in a straightforward documentary we would expect to be told precisely which sites had been filmed and who we were being shown. In place of this we see a group of miners walking past the camera, accompanied by drum beats, to represent footsteps and a chanted list of what are evidently the various tasks fulfilled by the miners: “Banksman, Barrowman/Caster, Changer/Checkweigher [...].” The miners are shown hewing away at the rock face, the sound of the rock falling being represented by a choral glissando, then they are shown coming back up into the open air. Their deliverance from danger and darkness, their importance to the community, the joy in seeing them safe, is symbolized by the song, written by Auden, with which the women greet them:

O lurcher-loving collier, black as night,
Follow your love across the smokeless hill;
Your lamp is out, the cages all are still;
Course for her heart and do not miss,
For Sunday soon is past and, Kate, fly not so fast
For Monday comes when none may kiss:

Be marble to his soot, and to his black be white 31.

All the sound in the film is carried by Benjamin Britten’s musical score. Natural sounds are represented by musical equivalents. Thus when the coal is carried off in a horse-drawn cart even the horse’s hooves follow the musical rhythm. The end of the film shows the coal being transported by train and then being transferred onto a ship: at this point the clanking and clanging, the blowing of whistles of the musical sound effects create a form of concrete music which prove Britten to be quite in advance of his time in musical creation.

The film does not correspond to our present-day idea of a documentary. With its use of montage, both in the visual and the auditory signs, its use of the musical score as a strong structuring basis and its inclusion of lyrical song, the emphasis of the film is far more on the lyrical than on the factual. However, in spite of the fact that the factual is somewhat in the background we would not classify the film as a "drama-documentary" because, contrary to Man of Aran, it does not use a narrative thread. It is carefully constructed but the basis of its construction is music, calling on poetic association rather than on narrative. We have elsewhere called it a "filmic opera" and we continue to maintain that its affiliation is with music and poetry rather than with a fictional genre 32.

The same is true of Night Mail. The first half of the film corresponds to what is generally expected of a “straightforward” documentary, nowadays. A voice over gives information about the London to Aberdeen postal express — the length of the journey, the route, the work carried out by the postal workers within and around the train. However, the second half veers away from this now classic factual framework, as the voice over, following the rhythm of the train’s advance, recites Auden’s poem, Night Mail, written specially for the film 33. We still learn more about the route, “crossing the Border”, the climb into Scotland, “Pulling up Beattock, a steady climb”, etc.. But, mainly, the poem leads the reader into a gleeful and witty exploration of the content of the train’s load – the letters it carries. Both their nature and their content are developed:

Letters of thanks, letters from banks.
Letters of joy from girl and boy.
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or to visit relations [...] 
And gossip, gossip from all the nations,

News circumstantial, news financial [...]  
Written on paper of every hue,  
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,  
The chatty, the catty, the boring, the adoring [...]  

The poem ends by pointing out that the main, eminently noble, function of the postal express is to draw together human beings the world over by bringing news from distant parts, reassuring each individual that he/she is not forgotten:

And none will hear the postman’s knock  
Without a quickening of the heart.  
For who can bear to feel himself forgotten? 34

Once again a lyrical agenda takes precedence over a factual one. The credits and this second part of the film also benefit from an amusing and highly creative Benjamin Britten score. We are certainly not in the domain of what is now considered as a straightforward documentary. Furthermore, part of the film which we take to be authentic, is in fact a reconstruction. The end of the first half of the film shows us the postal workers inside the train, sorting the mail. The train rocks about and rattles along in a very convincing manner. However, due to the technical difficulty of filming inside a real train carriage, with the equipment of the day, the scene was not shot inside a genuine train but in a reconstructed train carriage. So, once again, although we think we are, we are not quite watching the genuine original scene, although the actors may be “native” ones. However, as with Coal Face, the absence of a narrative thread discourages one from the use of the term drama-documentary. The intention of the film is not to create a fiction. The reconstruction intends to imitate as closely as possible the genuine the postal workers still sorting the post in an authentic manner. On the other hand, the intention does seem to be to add a symbolic dimension to the film. There is more behind the train’s activity than the mere moving of correspondence from one place to another. It is music and poetry which create an effect of elation and the sensation that the delivery of the mail is a source of deep well-being for the inhabitants of Scotland. If Coal Face was a “filmic opera”, then Night Mail is an example of “filmic poetry” 35 for we would maintain that it is closer to a poetic than to a fictional genre. Therefore, that the examples of Coal Face and Night Mail, show that there are diverse ways of filming and editing authentic situations and participants, mixing them with fiction, poetry and/or music but all mixtures of the factual with non fiction do not necessarily lead to drama-documentary.

Examples of films which mix the documentary and the fictional in a way which seems to prolong Flaherty’s approach and, thus, to correspond more closely to the concept of drama-documentary, are to be found among the films made during the

34. Idem.  
35. De Cacqueray, op.cit., 234.
Second World War, either by filmmakers who began their careers with Grierson in the GPO Film Unit, or by others of diverse origins. *Fires Were Started* 36 is an interesting example. Its style of filming leads the spectator to believe it is a straightforward documentary, as we understand the genre today. We witness men and women at work, in and around a fire station, at the scene of a fire near the London docks or at the central office where the dispatching of the fire fighters to the different sites and the distribution of available water are organized. As any documentary has to be structured in some way, at first it is the convincing realism of the environment which leads us to believe in the authenticity, or purely factual nature, of the film content, over and above any idea of fictive construction. However, one or two factors do arouse our suspicions in relation to the film’s exact correspondence to reality. The arrival of a new recruit, a middle-class addition who manages to achieve a smooth integration into the predominantly working-class group, a big fire down by the docks and the death of a fireman, all on the same day, appear in the end to constitute a rather over- coincidental series of events, which point to fictional construction rather than to the filming of entirely genuine situations. For the spectator of the day, there would have been less ambiguity as he/she would have been well aware of conditions in London in 1943, at the time of the film’s release, even if the sort of bombing and damage shown correspond more to the 1940-1941 Blitz. For today’s spectators, less familiar with events in the 1940s, it is more difficult to distinguish between the genuine and the reconstructed. In fact, the fire, which could represent the use of genuine footage within a fictional framework, is the reconstruction of a factory on fire. *Fires Were Started* is very much a film based on the idea of dramatization according to a script based partially on facts: the people who participate are fire fighters but the situations they are put into have been fabricated for the occasion, in a manner similar to Flaherty’s and for a specific purpose.

Almost immediately after the outbreak of war, members of the GPO Film Unit decided to concern themselves with this subject, without having received any specific request to do so. In September 1939 they shot scenes in the streets and put together a film showing the atmosphere in London in the first days of the war, the reactions to the air raid sirens, the degree of preparation in different parts of the city, a glimpse of the evacuation of children, etc. Called *The First Days* 37, it is a mixture of genuine footage, shot by Harry Watt, Humphrey Jennings and Pat Jackson, with more fictive pieces added, such as improvised dialogue or the presence of members of the Film Unit acting various parts. The mixing makes it difficult to distinguish what is absolutely authentic and what may be idealization, particularly as regards the degree of unity one witnesses among the population. The

36. 1943, dir. Humphrey Jennings, Crown Film Unit.
37. September 1939, GPO Film Unit.
film nevertheless corresponds more to the Night Mail/Coal Face approach, since, whilst it includes genuine incidents which are mixed with fictive additions, it does not include a narrative thread, as such, and is not therefore suited to being classified as drama-documentary.

Other wartime events received different treatments. For Freedom 38, released in 1940, offers a dramatisation of the Battle of the River Plate which occurred in December 1939. The film is the result of a reconstruction and everyone, at the time of release, would have known that it was not the real battle filmed even though it used "actual people who had participated, officers from the Ajax and Exeter" and "Captain Dove, master of the Africa Shell" 39. Here, the term drama-documentary would appear to be appropriate. Similarly, Men of the Lightship 40 is a reconstruction based on genuine German attacks which took place in 1940 41, using, at the request of Alberto Cavalcanti, people who were directly involved. The result is that the dialogue has an absolutely authentic ring to it and makes the film appear more true-to-life 42. Squadron 992 43 was intended to show the necessity of barrage balloons as a means of protection, in spite of the difficulty in manning them. The film offered a reconstruction of a German raid over the Firth of Forth, in which real fishermen were used to pick up "survivors", played by students. The reconstruction was so effective that Harry Watt and his assistants were arrested while filming and their cameras were seized by the Royal Navy, on suspicion of them being German spies 44. Target for Tonight 45 was in large part filmed in studio but it simulated reality very effectively and included many genuine components, not least an authentic aircrew of six who were released to work with Watt, a genuine Wellington fuselage which was used for the shots inside the plane, some location shooting at Mildenhall airfield and the real station commander Sir Richard Peirse "giving out instructions for a maximum effort attack" 46. All these films mix fact and fiction along drama-documentary lines and, in particular, use some "genuine" participants, which places them at a distance from the principle of the historical reconstruction, which would give the role of a known public figure to an actor. Pastor Hall 47, on the other hand, uses a slightly different approach. This film was based on a play

38. 1940, dir. Maurice Elvey. Script: Leslie Arliss and Miles Maleson.
40. 1940, GPO Film Unit, dir. David MacDonald. Editor: Stewart McAllister.
41. German attacks on the Trinity House relief vessel, Reculver, and on the East Dudgeon lightship.
42. Couttass C., op.cit., 30.
43. 1940, dir. Harry Watt. Music: Walter Leigh, killed after this in Libya.
44. Couttass C., op.cit., 29.
45. 1941, dir. and script Harry Watt, Crown Film Unit.
46. Couttass C., op.cit., 57.
which was itself inspired by the example of Protestant Pastor Martin Niemöller in Germany. Niemöller, who opposed the Nazi regime, was arrested and sent first to Sachsenhausen concentration camp and then to Dachau. Thus, it is based on genuine events but does not use any of the actual participants in the genuine events which took place. It is more of a historical narrative but its filmic style equates it with drama-documentary.

*In Which We Serve* is an interesting case. It is rather the reverse of *Fires Were Started*, since it presents itself, in stylistic terms, as a straightforward feature film, particularly to a spectator nowadays. It does, indeed, have much of the feature film about it, but it is also, in fact, based on the genuine experience of Lord Louis Mountbatten and his crew, who had the ship they were serving on, the *Kelly*, sunk under them. Mountbatten helped Noël Coward with the script whilst the latter played the Mountbatten character, Kinross, in the film. Some of the incidents shown on the fictive *Torrin* occurred on the real *Kelly*: the desertion of the young deckhand from his post on the *Torrin* is similar to that of a stoker on the *Kelly*, when a mine exploded near the ship’s stern. Mountbatten’s speech to his crew is reproduced almost word for word at the close of the film. After the sinking of the *Torrin* the men are shown gathered together on the quay so that Commander Kinross can bid them farewell, admitting he has “run out of jokes” with which to pepper his farewell. These were Mountbatten’s actual words when, having lost 130 men, he made a final address to the survivors of the crew.

The interesting point about the film is that it uses genuine incidents but does not connect them directly to the people on whom the characters are in fact based. This is a good illustration of one of the distinctions between a drama-documentary and an historical narrative film. According to the remarks made earlier, the historical narrative film would include Mountbatten, as a character, under this name, would also keep the name of the ship and probably most of the genuine events. Changing the names and some of the events concerning the original ship creates a displacement from documentary and from “history” towards fiction yet, as many people at the time knew of the story of the *Kelly*, the fiction would have been somewhat transparent and would also have retained a certain documentary aspect.

We remarked earlier that an essential component of the drama-documentary is not the presence of elements which are not related to the factual, but the existence of a narrative thread. A further essential characteristic, in these early drama-documentaries, seems to us to lie in the status of the characters. Feature films offer the spectator a larger-than-life mirror image, a more perfect, stronger version of himself with which he can identify and thereby imagine himself as an ephemeral “Superman”. Drama-documentary, on the contrary seems to call upon characters

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who could more nearly be any one of us; they seem to correspond more to the "Everyman". Thus we saw that the man of Aran could be any one of the men of Aran: one stands for all and, in a way, all the members of that particular group stand, themselves, for a slice of mankind. Thus the Commander in *In Which We Serve* does not correspond to the individual Mountbatten but could be any Commander.

It is perhaps for this reason that the drama-documentary form was so often used in the war films we have referred to 49. This form may have corresponded peculiarly well to the variety of functions the films seem to have been called upon to serve. Indeed, as their subject matter often shows, they were useful as a means to try and instil socially useful behaviour among citizens: they often include reminders of what to do and not do, in order to help in the war effort. They generally, in some way or another, offer encouragement: the characters provide examples of solidarity and effective organisation, showing thus that the war can be won in spite of the suffering it implies. By including genuine situations and events, the films do not deny the suffering and this was perhaps part of their attraction: the public recognized itself, saw that its suffering was acknowledged by the filmmaker and beyond him by society as a whole. Anchoring films in events the public were aware of may have created the impression that the films were not attempting to bluff in relation to the war. Faced, on land, with death from indiscriminate bombing, or, at sea, with death due to invisible mines and torpedoes, the larger-than-life hero had perhaps lost some of his potential credibility but most people recognized that they often owed their lives to discreet acts of genuine heroism. The characters of the drama-documentary could embody these figures; they were believable and acceptable.

The early films we discussed (*Man of Aran, Coal Face, Night Mail*), although differing in their relationship to narrative, shared two other characteristics. The first was the attention the filmmakers paid to the exploration of lesser known sectors of the population, be it the fishing community of the Aran Islands, the miners or the ordinary postal workers. The second was their concern for the aesthetic and purely cinematographic quality of their films. Their mentors were the early Russian filmmakers, as can be seen through their use of montage, both visual and auditory. In stylistic terms, a film such as *Fires Were Started* continues, cinematographically, to refer to the montage approach, although others became more involved in action, rather than in paying close attention to camera angles, scales or effects of editing.

However, most of the films, as we have seen above, continued to show ordinary citizens convincingly: they were the result of “know-how” British filmmakers developed early on and which still serves them in good stead in filmmaking today.

American theorists see docudrama as emerging, in the 1970s, from a dearth of Hollywood films suitable for television programming. As regards the history of cinema and filmmaking in the United Kingdom, it would seem that the roots of drama-documentary can be traced further back than that. In this early period, from the 1930s to the mid 1940s, drama-documentary was a form of cinema rooted in the filmmakers’ concern with fellow citizens or human beings, in a commitment to recording and encouraging the survival of ways of life judged as worthwhile, be it the proudly independent, struggling Aran islanders or the beleaguered British at war. According to the American theorists the docudrama was developed because, presenting events with which the spectators were familiar, it had the economic advantage of being “pre-sold”. This relationship with the familiarity of the event would certainly correspond to the British Second World War films. However, it does not fit with the subjects of Flaherty’s films, neither does it fit with the coal miners of Coal Face or even with the postal workers. In these cases it was more the presentation of something with which the audiences were not familiar which created the attraction. The basis of the drama-documentary seems more to be, on the filmmakers’ part, a combination of social concern and an interest in aesthetics. This leads us to suggest that the early drama-documentaries constitute a form of film art with a social conscience.

In the years immediately following the war this approach seemed to go somewhat to ground. The documentary as such lost popularity and the drama-documentary form along with it. The public became keener on straightforward comedy, horror or melodrama. However, it appears that past experience is never long forgotten for the earlier concern with the less glamorous sectors of the population and the interest in documentary made a reappearance, from the 1950s onwards, thanks to filmmakers such as Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz and their “Free Cinema” programmes at the National Film Theatre. The threads of social realism, drama and documentary were, at least for a time, woven together differently, as the content of social realist feature films like The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner 50 did not claim to be other than similar to real life, whilst it was television which was to develop new horizons. However, cinema, as opposed to television, has still continued to provide examples of what we would term drama-documentary, as opposed to historical narrative. Sunday, Bloody Sunday 51 would be an example: the classification, in our opinion, depends ultimately on the nature of the cinematographic style but still also, in part, on the

50. 1962, dir. Tony Richardson.
concern for the rather ordinary citizen, the crowd, the general member of the public, even if, in this case, the situation is particularly dramatic.

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FROM WE ARE THE LAMBETH BOYS TO
THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER

New portrayals of working class Britain on the big screen?

Susannah O’CARROLL*

The academic and critical debate as to the real or imaginary links between the British documentary movement of the interwar and war years and that of the Free Cinema movement in the late 1950s has already been richly documented. This article will therefore consider this problem of continuity or legacy only briefly, before turning to the germane question of the transition or transmission between the Free Cinema movement and the “social realist” films of the early 1960s. This question will be addressed through a comparison between We Are the Lambeth Boys (1958) and The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962). Our aim is to show that while the obvious common point between the work of John Grierson, Humphrey Jennings and that of the new generation of Free Cinema directors such as Karel Reisz, Lindsay Anderson and Tony Richardson is the representation of working class people (both in situations of work and leisure) the question of the nature of the social comment conveyed by these various directors is more problematic.

If Italian neo-realism can be said to have changed aesthetic and narrative standards in cinema in the immediate post-war period, the (arguably) British equivalent to this cinematic ‘revolution’ came with the Free Cinema movement, and the critical and artistic manifesto Stand Up! Stand Up! published in 1956 in Sequence magazine. The manifesto called for cinema which would reflect “the importance of the people and the significance of the everyday” 2, with the emphasis

* Doctor in English Studies, Grenoble, France.

1. For a French language overview of this debate see Tony Aldgate, “Grierson et après : documentaire, cinéma, télévision”, in Roger Odin, L’Age d’or du documentaire, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1998, 9-36. The work of Raymond Durgnat is representative of an evolutionary point of view, for example, A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence, London, Faber and Faber, 1970, 126-127, while that of John Hill typically puts forward the thesis that the Free Cinema movement was far more representative of social concerns stemming directly from the specific social and political context of the 1950s, see Hill John, Sex, Class and Realism. British Cinema 1936-1963, London, British Film Institute, 1986, 128-133.

2. This quote is taken from the notes to the selection of Free Cinema shorts distributed by the British Film Institute.

Cahiers de la MRSIH, n° spécial, juin 2007, p. 31-48
on the sense of community and a ‘poetic’ vision of the working and social lives of the British working class.

This self-proclaimed movement was in fact based around several series of short films programmed at the National Film Theatre in London. The first of these events was the projection of three shorts, proposed by Karel Reisz in February 1956 and featuring Lindsay Anderson’s *O Dreamland* about a funfair in Margate (11mm), Tony Richardson’s *Momma Don’t Allow* about Teddy Boys in a London jazz club (22mm) and Lorenza Mazzetti’s *Together* about deaf East End dockers (52mm). Subsequent contributors to the Free Cinema screenings included François Truffaut with *Les Mistons* (1957, 26mm), Claude Chabrol with *Le Beau Serge* (1959, 97mm) and Roman Polanski with *Two Men with a Wardrobe* (1957, 15mm). There were six such sessions in total, number three was entitled *Look at Britain*, number four *Polish Voices*, number five *French Renewal* and number six, *The Last Free Cinema*, a programme which included Karel Reisz’s *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959, 52m) which will be considered in some detail later in this article. The directors behind Free Cinema were about to make their first feature films within the British film industry, films such as *This Sporting Life* (Anderson, 1963), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Richardson, 1962) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), where the poetic vision of working class life was replaced by a far more acerbic social commentary.

It is clear that the Free Cinema Manifesto *Stand Up! Stand Up!* marked a turning point in the artistic philosophy of certain directors (and sometimes critics) such as Karel Reisz, Lindsay Anderson and Tony Richardson, the self-proclaimed champions of poetic realism in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In his writings of this period Anderson called for a more “socially conscious and responsible British cinema” coupled with the kind of personal, quirky vision which was a marked feature in the diversity of the Free Cinema short films. The actual application of these principles in the work of some of these directors will be examined shortly, but it is interesting first to consider what these directors felt they were reacting against, other than, that is, the kind of stuffy star-led, class-ridden films which had often characterised British studio productions before the Second World War. Indeed the need to boost morale and reflect the wartime experiences of much of the British population led to an increased diversity in social representations during this period.

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British wartime cinema brought ordinary British life to the screen in a sharp break with the upper middle-class ethos and world of South Kensington and the country house retreat that had dominated in the 1930s.  

This visibility of all social classes directly involved in the war effort, at home and abroad, was a marked feature of Noel Coward’s *In Which We Serve* (1942). However the strict codes which ruled the interaction between social classes in British life at this time, also a distinctive feature of life in the armed forces with the interactions between different ranks, went unquestioned and the representation of social cohesion in the face of a common enemy was the clear aim of wartime films. The ‘positive’ propaganda message which was relayed to the British viewing public through *In Which We Serve* was that by respecting and relying on these distinctions Britain at war could also be “a happy ship and an efficient ship”. These films were visibly designed to show British men and women at their best, embodying “British qualities of endurance, stoicism and self-sacrifice in the face of war and other difficulties”.  

The other significant feature of the cinema of the 1940s was that it is from this point on that the frontiers between fiction and documentary became increasingly blurred in so far as the frontiers could ever be said to have been clearly definable:  

Many [...] fictional films incorporated documentary techniques while actual documentaries such as Harry Watt’s *Target For Tonight* (1941) and *Fires Were Started* (1943) introduced dramatic strategies into factual films. Critics identified this amalgamation of what had previously been distinct modes of film-making as one of the key elements of the ‘quality’ film on which the new reputation of British cinema was based.  

The problem of how to label these new ‘hybrid’ films was to remain and spread to television in which the so-called ‘docudramas’ of the *Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today* series for the BBC took over from the ‘filmed theatre’ style of the *Armchair Theatre* which had previously broken audience records for ITV. Ken Loach’s docudramas — *Up the Junction* (1965), *In Two Minds* (1965), *Cathy Come Home* (1966) — are but a few examples of how the television writer had to develop their skills to produce these hybrid texts.  

6. In the words of the Captain addressing his crew in *In Which We Serve*.  
8. Idem.  
9. *The Wednesday Play* series lasted from 1965 to 1969 and was then replaced by *Play for Today* by the BBC. In his introduction to Bignell, Lacey and Macmurrough-Kavanagh, *British Television Drama. Past, Present and Future*. London, Palgrave, 2000, Tony Garnett, Ken Loach’s producer during this ‘mythical’ period of television drama, temporises the myth in the following terms “[...] Much of the drama produced in venerated strands such as *Armchair Theatre*, *The Wednesday Play* or *Play for Today* would strike contemporary viewers as, at best crude, and at worst, embarrassing. In short, for every *Cathy Come Home* there were a dozen profoundly forgettable plays”.  
10. This successful series ran on ITV from the mid to late 1950s; its creator Sydney Newman was then poached by the BBC to set up *The Wednesday Play* in 1964.
Home (1966), The Big Flame (1969) and The Rank and File (1971) — and The War Game (1965) by Peter Watkins drew on well documented research but more problematically relied on a mix of more traditional fictional narrative with documentary tropes such as the authoritative voice-over and location filming to establish both authenticity and place, along with pseudo-documentary elements such as the intervention of phony journalists and ‘experts’. This hybrid form aimed to challenge the notion of a clear separation between established critical categories by combining the traditional ‘authority’ of documentary within a more ‘subjective’ fictional narrative. This new and multiple form of televised drama echoed the innovations of the “social realist” feature films of the early 1960s which could be said to combine the desire to represent the British working class at work and at leisure with a more critical judgment of the social status quo than had been demonstrated in the earlier ‘golden age’ of British documentary in the 1930s and 1940s or indeed during the Free Cinema movement in the 1950s.

John Grierson: the father of British documentary?

It would seem to be chronologically opportune to see Free Cinema as the direct descendant of the British documentary movement of the 1930s, owing to both its collective nature and its interest in representations of working people. However the Free Cinema directors, who in fact owed much to this earlier social-antropological approach, rejected the filiation claiming that theirs was a new vision of filmmaking, with a “new set of social and political objectives” 11. This initial position was itself largely a reaction to the theories of the great documentary filmmaker John Grierson and the utilitarian approach to cinema and documentary which he advocated from the 1930s onwards, with the emphasis on social persuasion and a belief in the promotion of ‘social stability’ through collectively made documentaries. Grierson’s overriding vision was that film, or more precisely documentary, could provide a valuable means of communication between the State and the People (the public), and thus play a crucial role in informing, and in forming opinion 12.

His short film Drifters, noted for its ambition and use of naturalistic images and innovations in editing, was shown before Battleship Potemkine, as a double bill, in 1929 to critical acclaim. It was this film which largely set aesthetic standards, or at the very least became the reference for British documentaries from this period.

onwards. He then led the *Empire Marketing Board-Film Unit* (EMB-FU), which became the *General Post Office-Film Unit* (GPO-FU) in 1933. Grierson was consistently anti-studio, anti-star system and considered himself to be a director, documentary filmmaker and journalist, writing numerous articles explaining his approach and that of his collaborators at the GPO, notably Humphrey Jennings and Alberto Cavalcanti. *Drifters* (1929) is considered by film historians to have given a face, for the first time in the short history of cinema, to the homeless, while another GPO documentary *Housing Problems* (1936) directed by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton on the subject of slum housing gave them a voice. More precisely, for the first time, one of the most socially and politically sensitive issues of the inter-war period was dealt with by interviewing the people most concerned, that is the slum dwellers themselves, thanks to the new technical possibilities of synchronized sound recording. Thirty years later Ken Loach was to integrate this approach within the fictional framework of Jeremy Sandford's script for *Cathy Come Home*  

The GPO-produced *Night Mail* (1936) was a *pro domo* propaganda or promotion film in an altogether different vein combining poetry, music and image in a modernist celebration of the technology put to work to operate the vast British postal network. An eloquent eulogy of modern technical possibilities, of an administration’s efficiency in the service of the people, of workers toiling for the common good, *Night Mail* also offers the allegory of the postal network as the fabric of social links within the nation, a symbol and a material proof of the benevolence of the State working as an instrument of national solidarity. While it is better known for its formal innovations, notably its attempts to integrate several artistic forms and modes of expression, *Night Mail* is above all a great modernist and modern propaganda film. One of the most significant sequences in the film shows the postal train *Seaford Highlander* travelling on the West Coast line, in a succession of striking and powerful images riding on music by Benjamin Britten, as W.H. Auden recites his famous poem *Night Mail*, written for the film, an ode to the glory of the postal service:

*Night Mail*

This is the Night Mail crossing the border,  
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,  
Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,  
The shop at the corner, the girl next door  
[...]  

Without having the grandeur, some might say the pretensions, of films like *Night Mail*, the rest of the work of John Grierson and his collaborators can be likened to

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13. *Housing Problems* is now available on the British Film Institute DVD and VHS release of *Cathy Come Home* in their *Archive Television series* (2003). *The War Game* by Peter Watkins is another recent release in the same series (2005).
that of artistic propaganda, in that it represents a endeavour to concretely support the interests of the State as unifying force within society and, somehow, above society itself. Aitken (1997) confirms this interpretation in the following terms:

Grierson was strongly influenced by forms of neo-Hegelian philosophy which placed considerable importance on the value of the State and the corporate institutions. He believed that the institutions of the State possessed intrinsic merit because they were the culmination of long-drawn-out historical attempts to achieve social integration and harmony. This led him to the view that the proper function of documentary film was to promote an understanding of social and cultural interconnection within the nation.  

Grierson, furthermore, argued for ‘good’ propaganda, which promoted social integration, while castigating ‘bad’ propaganda, which promoted social division and conflict. He believed that it was the duty of documentary filmmakers to represent the working class directly on the screen, as in Drifters, but at the same time he tended towards an idealization in these representations. It was this approach which characterized his work and that of Humphrey Jennings, who favoured a more sensitive and poetical approach in films such as Fires Were Started, The Silent Village (1944) and A Diary for Timothy (1946), amongst others.

These few brief remarks give an indication of several fundamental problems in identifying the work of Grierson as the natural and direct forerunner of the far more political docudrama aesthetic of the 1960s. Indeed, the critical point of view, demonstrated for example by the early politically aware work of Ken Loach (among others), clearly aimed at promoting social and political change, the very antithesis of Grierson’s aims. As for the brief Free Cinema movement, it is difficult to characterise its different (one could even say disparate) elements in any meaningful way.

New realism or new opportunism? British working life on the big screen

The cinematic strand of the 1960s’ “new realism”, itself a movement often associated with the writers of the literary group referred to as the “angry young men” (such as Alan Sillitoe, John Osborne and Shelagh Delaney) 15, also fed on some

15. In his biographical dictionary of film David Thompson is more than sceptical about both the artistic and social merits of both Free Cinema and “social realist” films of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Writing about Tony Richardson, director of Momma Don’t Allow for the Free cinema movement in 1956 and what is often considered to be the first film of the “social realist” movement with Look Back in Anger in 1959, Thompson calls him “a wretched film director [...] The films are all object [...] As far as Osborne, Delaney and Sillitoe were concerned, Richardson tacked a literal-minded realism onto their rhetoric”,
elements of the Griersonian documentaries of the 1930s, among other influences. This legacy may appear particularly evident in the portraying of working class life, including difficult living conditions, leisure activities and working class youth, in the films of the so-called “new realists”, yet a striking difference is that the attitude of these film-makers also included a measure of social critique, in an attempt to distance themselves from their middle-class origins. Aesthetically, these directors innovated by fully exploiting the relatively new technical possibilities of lightweight 16mm cameras and direct sound recording. The typical trajectory from cinema critic, to director of short films and then ultimately to directing feature films, while all the while working on more or less experimental theatre productions, followed by the directors associated with the Cahiers du cinéma and the nouvelle vague in France was also characteristic of the careers of Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson in the early 1960s. These directors were to direct such films as This Sporting Life (Anderson, 1963), The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (Richardson, 1962) and Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Reisz, 1960), films which were met with critical acclaim and immediately heralded as ground-breaking, notably for their treatment of previously taboo subjects, on-location rather than studio-based filming and the choice of a different kind of working-class actor.

But where does this leave the self-proclaimed ‘revolution’ of the Free Cinema movement, whose aim was “to produce films outside of the industry” while admitting that these short films had been made “with the help of the industry”, notably through sponsorship from the Ford Motor Company and funding from the British Film Institute’s Experimental Film Fund? To what extent, if at all, can this short-lived movement represent a ‘revolution’, in the sense of a fundamental change, as was proclaimed by its principal directors? Was this simply youthful bravado, clever self-marketing, or did it express a genuine wish to challenge the social order as it had been generally represented on celluloid?

At the time of the programming of these short films at the National Film Theatre, the intended difference, this alleged break with the past, was proclaimed in the Free Cinema programmes. The British Film Institute later reproduced the same declaration of intent in the literature which accompanied the release of four Free Cinema shorts:

Free Cinema can be seen as part and parcel of a growth of interest in working class life and, as one of its programmatic statements put it, as an attack on ‘a British cinema still obstinately class bound; still rejecting the stimulus of contemporary life, as well as the responsibility to criticise; still reflecting a metropolitan, Southern English

Thompson David, A Biographical Dictionary of Film, London, André Deutsch, 1995, 632-633. On the other hand, in Sex, Class and Realism, John Hill qualifies the angry young men ‘movement’ in the following terms “[...] a contrivance it may have been but one with a particularly potent cultural resonance” (Hill, 1986, 21).
culture which excludes the rich diversity of tradition and personality which is the whole of Britain.\textsuperscript{16}

Lindsay Anderson, however, was to give a rather more pragmatic — some might say cynical — take on the Free Cinema movement in Cineaste magazine in answer to the question: \textit{What was the British Free Cinema movement about?}

The British “Free Cinema” movement was a purely empirical phenomenon. That is to say, there were three or four of us — Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson, an Italian girl, Lorenza Mazzetti, and myself — who were working on very modest projects in 1956, and we thought how on earth are we going to show these projects? I'd made a little film called \textit{O Dreamland}, which was three or four years old, which naturally nobody had ever seen. It was a ten minute picture on 16mm, and what were you going to do with that? So we thought that the only way to do this was to put the films together, make a programme, and call it “Free Cinema”. We'll write a manifesto, and then all these idiotic journalists, who would never be bothered to come and see the films separately, will come and write about them. And it worked\textsuperscript{17}.

But what was Free Cinema? Firstly, in common with other European cinematic evolutions, Free Cinema was possible at this time due to certain technical developments, such as the invention of a lighter hand-held 16mm camera capable of recording synchronized sound and thus allowing on-location filming. It was possible to film a multitude of situations and locations in a way which would have previously presented real technical difficulties, for example Covent Garden fruit and flower market in Lindsay Anderson’s \textit{Every Day Except Christmas} (1957). The directly recorded sound is far from being of excellent quality, a technical constraint which was turned to advantage with the poetic use of a mixture of direct sound and unsynchronised recording overlaid with images. Sequences play with this mixture and include jazz music and voice-over, sometimes directly commenting on the images, sometimes putting them into context or contradicting them, therefore enabling Anderson to create a very particular atmosphere. This lyricism, one could even say idealisation, of the lives of the Covent Garden workers has little to do with a critical rethinking of the possibilities of cinema, as was suggested at the time.

Secondly, the directors mentioned above were themselves instrumental in presenting their films as a rupture with the past, both in technical and narrative terms, rather than as a continuation or re-working of previous themes and approaches. This idea of rupture is common to all of the new waves in cinema which were said to be sweeping Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, but for many this rejection of the previous generation’s work and championing of Renoir or American Film Noir was little more than journalistic posturing, and most were quick to return to making the scorned “cinéma de papa”.

\textsuperscript{16} Comments included in the 1994 release of a Free Cinema compilation by the British Film Institute.
\textsuperscript{17} Cineaste magazine, Vol. XII, N° 4, 1983, 37.
The third, and perhaps the most characteristic of these films was the large place and status given to the working class in the work of the Free Cinema directors. This self-proclaimed difference was little more than opportunism, as was noted by one critic after the first Free Cinema screening:

Anderson’s vehement ambivalence towards the common people and Reisz’s cool calculated tact dampen one’s enthusiasm a little. We’re too obviously in the presence of outsiders to the society they claim to be revealing to us 18.

The Free Cinema films were themselves varied in character and aesthetic inspiration; for example the consciously poetic quality of *Every Day Except Christmas* has little in common with the almost anthropological documentary approach taken by Karel Reisz in *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959). Both however treated the working lives and pastimes of the working class, themes which were not yet visible in mainstream cinema but which had been a feature of the documentaries of the 1930s and also visible in the documentaries of Humphrey Jennings such as *Fires Were Started* and *A Diary for Timothy*. However, this portrayal is anything but revolutionary and the voice-over commentary often resembles little more than a series of patronizing platitudes. For example, in *We Are the Lambeth Boys* about Alford House Youth Club in Kennington (Lambeth) a series of shots of the younger members of the club at their work-place performing mindless menial tasks such as repeatedly and endlessly filling meat pies in a factory, is accompanied with the following commentary:

Work is something that has to be done, by everyone, and it’s good to have it.
Just the same, the day doesn’t go by any too fast...

Similarly, in one of the debates filmed in the club’s library, where some of the members are shown to be in heated debate about the death penalty, the sound cut to the narrator’s voice-over commentary again temporises and qualifies the opinions which have been expressed by the youths:

When a good subject like murder comes up everybody pitches in.
The words pour out wild, and they’re felt.
You think what you feel and you say what you feel. But when the feelings get angry or confused, it’s not surprising that the words come out ugly.
It’s good to have strong feelings, but for living in the world a bit of knowledge is needed too, and a bit of curiosity to look further than the headlines of the morning paper.
Who’s helping Bobby to find that, and Beryl, and Percy and all the others?
Not that they’re worried.
They’re good at making the most of every day, and just talking about things like this is a beginning.
And it’s good for a giggle.

The question is asked directly: who indeed is helping these youths to have informed opinions about society? No sooner the question asked, however, a lighter, more jocular tone is reintroduced, as if to deny the potential gravity of the moment.

When comparing the work of Free Cinema directors with the feature films they made in the 1960s (through a comparison of *We Are the Lambeth Boys* and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*) one of the most striking differences is that the tone and point of view in the latter is visibly and consciously questioning of British class constraints and the role of social institutions in perpetuating these constraints. Undeniably, films such as *Look Back in Anger* (Richardson, 1959), *Room at the Top* (Clayton, 1959), *A Taste of Honey* (Richardson, 1961), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Richardson, 1962) and *This Sporting Life* (Anderson, 1966), taken together, demonstrated a preoccupation with the lives and problems of a certain segment of society at that time. These films dealt with themes which had so far been largely absent from the big screen in Great Britain, such as extra-marital sex, women’s sexuality, homosexuality and a certain form of social and institutional contestation.

This short period in British cinema is often referred to as a period of “social realism” or even “northern realism”, due to the advent of films made mainly, and for the first time in the ‘griny North’. As with Italian neo-realism, this period was brief, lasting no longer than five years, and its best known directors went on to other projects and styles, sometimes abroad. The rest of this article will briefly consider an example of social criticism and class analysis in one of the films of this period which has best stood the test of time, that is to say *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. This film provides a rich example of many of the themes and experimentations which were common in British cinema at this time, even giving a satirical nod to the glamorous ‘swinging London’ films which were another part of the exploitation of the new ‘youth culture’ on the big screen.

**British “social realist” cinema in the 1960s**

*Ce qui compte dans une révolution cinématographique, c’est autant le talent que le moment. C’est ainsi que le cinéma britannique a radicalement changé dans les années soixante.*

When looking back on the films of the 1960s which caused outrage and shock when they were first screened, such as *A Taste of Honey* or even *A Hard Day’s Night* (Richard Lester, 1964), it is clear that neither new talents or faces, nor a simple change in style can fully explain the evolution which took place on both the

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big and small screen in the 1960s. The importance of the social, artistic and institutional changes which took place in the British cinema and television industry during this period has been noted by many recent commentators, many of whom have also emphasised the importance of the films of this period as a new means of expressing different degrees of social contestation. However, it is also interesting to note that while these films were often seen as flaunting the rebelliousness of the much talked about ‘new’ youth culture, the ‘rowdy generation’ referred to in We Are the Lambeth Boys, many were in essence outwardly rebellious without ever being intrinsically radical, either in outlook or message. The so-called ‘swinging London’ films of the 1960s such as Darling (John Schlesinger, 1965) and A Hard Day’s Night typify this attitude of shocking without questioning.

The last film to be considered here, The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, is interesting in that it not only bridges the gap between Free Cinema and the new realism films of the 1960s, but also demonstrates an evolution in the point of view of Lindsay Anderson, signalled by the radicalism of this film’s class-based, albeit rather confused, political analysis.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner is the story of Colin Smith, starting from the moment he enters a Borstal, handcuffed in a van – with the hymn to England’s glory, Jerusalem, as the only commentary – to his refusal to sprint to the finish for the much-prized long-distance challenge cup with Mill Hill Public School. This linear framework is interspersed with fades to flashbacks, either triggered by encounters with the Borstal’s figures of authority or during his long cross-country training runs. During these flash-backs, Colin reviews scenes leading up to his incarceration: his home life, relationship with his parents, the death of his father and the latter’s contempt for his employers, the robbery of the bakery for which he was sent down, and, most of all his relationship with Audrey, with whom he has two somewhat self-conscious analytical and political discussions, the scripts of which are reproduced in full here (a/ and b/).

a/ The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, the trip to Skegness

Audrey: What did your old man do before he died?
Colin: He was a labourer.
Sweated his guts out for £9 a week.
He’d never had it so good.
Audrey: It’s about the same for everybody.
Colin: There’s always rows in our house though and mostly about money.
Mam and Dad fought like cat and dog.
Dad threatened to bash Mam’s face in because she was doing it with other blokes.

22. A homage to this scene is evident in the opening sequence of Alan Clark’s Scum (1980).
Mam cursing Dad for not bringing enough money into the house.
That's how most people live.
I'm beginning to see that it should be altered.
Go on try and catch me...

b/ The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, outside a chip shop in Nottingham

Andrej: Why don't you get a job Col?
Colin: What's it got to do with you? [Colin leaves the shop]
Andrej: Oh Col! [joining him outside in front of the lit window of a furniture shop]
Colin: Maybe I will get a job.
It's not that I don't like work.
I just don't like the idea of slaving me guts out so the bosses can get all the profits.
Seems all wrong to me.
My old man used to say that the workers should get the profits.
Andrej: I know. That's what I think.
I bet that's what it'll be like in the future.
Colin: It will if I've got anything to do with it.
Thing is, I don't know where to start, though.
Andrej: What do you want to do Col?
Colin: I don't know really.
Live, I suppose.
See what happens.
Andrej: Stay out with me tonight, Col.

These two dialogues, shown in flash-back, which took place prior to the robbery which led to him being sent to Borstal, reveal Colin's somewhat confused but growing questioning of the constraints of the British class system. This rather confused questioning only serves to make the changing room scene (c/ below) where Public School and Borstal boys mingle on the day of the all important race meeting all the more absurd and effective. It also gives more sense to Colin's decision to refuse to win the race.

Some of the features of We Are the Lambeth Boys are present in The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, in particular in the montage sequences where the training runs fade to sequences showing Colin's home and social life, as well as the theft in the bakery with led to him being sent to Borstal. In both films youths are seen in cafés, messing around at the chip shop, dancing to jazz music, dating, however, in The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, the young people are also shown to go further than just flirting and their girlfriends are also shown to be happy to benefit from stolen money. The morally ambiguous tone of a film like Ken Loach's Poor Cow (1967), is far more reminiscent of The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner than the rather straight-laced We Are the Lambeth Boys which only just admits to the members of the youth club having stolen cigarettes.

The rather heavy-handed positive approach to youth culture of We Are the Lambeth Boys is evident in the footage showing the youths at their workplace, debating serious subjects at the youth club, dancing, drawing and playing sports, notably the boys playing cricket while the girls are busy sewing and gossiping. This
is a clear attempt to dispel the growing fears at this time about the dangers of a new ‘youth culture’. The implicit social criticism in *We Are the Lambeth Boys* is reserved for the sequence of the cricket match between a private school and the Lambeth youth club. The comparison between this cricket match in *We Are the Lambeth Boys* and the cross-country challenge race between a Public School and the boys from the Borstal is particularly remarkable.

The sequence showing the away cricket match between Alford House boys and Mill Hill Public School starts with the truck ride to Mill Hill in a leafy suburb of London. The 1st eleven match is played in white flannels in front of the pavilion while the 2nd eleven match takes place in the dark suits of everyday for the Alford House boys, at the back. The most striking moment in this sequence takes place after the match when some of the Alford House boys take advantage of Mill Hill’s outdoor pool, others are shown uneasily sitting together, smoking, their brilliantined hair, dark suits and thin ties marking them out as working class boys while the Mill Hill boys, who are standing in the background chatting easily to their teachers, have their cream cricket sweaters knotted casually around their necks. The comparative social uneasiness of the Alford House boys is captured, as they look directly to camera, with a stare that says more than a thousand words. The end of this sequence shows the boys returning home, firstly shouting rowdily through the posh West End of London:

**Commentary:** That’s how it always goes on a Saturday night when the club gets away from home.

When the boys pass through the West End, the West End remembers for a while that they have passed through. And that’s how the boys want it.

[Singing *We Are the Lambeth Boys...jazz music slows to a melancholy tempo*.]

On the other side of the river people know the boys and the boys know them.

Back in these familiar streets there is no need to shout so loud anymore.

There is not so much to shout about.

The change in pace and atmosphere is clear once the boys have crossed the River Thames in front of Big Ben from the affluent West End to the poorer East End. The van passes in front of new blocks of flats and rows of identical streets marked with the unmistakable signs of poverty: boarded up houses, rubbish on the streets, broken pavement, dirty children playing. Suddenly the boys seem subdued, no longer shouting and singing, as if fully realizing that they are back in their rightful place and are measuring the real distance which separates the two sides of the river.

The implicit criticism of social philanthropy on the one hand and social divisions on the other is even more explicit in the long-distance cross-country challenge cup sequence in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*.

c/ The changing rooms before the race

**Borstal Teacher:** Now listen here you lot, you’d better not let me down today.

I don’t want any bloody messing about.
Public School Teacher: Oh, hello.
Borstal Teacher: How do you do?
Public School Teacher: Pleased to meet you.
Borstal Teacher: My name is Mr. Craig.
Public School Teacher: Mr. Smith.
Borstal Teacher: Your boys take the pegs this side.
Public School Teacher: Right, thank you.
This way fellows.
Public School Boys: [entering the changing rooms] Hello fellows nice to meet you,
Hello, Hi, Hello, Hello fellows, How do you do? Hello.
Public School boy: What's this joint like?
Borstal Boy: Bloody awful!
Public School boy: It can't be any worse than ours!
Borstal boy: Do you wanna bet?
Borstal boy: How about your nosh?
Public School boy: Pardon?
Borstal boy: Food, Grub.
Public School boy: Oh, pretty dreary.
Borstal boy: [affecting posh accent] Oh, we do have a lot in common, don't we?
Public School boy: Yes, perhaps we should get together and join forces.
Borstal boy: Yeh! That's an idea, a bit of a revolution, eh? [cheers from the Borstal boys]
Borstal boy: Join Castro, have a go!
Public School boy: That's an idea [laughing]
Borstal boy: Eh, you haven't got a burn, have you?
Public School boy: A burn?
Borstal boy: A smoke.
Public School boy: No, sorry. We're not allowed to smoke.
Borstal boy: What happens if you get caught?
Public School boy: We get beaten on the backside.
Borstal boy: You pay to go to this school?
Public School boy: Our parents do.
Borstal boy: Stone me!
Public School boy: Are the staff here tough?
Borstal boy: The screws? Well they think they are but we can handle them.
Borstal boy: Yeh. We've got the skids under'em.
Public School boy: Who's the opposition here today?
Borstal boy: Over there.
Public School boy: [moves over to shake hands with Colin] Good luck then.
Colin: Good luck to you too.
Borstal boy: You're going to need it mate. You haven't got a chance.
Teacher: Come along lads here we go.
Borstal boy: After you.
Public School boy: No, after you.
Colin: Okay, come on.
Borstal boy: Sure you don't want to lock your gear up before you go fellows?

This scene is all the more striking due to the confined changing room setting which accentuates the obvious and exaggerated physical difference between the two
sets of boys, one full of blond good looks and physical assurance, the other dark haired and street-wise. The periodic incomprehension of the Public School boys and the sarcasm and parodying of upper-class accents from the Borstal boys only serves to exaggerate this sense of otherness. Colin takes no part in this verbal game but his hesitation before shaking his opponent's hand is eloquent.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner plays with many of the conventions of realism and documentary by inserting accelerated images and exaggerating the already familiar background of kitchen-sink drama: infidelity, domestic disputes, unemployment, straitened circumstances etc.. The bright lights, slick promises and jazzy music of the new commercial television station, ITV, are also featured in the shopping sequence which follows Colin's father's death and the payment of the £500 insurance money by his former employers. The explicit, if confused, political opinions given by Colin and Audrey are more symptomatic of Colin's identification with and admiration for the militancy of his dead father, and disgust with his philandering, spendthrift mother, than any real conscious reflection on his part. Just as the reasons behind his refusal to cross the race's finishing line are shown, by means of a montage of images, to be multiple and confused.

Conclusions

This article set out to briefly assess the importance of the Free Cinema movement and the evolution in terms of social critique from this movement to that of the "social realist" films of the early 1960s. The historical reference to the ideology and aesthetics at work in the documentaries of the Griersonian era has provided a useful insight into the cinematic evolutions of later periods, as well as into the motivations behind these evolutions. More specifically, a comparison between We Are the Lambeth Boys and The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, has served to demonstrate the lack of any form of genuine social critique in the former in contrast with a potential for voicing authentically different views of British society in the latter, in spite of the rather formless and confused political analysis which characterises the 'angry' cinema of the early to mid-1960s. These two films were chosen for their exemplary value as well as for the scope for comparison which they seemed to offer, in particular thanks to their thematic resemblances (working-class youth, sports as a means of social integration). Beyond these similarities, the two films remain typical examples of the categories or movements in which they are usually classified, each with their own merits and limitations.

As such an exemplar, We Are the Lambeth Boys seemed to perfectly illustrate the innocuousness, if not the vacuity, of Free Cinema films in terms of social and political critique. Nor does Lambeth Boys seem to have had a deeper impact at a
technical and artistic level. As for The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, even with its parody of the accepted style of its genre (and of others), it clearly typifies the cinematic adaptation of the literary ‘rebellion’ of the immediate post-war period, with a degree of social awareness but very little in the way of true political consciousness.

Such political consciousness was to be found elsewhere in the changing landscape of the moving image. Thanks to the conjunction of several factors favourable to social commentary and political critique of British society, television dramas at their best were the locus of both technical and aesthetic innovations and truly challenging representations of the British working class, as well as of British society at large. But that, of course, is another story.

Selected bibliography


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23. David Thompson even goes as far as to refer to the Free Cinema movement as “arguably one of the most dated ‘innovations’ in all cinema” in his entry dedicated to Karel Reisz. David Thompson, *op. cit.*, 624.


DRAMA-DOCUMENTARY AND BRITISH TELEVISION

A quest for legitimacy

Georges FOURNIER *

The history of popular factual programming 1 is studded with creations that hinge on the interplay between fiction and reality. One of the seminal examples of such programmes was undeniably Orson Welles’s realistic radio interpretation of H.G.Wells’s War of the Worlds which led thousands of Americans to flee their homes in panic. The same topic was later given a cinematic treatment with F for Fake in which Orson Welles examined the nature of truth and deceit. The origins of docudrama can be partly traced back to these radio or cinematic experiments carried out in the fields of artistic make-believe.

Yet, docudrama is a highly elusive concept likely to foster frustration: whenever a satisfactory definition for this term seems to have been found, there always arise, on TV or in cinemas, filmic creations that just do not fit. This is all the more likely to happen as definitions differ on either side of the Atlantic. While in the United States docudrama is closely connected to the lives of the rich and famous, in Great Britain it follows in the footsteps of the Griersonian tradition of the social and political documentary. Although in Grierson’s days factual and popular were words that went well together, such is no longer the case today, a situation largely accounted for by the fact that documentaries are deemed unsuited for a prime time TV viewing slot.

One of the main assets of docudrama is its fictional dimension, even though it retains much of the aesthetics of the documentary. Its hybrid nature — which detractors would go as far as calling mongrel — actually makes it extremely original and valuable. Thanks to docudramas, British TV viewers have been kept informed of the state of the Nation: the dire conditions of the poor were aptly dramatised by Ken Loach’s Cathy Come Home, while Peter Kosminsky’s Warriors partly reassessed the role of Great Britain on the international scene. Docudramas have explored new territories from both topical and aesthetic points of view and opened up new perspectives.

The current vogue for reality TV on British screens has sparked off debates on the nature of what viewers are presented with. Documentaries have undoubtedly

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* Teaches at Jean Moulin University in Lyons, France.


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suffered the most from this newcomer since, until then, their merits relied on the
long-held assumption that what viewers saw on TV was reality. The notorious
reputation of reality TV programmes has hardly affected docudramas which have
never really been favourably considered by either documentary or fiction
filmmakers. Yet, the new influence can be found in the trend towards the
sensational, at the expense of the informative, which can be witnessed in some of the
recent docudramas commissioned by the main British TV companies.

Docudrama: a new genre?

The diverse and heterogeneous television productions that borrow from fictional
and documentary genres have fostered a great variety of descriptive terms:
"docudrama", "drama-documentary", "dramadoc", "factual film", "non-fiction
film", "mould-breaking TV drama", "an account shot as a news report", "quasi-
documentary", "period drama", "semi-fictional recreation", to mention but the most
commonly used. While docudrama is the term most often found in TV magazines
and among professionals to refer to productions that combine features from fiction,
documentary, TV news and reports, it is not uncommon to meet with surprise and
perplexity from listeners when it is used in the course of a conversation.

Semantically, all these words refer to the same type of production. Yet, no
production is, for TV and cinema critics, adequately described by any of them.
Consequently, many film reviews revolve around a string of apparently synonymous
terms meant to describe a creation that is neither an absolute fiction nor an exact
record of life. Though time and usage seem to have imposed docudrama as generic,
critics do not find it accurate enough and consequently supplement their reviews
with descriptive words like "re-enactment", "reconstruction", "investigation", etc..
For exactly the same reasons, critics feel the need to be always more inventive and
they often come up with neologisms, when they are confronted with creations that
do not neatly fit into either the fictional or the documentary genre. A possible
explanation of this trend is afforded by the confusing nature of the term docudrama
which is an oxymoronic juxtaposition and which thus poses a threat to both
understanding and classification.

The absence of any precise term that would satisfy both professionals and TV
viewers is accounted for by the simple fact that until recently most such productions
would fall under the heading of either fiction or documentary. Hints were dropped as
to their hybrid nature through specific words and phrases, hence Humphrey
Jennings's I Was a Fireman described as "a dramatized re-staging of the London
Blitz", Ken Russell's Elgar as "groundbreaking in that for the first time the BBC
relaxed its taboo on using actors in factual films", and Peter Watkins's The War
Game as “blending fiction and fact”. More recently, The Guardian stated that The Hamburg Cell by Antonia Bird was “based on exhaustive research including investigation files, court transcripts, personal interviews and unpublished correspondence”. As for Channel 4, it promoted Peter Kosminsky’s latest production, The Government Inspector, as a “film [...] based on original research”.

Even though docudramas have been a firm favourite with British viewers, the organisational charts of the main TV broadcasters show no such sub-division, which further increases the confusion. While in the past these productions were taken care of by the Current Affairs Departments, that is to say news-oriented professionals, it is today the role of the drama or documentary heads in TV companies to decide on the commissioning of such productions. Currently, the BBC seems to be the only TV broadcaster to retain former divisions and its recent drama-documentary programme, on the new forms of terrorism, is backed by the Current Affairs Department: “Drama-documentary is proving an effective form of Current Affairs, such as Dirty War shown on BBC One”.

A further layer of confusion is added by the majority of Independent Production Companies (indies) which do not specialize in a specific type of programme. With the notable exception of Brook Lapping Productions who have produced some of the most acclaimed programmes dealing with international politics (The Fall of Milosevic, I Met Adolf Eichmann), most Independent Production Companies are currently working on topics which cover the whole gamut of genres. Mentorn, the indie which produced The Government Inspector, is also the one which took on the production of the more “popular” programme entitled Britain’s Worst Driver. Recently, it “has won a trio of commissions for Channel 4 and Discovery Health, including a programme which follows attempts to create a diet for the world’s fittest man, Bodyshock: Half-Ton Man”. The collaboration between indies and TV broadcasters does not abide by strict rules either and Mentorn’s head of drama teamed up with Channel 4’s head of documentaries to make Peter Kosminsky’s project on the Kelly affair come true.

As far as ordinary viewers are concerned, key words like “record”, “account”, “research” and “investigation” can prove helpful to understand reviews and discriminate between fictional and documentary films, while references to technical or stylistic features are far more difficult to decipher. As for the dichotomy that used to oppose the pick-up-your-camera-and-go documentary maker to the affluent

feature film director, it is no longer valid. In addition to being a caricature, this opposition is of little help when it comes to explaining what a TV docudrama is. The general confusion that prevails is aptly summed up by Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight:

Although it is sometimes possible to identify particular conventions within any given text, in most cases codes and conventions have been mixed as a result of the development of the form and it is often impossible to separate such conventions out in any sequence.\(^8\)

The boundaries between documentary and fiction were blurred from the very beginning: originally, when Robert Flaherty embarked on an expedition to the Arctic, his intentions were akin to those of a documentary filmmaker. Yet Nanook of the North is far from being an authentic account of the daily lives of Northern American tribes, as is substantiated by the alternative title put forward by the author for his work: *A Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic*.\(^9\) The controversy that ensued led some critics to exclude Robert Flaherty’s work from the category of documentary on account of its non-factual status, which demonstrates that the question of the nature of the filmmaker’s creations was raised very early in the history of cinema. Nevertheless, Nanook of the North has gone down in the history of cinema as one of the first documentaries which means that, even in those days, the category could accommodate creations that did not fit in with the strict definition of an exact recording of life.

The presence of the words docudrama and drama-documentary alternatively in the same article highlights the dilemma that critics face when confronted with creations that do not totally belong either to fiction (a docudrama being a drama that is well-documented or a drama which follows the rules of the documentary genre) or to documentary (a drama-documentary referring to a documentary that is dramatised). Consequently, as these creations are unique, they do not fit into the category of sub-genre which proves irrelevant. The failure to classify docudramas within the boundaries of either fiction or documentary testifies to the existence of a new genre which consequently requires a fixed and definite terminology.

The problem docudrama productions have gone through up until now is not one of identification but one of recognition, and the difficulty for professionals to agree upon a precise term testifies to it. Moreover, as Steve Neale aptly explains, there is more to genre than constitutive technical features:

Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectations and hypotheses that spectators bring with them […] and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process.\(^10\)

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9. Taken from the review of the film by Dean W. Duncan for the British Film Institute.
Expectations concerning representation being different in fiction, documentary and docudrama, the use of different terms to refer to different genres might prove relevant and less confusing.

From a diachronic point of view, the relationships between documentary and docudrama perfectly fit with what the Russian Formalists termed “the canonization of the junior branch”:

[The model provided by the Russian formalists] has the virtue of embodying the history of individual genres within the history not just of generic formations but of wider cultural formations as well. It is perhaps best known for Tynyanov’s concept of “the dominant” (with its connotative concept of genre history or the displacement of one dominant genre by another), and by Shklovsky’s idea that such displacements occur according to a principle known as “the canonization of the junior branch”: when the “canonized” art forms reach an impasse, the way is paved for the infiltration of the elements of non-canonized art, which by this time have managed to evolve new artistic devices 11.

Docudrama would greatly benefit from a revised taxonomy that would make room for this new genre: it would achieve new perspectives, wider currency and greater autonomy. Documentary directors, especially in France, have often spoken disparagingly of docudramas: the birth of a form that mixed fiction and reality meant the end of the myth according to which there still existed terra incognita for documentaries to discover and explore. By intentionally interfering with the recording of reality, docudramas have cast doubts over the illusion of an exact reproduction on which the reputation of the documentary has long rested, an opinion Peter Kosminsky voiced in his recent interview with Peter Keighron, a journalist with Broadcast:

I think people are a bit disingenuous. As a former documentary-maker I know myself there is nothing intrinsically objective about a documentary and subjective about a drama documentary. And because there is this sort of phoney, undeserved sense of the inherent objectivity of straight documentary it’s easier to mislead people because they don’t question the form. Every single thing I do in a drama is questioned, not only by critics and the viewers but by the lawyers who pore over the film by the time we get it on the air 12.

Docudrama as the cornerstone of the 1960s’ experiments in British television

The 1960s witnessed the appearance, on a large scale, of TV sets in British households. Television proved to be the perfect medium for the release of hybrid

11. Ibid, 173.
forms experimented with in cinema some years before, and docudrama was one of them. Docudrama was the result of television experiments that were much akin to the ones the film-makers of the 1930s and 1940s had undertaken, while being totally in keeping with the realistic spirit of the post-war cinema. By exposing TV viewers to disquieting and sometimes even mind-boggling creations, the directors of docudramas perfectly fulfilled the obligations laid down by the BBC’s 1926 Royal Charter, namely “to inform, educate and entertain”.

The clear-cut difference between documentaries and feature films gradually faded under the influence of directors who had worked in the USA where, in the war-time period, documentary directors started making feature movies while feature directors were producing documentaries:

The real years of achievement for British documentary in the 1930s were those of the G.P.O. after 1934. The work produced at this time was greatly influenced by the acquisition of sound equipment and the presence as producer and director of the Brazilian-born Alberto Cavalcanti who had achieved a reputation with his experimental film work [...] He brought a new professionalism and took over when Grierson resigned in 1937, fostering the move towards dramatised narrative 13.

The blending of news and imaginary writings can be traced back to The March of Time, originally a radio programme commissioned in the 1920s by Henry Luce, an American media tycoon. It was later turned into a very popular cinematic newsreel series shown in movie theatres (from 1935 to 1951); under the same title, it used professional actors and ordinary citizens to deal with current events in a dramatised way.

In Great Britain, things did not go so smoothly and a controversy raged within the G.P.O. between traditional documentary directors and advocates of more dramatised forms:

Both [Alberto Cavalcanti and Harry Watt] had already shown an interest in feature productions which set them apart from Grierson and his closest associates 14.

The more experimental school of thought prevailed and, in 1938, North Sea, considered as the first British docudrama, was made. It reconstructed the rescue of an Aberdeen trawler and was produced by Harry Watt who, two years earlier, had been appointed head of the London unit of the American series The March of Time. Experiments were not restricted to aesthetics only and, from a thematic point of view, cinema found inspiration in the daily lives of workers. Housing Problems by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton is an apt instance of the aesthetic and topical changes that were taking place at the time. Produced in 1935 it tackled the problem of extreme poverty and slum clearance: it relied “totally on the impact of words and images presented directly to the viewer, and [...] direct-to-camera-statements of

personal experiences” 15. Housing Problems largely inspired Cathy Come Home. Nevertheless, the docudrama Ken Loach made, more than thirty years later for The Wednesday Plays series, was experimental too: it confronted prime time TV viewers with the problem of homelessness in the form of a fiction that bore a striking resemblance to the documentary form.

Consequently, one may argue that the British television of the 1960s somehow picked up the experiments on form and content that cinema had carried out in the 1930s and the 1940s. As for the post-war period, it witnessed more realistic narrative forms in films across Europe, more precisely in Italy with the neo-realist movement; once again television could not remain immune to such changes. The freedom film producers enjoyed at the time in the main broadcasting organisations (BBC, ITV) enabled them to introduce the result of their research on form and topics to a vast majority of British viewers. The Wednesday Play programme, which ran on British TV from 1964 to 1970 and was later followed by Play for Today, remains emblematic of the spirit of the time.

To quote but the most famous docudramas of these days, Cathy Come Home directly criticised the workings of the Welfare State which had been set up to promote the well-being of the whole British population, and more precisely the poorest and weakest, while The War Game exposed the atrocities of a nuclear war and the lack of civil defence preparedness. As for Chariot of Fire, it presented the problem of the rehabilitation of sex offenders. Mock-up interviews, a “you-are-there” 16 style of newsreel immediacy, non-professional actors, improvised dialogues and location shooting were among the many devices used by the directors to give their creations the appearance of documentaries.

For a while directors believed that they possessed the perfect tool for agit-prop, the means to promote and spread ideas in keeping with the social and political aspirations of the population. Docudrama had apparently become the most appropriate form to rouse the population’s interest. Thanks to its dramatization of both public and private issues, docudrama appealed to all the population: it rendered accessible and attractive topics which conventional documentaries would have made either tedious or unintelligible. Moreover, it turned private issues into publicly debatable topics which were presented in a serious, though attractive, way. A first step towards the social and political treatment of these public matters was consequently afforded by such docudramas. In Two Minds, which was presented to the British viewers in 1967, and five years later adapted by Ken Loach under the title of Family Life, was an indictment targeted at both political and institutional authorities for their failure to treat psychiatric disorders decently.

For many, The Wednesday Play has remained a landmark in the history of British television. It corresponds to public service at its best, though, according to

15. Ibid, 140.
16. Taken from Peter Watkins’s website: <http://www.mmsi.net/~pwatkins/diary.htm >.
George W. Brandt "it would be false to sentimentalise the single play of the sixties" 17. With time, the broadcasting of programmes, rather than their production was subjected to stricter control and Peter Watkins's The War Game, though produced in 1964, was only broadcast in 1985.

Stockpiling became the main strategy to avoid the cancelling of a programme at short notice: it consisted in storing some plays which could later be used at any time to replace a censored one. The choice of single plays instead of series further protected the broadcasters from productions which might have got out of control. A mixture of fictional and realistic elements lay at the heart of the controversial nature of the censured creations: the topics the programmes treated were usually daily concerns that a large part of the population was confronted with. Access to lightweight 16 mm filming equipment, combined with documentary-related devices, lent the production an additional documentary edge. Yet, the narrative treatment was reminiscent of fiction and, for example, the personalisation of social dramas permitted narrative condensation, a feature uncommon in the documentary form.

The fictional dimension of this hybrid format could guarantee producers immunity from any lawsuit—which is, at present, no longer the case—while its realistic edge and apparent naturalness gave docudrama the credentials required to engender debate in the population. The Wednesday Play was the target of violent attacks from Mary Whitehouse and her Clean-up TV campaigners who, at the time, were lobbying to have allegedly immoral programmes removed from the screen. Nevertheless, these reactions actually proved counterproductive and they had the effect of substantially increasing the ratings.

Originally, television was thought of as an instrument meant to entertain but also to educate the population. Yet, the debate on whether TV should mirror society or fashion it intensified when television started broadcasting programmes that gave the social issues they treated the documentary touch that sparked off nationwide debates. Television could then potentially become a medium for public protest. It would no longer silence people by lecturing them on topics they were ignorant of, but would voice their daily concerns, or the ones of the less affluent and in particular those without a TV set, or access to one. The first year The Wednesday Play was on the air witnessed the broadcasting of programmes concerning the working classes: Up the Junction; Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton. This programme also afforded viewers an insight into the ups and downs of the outcasts (A Tap on the Shoulder; Three Clear Sundays) and ended with the banning of a docudrama on the then major political issue of nuclear defence: The War Game.

Peter Watkins’s *The War Game*: “exploring new territory” 18

Peter Watkins’s work, which was an attack on the nuclear defence policy, was originally commissioned to be broadcast as a *Wednesday Play*. Apart from the fact that it was far from being family entertainment, this programme was not solely informative. It is to be understood in the light of Peter Watkins’s interest in television as a pedagogical instrument. Even in those days, he created his films with a mature viewer in mind, one that demanded more than the conventional narrative form with its expectations and mandatory closure. For him, viewers needed to be stirred intellectually with inventiveness.

The combination of journalistic and documentary styles within a fictional form was one of the main innovative features Peter Watkins confronted viewers with in *The War Game*. In this anticipatory fiction, the documentary dimension can be found in a repeated concern for facts and figures. Detailed explanations, complemented with precise map presentations and given by an authoritative male narrative voice, are the result of almost obsessive didacticism. References are made to the then government and its policy on how to protect civilians: “it would take Britain four years to recover from full scale evacuation”, “the building of shelters for the whole population would cost 2 000 million pounds”. Opinions are dramatised in the form of talking head interviews which serve as conduits for identification: ordinary men and women express their points of view so that the viewer is led to believe that whatever they say is shared by the whole population. Spontaneity and authenticity are afforded by people who happen to walk past the camera inadvertently while others stare at it, filmic features that were later resorted to even more often in *Punishment Park*.

Yet, Peter Watkins also used traditional feature film techniques like fast-moving images and abrupt cutting for shock effects and a feeling of immediacy. Flickering images during the riots in Berlin, blinding white light and the introduction of negatives, for the viewers to realize what the immediate result of a nuclear bomb explosion would be like, were some of the creative devices the director used to give greater impact to his prophecy. The deafening sound of sirens at critical moments even saturates the scene and renders it unbearable. Peter Watkins pushes the limits which, as far as television is concerned, rely on repetition, both in the storytelling and in the editing. Right from the beginning, viewers are subjected to a single sequence of almost one and a half minutes: shot with a hand-held camera from the back seat of a motorcycle, the scene takes the viewers through a long narrow road, up a flight of stairs, into a room, across the room and round a table at which newly appointed emergency officers are sitting. This shot stands out as a good instance of

18. Quotation borrowed from the title of an article by Danny Cohen published in *Broadcast* and dated October 7th, 2005, 14.
how to achieve a sense of immediacy without any sophistication and at rather low cost. Authenticity is reinforced by the narrator who lists, in a solemn voice, the consequences of this international crisis for Great Britain: precise references are made to the Government of Her Majesty, to the appointment of regional bodies to solve the problem of the evacuation of the population from the main British cities in the event of a nuclear attack. Yet, there is more to this first scene than the introduction of the main dramatic ingredients. Metadiscursively, it is to be understood as a first blow against standardised dramatic forms that ultimately render viewers passive.

Peter Watkins’s creation was anticipatory in more than one respect: it was a pioneering attempt at giving a crucial issue the massive audience it deserved (the programme was to be broadcast in the prime time slot occupied by *The Wednesday Play*). In this filmic venture, Peter Watkins acted as a citizen who felt that it was his duty to awaken the rest of the population to potential fatal dangers; he also acted as an artist whose job it was to render visible what the rest of the population was blind to. Moreover, though produced in 1964, it was broadcast on TV in 1985, a year after *Threads*, another docudrama about the potential dangers of a nuclear war which was largely inspired by *The War Game*. Both films date from nerve-racking periods in the history of the relationships between the Eastern and the Western blocks: successively, the Cold War and Ronald Reagan’s commitment to a war missile shield. They also answer the necessity to inform the population on such crucial issues. Peter Watkins’s belief in the need for art to help create discriminating viewers and active citizens was taken a step further in 1999 when he decided to shoot *La Commune*. During the preparation of this film on the aftermath of the French Revolution, non-professional actors were asked to take an active role by gathering information on the period.

**From experiment to conventionality**

Popular language is never documentary. It takes a learned man to understand a documentary well, to know how to treat information. This is not the way peoples pass unimportant things. They talk about them through fiction: tales, epics, stories.\(^\text{10}\)

This statement by Fernand Dansereau, published in *Séquences*, underlines the fact that the gap between fiction and documentary is not only a matter of taste but also of education. When it comes to the treatment of recent historical events, the

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most adequate form to entertain viewers, but also to inform them, is fiction. Yet, to be politically or socially relevant, a docudrama cannot be a fable or a tale; it must convince viewers that the creation they are watching is close to documentary. From a factual point of view, this is achieved by direct references to individuals, places and institutions, while stylistically this is often obtained by re-enactment. A kind of tacit moral contract binds the film-maker and the viewer: according to it the director freely represents publicly known and undisputed acts and voices public statements. As far as the viewer is concerned he is to understand that what he is watching may have happened somehow differently but that the content remains faithful to reality.

The last few decades have witnessed an increase in the number of TV reality programmes which pander to narcissistic or voyeuristic inclinations in viewers. The negative impact left by these creations on all the other TV forms is undeniably great, as shown by some of the documentaries presented at the 2004 Sheffield International Documentary Festival: Dying to Live, about a young man with leukaemia whose mother has terminal cancer, The World's Strongest Boy, about a 6-year-old bodybuilder and The Boy Can't Help It, about a boy having uncontrollable jerky movements. The thirst for publicity has driven some documentary makers to opt for sensational topics and to mistake sensationalism for authenticity. The general impression that arises from such a trend is that, if documentaries want to survive, they need to trade on misery and uncharted land, a recipe that should help them make up for the absence of diversity and inventiveness in the narrative form.

The fictional narrative of docudramas is undeniably an asset which documentaries do not possess and which enables them to compete, on prime time TV, with other more recreational formats. Observational social and political documentaries are losing ground: the conventional way they treat current topics has become unacceptable to the vast majority of modern viewers. The problem for documentary directors is to move away from a purely observational, fly-on-the-wall way of filming while retaining the credit this non-intrusive style affords them.

Moreover, TV viewers have become cynical and are more likely to question the nature of what they are presented with on TV. The first reason for this phenomenon is that new technologies have taught them that reality can be tampered with. There is also the need among TV professionals to be ever more unconventional in their attempt to increase audience. In such conditions, how can traditional documentaries hope to attract viewers?

Television has lately opted for docudramas partly because reality TV has increased the dosage of sensationalism, while observational documentaries are thought of as being too drab and tedious. Viewers are used to fictions with specific narrative features such as tension, suspense, and a general suspension of disbelief which represent criteria that are part and parcel of the docudrama narrative. More than any other format, docudrama can offer viewers a serious treatment of current affairs likely to be compatible with the entertaining mood of a prime time slot. An
apt example is The Hamburg Cell by Antonia Bird, broadcast by Channel Four on September 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2004, which dramatises the lives of the terrorists of the 9/11 attack on the New York Twin Towers. Similarly, Peter Kosminsky's The Government Inspector, broadcast by Channel Four on March 17\textsuperscript{th}, 2005 deals with the death of David Kelly, one of the British inspectors sent to Iraq to investigate possible weapons of mass destruction. The trend towards the dramatisation of current events, instead of their simple (re)presentation, is not characteristic of television only. The same tendency is witnessed in cinema with, for example, Gus Van Sant's Elephant, which relates the shooting that took place in 1999 in a high school in Portland, Oregon.

Stylistically speaking, the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, have witnessed a shift in focus: away from aesthetic experimentation and the representation of the difficulties of the less fortunate in society. More "glamorous" topics have been favoured by programmers. To put it in a nutshell, it has meant a move away from the social, towards the sensational.

With docudrama, TV seems to have found the perfect vehicle for the treatment of information in an entertaining way, though the negative aspect has been to shatter any attempt at experimenting with any other form of mass information. Introducing new stylistic codes might possibly mean blurring the message or even lead to total misconception. When dealing with politically sensitive topics, no such chance can be taken and only the most conventional, "natural" forms can be envisaged, as instanced by the direct reference Peter Kosminsky made to the legal side of his filmic treatment of the Kelly affair:

We spent four or five days with a barrister and a solicitor going through the script, where we had to provide an extremely detailed annotated document, six or seven times the length of the script itself, to show what the evidence was for each scene\textsuperscript{20}.

Ironically, there is nothing natural in the "real seemingness" rendered by cinema, and "the meanings of films are generated as much by the connotations constructed by the use of cinematic codes and conventions of representation which are shared by both film-makers and audiences"\textsuperscript{21}. Therefore we can suppose that only the complete respect for traditional filmic conventions seems both to protect directors from any law suit and afford their movies the realistic touch that gives them credibility. As the vast majority of the population who watched The Government Inspector had previously seen David Kelly at least once on TV, or in the newspaper, verisimilitude could only be achieved by choosing an actor whose figure and traits were somewhat close to Kelly's, hence the choice of Mark Rylance, better known to theatre-goers for his roles in Shakespeare's plays. Other problems of credibility and

\textsuperscript{20} Quoted in Peter Keighron, \textit{op. cit.}, 23.
iconicity were solved by the use of harsh broad daylight and oriental music to conjure images of the Middle East. The difficulty with representing key figures from current events is that any departure from close resemblance is likely to cause disruption, to bring discredit on the production and upset viewers or, even worse for TV broadcasters, make them change channels. Consequently, only a high degree of iconicity can lend docudramas authenticity. In The Government Inspector, credibility is also achieved through numerous scenes representing David Kelly at home, engrossed in ordinary daily activities. By describing the scientist as an ordinary man, the director was sure to arouse identification among viewers which eventually meant empathy. Another result is that viewers are less likely to take a critical stance towards what is being represented. Thanks to the character of David Kelly, viewers have an insight into the proceedings of the commission set up to conduct investigations into the presence of weapons of mass destruction on the Iraqi soil. David Kelly is depicted as a scientist but also as a human being whose relationships with his Iraqi counterparts are not strictly professional, a man whose personal life gradually becomes deeply affected by the prominence of his position. This kaleidoscopic rendering of what was later called the "Kelly affair" somehow conflicts with the more purely factual approach demanded by the international backdrop. Issues are blurred, the personal and the professional often overlap and, in the end, the viewer may wonder about the subject matter of this programme: is it an indictment of the British government and its involvement in the war in Iraq or just another dramatisation of the classic conflict of the individual versus the State, a similar topic touched upon by Peter Kosminsky in The Project.

Docudramas abide by conventional cinematic rules: no voice-over, a feature common to many documentaries, the use of shot-reverse-shot for dialogues and the respect of the chronological order, to name only the most obvious. Unlike cinema, television is, for many, purely conventional and commercial and consequently not suited for art. Yet, TV docudramas, like art, are, for some directors, meant to render visible what was invisible and familiar what was unfamiliar. In their treatment of information, today's directors of docudramas use conventional modes of representation mixed with news footage, a method which tends to blur the gap between fiction and reality. This strategy enables them to throw light on what remained until then invisible. They are better equipped to succeed where other media professionals previously failed.

Docudrama or infotainment?

Docudramas are not meant to repeat information but to afford viewers a different approach. They are meant to attract to current events people who do not normally pay much attention to what is going on in the world. The role of directors of docudramas can then parallel that of journalists: they attempt to reach, on major
issues, the large prime time audience of a major TV broadcaster, which is something documentary makers can no longer do.

Moreover, it is often a personal point of view, rather than that of an institution, that is offered viewers. In the case of Peter Kosminsky’s *The Government Inspector*, it was impossible for the BBC to commission this film because it was too deeply embroiled in the controversial Hutton Report: “the BBC could not have made it [The Government Inspector] because the Corporation is a central character”, wrote Mark Lawson in an article entitled *A Drama Out of a Crisis* published by *The Guardian* on March 14th, 2005. Yet, critics are right when they claim that the docudrama form is not journalism and that frequently it gives in to melodramatic overtones. The critical acclaim Peter Kosminsky’s latest production enjoyed should not overshadow the fact that, in this film, the difficulties Dr Kelly had with the government are too often perceived from a personal point of view. The viewer is also often led to think of the consequences of the decisions taken by Tony Blair’s government on David Kelly’s family.

Unlike the reporter or the documentary maker, the director of docudramas does not try to pretend that his creation is either benevolent or produced in the name of truth. His purpose is not elitist either and the form he chooses can easily draw a large audience. In the case of burning social or political issues, the motive would more likely be to re-examine a case so as to afford the population a different perspective, one that is not presented by the conventional media. This type of approach is reminiscent of the one undertaken by directors of documentaries as it is carried out from a retrospective point of view: unlike journalists who mainly work on current events, the directors of both documentaries and docudramas possess a retrospective vantage point. Yet, TV increasingly cashes in on immediacy at the expense of substance and quality: despite the criticisms levelled at the docudrama form, broadcasters just cannot get enough of them, nor can they get them quickly enough. Today, information being a commodity, directors are almost immediately requested to provide viewers with a filmic treatment of news. Peter Kosminsky has already started working on a project inspired by the July London bombings:

Now there is a real feeding frenzy when an event like the London bombings occurs. So you have your hand forced [...] and that means coming forward with your proposals, and ultimately your television programmes, sooner than you would have done in the past and perhaps sooner than you would like, but the alternative is you miss the boat. 22.

This tragedy, which occurred four months ago only, has already been afforded a dramatic treatment thanks to a docudrama broadcast in France by the National Geographic channel on December 5th, 2005. This new policy from commissioners raises the question of the emphasis today’s Western media put on fast thinking.

The reasons which can lead a director to re-examine a social or a political case remain somewhat obscure. Obviously it cannot be to stir the population to react since the topic in question is no longer relevant because it has become history or has been totally forgotten. The broadcasting of The Government Inspector, a thinly veiled indictment of Tony Blair’s Government, on March 17th, 2005 at 9 pm on Channel 4, was rather badly timed for Tony Blair who wanted to secure a third term on May 5th, 2005. Tony Blair’s supporters can claim that the fact that the Prime Minister did not interfere with the broadcasting of this programme shortly before the general elections testifies to the respect he pays to democracy. Yet, it can be imagined that the Prime Minister could hardly afford to draw the attention of the media by cracking down on Channel 4 while Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s Director of Communication, was accused of having interfered with the BBC 23. Finally, neither the broadcasting of The Government Inspector nor the topic it tackled had much influence on the results of the general election and Tony Blair joined Margaret Thatcher as the only post-war Prime Minister to have won three successive general elections. This may tend to suggest that television is not to be taken too seriously. Another possible and more cynical explanation would be that, nowadays, everything on television is infotainment and that even news, like fiction or TV reality, is understood to be made with a view to increasing the audience. The result is that viewers are too sceptical to take any piece of information or any explanation at face value, or for what it is worth, and know that programmes should always be thought of in terms of ratings.

The large number of lighter TV docudramas tends to confirm a trend away from social issues towards sensational issues. Touching the Void, produced by Channel Four and broadcast in the Autumn of 2003, taps the current fashion for thrill and excitement associated with extreme sports: it tells the story of “two men who stared death in the face while climbing a treacherous peak in the Peruvian Andes” 24. “Sensational” needs to be defined: in this case it is not to be understood as pertaining to the same semantic field as “exaggerated” but as connected with “dramatic”. The incidents reported are not exaggerated, they are just part of the experiences of people who are adventurous and whose lives, especially when things go awry, are worth being related to a prime time audience. Even though few are the TV viewers who have ever experienced such intense moments, the director can nevertheless expect to arouse feelings of fear, agony and pain that viewers can enjoy in the comfort of their living room.

Fear for fear’s sake is not apparently the main motive behind the series entitled IF..., which consists in dramatising potentially catastrophic events with a view to awakening the conscience of the population to things that go wrong in society. The

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23. In the wake of the Hutton Report, many accused the Government of orchestrating the wave of resignations among BBC top officials.
format is not exactly new and it is somewhat reminiscent of Peter Watkins’s *The War Game*. Half a century earlier, Alfred Machin had pioneered the genre in *Maudite Soit La Guerre (Cursed Be The War)* shot in 1913 and released two months before the outbreak of the First World War; it was an attempt to warn the populations—or rather the leaders, if we consider the small number of cinema-goers at the beginning of the 20th century—of the tragedy of a war, augmenting the dream-like power of moving images with superimposed images representing air attacks from planes and hot-air balloons. *IF*..., broadcast by the BBC, shares with Alfred Machin’s filmic creation an anticipatory dimension: to quote but two episodes, *Smallpox 2002*, broadcast on February 5th, 2002 raised the issue of the consequences of a massive smallpox attack on Britain, while *If. . . Things Don’t Get Better*, aired on March 17th, 2004 examined the social consequences of the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Based on thorough research by experts, the programmes often use archetypal features of war journalism like flickering images, erratic movements, the juxtaposition of close-ups and wide angle shots to render the imminence of the danger. Unlike *The Wednesday Play*, which was innovative in the history of British television, the *IF*... format, which is to be understood with the highly competitive media market in mind, may, in the end, appear to be guided more by ratings than by the education of the population. This opinion may be reinforced by the highly repetitive and sensational nature of the topics offered viewers. While the subjects tackled in *The Wednesday Play* programmes ranged from literature to history 26 and burning social issues 27, the *IF*... series draws on the craze for potential sensational topics: *If. . . Cloning Could Cure Us* (December 16th, 2004); *If. . . We Could Stop The Violence* (December 22nd, 2004); *If. . . Drugs Were Legal* (January 12th, 2005); *If. . . The Toxic Timebomb Goes Off*, (March 13th, 2005).

**Conclusion**

In an article entitled *TV that Changed the World* 28, James Curtis, a journalist with *Broadcast*, draws a list of the ten “agenda setting” programmes aired on British television. Among the ten shortlisted programmes, two famous docudramas can be found: Ken Loach’s *Cathy Come Home* and Ian McBride’s *Who Bombed Birmingham?* Their fame can be ascribed to their rather innovative form which can be described as fiction with a documentary edge. This form can be credited with

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25. The first programme, entitled *Catch as Catch Can*, was based on a play by Jean Anouilh and aired on September 30th, 1964.

26. *The July Plot* related a failed conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and was broadcast on December 9th, 1964.

27. *Fable*, aired on January 27th, 1965, was about contemporary racial debates while *A Tap on the Shoulder*, broadcast on January 6th, 1965 recounted the sudden rise of a convicted murderer to wealth and power.

having fore-grounded social and political issues which is something the documentary, a less glamorous form, is no longer able to do, because of the shift in expectations among prime time viewers.

In modern Western societies, the respect for private interests is top priority and directors of TV docudramas are careful not to ruin their creations with a lack of accuracy in the information provided or in the treatment of this information. Consequently, the mixing of fiction and reality is not meant to distort information or even twist the perspective, an accusation often levelled at docudrama. Its main interest lies in its attractiveness for modern viewers whose televisual expectations have recently been modified by the introduction of reality television.

The debate that opposed directors of docudramas to documentary film makers who denounced docudrama as an instance of cinematic forgery is rather outmoded. Today, the main concern, for both documentaries and drama-documentaries, is sensationalism and the glamorisation of triviality which are increasing features in modern television programmes. Though the heads of dramas and of documentaries often advertise “authored documentaries” — when in fact they are referring to docudramas — and “support unique authorship of the sophistication of Peter Kosminsky and Angus McQueen” 29, the praise sounds like an alibi. At present, more sensational programmes are being favoured by broadcasting companies and the chances are that, in the future, British TV viewers will have to contend with even more 30.

Selective bibliography


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30. “Channel 4’s commitment to factual storytelling at 9 p.m., night after night, provides us with both creative opportunity, and a chance to influence the world around us. The political impact of Jamie’s School Dinners, the emotional reverberations of The Boy Whose Skin Fell Off, the popularity across continents of Supernanny should excite, motivate and encourage us”, *Ibidem*. 


CAPTURING THE "REAL":
FROM FACT TO FICTION
THROUGH THE SOCIAL LOOKING GLASS

Fiction depicting society in British soap opera

Renée DICKASON *

The "soap opera" or "soap" is not by any stretch of the imagination an exclusively British or indeed exclusively televusual genre. The form originated in the 1930s, at a time when American corporations chose the sponsorship of radio programmes as a means of promoting their products. The series were created by major manufacturers of household cleaning products, such as Colgate-Palmolive and Procter and Gamble, hence the term "soap", while the melodramatic and emotional nature of the story and its presentation was the apparent justification for the epithet "opera". British broadcasting was to lag far behind the USA in the search for advertising outlets: until the 1950s, the only commercial programmes available to the British public were from overseas-based radio stations like Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandie. Independent television, when it came, was limited to spot advertising, commercial radio stations situated in the UK were only authorised in the 1970s and it was not until the passing of the 1990 Broadcasting Act that the sponsorship of radio and television programmes was allowed. Interestingly, one of the first such sponsorship deals was between chocolate manufacturer Cadbury and the UK's longest-running television soap opera, Coronation Street.

Nevertheless, the soap opera as a genre has long been a popular favourite in the UK. The Archers, originally sub-titled "an everyday story of country folk", followed The Robinson Family and Mrs Dale's Diary onto the national radio waves in 1951 1, and the programme is still going strong on BBC Radio 4, having been the first to initiate the now standard format of a repeated short (15 minute) broadcast five days a week and a Sunday omnibus. Nor has home production always been essential to popular appeal: at one time, the wonderful worlds of Dallas, Dynasty and Santa Barbara attracted millions of viewers with their particular interpretations of the American Dream, and, in the 1980s, British broadcasters found another cheap way of filling their schedules with the acquisition of the Australian series A Country Practice, the success of which has encouraged the purchase of the still-scheduled Neighbours and Home and Away. For television companies, such soap operas have proved highly lucrative. American and Australian soaps offer their own brands of

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* Professor of English Studies, University of Caen, France.
1. The programme began the previous year, but was transmitted only in the Midlands. The series continues to be recorded in Birmingham.

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exoticism which can appeal to different target audiences and buying-in can be a cheap alternative to in-house production, especially when no translation fees are involved. Nor has critical attention been lacking. The variety and evolution of the genre have made it a worthwhile subject for specialists in such diverse fields as semantics, semiology and sociology, alongside historians of broadcasting.

Characteristics of British soap opera

Soap opera is not an easy genre to define precisely. The workplace and the social and domestic environments have all proved to be viable settings and, like all enduring favourites, the soap opera has evolved while retaining certain abiding characteristics. Meanwhile, different countries have developed their own versions in their own way. Beyond these variations, the essential and distinctive feature of soap opera resides in its narrative peculiarity, what Sonia Livingstone has described as an "endless middle", namely that the story lines are interwoven and juxtaposed to avoid what David McQueen has called "the moment of final closure". The salient features include such qualities as redundancy and repetition (to remind the viewer or listener of previous events, recent or more distant, enabling him/her to follow a continuing story line), multiple plots developing simultaneously (to provide continuing interest), suspense (including cliff-hangers to entice the audience into following every episode) and the modification and rewriting of past events. Most of these techniques could already be found in the serialised novels of the Victorian age, when the difference between the "literary" and the "popular" was, for critics, hard to discern and, for writers, most often irrelevant. Like the 19th century novel, the soap opera often contains its own brand of humour while remaining both popular and serious. Unlike the 19th century novel, it has the potential to be unending: situations evolve, characters appear and disappear, writers and producers come and go, but the series can continue as long as it retains its audience. Indeed, as Christine Geraghty observes, "the longer soaps are screened, the less easy their disappearance becomes".

Not all series are successful, of course. The BBC tried a number in the 1960s, before abandoning the attempt and leaving the field free for its independent or commercial television rival, ITV, while in the more competitive 1990s, many new series, often admittedly of an experimental nature and too-rapidly conceived, found

themselves rapidly axed. The fact remains, though, that soap operas, which were once considered inferior, entertainment suitable for the less affluent and therefore less discerning social classes, or alternatively for a largely female audience of mothers tired from looking after pre-school-age children or of “sad housewives with nothing better to do”, are now a mainstay of company schedules. With the disappearance of other types of programmes, particularly single plays and classical adaptations, soap operas now find themselves in the broad category which programmers call “drama”, a classification which now includes the strictly formattted hospital, medical and police series which some critics are inclined to regard as soap operas. In this sense, soap opera has become “respectable” and “mainstream”, which may be due to what adherents to the “dumbing down” theory consider as declining standards elsewhere, but may equally reflect the abiding quality of the genre or its increasing concern with the kind of contemporary issues which single plays once dealt with. What is undeniable is that the best-known series are unfailingly popular. Non-competitive scheduling allows soaps to attract and retain the same audience through an increasing number of regular broadcasting slots throughout the week, which have become, for many viewers, meeting points which must not be missed, as they may form the substance for discussion at home, at work or even socially as well as providing copy for the popular press. Since they are broadly considered as suitable for a family audience, as they contain little which may cause offence, and may therefore be screened before the 9 p.m. watershed, the habit of viewing can be passed on from one generation to another.

Beyond these factors linked to the British media environment, it should be emphasised that successful soaps remain a predominantly national phenomenon, and this is the point to which this article will be largely devoted. British soaps may have been adapted and copied elsewhere in the world, Australian and American imports have had a certain appeal to sectors of the British public, but what lies behind the enduring popularity of British series is no doubt their obvious associations and connections with society itself. Accordingly, the subject matter for what follows consists principally in the best-known and longest-running television series intended for a general audience: Coronation Street (1960 to date), Emmerdale (Farm) (1972

5. At the moment, only BBC 2 of the five terrestrial television channels is without its soap opera.
6. The highest audience figures for a single soap opera episode, in 1996, 2000 and 2001 were respectively 19.8 million (Coronation Street), 19 million (Coronation Street) and 20 million (EastEnders). These ratings were topped only by special Christmas editions of other popular programmes.
7. Most weekdays, it is possible, by switching channels, to watch nothing but soap opera from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.
8. 9 p.m. is the time after which more “adult” programmes may be screened. Repeated research has shown that the public is well aware of the deadline and it is significant that most complaints about soap operas concern unsuitable material at times when children are liable to be watching.
to date), Brookside (1982-2003) and EastEnders (1985 to date), although reference will also be made to other series by way of comparison or corroboration.

This should not be taken to mean that soap opera has remained unchanged over the last fifty years. Writing in the Radio Times in November 2001, Mal Young, controller of drama series for the BBC, produced an analysis of the evolution of soaps which he divided into seven “ages”. Even though the validity of this term may be questioned as the classifications are not so much chronological as thematic or generic, Young’s comments offer a useful starting point in the discussion of the evolution of soap operas on British television. The chart on the following page, based on the Radio Times article, presents the different stages of development in schematic form:
Evolution of main soap operas broadcast in the United Kingdom (1954-2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Ages” / Characteristics</th>
<th>Dates of first and last episodes</th>
<th>Titles and channels</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st British Realism</td>
<td>1951-</td>
<td><em>The Archers</em> (BBC radio)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1954-1957</td>
<td><em>The Grove Family</em> (BBC)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1960-</td>
<td><em>Coronation Street</em> (ITV)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1972-1976</td>
<td><em>The Brothers</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1972-</td>
<td><em>Emmerdale (Farm)</em> (ITV) Emmerdale from 1985</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1985-1990</td>
<td><em>Howards’ Way</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Fantasy Excitement</td>
<td>1978-1991</td>
<td><em>Dallas</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1981-1989</td>
<td><em>Dynasty</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd British Authenticity</td>
<td>1982-2003</td>
<td><em>Brookside</em> (Channel 4)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1997-</td>
<td><em>Family Affairs</em> (Channel 5)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Fantasy Excitement</td>
<td>1984-</td>
<td><em>Neighbours</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1988-</td>
<td><em>Home and Away</em> (ITV)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th British Revolution</td>
<td>1985-</td>
<td><em>EastEnders</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th British Youth</td>
<td>1978-</td>
<td><em>Grange Hill</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1990-</td>
<td><em>Byker Grove</em> (BBC1)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1995-</td>
<td><em>Hollyoaks</em> (Channel 4)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th British Fantasy</td>
<td>2001-2003</td>
<td><em>Night and Day</em> (ITV) Possible new evolution of a soap opera (according to Mal Young)</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Certain salient features are at once apparent. The categories of soap opera adopted by Young, correspond closely to the three major focuses of interest which the individual programmes may have and in varying proportions, concentration on characters, on plot and story-line or on social questions or issues. The chart also includes key terms which will be discussed later in this article, namely the concepts of realism, authenticity, sensationalism and fantasy. Moreover, the diagram highlights the fact that the birth of a new television channel brings with it the start of a new soap opera, which is a good brief illustration of the predominant place of the genre in programming and in establishing the credibility of a channel. Thus, Channel 4 has had, for almost the whole of its existence, Brookside as a flagship programme, something which no doubt inspired Channel 5 to adopt the same approach for its launch in April 1997, by screening Family Affairs.

The growth in competition between stations can equally be detected. The success of Brookside spurred the BBC into breaking its self-imposed restraint by creating its own mass-audience, prime-time soap, EastEnders. As the Corporation hoped, the new programme rapidly became a more than serious rival to ITV’s Coronation Street and the competition between the two for top audience ratings continues to this day. Even though it now seems that Coronation Street has managed to regain and subsequently maintain its top position, the series itself has been obliged to modify and modernise in order to compete. The same process of forced evolution can be observed in the change of name of Emmerdale Farm which became simply Emmerdale in 1985, thereby reflecting the transition from a limited farm setting to a focus on a village community which in turn allowed a widening in the number of characters and consequent plot development.

Moreover, the table indicates the growing trend towards “specialised” soaps, destined for a specific young target audience, Grange Hill for younger teenagers, Byker Grove for a similar 11 to 16 age group and Hollyoaks for the 18 to 30s. The new series of Grange Hill, screened from January 2005, is taking the show back to the younger children, aged from 8 to 11, for whom it was originally intended. Audience figures for other soaps indicate that they too tend to appeal to particular sections of the community, those closest to the fictional characters presented, for the truism of television advertising also applies to soap opera, i.e. that viewers are most interested in the fate and opinions of people like themselves, with whom they can most easily identify.

Finally, the chart reminds us that soap opera is not guaranteed to succeed. That the BBC was unable to strike the right chord in the 1960s was unfortunate and the list of failed soap operas is long and undistinguished. Over-drastic innovation may be dangerous too: Night and Day was short-lived, despite the substantial media hype.

9. The proportion of female to male viewers of soap opera remains approximately two to one. Typical figures for 2001 showed that people over 65 watched the most, their favourites being Coronation Street and Emmerdale, with an average of 3 hours viewing a week. Hollyoaks and Home and Away appealed most to the 16 to 24 and 25 to 34 age groups.
which accompanied its launch, while the new *Crossroads* series was unable to capture the regular audience of its long-running predecessor and was rapidly removed from the schedules. Why failures should occur remains unclear. Critics point to the poor quality or lack of coherence in series like *Eldorado*, but the same argument could have applied to the original *Crossroads* which critics and viewers alike regarded as at best mediocre and sometimes laughable in the amateurishness of its decor, dialogue, plot, acting and absence of continuity. It is even argued that the very appallingness of the soap attracted viewers avid to see the new depths to which the show might plunge. What Mal Young's different "ages" seem to suggest is that the genre can accommodate a range of approaches which may survive side by side, but that a degree of evolution is essential, while established series are best placed to manage change.

**Realism or idealisation?**

As the examples of *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* show, the notion of "realism" is a key factor for success, but the concept does need to be treated with caution. In the world of soaps, the term can be interpreted in three principal ways, which critics tend to use according to their own particular interests, the series they are discussing and the time of writing. As we shall see, the "British realism" of Young's classification is close to the "social realism" mentioned by Marion Jordan when discussing *Coronation Street*, but both differ from the interpretations of, for instance, Ian Ang and John Fiske. In the case of the latter, we should note that, while Fiske is writing about the genre generally, Ang's remarks apply only to a single series. In her comments on *Dallas*, she emphasises the importance of subjectivity in the viewer's appreciation of the programme and his / her attitude to it. She claims, "what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world, a 'structure of feeling', or again that "what is experienced as real indicates above all else a certain structure of feeling which is aroused by the programme". These comments implicitly acknowledge what is clear for a British audience, namely that identification with the American setting and intrigues is, at best, highly improbable, but stress that a programme can establish its own norms which viewers may find acceptable and may thus be perceived as representing a certain reality. We may perhaps add that, as a true soap opera, *Dallas* contained some characters who were sufficiently remarkable as to excite among viewers a continuing interest in their fate. Ang's comments are thus valid for the whole question of the relationship between fiction and reality and between depiction and construction evoked in the title of this article.

In *Television Culture*, John Fiske explores the same issues. His opinions seem to coincide with those of Ang when he writes, "Realism is not a matter of fidelity to an empirical reality, but of discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed". Reality would therefore be a matter of "construction" which is achieved by the manner in which the stories are related and which, to extend the argument, depends on the conditioning of the spectator by observing certain expected norms. Later in the same critical work, Fiske stresses once more the importance of structure. He argues:

Realism can be defined by its form as by its content. This relates to what it does or what it shows (its content). Realism does not reproduce reality, it makes sense of it — the essence of realism is that it reproduces reality in such a form as to make it easily understandable. It does this primarily by ensuring that all links and relationships between its elements are clear and logical, that the narrative follows the basic laws of cause and effect and that every element is there for the purpose of helping to make sense: nothing is extraneous or accidental.

The latter part of this quotation covers familiar ground in the definition of literary realism, the standard concepts of causality and plausibility. More interesting for the phenomenon of the soap opera is the emphasis on the need for reality to be understandable, which suggests that the vision offered to the viewer has both a communicative and a didactic function. This takes us away from "realism" proper to the idea of a different dimension in the viewing and broadcasting process, suggesting that soap opera may have a function which goes beyond entertainment and beyond the construction of a fictional world towards a role in influencing the reactions of the spectator to the real world in which he / she lives. From the arguments offered by Ang and Fiske, we may well conclude that there is more to soap opera, or indeed more to realism than meets the eye; it is important to consider the familiar territory of "British" or "social" realism and of the difference between "authenticity" and "realism" in this light.

As Mal Young's "ages" suggest, "realism" was a dominant characteristic of British soap opera, at least until the 1980s. *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale* and *The Archers* adopted the approach of making events and characters as close as possible to those believed to be present in real life in Britain, and only *Crossroads* offered a different emphasis. Despite its recurrent characters, the arrival of new visitors to the fictional motel near Birmingham offered the opportunity to add new story lines which the other three soaps, centred around the home or close community, could much less plausibly exploit. The dates at which the three series in question started broadcasting are not without significance, as the initial social and economic model depicted was to prove to be particularly enduring. The world first portrayed in *The Archers* can be described as more or less immediately post-war, at a time when the

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country was still struggling to recover from the conflict and its aftermath. This was a
time of hope, but also of austerity; food rationing did not finally end until 1955 and
one of the explicit roles of the soap opera was to give factual information about
changes in government agricultural policy and a degree of practical advice to the
farming community in order for the supply of food to be maintained. The early
1950s were a time when authority went almost unquestioned and where, in rural
communities at least, the traditional social hierarchy still obtained. Moreover, in
order to ensure the reliability of the details given, The Archers appointed an
agricultural story editor, a title which still exists. Coronation Street dates from some
ten years later. The late 1950s and early 1960s were a period when, thanks to the
work of playwrights, novelists and cinema directors, the industrial towns and cities
of the Midlands and North of England, along with the lives and attitudes of their
working-class inhabitants, had begun to attract a certain fashionable interest. In
contrast to the effervescence of the 1960s, the following decade has often been
classed as “gloomy”, which may in part explain both the more stable and reassuring
rural model adopted for Emmerdale Farm and the hold it had over its regular
audience.

Coronation Street: rewriting social history

In the history of soap operas, it was nevertheless the realism of Coronation
Street which was to prove to be the most enduring and to attract the greatest amount
of critical attention. In the context of the 1960s, it is perhaps no surprise to see the
term “social realism” used for the depiction of the urban working-class in the series,
even though it should be remembered that soap opera is not a politically oriented
genre and therefore that the ideological connotations often applied to the expression
“social realism” are not relevant in this case. Indeed, anything shocking or
contentious was to be avoided, for, in the words of the creator of Coronation Street,
Tony Warren, subsequently quoted by Andrew Goodwin and Garry Whannel, the
programme was “in the business of entertaining, not offending”. A detailed
definition of what “social realism” in soap opera consists in was given by Marion
Jordan, who, although writing in 1991, in the heyday of EastEnders, clearly based
her comments heavily on the approach adopted in Coronation Street. She wrote:

Briefly, the genre of social realism demands that life should be presented in the form
of a narrative of personal events, each with a beginning, a middle and an end,
important to the central characters concerned, but affecting others in only minor

13. Distinctions were therefore made between major landowners (minor aristocracy), family
farmers (owning their land), tenant farmers, smallholders (who had another job besides
farming) and farm labourers.
14. Andrew Goodwin & Garry Whannel, Understanding Television, London, Routledge,
1990, 122.
ways; that though these events are ostensibly about social problems they should have as one of their central concerns the settling of people in life; [...] characters [...] should be credibly accounted for in terms of the ‘ordinariness’ of their homes, families, friends; [...] the locale should be urban and provincial; [...] the settings should be commonplace and recognisable (the pub, the street, the factory, the home and more particularly the kitchen); [...] the time should be ‘the present’; [...] the style should be such as to suggest an immediate, unprejudiced and complete view of reality; [...] to give, in summary, the impression that [...] the viewer has spent some time at the expense of the characters depicted 15.

We note here again that emphasis is laid on both characters and narrative convention as essential to realism, but that the anchoring of the story within an everyday and “recognisable” setting is obviously a key consideration. Moreover, the use of the modal “should” seems to suggest a prescriptive rather than a merely descriptive approach, which can be justified only by close observation of the use made of the ordinary and the commonplace in the series.

For the British viewer, the television “street” and its houses and other buildings have acted as an instant signal indicating the type of neighbourhood and its inhabitants. The houses represent a Victorian, or more properly Edwardian, terrace, the Coronation of the title being that of Edward VII in 1901. Such modest houses, joined to their neighbours on each side, were typical of building at the turn of the 20th century which provided basic accommodation for the respectable urban working-class and lower-middle-class. The areas where such housing was to be found were close to the centres of large towns and cities, for at that time people tended to live in close proximity both to their places of work and to other members of the extended family. The accommodation, as Coronation Street showed in 1960, was far from luxurious, the front door opened directly onto the pavement, there was mains water and drainage, but neither bathrooms nor inside lavatories were included in the design. Space was equally limited: such houses normally had only two bedrooms, the best downstairs room, the “front room”, was reserved for very special occasions only and the substantial kitchen was the place where most people spent most of their time. At each end of the original television street were two other establishments typical of such urban areas, the corner shop and the public house. If the initial studio setting of Coronation Street was typical, it was also faithful to an actual original, a certain Archie Street in Salford, the real name of the fictional town of Weatherfield in the series. The effect of a recognisable district was heightened by the filmed title sequence showing the roofs of rows upon rows of similar houses, all with their own chimneys giving out smoke from innumerable coal fires.

Despite this firm link to the real world, the original set was highly artificial (the houses were nothing more than painted wooden fronts \(^{16}\) and only one side of the street was shown). Opposite, but represented only in indoor scenes, were two other symbolic edifices, a small textile factory and the *Mission of Glad Tidings* \(^{17}\). Within this restricted setting then the bodily and spiritual welfare of the inhabitants was catered for, as well as offering opportunities for employment and limited leisure facilities. The action took place in both the public and private spheres. Indeed, the very promiscuity of the houses had a number of important and logical consequences. Many encounters took place outside of the home, in the corner shop, in the Mission and most notably in the pub, the *Rovers Return*, where the presence of two rooms, the bar and the snug, allowed separate groups of characters to be formed, and interaction between them to be shown \(^{18}\). What occurred in the public domain rapidly became common knowledge, thereby adding to the collective memory of both characters and spectators and fuelling the rumour and controversy on which the series thrived. Moreover, the street itself, for in the early 1960s the private motor car was still a rarity in working-class urban areas, served as the setting for major showdowns between characters, in a way which was reminiscent of Wild West movies in its predictability and inevitability. We should also note that the adoption of public areas as meeting places is sociologically plausible: the habit was acquired notably in the latter part of the 19\(^{th}\) century by the working population forced to live in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions.

If the street itself gave a very broad hint as to the social class of the inhabitants of Coronation Street, this impression was reinforced by the clothes, hairstyles, aspirations and activities of the different characters. Within the largely domestic contexts portrayed, it is no surprise that the dominant personalities should be, for a long time, women, segregated by age, which in turn conditioned their moral judgements and codes of behaviour. Virtually all were keen on minding other people’s business and spreading rumour, but they were equally worthy of respect, like the mother or “mam” lauded in Richard Hoggart’s celebrated evocation of working-class life and culture, *The Uses of Literacy* \(^{19}\). Men came to the fore only within the social sphere, in practical terms in the pub, the male-dominated workplace not being a setting for this soap. With the passage of time, the range of classes among the inhabitants of Coronation Street has broadened to include businessmen, professionals and even yuppies, albeit in limited numbers, but the more subtle differences were nevertheless the source of degrees of snobbery or envy which reflected real life attitudes. Thus, distinctions were to be made between

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16. We should remember both that viewers’ expectation of visual authenticity was limited and that the relatively unsophisticated black and white camera equipment of the time was unlikely to draw attention to the weaknesses of the set.
17. The Mission belonged to a unidentified non-conformist church.
18. See plans of the pub, appendix pages 95-96.
owner-occupiers, private tenants and later those who rented their accommodation from the council, while a classic conflict of middle-class and working-class mores was exhibited in the very first episode. The young Ken Barlow, born in the street, brought home for the first time a young lady who, like him, was in her final year at university. To his huge embarrassment, the spectacle which met their eyes when they entered the family home was the sight of Ken’s father and brother, busy repairing the younger son’s motor cycle in the kitchen. The incident itself was rich in plausible sociological detail: Ken, having passed the 11 plus 20 and gone to grammar school, was the first member of his family ever to enter higher education, where he came into contact with the wider world and different modes of thought, while the limited space within the Barlow home explained the need to conduct manual repairs within the communal cooking and eating area. In the 1960s, young Ken was something of a rebel, criticising his neighbours in an article for the local paper as “lazy-minded and politically ignorant” and joining in protests against the Vietnam War. In the longer term, despite his university education, he was to prove no more successful in life than his neighbours and his continued presence within the series is testimony to the domestic instincts and lack of professional ambition of many working-class children who profited from the better educational opportunities after the Second World War.

If this picture of limited ambition is typical, and therefore psychologically “realistic”, it is worth emphasising that a wealth of other detail serves to complete the picture. The slow advance in the quality of life and aspirations has been reflected by the arrival and subsequent general availability of the private motor car and the telephone, and by home improvements leading to much greater degree of comfort. Moreover, the references to actual events or current social trends, which punctuate the lives of the fictional characters, achieve the same purpose. In the mid 1960s, for instance, many streets like Coronation Street were demolished by over-zealous urban planners, destroying the communities which lived there, replacing the tightly-woven network of small houses and narrow streets by tower blocks in which human contact was difficult and which, as subsequent experience has shown, have been both a major source of discontent and a prey to vandalism. Archie Street in Salford fell victim to the push for redevelopment in 1968 and, seven years before, a script showed Coronation Street was threatened, a source for general disquiet until it was realised that the target of the bulldozers was not Coronation Street but Coronation Terrace. Reaction against ubiquitous concrete and glass has meant that those streets which survived the redevelopment of the 1960s and 1970s are still inhabited today.

20. The 11 plus was a written examination taken by almost all primary school children from the late 1940s until the rise of comprehensive education in the mid 1960s. Only those children deemed to be “academic” obtained a place at grammar school. In national terms, between 25 and 30 per cent of children went to grammar schools, but as education was controlled and administered locally, figures for different areas of the country varied widely.
but, since the housing has never been, in the legal sense, substandard, survival rather than gentrification has been on the agenda and such areas have not become a mecca for the wealthy. They nevertheless represent a part of a particular cultural heritage, a fact exploited by the programme in 2000 when Coronation Street itself became the subject of a preservation order, a convenient but not altogether unconvincing narrative device ensuring that the cobbledstones which had been present since 1960 and which were even then a substantial rarity in British urban settings, should be maintained intact for future generations of viewers.

Another realistic element brought to the soap opera by Coronation Street was the importance of regional identity. One of the reasons for the failure of BBC's early soap operas may well have been their national focus, which arguably reflected the Corporation's centralised structure in which the role of individual regions was limited. Independent television was conceived in a radically different way, with local companies (or contractors) maintaining substantial freedom over aspects of programming. It was important for them to establish firm ties with the areas they served, and part of this process was achieved through the settings of soap opera. Thus, Granada Television, broadcasting from its headquarters in Manchester, based the Weatherfield of Coronation Street on nearby Salford, while the Crossroads motel was situated at the equally fictional Kings Oak in the heart of the Midlands where the company ATV was centred. The same trend continued with the creation of a separate television region in England's largest county, which gave Yorkshire Television the opportunity to exploit the local countryside for Emmerdale (Farm). Channel 4, a national broadcaster from the very start, commissioned a provincial production company, Mersey Television, to create its soap opera Brookside, which was set, predictably enough, in the suburbs of Liverpool 21. The connection with the respective areas is achieved in a variety of ways, but one of the most abiding is that of pronunciation. If we accept the notion that regional accents are more marked within the lower social classes whose mobility is more limited, then the soap opera seems a natural vehicle for phonemes other than those of received pronunciation. Nowadays, the short vowels and flat intonations of the North are familiar to viewers even in the South of England, many of whom can recognise the nasal intonations of Birmingham or Liverpool, and some of whom can distinguish between them. At a time when national broadcasting was particularly London-centred, the accents of Coronation Street, most of whose first actors originated in the North and had spent years on stage in Northern repertory theatres, were a revelation and helped to initiate a regrowth of interest in the large industrial cities and their working-class inhabitants, even before the arrival of the Beatles. It is also a truism of realism that linguistic registers should reflect the social class of the speakers, something which

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21. The use of local settings has remained current practice. Apart from the programmes mentioned here, we may also quote Pobol Y Cwm (in Wales on S4C), River City (BBC Scotland, depicting Glasgow) and RTÉ's Fair City (Dublin).
soap operas in general, including the BBC’s London-based *EastEnders*, have successfully striven to achieve.

**Change and continuity**

One of the key problems faced by all soap operas is how to manage change while maintaining a plausible degree of continuity. In narrative terms, past events in the history of the series are easy to explain, by recourse to the memories of individual characters or their collective recollections, and may be reinforced by reference to similar experiences shared between fictional characters and real audience. Thus, such significant details as the names of previous inhabitants, the history of buildings or the previous misadventures and vices of current characters are evoked by personal memories and strike a chord with the conversations shared or heard by the real-life audience. On a day-to-day basis, continuity, essential to the survival of the series, is most often achieved through a gradual approach which corresponds to the theoretical notion that one of the appeals of soap opera is that viewers grow old at the same time as the characters. Change may equally be reflected and reinforced by the settings and decor used for filming, which may also be regarded as an element of realism. *EastEnders* is an exceptional case. It was given, from the start, an individual, purpose-built facility at Elstree with sets covering the outside of the fictional Albert Square, along with the insides of some of the buildings. In the 20 years of the programme no changes have proved necessary, largely because of the scope of the original decor, which includes several streets, containing a range of up-to-date business premises, a betting shop, a Chinese takeaway, a foodstore, a garage, a launderette, a Post Office, a video shop and a wine bar, along with the traditional pub, *The Queen Victoria. Coronation Street*, on the other hand, has seen a series of modifications, both in decor and title sequences, to accommodate colour broadcasting in 1969, to remove unwanted additions in 1971, to use authentic materials (49,000 bricks and 6,500 slates) from demolished houses in Salford in 1982 and to enlarge the whole outdoor set in 1990. *Brookside* took the realistic approach one step further. Mersey Television bought a whole cul-de-sac of new houses on the outskirts of Liverpool, using one to store film equipment and props and the others, and the road itself, for filming. The introduction of a studio set

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22. References in *Coronation Street* have included, for instance, Elsie Tanner’s typical amorous adventures with members of the US Army and Air Force during the Second World War and a detailed, plausible and entirely fictional history of the pub. The *Rover’s Return* was first named after a certain Philip Ridley, a member of the brewing family which owned the premises, on his return from the Boer War in 1902. In 1918, the name was modified to the *Rovers Return*, in honour of the troops coming home from the trenches of Flanders.

23. The *Grange Hill* set was on the same site until the creation of the new series in 2005.
to represent a local shopping centre was a later development. For its part, 
Emmerdale has used a mixture of indoor and outdoor settings, which have changed 
more out of necessity than design. The fictional village of Beckinsale was the real 
village of Arnciffe until 1976, when the number of visitors made it necessary to 
move to a second site, Esholt, which was replaced in turn by a new, specially 
constructed set on the nearby Harewood Estate. Lindley Farm, between Harrogate 
and Otley, was the original Emmerdale Farm, and only abandoned in 1993 when the 
owner, farmer Arthur Peel, retired. The script used the excuse of mining subsidence 
to justify the move, an argument which was less convincing for rural Yorkshire than 
for urban Coronation Street in 1965.

Change in soap opera is nevertheless both driven by the relentless passage of 
time and accelerated by a number of more specific factors linked to the demands of 
a fictional genre, among them narrative necessity (the need to find new story lines 
and replace unpopular characters), financial constraints (such as the obligation to 
maintain and if possible improve audience ratings) or the unexpected illnesses, 
withdrawals or deaths of established actors. With the arrival of new categories of 
soaps in the 1980s, change was to become more frequent and more radical, 
sometimes with the use of spectacular special effects. Indeed, the whole tempo of 
British soap operas was transformed, a new concept of the “dramatic” was born 
entirely in keeping, not with the “realism” evoked by Mal Young, but with what he 
refers to as “sensationalism”. It is now time to examine the concepts of the 
“sensational” and the “authentic”, in relation to the underlying question of the blend 
of fact and fiction in soap operas.

Sensationalism and authenticity

The primary instigator of the transformation of British soap operas in the 1980s 
was Phil Redmond, the creator of Grange Hill, whose Mersey Television was 
commissioned by Channel 4 to make Brookside. Channel 4 was, of all television 
stations, the one most suited for the experimentation of a new form of soap opera. It 
was, until the passing of the 1990 Broadcasting Act, a wholly-owned subsidiary of 
ITV which supplied a guaranteed income, while one of its statutory tasks was to 
encourage innovation by purchasing from independent production companies. 
Mersey Television was one such external provider. Rather than adopt the term 
“realism”, Redmond emphasised the “authenticity” of Brookside, a term which has 
ever been clearly defined, but seems to be closer to “reality” than to “realism”,

24. Subsidence caused n°7 Coronation Street to collapse, after which the local council 
replaced the building by a simple bench which remained in situ for 17 years.
25. Phil Redmond has subsequently launched Hollyoaks and acted as technical adviser to 
Emmerdale.
26. Amounting to 13.6 % of national advertising revenue throughout the ITV network.
"tell[ing] the truth and show[ing] society as it is". Redmond's own comments are particularly revealing:

I well remember that people used to say to me: "It's different from other soaps – it's more real, it's like the news or a football match" [...] That was exactly the sort of reactions I wanted to hear. I wanted Brookside to be different – to break the mould if you like – and as a contemporary dramatist I have always wanted to show life as it is. I see Brookside as being about modern Britain, about real people.

Several key notions can be drawn from this admittedly retrospective observation. Firstly, Brookside was to be contemporary, depicting "modern" Britain. This is, at the very least, an implicit criticism of Coronation Street and Emmerdale for being outdated and presenting a social reality which no longer existed. Secondly, the comparisons made with other programmes are significant in themselves. The news is supposedly factual and authoritative, in contrast with the avowedly fictional character of soap opera, while a football match is immediate, exciting and popular. Moreover, Redmond's intention was revolutionary, to be "different" by "break[ing] the mould". This was achieved in a number of ways, from the use of outdoor sets and consequent changes in shooting techniques, to the frequency of bad language which attracted disapproval from such diverse sources as The Sun, The (Liverpool) Daily Post and Mary Whitehouse and her National Viewers' and Listeners' Association. Most significant was the mix of social groups which the soap opera included from the very start and which was favoured by the deliberately class-neutral setting of a modern residential area. Redmond himself explains the process in terms which indicate the universality of the issues raised and evoke the concept of a mixed community dear to Aneurin Bevan, while suggesting the varied storylines and conflicts which might ensue:

I came up with a mix of characters from different socio-economic groups living next door to one another on a mixed estate. There were people who would be on the way up, people who would be on the way down; the shop floor, middle-management and professional people; the black economy; trade unionists and Tories. What I did was to juxtapose them.

Perhaps the most interesting of Redmond's remarks is his reference to himself as a dramatist. At one level, this explains the use of more dynamic, some were soon to

29. Mary Whitehouse's NVALA (renamed Mediawatch after its founder's death) was created in 1964 and has campaigned consistently in favour of Christian values and against sex, violence and bad language in radio and television programmes.
30. Aneurin Bevan was Minister of Health in Attlee's post-war Labour government and as such was responsible for housing policy. His idealistic dream was that English housing estates (built by local councils) should resemble the Welsh villages of his youth, in which, he claimed, the doctor and labourer lived side by side in the same street.
say more sensational, story-lines adopted in Brookside, but it is also a strong echo of the socially committed Wednesday Play and Play for Today series of the 1960s and 1970s, which through drama and drama documentary techniques raised key social and economic questions of the day. The revolutionary nature of Brookside can be seen through these two perspectives. On the one hand, the series was technically different from what had gone before. As Christine Geraghty put it, “Brookside has developed story lines which depend more on action and resolution than the more soap-oriented strategies of commentary and repetition” and it was precisely this concentration on dramatic action which was to be the key to the success of EastEnders and which prompted, in turn, radical new approaches from Coronation Street and Emmerdale. On the other hand, and arguably more memorably, Brookside’s concern with “issues” was to give soap opera a more informed and serious social purpose and, to some extent at least, to move it out of the field of pure entertainment into a more didactic and socially-aware sphere. Without wishing to produce what would be no more than a catalogue of the causes and issues discussed, suffice it to say that Brookside has prided itself on evoking a range of topics, from mental and physical handicap, genetic defects, learning difficulties, physical and sexual violence to the problems of drugs and crime. The programme’s initiatives have been welcomed by charities working in the fields in question and strengthened by the association of episodes with the activities of voluntary Helplines whose mission is to inform, to unite and to help victims.

The differences between Phil Redmond’s “authenticity” and the “social realism” of the existing series can therefore be found at various levels. In one sense, “authenticity” is a bringing up to date of “social realism”, accompanied by a greater diversity of characters and situations, by much more striking language and by a desire to confront contemporary life and its problems. This was to be a trademark of EastEnders, a series which nevertheless needs to be viewed differently. Although clearly created in the wake of Brookside, what is most striking is the stress on plot-driven incidents and major confrontations, for which the term sensationalism is not unjustified. Strong characters and dramatic story lines have been the key attribute of the series, where violence, verbal or physical, has never been far below the surface, while the wider range of characters and multiple plots add pace and keep the excitement which has always been essential to the maintenance of audience figures. In this context, it is no surprise that, if the most watched episodes in Coronation Street concerned the romanticism of the marriages of Valerie Tatlock to Ken Barlow, Deirdre Langton to the same Ken Barlow and Elsie to Steve Tanner, respectively attracting audiences of 20 million viewers in 1962, 21 million in 1981

32. The most frequently quoted example is Cathy Come Home (1966), directed by Ken Loach.
34. Such as the British Dyslexia Association, the British Meningitis Trust, the Down’s Syndrome Association and Refuge, a charity working to protect battered women.
and viewers in 9.5 million homes in 1967, EastEnders' highest rating of 30 million was achieved in 1986 when the adulterous and violent Denis Watts, alias "Dirty Den", offered his long-suffering, depressed and alcoholic wife Angie a divorce petition as Christmas present. The qualities of EastEnders are undeniable. The series was the first to include racial minorities on other than a token basis, giving a genuine reflection of the racial mix in the capital. It has dealt with issues of particular interest to the young, "aspects of adult life from which they were normally 'protected'" \(^{35}\) and the impression of the depiction of real life incidents is heightened by neutral camera work. As David Buckingham observes, "the use of the camera is unobtrusive and largely static, with only rare use of close-ups and tracking; the editing seeks to be 'invisible'" \(^{36}\). The social questions raised are numerous and pertinent to contemporary life, including racketeering at school, drugs, AIDS, unemployment and insecurity and the way in which the delicate matter of breast cancer was handled attracted approval from the then Minister of Health. Nevertheless, since Brookside, social issues are no longer a novelty in soap opera and have even become an area where a good idea is taken up again, later, in a different form and serves to sustain several episodes of a series. The example of conjugal violence is a case in point. The question was evoked by Brookside in 1992, in a complex plot-line lasting two years and spiced with incest, lesbianism and the burying of a body under a patio. Ten years later, EastEnders' Mo Slater was acquitted of murdering her abusive husband, but only after a lengthy and much-heralded trial sequence which attracted attention in the popular press and higher than normal viewing figures. Overall, EastEnders undoubtedly has its realistic and contemporary side, "we don't make life, we reflect it" as the co-creator of the series Julie Smith was proud to proclaim, but the abiding impression of the soap is that its principal virtue is as entertaining, compelling drama with a predilection for testing the limits of the genre by the use of the excessive and sensational.

Fact and fiction

Where do these arguments leave the question of the blend of fact and fiction in the construction of British society in soap opera? One point is almost immediately apparent: although the genre is notoriously situated in the present, long-running soap operas frequently fail to remain up-to-date, a feature which can be partly attributed to the gradualist approach to the management of change evoked above. This is not the whole story, however. The construction may be deliberately selected to achieve a particular mood. A rural setting, as in The Archers and Emmerdale,


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 74 (original emphasis).
naturally brings associations of timelessness, respecting the cycles of nature and the seasons along with customs hallowed by tradition and experience. In both soaps, substantial emphasis is placed on delights virtually unknown to an urban population such as the beating the bounds, the Hunt Ball, the Christmas pantomime or other dramatic production, the Flower and Produce Show and the successes and failures of the village cricket team. Moreover, in rural contexts, idyllic or not, the old ways are still present and the picture of a traditional rural community is not necessarily hopelessly or deliberately old-fashioned, but may reflect some aspects of the points of view of country dwellers. According to Paul Cornell, this, at least, was the opinion of the creator of *Emmerdale*, Kevin Laffan. He writes:

The series is unique in featuring the joys of sheepdog trials, the annual cricket match against Robblesfield, and the problems of farming equipment, pot-holing and sheep rustling. [...] And yet, if anything, Kevin Laffan [...] wanted to demythologize the countryside, noting of the farmer that “sustaining and destroying life is his business”. *Emmerdale* can claim to be the most literary, spiritual or even “earthy” soap, Laffan commenting that “real country folk are fundamentalists. They accept all the facts of life [...] without worrying over the niceties of social etiquette” 37.

Nevertheless, *Emmerdale* has been obliged to modernise its story lines and to introduce the kinds of sensational themes found in other soaps, which may be a tacit admission that the series felt the need to stress that it was not old-fashioned.

Some of the same arguments apply to *Coronation Street*. Right from the start, concentration was on a close-knit local community, with its own interests, problems and jealousies but one could argue that the vision has never been completely up-to-date. This at least was the point of view endorsed by Marxist social and media commentator Raymond Williams when he wrote as long ago as 1973:

*Coronation Street* is a distanced and simplified evocation and prolongation of a disappearing culture; the northern urban backstreets of the depression and its immediate aftermath 38.

Along with the working-class setting, the ages of the characters depicted may account for some of the backward-looking perspective. At the start of the series, many of them were already of pensionable age, which helped to complete necessary details of the history of the street, but at the same time slowed the advent of new ideas. It was, for instance, not until 1990 that a coloured family settled permanently in Weatherfield, taking over the mini-market which had superseded the original corner shop.

Despite its much more recent broadcasting debut, *EastEnders* cannot entirely escape the charge of being retrospective. By the 1980s, the traditional working-class East End of London had largely disappeared and the fictional London Thames side

setting of *EastEnders*, Walford E 20, had already been taken over by the professional and commercial district of the Docklands and Canary Wharf. One of the houses around Albert Square, n°5, was evocative of an even older period: the building had been left derelict since the Blitz of the Second World War. The substantial amount of low-level local criminal activity which has been a regular feature of the series is another cliché and typical of many programmes dealing with the poorer districts of the capital. The presentation no doubt contains a grain of truth, although it is hard to overlook echoes of the reign of the Kray twins, notorious gangsters whose brutal behaviour dominated the East End, but which ended when they were sentenced to life imprisonment in 1969. Of the major British soaps, then, only *Brookside* may truly be said to be free from the accusation of being old-fashioned, a tribute to the vision of Phil Redmond whose dedication to contemporary authenticity included determination to eliminate a familiar landmark, the pub, which in his opinion reflected an outmoded view of social life:

One crucial element in [the] portrayal would be the absence of a local pub. Communities in the 1980s did not and do not base themselves around the local pub in the same way as in the past. I was determined not to have a Rovers Return in *Brookside* (or indeed as we have seen more lately a Queen Vic in *EastEnders*). [...] People in modern Britain tend not to go into the pub and announce all their private and personal business to all concerned.\(^\text{39}\)

As I have suggested, the evolution of the genre has brought with it a much increased use of dramatic, action-packed plots touching on modern "issues". We may nevertheless wonder how far these truly reflect society, while noting one further drawback, namely that different soap operas sometimes seem to have an exaggerated concentration on the catastrophic, which is far from reassuring. Commenting on her personal experience in the United States, Helena Sheehan suggested the essential implausibility of many American soap opera story lines:

These stories were meant to be about ordinary lives of ordinary people in ordinary towns of the time, although it was extraordinary how many affairs, surprise appearances and disappearances, exotic diseases, afflications of amnesia, murders, kidnappings and frauds befell such a small number of people in such small towns.\(^\text{40}\)

British soap opera has not stretched credibility to the same extent, but there is a strong movement in the direction of such excess, as the first episode of *EastEnders* showed. It began with a murder which remained unsolved for a number of weeks and ended with a character being thrown out of the pub and breaking a window with his fist. The series continued in the same vein, as by the end of the first year of broadcasting a surprising number of other life-changing events had occurred in a single family, the Fowlers. The forty-one-year-old mother found herself pregnant,


\(^{40}\) Comments made at the *Imagining Ireland* conference held at the Irish Film Institute in Dublin on 31 October 1993.
refused an abortion and gave birth to her third child, her son was tempted into joining a racist organisation, feared reprisals and ran away from home. Meanwhile his sister, still at school and unable to find a boyfriend of her own age, became fascinated by older men and soon became pregnant, the identity of the (married) father only being revealed after a month of suspense.

What Helena Sheehan’s comments quite correctly suggest is that what makes for an imperfect reflection of society is not so much that shattering events occur, but that so many things happen to so few people, and, one might add, with such frequency. This may be partly attributable to the habits of the society depicted. As the pub is a central meeting place in British soap opera, it is not surprising that the number of drinking scenes should be considerable 41, and a logical consequence of this may be alcohol-related violence and criminality. On the other hand, soap opera characters do seem more disaster-prone, as well as more fertile, than the rest of the population 42. The number of deaths and accidents is a case in point: over the first 40 years of Coronation Street no fewer than 75 characters “died”, mostly in a sudden and unexpected fashion (20 from heart attacks, 22 in motor accidents, many of which were, for reasons of convenience, reported rather than shown). In view of the ages of many of the characters, it is surprising that old age should account for less than 10 % of the deaths, while cancer, the nation’s second-largest killer, claimed only five victims. It is undoubtedly true that respect for the public’s feelings may explain a desire to avoid showing lengthy scenes of suffering, but, by any criteria, Coronation Street remains a statistical anomaly. A similar criticism would be that a spectacular accident, often a fire, is another over-used device in soap opera plot construction, allowing the elimination of unloved characters, the departure of actors seeking new openings or simply the modification of a set. The most spectacular of such disasters was undoubtedly the plane crash which struck Emmerdale’s Beckinsale in 1993, when Phil Redmond was acting as adviser to the series. Filming the event took three weeks, cost over £1 million and eliminated several characters. The incident was sufficiently similar to the real Lockerbie air crash some five years before to cause an outcry among victims’ families, and, in the context of an assessment of soap opera, must be regarded once more as taking the sensational too far and giving a needlessly exaggerated view of the perils of life within British society.

41. According to serious research undertaken in 1997, the amount of time devoted to drinking scenes in British soaps is more than twice that in American and Australian series (14 % compared with 6 %). See Adrian Furnham, Barrie Gunter and Alastair McClelland, _A Content Analysis of Alcohol Portrayal and Drinking in British Television Soap Operas_, in Health Education Research, vol. 12, no 4, Oxford, OUP, 1997, 519-529.

42. An article published in the British Medical Journal in July 1998 entitled _Death Rates of Characters in Soap Operas on British Television: Is a Government Health Warning Required_ judged that “television gives a distorted picture of birth as well as death”.
If we accept, then, that soap opera no longer reflects society as it is, nor indeed ever has done, but is rather a convenient construction, "a perfect copy of a world and of a way of life that never existed" in historian Paul Hewison's memorable phrase 43, what is then its relationship to and attraction for the public? Clearly, entertainment (or the willingness to be diverted, what the poet Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief") is a major factor. The lasting popularity of soap opera has made it a ready source of copy for the popular press, a subject of conversation and the object of remarkable enthusiasm, to judge by the affectionate names, Corrie and Brookie by which two of the series have been known, the success of publications dealing with the different series, the number of unofficial web sites created to comment on and provide background details and the popularity of the studios as visitor attractions, one might almost say places of pilgrimage. It is undeniable that many viewers feel a strong sense of identity with television soaps as somehow belonging to them, which seems to blur their ability to distinguish fact and fiction. The characters of soap operas have become public figures whose love affairs, marriages, divorces, child bearing, illnesses and deaths have been successful in capturing audience ratings, but this is no recent phenomenon. On the night in September 1955 when ITV started broadcasting, the BBC competed by transmitting an episode of The Archers featuring the death of the heroine Grace Archer. In 1961, the year after the introduction of Coronation Street, the series became the theme for the annual Blackpool Illuminations held at the celebrated Lancashire seaside resort and actress Violet Carson was invited to switch on the lights. She appeared resplendent and was duly applauded, but attracted an even bigger cheer when she seized the opportunity while the spectators were gazing elsewhere to slip on the old raincoat and hairnet which were the characteristic garb of her fictional character, the instantly recognisable Ena Sharples.

This confusion of fact and fiction in the public mind is one of the extreme reactions to soap opera, to which the popular press has been known to contribute. In 1983, Coronation Street's Deirdre Barlow was temted by the prospect of an extramarital affair. The Daily Star carried out a survey of its readers, who considered that she should move in with her lover, while the Sunday Mirror and Daily Express argued that she should stay with her husband. Fifteen years later, when the same Deirdre (now Raffid, having divorced after all and of course remarried and furthermore been widowed in the meantime) was wrongly imprisoned for using a stolen credit card, four newspapers leapt to her defence, campaigning the freedom of the "Weatherfield One". It took an editorial in the Evening Standard to bring a note of good sense to events, reminding its readers "she is not real, you know".

43. Used to describe the process of television advertising in the BBC Broadcast Washes Whiter in 1990.
This identification with soap opera characters seems to have limited unfavourable reactions to some of the more extreme story lines, although the growing tendency to voyeurism in other television programmes like “reality shows” may suggest that the public is acquiring a more general penchant for such salacious detail. This does not mean, of course, that an overdose of stories featuring violence, marital infidelity, promiscuity, drug taking or homosexuality is necessarily to everyone’s liking. Mary Whitehouse was shocked by the arrival of the “three s’s”, sex, sin and sensationalism, in the new-look *Emmerdale* and dubbed the programme “a den of vice”, and this has not been an isolated judgement. Fans of the programme who had created the *Emmerdale.Net* website ended operations in June 2002, more in sorrow than in anger it would seem, leaving just a tombstone bearing the inscription

RIP
EMMERDALE
1972-2001

"A once proud soap-opera [...] Done for by Yorkshire Television,

*itself under the evil spell of the Granada Group*

Some commentators have blamed the general fall in viewing figures of all soap operas on an excess of shouting, rowing, violence and bad language, while a *Coronation Street* plot-line in 2002 permitted an unusual and, some would say refreshingly amusing, glimpse at the new political correctness through the actions of Les Battersby, already established as a somewhat comic figure. When his wife walked out, he took in a lodger in order to be able to pay his rent. Unfortunately, his landlord, the local council, discovered what he had done, which was in contravention of his tenancy agreement and threatened eviction. In desperation, Les persuaded his (male) lodger to pretend to be his lover, which would enable the “homosexual couple” to continue to occupy the accommodation. The problem was solved in farcical fashion, Mrs Battersby returned home and was suitably (and indignantly) amazed to learn of her husband’s hitherto unsuspected sexual inclinations, while the lodger beat a rapid retreat. It must nevertheless be admitted that this kind of ironical take on the norms of soap opera remains the exception, rather than the rule.

What is undeniable is that the important place occupied by soap operas has enabled them to have substantial influence, if not on the whole of British society then at least on a considerable number of individuals and their attitudes, and that this has always been a feature of broadcasting as a whole. The potential of the new medium for good or evil was acknowledged right at the start of the British Broadcasting Corporation, which, in its first Royal Charter, granted in 1926, had as
its function to inform, to educate and to entertain 44 three terms which are not without relevance to soap opera. The entertainment value of the genre is, it would seem, self-evident. The giving of factual information is another role which has been fulfilled from time to time, more or less directly in the early days of The Archers, more recently through the indirect, but highly effective means of the experiences of characters with whom the audience feels a sense of empathy or identity. The first such case concerned the newly-introduced social security payment called Supplementary Benefit in 1967. At the request of the government, a Coronation Street script was produced showing a pensioner, Minnie Caldwell, explaining how she had applied successfully for the new allowance and urging her friend Ena Sharples to do the same 45. Subsequent initiatives have been conducted with the approval, if not on the direct orders, of government. Nowadays, in an age when authority is frequently called into question, it might be more correct to talk of heightening awareness and understanding, rather than of education or information per se. The showing of excessive behaviour, conjugal violence or drinking and driving, for instance, may have a certain cathartic effect on viewers, without the need for explicit condemnation. Giving actual details of the nature of AIDS, its transmission and its real, rather than imagined, consequences was arguably easier to achieve through a fictional story line and characters, than via traditional educative methods. The sight of a well-known EastEnders character, Mark Fowler, revealing that he was HIV positive and deciding to take counselling at the Terrence Higgins Trust 46 no doubt had a beneficial effect by pointing to a channel of help for sufferers from the disease, as well as reminding viewers of the danger of infection through heterosexual intercourse. Considered in one way, and paradoxically for a dramatic genre, the role of soap opera in such cases is therapeutic precisely in the sense of dedramatising a problem by allowing sufferers from major health, economic, psychological or social difficulties to take comfort from the realisation that they are not alone and that help may be available. A less charitable view would be that such story-lines are designed to attract an audience by playing to voyeuristic instincts. Opinions will vary as to which interpretation is correct, but the question does put into perspective the possible functions of soaps. The therapeutic argument was well formulated, in the context of drama and fiction, by Phil Redmond and it seems fair to quote in full the argument to the man principally responsible for bringing social issues into soap opera:

There are two schools of thought on contemporary drama. The first is the often declared view that all drama should be escapism or fantasy. The thriller, suspense,
"Dallas'/Dynasty" type of fiction. The other view, and the one which I support quite strongly, is that drama should have a strong reassurance element. [...] We have all had experiences in our lives where we have asked the questions: "Why me? Why is this happening to me?" It is therefore often reassuring to turn on a drama and see characters, although fictional, going through the same situation. Despite the fact that it is clearly fiction, the audience can accept that behind these fictional characters there are writers, producers, directors, actors, some of whom have obviously experienced the situation for it to reach the screen. Somebody else understands 47.

Evaluating soap operas and society is then a complex task. The genre may be and often has been purely entertaining, comfortably old-fashioned, excitingly modern or challenging, but it nevertheless remains, despite all the realistic or pseudo-realistic aspects which serve to reinforce the links between viewer/listener and characters, a fictional product. Despite all the references to real and mediatised events, to personalities and to real or supposed social trends and problems which may sometimes lull the audience into forgetting that what is being shown is not real life, soap opera offers a fictional interpretation and construction of aspects of a section of society at a given time and in a given place. It does not represent society, it reflects it, whether it helps to change or sustain it is another question.

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Appendix

Coronation Street, Rovers Return Inn (1902-1986)
Coronation Street, Rovers Return Inn (1986 to now)
COMIC CONSTRUCTIONS AND SOCIAL REALITIES

The case of the British black sitcom (1972-1998)

Amandine DUCRAY *

The second half of the twentieth century marks a watershed in the history of British race relations. The independence of India in August 1947 followed — almost a year later — by the arrival of the Windrush both put an end to the Empire and paved the way towards what is now referred to as a multi-racial/cultural society. This, as Kobena Mercer suggests, was paralleled by the restart of the BBC, after World War Two, and the launching of a new independent television network:

During the 1950s two events occurred which, between them, transformed everyday life and public culture in Britain. One was the mass migration and settlement of Caribbean, Asian and African citizens from the former colonies of an Empire [...] the other was the mass installation of television sets wired up and tuned-in to receive broadcasts from the BBC and the newly-formed ITV network 1.

The first Black performers to appear on British television were the Afro-American duo Buck and Bubbles whose singing and dancing number was broadcast on the very day the BBC was inaugurated, November, 2, 1936. From Cy Grant’s performances in Tonight (BBC, 1957-1960) to those of the blacked-up artists of The Black and White Minstrel Shows (BBC, 1948-1978), there seems to be a long tradition of representing ethnic minorities in playful or comic roles on British television.

Television is an ambivalent medium. It draws its inspiration from the Zeitgeist of a given society and re-creates it at the same time so as to meet the needs and expectations of the audience. By echoing the point of view of the greatest number of viewers, it further contributes to re-presenting a common fund of cultural knowledge and establishes the notions of representation and of community as foundation stones in the process of TV broadcasting. This is also how comedy works. A joke presupposes common references and, more often than not, draws a line between ‘us’, who laugh, and ‘them’, the butt of the joke. For humour, like television, is both structural and conjectural. It is based on well-entrenched, socially established comic conventions and constructions which are nonetheless subject to renewal and may express contemporary social realities.

* Senior lecturer, University of Paris X Nanterre, France.

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The present study will focus on the representation of ethnic minorities in five British black sitcoms broadcast on BBC, ITV and Channel 4 from 1972 to 1998: *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV, 1972-1976); *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum* (BBC1, 1974-1981); *Mind Your Language* (ITV, 1977-1979; 1986); *Desmond’s* (Channel 4, 1989-1994) and *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC2, 1998-2000). 2. Spanning a little more than twenty-five years, these comedies all constitute different testimonies of the so-called ‘race relations problem’. And if each depends on its context, these texts, once analysed and compared, should nonetheless enable us to tackle the evolution of the comic portrayal of Black people (Africans, Caribbeans, or Asians) on British TV from the early seventies to the late nineties.

Towards a definition of the ‘black sitcom’

The sitcom is part and parcel of British television. Here is how Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik define it: “The term ‘sit-com’ describes a short narrative-series comedy, generally between twenty-four and thirty minutes long, with regular characters and setting” 3. The authors thus lay emphasis on five generic elements:

- Its comic mode;
- Its brevity;
- Its narrativity;
- The recurrence of the characters and of their environment;
- Its seriality.

Yet if this structure is common to the sitcom and to the black sitcom, the latter’s motives and style seem to place it as a genre of its own. I shall first briefly remind the reader of some of the generic conventions common to those two types of TV broadcasts and then suggest a definition for the specific category of black sitcom.

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2. It is mainly the first series of these programmes which will be dealt with in this article. *Goodness Gracious Me* is not strictly speaking a sitcom but a sketch show. Yet its recurring protagonists and situations enable the audience to follow the adventures and misadventures of the characters as they would in any sitcom. Mark Lewisohn compared it to *The Fast Show* (BBC2, 1994-2000), underlining that, in both programmes, “recurring characters provid[e] vital continuity”. Mark Lewisohn, *Radio Times Guide to TV Comedy*, London: BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2003 [1998], 328.

Sitcom and Black sitcom: common generic conventions

Among the generic conventions shared by the 'traditional' sitcom and the black sitcom, one is of particular interest to me concerning the relationship between social realities and comic constructions. Jerry Palmer explains: "[...] the story always refers to some situation which, however farcically exaggerated, is a recognisable feature of the everyday social world of its audience" 4, thus underlining the extra-diegetical nature of the genre. The situations encountered by the characters in this kind of series seem indeed to be rooted in the contemporary society in which they are broadcast. The possibility, for the viewers, to anticipate the actions and reactions of the protagonists is therefore not only triggered by the recognition of recurring types that they are familiar with, but also by that of a social landscape which is itself typical of a given society at a given time.

Except It Ain't Half Hot, Mum, set in 1945 India, all the comedies studied in this article deal with a period of time contemporary with their period of broadcasting. The situations presented, despite their fictional natures, therefore potentially echo the everyday experience of the audience. They are social realities reconstructed via comic fictions. The arrival of the Reynolds, British citizens from Jamaica, who, in the early seventies, move next door to left-wing, patriotic and staunch Labourite Eddie Booth and his wife Joan in the working-class district of Twickenham thus rang true to British viewers (Love Thy Neighbour). This was also the case for the British-Guyanese-owned barbershop of Desmond's in Peckham 5, the College of Further Education in Mind Your Language and its English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes as well as the sundry sketches of Goodness Gracious Me. These various characters and situations were all credible for the contemporary viewing public.

The sitcom relies on two kinds of convention: on the one hand, it is based on types whose stock behaviours the audience can anticipate and, on the other, it is of a social, and therefore transient, nature. Those programmes are organised so as to

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5. The inventor of the sitcom, St Lucian Trix Worrell, thus explains: "I got a phone call from my agent saying that Humphrey Barclay and Farrukh Dhondy were looking for a new comedy series and that they were interested in meeting me. At the time I didn't have the vaguest idea of any comedy I wanted to write. [...] Anyway, I was on my way to meet Humphrey on the bus when I spotted a barber shop – the bus must have pulled up at a set of traffic lights and it was about nine o'clock in the morning. All these school girls were coming past and I saw these guys, three barbers, with their faces pressed up against the shop window, ogling. I remember it so vividly, because the barber shop around the corner from where I was brought up in Peckham (South East London) was like that. And that's how the idea for Desmond's came to me". Trix Worrell interviewed by Jim Pines (ed.), Black and White inColour: Black People in British Television Since 1936, London: British Film Institute, 1992, 184.
place stereotyped characters in plausible situations, which, as I shall study later, can account for the possible racial readings of TV series handling the thorny ‘race relations problem’. Yet if the traditional and the black sitcoms share a common structure, the latter seems to have both a history and a hermeneutic of its own.

**What to understand by ‘black sitcom’?**

Though the American academic Darrell Y. Hamamoto, by forging the expression ‘ethnicon’, hints at the possibility of seeing in this specific format a genre of its own — where the term ‘sit(uation)’ would be replaced by that of ‘ethn(ic)ty’ — there is no such terminological equivalent in the British context 6. The phrase used this side of the Atlantic is ‘black sitcom’, which, like ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ sitcoms, suggests that those are only variations of the supra-genre, situation comedy.

The very first black sitcom, *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, dates back to the thirties. First entitled *Sam ‘n’ Henry*, the series narrated the story of two single Afro-Americans (Alvin Childress and Spencer Williams) leaving their rural South for the promising Chicago and then for New York. It was broadcast from 1928 to 1955 on Chicago radio station WGN and spotted by CBS which bought it in 1929 and transferred it to television in the fifties. The invention of the black sitcom thus coincided with that of the sitcom, born in the same decade and in the same country. The format, black or not, was soon exported to Britain and *Amos ‘n’ Andy* was the first black sitcom to appear on British screens (BBC, 1954-1957).

More than ten years later, the very popular, and satirical, *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1, 1966-1968; 1972-1975) initiated a new trend in the British broadcasting landscape. Even though no black actor was part of the cast, Johnny Speight’s British sitcom was the first to tackle the polemical subject of race relations in contemporary Britain. Its main protagonist, Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell), was a kind of a working class hero as well as a loud-mouthed bigoted racist. As many critics underline, his ideas paralleled some of the worst fears of white members of the audience. His invention occurred at a time when Enoch Powell’s views were significant in British politics and, as Andy Medhurst comments among others, it seems that, despite its scriptwriter’s good intentions, the viewers were laughing *with* rather than *at* his prejudiced behaviour 7.

The very first British black sitcom was in fact born in 1972. Its title was promising enough: *Love Thy Neighbour*. Depicting the tense relationship between two neighbours and colleagues, one black, the other white, it was transmitted on ITV

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until 1976. Independent Television was, in this respect, more innovative than the BBC as *The Fosters* (ITV, 1976-1977) and *Mixed Blessings* (ITV, 1978-1980), which both cast black actors, tend to show. Despite a tepid welcome — it only ran for two seasons — *The Fosters* constitutes a further landmark in the representation of ethnic minorities in British TV sitcoms: the series was the first with an all black cast. *Desmond’s* followed ten years later. Table 1 sums up this evolution:

**Table 1: Chronology of the black sitcom on British TV**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broadcasting period</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fifties</strong></td>
<td>Importation of the first American black sitcom</td>
<td><em>Amos 'n' Andy</em> (BBC, 1954-1957)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Late sixties**    | Introduction of a ‘race relations’ theme in British sitcoms | *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC1, 1966-1968; 1972-1975)  
                      |                                               | *Curry and Chips* (ITV, 1969) |
| **Seventies**       | Beginning of the first British black sitcoms    | *Love Thy Neighbour* (ITV, 1972–1976)  
| **Late seventies - Eighties** | Beginning of the first British sitcoms with an all black cast ("all black sitcoms") | *The Fosters* (ITV, 1976-1977)  
                      |                                               | *Desmond’s* (Channel 4, 1989-1994) |

As Table 1 indicates, the pioneering *Till Death Us Do Part* does not belong to the category of black sitcoms since none of the main protagonists is played by a black actor. Neither does the short-lived *Curry and Chips* (ITV, 1969), also written by Johnny Speight, in which a blacked-up Spike Milligan embodied Kevin O’Grady, best known to his work-mates and to the audience as ‘Paki Paddy’, a character of mixed parentage – Irish on his father’s side, Pakistani on his mother’s – who was regularly opposed to black character Kenny (Kenny Lynch). The writer’s third attempt, *In Sickness And In Health* (BBC1, 1985-1992), a spin-off of *Till Death Us
_Do Part_, gives an ethnic minority protagonist the opportunity to answer the bigoted Alf Garnett. His gay home-help Winston (Eamonn Walker) is Black. The white character, however, as in the previous series, is as racist as ever and the chance given to a member of the Commonwealth immigrants' community to speak for himself therefore, as in _Curry and Chips_, inevitably thwarted.

Vince Powell and Harry Driver's _Love Thy Neighbour_ (ITV, 1972–1976), on the contrary, managed to give Rudolph Walker, who plays the British-Jamaican Bill Reynolds, one of the two leading roles of the series, thus fulfilling one of the first criteria of the black sitcom. For it seems that one of the conditions under which a British sitcom can be termed 'black' is that at least one of the main protagonists, i.e. one who appears systematically on screen, is a member of an ethnic minority group, be it the African, the Caribbean or the Asian community. Such a focus on 'coloured' characters is significant on the British broadcasting scene; it is in stark contrast with the practice of 'tokenism' which, especially used in TV fictions and dramas, amounts to having a few black extras or minor characters in the cast.

A second criterion is that the plot itself is more or less able to raise ethnic considerations. While Winston, in _In Sickness And In Health_, seems to serve as a mere foil to Alf's bigotry, Bill Reynolds, in _Love Thy Neighbour_, though subject to Eddie Booth's racism, has a voice and an opinion of his own — a condition established by actor Rudolph Walker himself before signing in with Thames Television.

However, the representation of ethnic considerations does not necessarily have to be positive about ethnic minorities. A sitcom is 'black' when it represents either a numerically balanced contact between two communities which are traditionally opposed or, as in series with an all black cast, an account of the experience of ethnic minority.

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8. A more radical third approach is 'integrated casting', which a policy statement first formulated during the 1983 conference of the actors' trade union Equity explained as follows: "The casting of artists in productions (dance/drama etc.) so that the cast/ensemble, in its entirety, is multiracial in composition. The casting of performers must be on the basis of their individual abilities as performers regardless of their racial origins. The range and type of work is in no way restricted, or bounded by stereotypical traditions and conventions. The establishment and practice of an equal opportunity programme in every aspect of the entertainment industry. The casting of artists in production(s) that exceeds tokenism. Whilst African, Caribbean, Oriental and Asian artists continue to be the subject of discrimination, they should be given preferential consideration in the casting of parts specifically written as African, Caribbean, Oriental or Asian. Equity acknowledges that the practice known as 'blacking-up' is offensive to many performers and cannot be justified except in very limited circumstances".

9. Rudolph Walker recalls: "[...] it was agreed that if the bigoted white neighbour called me something I would call him the equivalent back. If he hit me, I would hit him back. In other words, we were to be on a par. Once those conditions were met, I certainly felt happy about doing it, and, to a certain extent, I enjoyed it". Rudolph Walker interviewed by J. Pines (ed.), _op. cit._, 78.
minority groups in British society. *Love Thy Neighbour*, *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum* and *Mind Your Language* belong to the first category whereas the second can be illustrated by comedies such as *Desmond's* and *Goodness Gracious Me*. The range of programmes which can be called ‘black sitcoms’ is therefore quite broad, which implies that each expresses an original point of view on contemporary race relations and (re-)presents varying, and sometimes contradictory, comic images of black people on British television.

**The sub-division of black sitcoms: Ideology vs. Culture?**

Ever since Buck and Bubbles’ inaugural appearance on the BBC in November 1936, one of the areas in which ethnic minorities have been the most represented on British television has remained ‘Light Entertainment’. And, since the seventies and the advent of the British black sitcom, they are proportionally more numerous in these programmes as Jim Pines, Stuart Hall and Lola Young have all noted. Yet, because of its large definition, this format can promote various comic messages as far as ethnicity is concerned.

Their content first depends on the source and the target of the joke. It also depends on the context, or to use Roland Barthes’ phrase, on its au-crage, as well as on whether or not the sitcom is with an all black cast. *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum*, by referring both to a microcosm external to Britain (Deolali, India) and to a bygone past (the British Empire in 1945) stands out as an exception among the five programmes studied in this paper. By having a blacked-up Michael Bates as Ranji, an Indian servant and true Uncle Tom, the series further seems to play with a certain nostalgia of the British viewers for the ‘good old days’. Moreover, despite the


11. Despite the end of the BBC twenty-year-running *Black and White Minstrel Shows* in 1978, i.e. one year after the publication of the Anman Report on the Future of
presence of natives, the microcosm of *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum* revolves around the experience of the various characters of a Royal Artillery Concert Party whose mission is to entertain British troops and who therefore sing and dance more than they fight. Written by the successful duo Jim Perry and David Croft, most likely with white British viewers in mind, the sitcom expresses a white British point of view on race relations.

*Mind Your Language*, the brainchild of Vince Powell, is quite similar in this respect. The EFL teacher Mr Brown (Barry Evans) not only has to contend with night-school Principal Miss Courtney (Zara Nutley) but also with students from various ethnic backgrounds, whose knowledge of the English language is, to say the least, quite limited. This sitcom too was designed with white viewers in mind as Karen Ross suggests when she describes it: “Possibly the worst of the 1970s ‘comedies’ about difference was *Mind Your Language*, a series set in an English language class which exploited every racist stereotype imaginable in an effort to turn a cheap laugh”\(^\text{12}\).

For its part, *Love Thy Neighbour*, though invented by two white writers, Vince Powell again and the late Harry Driver, seems to promote a certain balance in the representation of race relations in contemporary Britain. As Angela Barry notes: “In the sense that it showed black people doing something other than singing, thieving or starving, it was a breakthrough. […] In the ideological battleground of 1972, a humorous black neighbour challenged the vicious young mugger on Britain’s television screens”\(^\text{13}\).

Finally *Desmond’s* and *Goodness Gracious Me* seem to illustrate a third trend in British black comedy. They are first different from the other three in that they are based on an all-black cast. Moreover, their writers are themselves from ethnic minority groups: *Desmond’s* (Channel 4, 1989-1994) was invented by St Lucian Trix Worrell, while *Goodness Gracious Me*’s sketches (BBC2, 1998-2000) have been jointly imagined by the actors-cum-writers Sanjeev Bhaskar, Kuivinder Ghir, Meera Syal, Nina Wadia and Dave Lamb, as well as by Sharat Sardana, Richard Pinto and producer Anil Gupta, who are, all except Dave Lamb and Richard Pinto, British-Asians. Scriptwriters of Caribbean or Asian descent, as members of ethnic minority groups, tend to lay emphasis on their own experience of British race

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Broadcasting which, as I shall explain later, stressed the importance of multiculturalism, *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum*, continued to use blacking-up.


relations; while media practitioners such as Jimmy Perry, David Croft, Vince Powell or Harry Driver may favour their own ‘British’ point of view.

And indeed, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE)’s research report on the representation of ethnic minorities on British television in 1978-1979 and 1982 shows the coexistence of two competing models in British black sitcom. Michael Anwar and Anthony Shang underline:

A whole decade of situation comedies, in casting ethnic minorities, have harped on the theme of racial prejudice. [...] Programmes such as Love Thy Neighbour, Till Death Us Do Part, [and] Mind Your Language [...], instead of breaking down misconceived stereotypes, actually reinforce and legitimise racial prejudice often by portraying ethnic minorities as silly and stupid.¹⁴

This negative conclusion is somewhat qualified by Michael Anwar and Anthony Shang’s discovery, in 1982, of unprecedented series such as The Fosters and Mixed Blessings: “Due credit, however, must be given to certain positive initiatives in Light Entertainment since the earlier monitoring exercise. Mixed Blessings puts blacks on an equal footing to whites. [...] Moreover, [...] with The Fosters, [an] all-black sitcom, black actors were able to get much-needed studio experience.”¹⁵

Stuart Hall shares this point of view and further insists on the paradox intrinsic to ethnic humour:

The black sitcoms and other forms of TV comedy represent one of the major — but inevitably ambiguous — achievements. In comedy, the breakthrough to the mainstream majority audience with black material is probably historically more significant [...]. The deeper significance will long be debated: between those who think that black comedy plays on, and those who believe it plays off the well-entrenched black clown stereotype. [...] Comedy is a double-edged game, in which it is impossible to ensure that the audience is laughing with, not at, the stereotype.¹⁶

Stuart Hall emphasises several features which are significant for the analysis of British black sitcoms. He distinguishes first “black material” from what could be called “black theme”, thus drawing attention to the ethnic origin of the protagonists and of the team working on those comic programmes. He further adds to this distinction the inevitable ambivalence of black comedy, a field in which it is impossible to ensure that the viewers are laughing with not at the butt of the joke. For the association of ‘coloured’ people with comic personas is long-lasting in British folklore. To provide TV viewers with new, but still comic, images of ethnic minorities was therefore a challenge for those willing to change their portrayal on British television: they had to make the greatest number laugh, from white viewers.

¹⁵. Idem.
to members of the audience who had settled in Britain from the New Commonwealth.

Given the wide-ranging definition of the black sitcom, how can one encompass its complex elements in a single global definition? The opposition between "black theme" and "black material" stands as a major distinction in this vast whole. I shall study them one after the other.

**Sitcoms with a "black theme"**

*Love Thy Neighbour, It Ain't Half Hot, Mum* and *Mind Your Language* all belong to this category. They first differ from the other two programmes — *Desmond's* and *Goodness Gracious Me* — in that they represent a frictional contact between two traditionally opposed ethnic communities: a white British couple and a British couple from Jamaica in the first series; British colonists and indigenous Indians in the second; and, in *Mind Your Language*, a British EFL teacher and his students from all over the world. In each the point of view on such a contact comes from the white majority. The main consequence of this British stance is the persistence of an ethnic humour based on mocking or, precisely, laughing at. This is implemented through three main comic devices: comic language, physical or visual comic and the use of stereotypes.

**Comic Language**

*Mind Your Language* is, as its title implies, the sitcom that uses malapropism the most, a device which amounts to "choosing a word with a similar sound, but inappropriate meaning". Mr Brown's EFL classes indeed systematically include a whole session of semantic slips or puns. When he introduces himself to Ali and Jamila (Dino Shafeek and Jamila Massey), both from the Indian sub-continent, the students answer: "No, you are not brown. We are brown, you are white", thus getting a laugh by playing on phenotypic considerations. The Indian servant Rangi (blacked-up Michael Bates), in *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*, also has a very approximate knowledge of the English language. This leads him to utter a few bawdy puns as he does when referring to the replacement of the punka wallahs by "an electric fanny".

In *Love Thy Neighbour* though, comic language is devoid of all subtleties; it consists in basic insults from both sides, with the potentially negative consequence,

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18. Dino Shafeek also played Char Wallah Muhammed in *It Ain't Half Hot, Mum*.
20. Punka wallahs were the servants in charge of pulling the fan to keep British officers cool. Episode 3, Series 1, *The Mutiny of the Punka Wallahs* (BBC1, 17 January 1974).
as Michael Anwar and Anthony Shang note, of the popular transmission to the audience of such derogatory terms as “nigger”, “Sambo” or “coon” 21.

**Physical or visual comedy**

In *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum*, this occurs via the mimesis of the British by the natives. Rangi thus so much wants to be one of them that he even declares to Gunner Parkins (Christopher Mitchell), who has come into conflict with a rickshaw driver: “Leave this to me Sir, I know how to handle these damned natives” 22. He also apes the salute by Sergeant Major Williams (Windsor Davies), his hand above his head and jumping on one foot, while Char Wallah Muhammed (Dino Shafeek) has his own musical interlude where he covers English national standards such as *Laud of Hope and Glory* and *Rule Britannia* or the American music hall classic *Top Hat White Tails* with his cithara and a strong Asian accent.

In *Mind Your Language* the visual comedy takes the shape of cartoon, as in the opening credits. Each student has his/her own caricature and to each a different semiotic attribute: The Sikh wears a turban; the Japanese carries a camera; the Chinese woman brandishes her red book and the Indian wears a sari and a bindi on her forehead, etc.. They thus all are characterised by one single sign that conventionally expresses their ethnic origin in the eye of the British beholder. Such a portrayal reflects a somewhat narrow-minded view not only of New Commonwealth immigrants but also of the next generation, born in Britain, the so-called ‘second generation immigrants’ 23. The comic construction here is done at the expense of any social reality concerning the experience of ethnic minorities in Britain.

Despite playing with stock images, *Love Thy Neighbour* uses a different visual comic technique. The scene in which Bill Reynolds (Rudolph Walker) suddenly jumps in front of Eddie Booth (Jack Smethurst) with a bath-towel as a loin-cloth, shaving-cream on his face as war-paintings and brandishing a rule, yelling: “Perish white man! This is how you expected us to behave and we don’t want to disappoint you. Barbie, light the fire!” thus represents an opportunity to mirror white men’s

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21. ”No doubt the BBC’s Till Death Us Do Part gave respectability to words like ‘nigger’, ‘sambo’ and ‘coon’ and that ethnic minorities were presented as a threat to British society. Similarly, Eddie Booth in Love Thy Neighbour used nicknames such as ‘coon’, ‘chocolate drop’ and ‘the gorilla from Manila’ to refer to Bill, his black neighbour.” Anwar M. & A. Shang, op. cit., 20-21.

22. Episode 1, Series 1, *Meet the Gang* (BBC1, 3 January 1974).

23. Bikhu Parekh, when decoding the ‘Language of Racism’, remarks: “It is [...] odd that the children of recent immigrants should be referred to by that strange and self-contradictory expression ‘second-generation immigrants’. Since they are born and raised in Britain, by no stretch of imagination can they be called immigrants”. Bikhu Parekh, ‘Reflections on the Language of Racism; The Legacy of Colonialism; Prejudice and the Press’, in Twitchin J. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 113 (original emphasis).
fantasies while simultaneously deconstructing them\textsuperscript{24}. Yet if this parody was quite innovating in the British broadcasting landscape of the seventies, it also reiterated one of the ready-made stereotypes concerning African and Caribbean populations, that of voodooism.

The use of stereotypes

The term ‘stereotype’, as Michael Pickering explains, was “ [...] in the first place taken metaphorically from the trade vocabulary of printing and typography, where it referred to text cast into rigid form for the purposes of repetitive use”\textsuperscript{25}. It relies on repetition and circulates quite easily from one medium to another. The three sitcoms with a “black theme” studied in this article enable the re-presentation of such stereotyped images of black people. Even though they come from a fictitious, comic and narrow-minded character, racial prejudices such as “Blacks play the tom-tom night and day” or “They are potential niggers and rapists”, in \textit{Love Thy Neighbour}, favour the transmission and recycling of a still negative portrayal of black people on British television\textsuperscript{26}.

This characteristic also applies to \textit{It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum} and to \textit{Mind Your Language}. Asians are considered as mutineers in the former as the episode entitled \textit{The Mutiny of the Punka Wallahs} particularly shows\textsuperscript{27}. That evinces that the threatening image of the Great Mutiny of 1857, as well as the concept of civil disobedience defended by Mahatma Gandhi, are still alive in British collective folklore, including TV sitcoms. \textit{Mind Your Language} does not innovate either; its main character, Jeremy Brown (Barry Evans), recurrently draws a line between the endogenous British and the exogenous Other, declaring for instance to his Indian student Ranjeet (Albert Moses), who fears being physically punished for refusing an ‘arranged’ wife: “Don’t be ridiculous, this isn’t Punjab, it’s England, a civilised country, people don’t just go round slicing each other up!”\textsuperscript{28}. The EFL teacher

\textsuperscript{24} Episode 1, Series 1 (ITV, 13 April 1972). No title given.
\textsuperscript{26} After discovering that his new neighbours are black, Eddie paradoxically phones the Race Relations Board to complain about their presence. In the course of conversation, he lets out a few prejudiced ideas: “I wish to make a complaint against a nig nog. [...] What has he done? He’s moved next door, that’s what he’s done! [...] What d’you mean is that all? [...] I beg your pardon I’m not bigoted. Just you wait, mate, till one of them moves next door to you, you’ll soon change your tune when the tom-tom starts!” Later, he tells his wife Joan (Kate Williams) that he does not feel safe anymore, that she could get raped during the night. Episode 1, Series 1 (ITV, 13 April 1972). No title given.
\textsuperscript{27} Episode 3, Series 1, \textit{The Mutiny of the Punka Wallahs} (BBC1, 17 January 1974).
\textsuperscript{28} Episode 3, Series 1, \textit{A Fate Worse than Death} (ITV, 13 January 1978).
establishes a stark contrast between ‘us’ and ‘them’, a device that is widely used in British sitcoms with a “black theme” 29.

In “black material”, like Desmond’s and Goodness Gracious Me, on the contrary, ethnic minority communities do not define themselves through their relation to the other, and dominant, group but rather through a genuine introspection.

**Sitcoms as ‘black material’**

Series like Desmond’s and Goodness Gracious Me constitute ‘black material’ in the sense that they have been written by members of ethnic minority groups and predominantly played by black actors and actresses. Moreover they are primarily based on experiences shared by the ethnic community that is the subject of the programme without this meaning that the white majority, i.e. the greatest number of viewers of mainstream TV, is excluded either from the audience or even from the microcosm of the series 30. Indeed, several of the characters in Desmond’s and in Goodness Gracious Me are white. The former has Louise (Lisa Geoghan), a friend of the Ambrose’s daughter, as a regular protagonist and Desmond’s assistant Tony (Dominic Keating) 31 and the latter includes white extras and secondary characters, usually played by actor-cum-writer Dave Lamb. In Desmond’s, furthermore, the two white characters stand on an equal footing with the other black protagonists; after a few initial negative comments 32, they are soon considered as part of the family. Unlike Love Thy Neighbour, It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum and Mind Your Language, Trix Worrell’s sitcom thus gets rid of the well-entrenched ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ dichotomy.

In Goodness Gracious Me, however, white actors are used in a different way from Desmond’s. Dave Lamb often plays the part of a white man subject to ‘inverse racism’. Not as blatant as in John Hopkins’ ground-breaking television play ‘Fable’ (BBC, 1965), which explored British inter-racial relations in the context of an imaginary apartheid state, this reversal of black-white roles leads both to comic surprise and social comment. In a sketch at the Indian Broadcasting Corporation for


30. Channel 4, though, is different from the two other channels taken into account (BBC and ITV) since it was launched in 1982 with minority viewers in mind, which includes ethnic minorities.

31. This character is introduced to the audience in Episode 3, Series 1, The New Stylist (Channel 4, 19 January 1989).

32. This can be illustrated by Shirley’s mistrust towards Louise in episode 1: “Last time she was here, that child nearly burnt my house down making beans and toasts!” (Episode 1, Series 1, The French Lesson, Channel 4, 5 January 1989) as well as by Desmond initially calling Tony “that white boy” (Episode 3, Series 1, The New Stylist, Channel 4, 19 January 1989).
instance, Dave Lamb embodies the character of Jonathan, whose name his Indian colleagues find hard to pronounce 33. And yet one should not over-stress the importance of inverse racism in this sketch show for, as comedian and writer Sanjeev Bhaskar explained in an interview: "You can use your humour to push your ethnicity but instead we used our ethnicity to push our humour. One thing we all agreed, we didn't want to write in a way that promoted inverse racism: saying that all white men can't dance and that sort of thing" 34. The fact of pushing humour via ethnicity means, in Goodness Gracious Me as in Desmond's, focusing on the experience of the community. This entails a reproduction of their own culture, be it Caribbean or Asian, which is expressed in three main fields:

- Food and cooking,
- Music and dance,
- The social reality of inter-racial relations.

Food and cooking

As I have noted earlier, Love Thy Neighbour stands out as a kind of exception among the three sitcoms with a "black theme" selected for the present study. The balance between the black and the white neighbours, which is rendered through verbal abuse and threats 35, is also of a cultural nature. Indeed, in spite of the 'us' vs. 'them' dichotomy on which it is based, this sitcom enables the expression of a Jamaican identity. In the first episode, devoted to the arrival of Bill and Barbie Reynolds in Twickenham, the audience can catch a glimpse of contrasting environments which, through the use of respective semiotic signs conventionally attached to the two differing cultures, seem to adumbrate the very problematic of the series 36. For if the Booths have a painting representing Beefeaters in their home, the Reynolds, on the contrary, give pride of place to that of a black female nude, a sort of Caribbean counterpoint to the British traditional imagery 37. The very first sequence of this episode further emphasises such an opposition by showing the viewers a close shot of the Booths’ dinner-table on which typical ingredients of a British diet have been laid: a tea-pot and a bottle of milk as well as stew and

35. One of the catchphrases of the Jamaican character was indeed: "Man, if you hit me, I'm going to hit you back!", which, as Rudolph Walker himself explains, was significant for black youngsters who, first the first time ever, had a hero on British television. Rudolph Walker interviewed by J. Pines (ed.), op. cit., 78.
37. The nudity of the female body nevertheless reiterates a white male's fantasy towards black women. For Love Thy Neighbour is complex; though on the verge of prejudice according to today's standards, it was still quite innovative in the early seventies.
potatoes and, later on, a pot of chutney, a bottle of Bisto and a gravy boat. The same technique is used again, in relation to Jamaican food, in episode 4 which opens on a shot of Joan Booth (Kate Williams) who, thanks to Barbie Reynolds (Nina Baden-Semper), discovers the taste of mango.

The use of food as a means of cultural expression also applies to Desmond’s and to Goodness Gracious Me. This is obvious in Shirley Ambrose (Carmen Munroe)’s mistrust towards the British Louise as well as in Desmond (Norman Beaton)’s habit of sharing rum with his Guyanese friend Forkpie (Ram John Holder). Though subject to irony, the Asian culinary identity also recurs throughout Goodness Gracious Me’s sketches, especially via the character of Mrs I-Can-Make-It-At-Home-For-Nothing (Nina Wadia) who thinks she can do wonders with only a small aubergine. To this one should add music and dance which, like food and cooking, represent a further means of claiming and reproducing an ethnic cultural identity different from that of the omnipresent and dominant British model.

Music and dance

Desmond’s makes continuous references to jazz and, as far as the younger generation is concerned, to rap. It also uses soca in its credit, while Goodness Gracious Me opens and closes with an air of bhangra. This can further lead to a few dance steps: the breakdance of the Ambroses’ youngest son Sean (Justin Pickett) or the traditional bhangra dance of some of the actresses in Goodness Gracious Me. Love Thy Neighbour, however, chooses a different stance. When Joan Booth (Kate Williams) admires the sound system of their Jamaican neighbours, Eddie (Jack Smethurst) replies: “It’s only to be expected, love. They do a lot of dancing,” a comment which, by betraying the white hero’s racial prejudice, seems to aim at denouncing such an attitude while depicting the social reality of inter-racial relations.

The social reality of inter-racial relations

While sitcoms with a ‘black theme’, especially It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum and Mind Your Language, reconstruct the social reality of inter-racial relations through comic language, physical or visual comedy and stereotypes, in Love Thy Neighbour to some extent, and above all, in Desmond’s and in Goodness Gracious Me, this is conveyed through three other different means: the mere enunciation of racist discourses, a comic which I would name “comic of exteriority” and inverse racism.

40. Episode 1, Series 1 (ITV, 13 April 1972). No title given.
Making the white protagonist utter a few absurd racial prejudices is the method favoured in Love Thy Neighbour in order to debunk racism. In Episode 1, Eddie Booth (Jack Smethurst) thus explains to his wife Joan (Kate Williams) that they are bound to move house since their new black neighbours will “stink [them] out with curry” 41. His confusion of food habits from the Asian sub-continent with those of the Caribbean shows a profound ignorance of cultures other than the British. As with Alf Garnett, the aim is to deconstruct rampant racism. No comment is given to the audience, it is for them to decide what to think, which as Karen Ross comments for Till Death Us Do Part, amounts to “many viewers [finding] their own opinions being expressed [...] opinions which they probably kept hidden, even from themselves” 42. This method is therefore dangerously ambivalent and the border between enunciation and denunciation very porous. The uttering of racial prejudice is too polysemic to really deconstruct such discourses.

The device that I have called “comic of exteriority”, which is mainly used in Desmond’s, seems less hazardous. I would define it as the possibility, for individuals belonging both to the British and to the Caribbean/Asian cultures, to choose to look at British society from the outside. When Desmond (Norman Beaton) scolds Lee (Robert Gee), a friend of the Ambrose family, for not saving up for a “rainy day”, the latter replies: “Hey, this is England Des! It rains everyday!” 43, thus playing on the literal meaning of the expression used by the barber. Such a comment is designed to criticize an English specificity. It rings all the more true as it is based on the genuine experience of the climate in England by a member of an ethnic minority group who simultaneously belongs to the British community. Lee’s answer is therefore very different from Eddie’s Booth prejudices in Love Thy Neighbour which, on the contrary, reveal a profound ignorance.

A third method used in ‘black material’ in order to demote racial stereotypes is that of inverse racism. It follows a Bakhtinian principle in that, like medieval carnival, it presents the viewers with a world turned upside down and, as far as black sitcoms are concerned, in which whites are the victims of stereotypes that blacks

41. *Ibid.* Such a confusion is similar to an older one, that of Helen Bannerman’s children’s book *Little Black Sambo* (1899) in which, as Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband note, surprising parallels are drawn between the Caribbean culture and the Asian one: “Sambo is commonly portrayed in illustrations of the story as a stereotypical Negro boy with a love for Western clothing in settings suggestive of the Caribbean. However he is threatened by tigers, animals of Asia, not found either in Africa or the Caribbean. The tigers are finally reduced to ‘a pool of molten butter (or ‘ghi’) as they call it in India’ with which his mother makes pancakes”. Paul Hartmann & Charles Husband, *Racism and the Mass Media*, London: Davis-Poynter, 1974, 28.

42. Ross K., *op. cit.*, 92.

usually suffer from. *Goodness Gracious Me* relies on this device on several occasions. One of the most classic examples is that of the sketch *Going for an English*, in which a group of drunken Asians go out on a Friday night to the Mountbatten Restaurant for ‘an English’ and harass the white waiter, ordering the most ‘exotically’ bland food on the menu. The sketch parodies the attitudes of whites in an Indian restaurant. Here is how Marie Gillespie analyses the sequence:

*Going For an Indian* has become a quintessential British experience [...]. It has become a British convention, among working-class British males especially, that after downing a dozen pints in the pub they descend in groups on an Indian restaurant, vent their racist spleen, insult the waiters, and probably vomit. Any British person visiting Indian restaurants in certain areas after pub closing time will have experienced this ‘lager lout’ behaviour. GGM turns that now stereotypical British experience around in their sketch *Going For an English*.

*Goodness Gracious Me* thus plays with comic constructions based on social realities. Furthermore, in this sketch show as well as in *Desmond’s* and in the atypical *Love Thy Neighbour*, “synchronising motives” are also to be found. Yet, on the contrary to those in other series, these are rooted in cultural contexts different from the dominant one. Praising popular black heroes enables ethnic minority scriptwriters, for instance, to substitute their own mythology to that of the British. The names of great jazzmen such as singer Oscar Brown Jr. and trumpet-player Joe Wilder thus circulate in *Desmond’s*, as well as those of boxers like Muhammad Ali. This device is shared by *Goodness Gracious Me*; in one sketch, the Bhangra Muffins (Sanjeev Bhaskar and Kulvinder Ghir) wonder about the nationality of young and talented Prince Nassem Ahmed, a contemporary British boxer from Yemen.

A parallel can further be drawn with the Jamaican character of Bill Reynolds (Rudolph Walker) in *Love Thy Neighbour*, who declares to his wife Barbie (Nina

45. Episode 1, Series 1 (BBC2, 12 January 1998). No title given. Anil Gupta, the producer of the programme, explains: “One of our first sketches was Going for an English (a group of Asians behave badly in an English restaurant – in the style of boozy lads at a curry house). We suggested that people tend to be a bit rude in Indian restaurants without saying it”. A new kind of laughter, op. cit., 24.
47. The segment “synchronising motives” was coined by Philip Drummond, in ‘Structural and narrative constraints and strategies in *The Sweeney*, *Screen Education*, n° 20, August 1976. James Baker also uses it in his analysis of the sitcom genre, counting the use of “synchronising motives: repeated actions, catchphrases, costumes etc.” as one of the “basic elements of form concerning sitcoms”. James Baker, *Teaching TV Sitcom*, London: British Film Institute/ Series Teaching Film and Media Studies, 2003, 22.
Baden-Semper) that their white neighbour would probably be more friendly if he
were Sidney Poitier, the Afro-American actor whose enormous contribution to
cinema includes the controversial *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Kramer,
1967) which also dealt with the thorny topic of race relations 49. The evocation of
successful members of the African, Caribbean or Asian communities consequently
creates, in those three black sitcoms, an autonomous ethnic mythology, different
from that usually conveyed in British comic programmes. Sitcoms as ‘black
material’ therefore differ from those with a ‘black theme’ — though *Love Thy
Neighbour*, to some extent, constitutes an exception.

There are in fact two main differences between the two categories. The former,
written and played by members of ethnic minority groups, focuses on the definition
of their identity through themselves; they do not rely on any kind of foil except,
perhaps, when using inverse racism. Moreover, by presenting their own
hermeneutics, references and folklore, ‘black material’ sitcoms constitute, as Jim
Pines explains for the British Black independent film genre of the eighties, “[...] an
tempt by black cultural practitioners to reconstruct visually black people’s
histories on a non-Eurocentric, anti-racist basis” 50. The author further adds:
“Though culturally oppositional in its effects, this engagement with the format
aspects of film/video, in conjunction with (black) historiography, places greater
emphasis on themes which are more closely concerned with black people’s cultural
identities as they themselves construct or define them” 51. This counter-cultural
attack then is only aggressive in principle and, especially in such a TV format as
sitcoms, it is almost always qualified by shared good values and domestic bliss but
also, specifically in ‘black material’, by the expression of a distinctive ethnic and
cultural identity.

In sitcoms with a ‘black theme’, on the contrary, and particularly in *It Ain’t Half
Hot, Mum* and in *Mind Your Language*, ideology seems to take precedence over
culture. For if a collective mythology is used in both categories, that of African,
Caribbean or Asian populations is innovative and unprecedented while the
hermeneutics of *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum, Mind Your Language* and, sometimes as
well, of *Love Thy Neighbour* rely on hard-dying stereotypes that make the audience
laugh at instead of laughing with the butt of the joke. In this case it is as if, to quote
Roland Barthes, myth transformed History into Nature, bridging the gap between
semiology and ideology 52. Their portrayal of Britishness is indeed ethnocentrically
exclusive while ‘black material’, by trying to unite British viewers in a common,
trans-ethnic laugh, seems to have contributed both to changing the representation of

49. Episode 1, Series 1 (ITV, 13 April 1972). No title given.
cit.*, 104.
51. Idem.
ethnic minorities on British television and to substituting for comic constructions sometimes wrought with imperialism a more accurate portrayal in keeping with the social realities experienced by those populations.

The representation of British race relations in black sitcoms: a historical overview

If the comic constructions used in the five documents studied in this paper all depend on the ethnic origin of the actors and of the scriptwriters, as I have tried to demonstrate in the preceding development, they are also rooted in a historical context which, though reflected in any kind of TV production at a given time and in a given society, seems to be particularly significant in black sitcoms. Because, as Jerry Palmer has commented: "[...] the story always refers to some situation which, however farcically exaggerated, is a recognisable feature of the everyday social world of its audience" 53, the comic programmes analysed here all provide a different account of the history of British race relations.

In this third part I shall tackle more precisely the diachronic considerations that condition the various representations of ethnic minorities in British black sitcoms and insist upon the existence of two competing models that have influenced the series analysed here: imperialism and multiculturalism.

Analysis of two contrasting credits

The credits of the five programmes studied provide seminal introductions to the content of each series. I shall especially focus on two, whose contrast seems interesting as far as the evolution of the portrayal of the so-called British ‘race relations problem’ is concerned: that of It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum (BBC1, 1974-1981) and that of Desmond’s (Channel 4, 1989-1994).

The credits of It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum open with a geographical map of the world on which British possessions are indicated in red, accompanied by the popular nationalist tune, Land of Hope and Glory. The map is similar to that published in 1927 by the Empire Marketing Board and mass-produced so as to be billed in schools across Britain 54. Such an iconographic reminder of a bygone imperial past is opposed to the use of the map of Guyana which is to be found in the home of the

53. See note 4 above.
Ambrose family in Desmond’s and whose presence seems to point to the slow substitution, in British TV folklore, of imperialism by multiculturalism.

For it is imperialism indeed which is at the core of the title sequence of It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum. The map of the Empire is followed by a zoom onto India and a voice-over comments: “India, the brightest jewel in Great Britain’s crown of Empire”. A fade then symbolically merges the Union Jack with the map of the country. The next sequence gives several historical landmarks and great names of some founding fathers of the British Empire in India. The first of these heroes is Robert Clive (“Clive of India”) who took possession of Bengal in the Battle of Plassey 1757; the second is Colonel William Sleeman, a British Officer of the Raj, who, in 1826, eradicated the Thugs, an indigenous sect that, in worshipping the Hindu goddess Kali, strangled lost passers-by 55; reference is finally made to General Havelock who contributed to stemming the Indian Mutiny of Lucknow 1857. One last date is given: 1945; the year when the mediocre colonists of It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum were sent to “Deolali, India 1945” as the caption on screen reads. The credits close with an antiphrasis: “This great tradition of Empire is defended by a new generation of heroes”.

However ridiculed along the whole series, Sergeant Major Williams (Windsor Davies)’s “lovely” boys nonetheless propose a somewhat nostalgic image of imperialist Britain. This is obvious in the credits through the listing of those long-forgotten heroes of the Empire, who, in the seventies, still seem to haunt British collective memory. If, as Marshall McLuhan has explained, “the medium is the message” 56, then it seems all the more significant that they are recalled to the audience via Victorian portraits. Both the content and the form used to convey the grandeur of British imperialism pander to the viewers’ nostalgia for the ‘good old days’.

Desmond’s, on the contrary, takes the opposite position of various semiotic codes used in It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum. Besides the contrast in geographical maps, a further dichotomy between these two black sitcoms is to be found in their respective use of flash-backs. With its imagery of the British Empire, It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum inscribes the history of British race relations in the continuity of that of imperialism; while Desmond’s chooses to date it back to the arrival of New Commonwealth populations in Britain in the late forties. The analeptic device in the series’ credits takes the shape of archive footage: images of the docking of the Windrush at Tilbury, London, June 1948, with its Jamaican passengers who, since the British Nationality Act 1948, were genuine British citizens. The inclusion, in the credits, of both black and white and of the past has several effects. The sequence first serves as

55. Note also the etymology of the contemporary meaning of ‘thug’.
a testimony, what Roland Barthes refers to as *le ça a été* (the ‘what has been’) 57, which is all the more eloquent as so genuine an image occurs in fictitious credits designed for commercial purposes. The chronological and chromatic ruptures also seem to constitute an attempt by the inventor of the sitcom, St Lucian Trix Worrell, at making this landmark more salient so as to include it in British collective memory. *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum* is exclusively backward-looking, whereas *Desmond’s* uses the past to contextualise the present 58. The former revives the spectres of imperialism; the latter, by juxtaposing a whole range of colours, those of the different phenotypes that compose British society, favours a multicultural spectrum.

With their fast-paced editing, *Desmond’s* opening credits show the viewers various examples of multicultural Britain: an elderly lady chatting along with two black teenagers in the street and a black judge with her black gown, white wig and collar conversing with a younger white colleague who only wears the black gown, which indicates her lower status in the judiciary system. This stands as a token of the successful socio-professional integration of members of ethnic minority groups in British society.

The juxtaposition, in *Desmond’s* credits, of different phenotypes therefore amounts to representing ethnic intermixing. The device is further developed through the fusion of traditionally opposed semiotic signs. The close shot, at the beginning of the sequence, of a young black punk with her leather jacket and distinctive haircut, thus represents the integration, by an Afro-Caribbean subject, of a musical movement born in Britain. More than ten years after the foundation of *Rock Against Racism*, in 1976, such an image remains a novelty in British mainstream programming. By fusing elements of both cultures, this young woman is very

58. It is also interesting to note, in this respect, that one sketch in *Goodness Gracious Me* parodies the successful film *Men in Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997), which becomes “Blacked Up Men”, the acronym of which - “BUM” - compared to the widely-used “MiB”, seems much less flattering. In this sketch Sanjeev Bhaskar, Meera Syal, Nina Wadia and Kulvinder Ghir overtly criticise the practice of minstrelsy by comedians such as Benny Fields or those involved in the BBC *Black and White Minstrel Shows* as well as by actors like Laurence Olivier, who was blacked up in Stuart Burge’s *Othello* (1965), and Alec Guinness, who played a guru in David Lean’s *A Passage To India* (1984). By using archival footage of these shows, *Goodness Gracious Me* lays emphasis on a third momentum in the history of race relations. It is neither that of the British Raj – as in *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum* – nor that of the immigration from the New Commonwealth – as in *Desmond’s* – but rather the very history of the representation of ethnic minorities on British television. The title of the sketch show is in itself a wink at blacking-up, “*Goodness Gracious Me!*” being the catchphrase of the Indian doctor played by Peter Sellers in *The Millionaire* (Anthony Asquith, 1960) where he co-stars with Sophia Loren. Significantly, the show’s pilot was entitled *Peter Sellers is Dead*. Marie Gillespie, *op. cit.*
similar to a minor character in Desmond's; a young patron who asks the barber for a "tennis racket", i.e. an Afro hairstyle popularised by rap singers in the eighties. Such scenes underline the existence of a third culture in which the music and the street are both central elements. This cultural syncretism was unprecedented; it was resolutely modern in comparison to the traditions and mores of the older Afro-Caribbean generation and simultaneously different from the British model for it prospered thanks to the so-called 'second generation of immigrants'. By merging different codes of identity, this new self-representation, which occurred in the eighties, therefore seems to be genuinely multicultural. This was taken up ten years later in Goodness Gracious Me, especially under the aegis of the Banghra Muffins (Sanjeev Bhaskar and Kulvinder Ghir).

The Banghra Muffins are two 'streetboys', they are 'cool', or at least they try to be, and speak a language of their own, a sort of Hindi-and-Punjabi-studded London slang. Among their recurring catchphrases, there are expressions such as "Ras Malai", the name of an Indian sweet they use to designate 'chicks'; "Chaa Mani", which they use to greet each other, and "Kiss my chuddies", an equivalent of the vulgar "Kiss my arse". All, as Marie Gillespie underlines, have spread easily across British school playgrounds whatever the ethnic background of the pupils.

From India considered as "the brightest jewel in Great Britain's crown of Empire", in It Ain't Half Hot, Mum, to the bright jolly good British-Asian fellows in Goodness Gracious Me, British black sitcoms thus seem indissociable from the real History of the country which intermingles with the fictitious stories of the plots.

**Stories and History**

The sitcom format, like any narrative sequence, depends on a fictitious story that is brought to light as the plot reaches an end. Moreover, in the specific case of black sitcoms, the history of inter-racial relations overlaps. And if it is inevitably not real, since it is re-constructed through the media of television and comedy, it is nevertheless based on contemporary social realities. James Baker analyses:

The changing nature of sitcoms' subjects over the years often reflects real changes occurring in our cultures. Hence, we can perceive a pattern in the nuclear family sitcoms which dominated the 1950s and 1960s, being replaced by various

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60. See note 23.
unconventional or dysfunctional family arrangements in the 1970s, the introduction of African-Caribbean families in the 1980s and the use of gay characters and families in the 1990s 63.

Black sitcoms, despite belonging to the category of ‘Light Entertainment’, can therefore constitute potential cultural studies documents.

Love Thy Neighbour, which was the first British black sitcom, thus mirrors the social reality of contemporary race relations in Britain. Eddie Booth (Jack Smethurst), the white British protagonist, thus decides, after having met his new Jamaican neighbour (Rudolph Walker), to call the Race Relations Board immediately 64. Besides being profoundly ignorant of its real function, Eddie is insulting and racist, referring to his neighbour as a “nig nog”. And yet, though a caricature, this portrayal of a British citizen remained likely at the time; the litany of racial prejudices uttered by this fictitious hero did exist in the early seventies. A survey between December 1966 and April 1967 – that is a year before Enoch Powell’s notorious ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech in Birmingham – revealed that 53% of the people interviewed answered “inferior” to the following question: “Do you think the majority of coloured people in Britain are superior, equal or inferior to you?” 65. The history of Britain therefore seems to be part and parcel of the stories depicted in black sitcoms.

Love Thy Neighbour, It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum and Mind Your Language, which were all broadcast in the seventies, can be retrospectively read as the reflection of the bipartisan consensus of the period, which led Labour MP Roy Hattersley to coin the now famous aphorism: “Without integration limitation is inexcusable, without limitation integration is impossible” 66. The Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, followed, in 1971, by an Immigration Act further restricting the entrance of New Commonwealth immigrants to British territory were thus counterbalanced by the Race Relations Acts of 1962, 1965 and 1976, through which the British legal system recognised the existence of racial discrimination. And yet Love Thy Neighbour, though older than the other two, seems, as underlined earlier, to promote more tolerance than It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum and Mind Your Language. Two hypotheses could explain this backward leap: the political convictions of the scriptwriters, on the one hand, but also, on the other, an ever-increasing desire, in 1970s Britain, to be ‘tougher’ on coloured immigration.

64. Episode 1, Series 1 (ITV, 13 April 1972). No title given. The Race Relations Board was founded in the wake of the second Race Relations Act 1965, that is to say seven years before the transmission of this episode.
The fact that Vince Powell was a scriptwriter both for *Love Thy Neighbour* and for *Mind Your Language* somehow invalidates the first hypothesis. As for the second, it seems important to note that this desire was made concrete with a new British Nationality Act, in 1981, which replaced that of 1948 and established three new categories of citizenship: “British citizens”, “citizens of the British Dependent Territories” and “British Overseas citizens”, granting only the first category the right of abode, which, as Harry Goulbourne explains consisted in: “[...] abolishing the ancient Anglo-Saxon tradition of jus soli, that is, citizenship deriving from the place of a person’s birth, and implementing the principle of citizenship by descent, that is, the Continental European practice of jus sanguinis” 67.

The parallel that I have drawn between the history of British race relations and the stories and, above all, the representations mediated through those three sitcoms does not mean that they are manifestos; it simply shows that TV comic programmes are inevitably rooted in a given society at a given time. To provide them with historical and political backgrounds can therefore help the viewers understand their content and seems to provide an interesting field of observation for any researcher interested in race relations and cultural studies.

And indeed *Desmond’s* can be seen as a turning point in the history of the British black sitcom. A political wind of change actually blew over British media as early as 1977 when the Annan Report on the Future of Broadcasting was published. It clearly stated: “Our society’s culture is now multi-racial and pluralist; that is to say, people adhere to different views of the nature and purpose of life and expect their own views to be expressed in some form or other” 68. The Annan Report led, among other things, to the creation of a new channel, Channel 4, in November 1982. Launched in the wake of the Broadcasting Act 1981, it was designed to promote independent production companies and directors while favouring experimental projects as well as targeting minority viewers, which included ethnic minorities 69.

*Desmond’s*, by portraying a black family, was part of this vast project. Moreover, this sitcom seems to illustrate a second momentum in the history of British race relations. In the eighties and despite the British Nationality Act 1981 several official documents investigated the problem of racism and especially of institutional racism. Two seminal reports were published: the Scarman Report 1981, which was launched consecutively to the race riots that had swept over the country, and the Swann Report 1985, which dealt with the education of all British children in

69. For a detailed account of the creation of Channel 4, see for instance Simon Blanchard & David Morley (eds.), *What’s This Channel Fo(w)r? An Alternative Report*, London: Comedia, 1982.
general and with the problems faced by ethnic minority pupils in particular. Both measures evinced a certain interest in the well-being of populations who, in the eighties, had been immigrants for so long that it was high time their tastes were at last catered for and their experience heard and seen on television.

Goodness Gracious Me finally manages to celebrate Britain’s ethnic and cultural diversity. As Anil Gupta, the producer of the show, and actor-cum-writer Sanjeev Bhaskar both explain, one of their aims was to show what it means to be Asian and British. One of the series’ main differences with Desmond’s, broadcast ten years before, is that it mocks those British-Asian citizens who want to remain exclusively Asian, such as Mr. Everything-Comes-From-India (Sanjeev Bhaskar) or Mrs. I-Can-Make-It-At-Home-For-Nothing (Nina Wadia). In Desmond’s, on the contrary, the eponymous barber represents such a personality: he recurrently speaks of buying “a plot of land back home” and returning there to retire. Desmond’s is therefore more about compromising, negotiating with British and Guyanese identities, whereas Goodness Gracious Me swiftly fuses them. For at the end of the nineties, it seems easier to take British multiculturalism for granted. The ‘race relations problem’ is tending to be slowly replaced by the ‘asylum seekers’ problem’ and the fear of the Other displaced from ethnic minority groups present in Britain for already several generations to immigrants from Eastern Europe or Somalia.

Comic constructions and social realities thus intermingle in the five black sitcoms examined in this study, each expressing a different point of view on a given period of British history. Either a vehicle of ideology or a means of cultural expression, these documents indicate that from 1972 to 1998, i.e. from the beginning of Love Thy Neighbour to that of Goodness Gracious Me, the comic representation of ethnic minorities on British television has evolved. The main change has occurred in the replacement of sitcoms with a ‘black theme’ and written by whites by sitcoms as ‘black materials’, invented by members of ethnic minority groups. This, in turn, led to further developments: the nature of ethnic humour itself has changed and, above all, seems to have freed itself from the long-sku1k1ng presence of imperialist imagery, replacing it with the celebration of a British ethnic diversity which is more and more undeniable in the new millennium.

Selective bibliography


70. Anil Gupta declared in an interview: “We found out that we could do some of the oldest jokes in the world but with an Asian twist”, while Sanjeev Bhaskar commented: “At that time there was no one out there who represented being British and Asian”. Gupta A. & S. Bhaskar, quoted in ‘A new kind of laughter’, op. cit., 23.


ROOM FOR SPEECH

The rhetoric of places in Conservative Party Political Broadcasts

David Haigron *

The space to be accorded to speech-making has been at issue in Conservative Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs) since the early development of this medium of political communication. As early as the fifties, a memorandum from Central Office discussed the role allocated to speech in this type of programme:

Party programmes in general will need to be devised on novel and appealing lines, with less speech-making, more picture material, and a higher dramatic content 1.

Since the 1951 general election campaign, Party Election and Political Broadcasts have occupied a particular place on the British political and media scene 2. They can be defined as audiovisual programmes paid for by political parties and broadcast free of charge by terrestrial channels (but not cable and satellite). In this respect they allow parties to have their message put across nationally without any hecklers or contradicts (be they political opponents or journalists). And, regarding this medium of communication, the Conservative Party often played the role of pioneer (by the way their PPBs were produced and how they fitted within a broader marketing strategy plan), from the 1951 campaign up to the rise of New Labour in the 1990s.

PPBs are the product of two writing processes: that of the speech delivered and that of the film sequences. Therefore, not only is the speech heard but it is also superimposed over images of specific places. As they are chosen, set up or even created, these places are obviously not neutral. They constitute, at the same time, a material setting and a symbolical framework for the discourse. What are then the respective roles played by the speech delivered, on the one hand, and by the places shown on screen, on the other hand? What is the influence of the latter upon the

* Teaches at the University of Caen, France.

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reception of the message? To what extent does it produce its own discourse, parallel, subordinate or opposed to the linguistic discourse?

We will study three aspects of the staging process of the election issues while putting forward the sociocultural representations and constructions upon which this process lies as well as the signification it intends to (co-)construct.

The symbolic space of the politicians’ speech

The political discourse constitutes a ritual part of the democratic process, through which the parties air their projects or take stock of their own record for the attention of the electorate. However the television platform imparts a particular dimension to the discourse and the framework within which the speech is delivered alters the reception of the latter. Various presentations may occur.

The most recurrent sequence in the Conservative Party Political Broadcasts  is the talking head shot, whereby a politician directly addresses the camera. He or she is filmed in close shot and reads from an autocue. The Prime Minister or the leader of the party appears in over a third of the cases (33.73%). The place is semantically relevant. A speech delivered in a cosy lounge with subdued lighting will help create a feeling of intimacy, closeness and sincerity and will give the sequence a conversational tone. Bookshelves placed in the background may be seen as a reference to knowledge. A mahogany desk may stand as a metonymic reference to ministerial institutions. It acts as a reminder of the orator’s political function: speeches and political decisions are written and made at this desk. Besides, the background may also feature symbolic elements related to parliamentary power: a window placed behind the orator may superimpose the speaker on the image of Westminster.

In contrast with or in complement to this institutional setting, PPBs may use excerpts of speeches delivered at rally platforms, showing the politician as a powerful orator inspiring an enthusiastic crowd. The position of the camera places the viewers within this supportive crowd which enables them to share the group’s partisan cheering. This device aims at creating a feeling of being part of a virtual gathering.

Alternatively the speech may be delivered in situ. The setting illustrates the issue broached. A speech on education can thus be heard from a schoolyard or a classroom. A speech on the National Health Service may be delivered in front of a

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3. With an occurrence of 40 % in the 160 PPBs for the period 1974 to 1997.
hospital. The image of Margaret Thatcher at the turret of a tank with a British flag stands as a metonymic representation of her being chief of the national armies ⁵. That of John Major alighting from a car and trotting into 10 Downing Street intends to show him as the legitimate tenant of the place ⁶. In every case the setting acts as an echo to the linguistic discourse and offers a visual anchorage of the argument in some tangible reality by calling upon the addressee's personal experience. In this respect, Claire Bélisle speaks about "the social rooting of representation" and about representation being "put to the test of reality" ⁷.

Places (be they genuine or built in studio) therefore play an important role in staging the political discourse and take an active part in shaping the orator's image: that of a leader seen in his or her function of head of state and government, projecting a feeling of competence and letting people believe that he or she can have a grip on the real issues. Besides this image is "co-construced" in the sense that this stage management implies that the sendee decodes the message the very way the sender wants it to be understood. In this respect the addressees participate in the construction of the message. Through a mirror effect, PPBs are meant to draw the viewers/voters into the logic of political communication.

The mirror-space of the non politicians' speech

Stage management (that is the composition of the setting and the movements and positions of characters within this setting) aims at presenting characters who are not politicians in places that can be identified by viewers, so as to create a feeling of recognition, either by projection into the characters and situations or by compassion and empathy for them. This process of recognition may rely upon two devices: either by turning the real into fiction (a situation experienced by the addressees reproduced on screen) or by re-acting a scene etched in their memories. It is indeed unnecessary for viewers to have actually personally encountered a situation for the latter to be part of their sociocultural patrimony. The places and the characters presented must however be stereotyped enough to permit a univocal identification.

In 1985, for example, a Conservative broadcast presented the trial of the Tory party (then in office) by Labour ⁸. The scene takes place in a court and the lawyer, on behalf of his client, answers various charges: responsibility for the increase in

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unemployment, waiting lists in hospitals, cuts in public expenditure, etc. By their
dress, their wigs and their rhetoric ("Objection your Honour!", "My client admits
that...", "I rest my case", etc.) the characters are easily recognisable: the Labour
public prosecutor, the defending counsel and the judge sitting up on a platform and
addressing the camera (and therefore the viewers) as he turns towards the jury,
asking them to decide whether to sentence the defendant to "five years' hard
labour". In this example, the scene has obviously been shot in a studio and the
setting is not meant to be the exact reproduction of a genuine court. Its plausibility
prevails over its genuineness and it displays enough characteristic features to frame
the scene and the issue at stake. As in all fiction programmes fitting within this
television genre, the trial sequence offers a verbal sparring match and many sudden
reversals. The people called as witnesses (a nurse and a worker, traditionally Labour
voters) are recognisable by their uniforms and they play the metonymic function of
being the representatives of their socioprofessional class. They stand as "actants" in
the "actantial universe of the political ad". The costumes, the props and the
setting constitute signs that are culturally identifiable and the co-construction of
the message between the party/sender and the viewer/sender relies upon shared
sociocultural codes. Only in understanding "the social construction, circulation,
and transformation of the codes the [political] ad contains" can the viewer "unpack
[its] meaning".

A series of programmes broadcast between 1992 and 1994 provides us with a
second example in the representation of stereotyped places. Besides it is based on an
element of the British television culture: that of soap operas.

9. In "five years' hard labour", there is a pun on the word "labour", "hard labour" referring
at once to a punishment consisting in hard physical work and to the Militant tendency
within the Labour party in the 1980s (otherwise referred to as the "hard left").
10. Frank Biocca (ed.), Television and Political Advertising, Signs, Codes and Images, vol. 2,
Hillsdale, New Jersey: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991, 52. In his study of political ads, the
author distinguishes between human actors (individuals representing a social group
through their clothes) and non-human actors (e.g. a building representing a sector of
activity) which he both names "actants".
11. "Codes are [...] the systems into which signs are organized. These systems are governed
by rules which are consented to by all members of the community using that code. This
means that the study of codes frequently emphasises the social dimension of
communication", John Fiske, Introduction to Communication Studies, London: Routledge,
1990, 64 (original emphasis).
Timberg, "The Rhetoric of the Camera in Television Soap Opera", in Horace Newcomb
Renée Dickason, "Une culture télévisuelle à l'anglaise", in Bertrand Lemmonier et alii.,
One of the broadcasts shows a couple having tea in their living room while watching television. This may actually reflect the situation experienced by the viewers as they are watching the PPB and this is reinforced by the fact that the programme they are watching happens to be "a party political broadcast on behalf of the Conservative party". The husband and wife, whose faces are never shown, start a discussion on the records and the promises presented by the government. The setting, the furniture and the accent of the characters designate them as members of the urban, non-partisan middle class whose vote is thus likely to swing from one election to the other. Still according to stereotyped sociocultural criteria, the man appears critical and displays a rather sceptical attitude. The woman puts forward her common sense. She is well aware of the cost of living for she is in charge of running the household's budget. By dint of arguments she talks her husband into voting Conservative at the next election. This scene aims at triggering a reproduction of the characters' actions by the viewers.

This format reveals a twofold implantation of the political sphere into the private space of the voters through television. Through the broadcast itself, politics (whose object is to deal with the community and the general public) enters the space of the individuals' family life and, as seen in the latest example, endeavours to have those individuals become the relay to its discourse. The various PPBs we have mentioned constitute fictional peripheries that are the expression of a partisan and normative interpretation of the social and economic issues at stake in an election: inflation, unemployment, growth, taxes, the role of the State, etc.. Party broadcasts show actors, be they politicians or not, in a signifying setting. They are elaborated upon the basis of a triple unity of action, time and place and provide the media stage upon which the theatrical show of election issues may be performed.

Staging election issues

The frame outlined by the broadcast defines the space where the message is produced. Within this very frame lie rhetorical and iconic perspectives that guide our eyes and attention. This is what we would like to illustrate with two examples,

15. Claire Bélisle gives the following definition of identification: it is "a psychological process through which one assimilates an aspect, a property, an attribute of the other and alters, totally or partially, according to his or her model" (un processus psychologique par lequel un sujet assimile un aspect, une propriété, un attribut de l'autre et se transforme, totalement ou partiellement, sur le modèle de celui-ci.), Bélisle C. et alii, op. cit., 297. See also Greg Philo (ed.), Message Received, Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1999, 287.
one presenting a representation of order versus chaos, the other an image of tax equity.

1984 and 1985 were marked by the miners' strike during which violent clashes occurred between the strikers and the police. An October 1985 broadcast staged the Conservative Party's interpretation of these events. The emphasis is laid upon the riots and upon the responsibility of the trade unions. The images selected are all saturated with signs referring to socially condemned actions (stones thrown, cars burnt, etc.). Through this presentation, the argument of the Conservatives is to expose Labour's weakness (if not their leniency or even collusion) towards trade union leaders and, by contrast, to assert their own ability to handle the crisis and bring the situation back to order. The iconic translation of this rhetorical device is the use of the "Kuleshov effect": by juxtaposing images of riots and chaos with stills of hilarious or satisfied Labour and trade union leaders, the editing forges a link between these two sequences. This elliptic device is common in film syntax and is much used in feature films, television fictions and commercials. So viewers are used to a certain decoding that relies upon a process of mental reconstruction of the meaning by the addressees themselves.

An April 1988 broadcast provides us with our last example. It deals with the introduction of the Community Charge, better known as the Poll Tax. The programme has a didactic dimension and the film sequences serve the purpose of presenting the new rating system as logical and fair. Unlike in the previous cases presented, it does not rely upon any social representation, in the iconic or analogical meaning of the term. The speech refers to what was criticised as extravagant measures implemented by Labour local councils in the 1980s, which had earned them the nickname of "loony left": conspicuous expenditure, unfair redistribution of public subsidies to minority groups, etc. The money collected through the Poll Tax is represented as tea in a large teapot whose content has to be broken down between various budget headings materialised by cups. The first example given corresponds to a well-managed administration. An equal sharing between three cups (housing,

sport and leisure, dustman) is described as fair. Besides the budget headings refer to priorities put forward by an administration concerned with its ratepayers' welfare. By contrast, bad management is represented by a shaking hand pouring tea unsparingly, wasting a large part of it on the ground and filling only half of five cups labelled "police monitoring", "nuclear free zone", "foreign trip", "overmanning" and "gay seminars" while a voice-over describes them as "extravagant services".

Conclusion: "We are image lovers..." 19

According to Dominique Wolton, political communication has the double function of "selecting the issues that will be at stake during the campaign and putting aside those that are no longer controversial" 20. Party Political Broadcasts wholly play this role. They show representations and stage the election issues as interpreted by the party that produces them. Their purpose is to draw the viewers/voters' attention and to leave some lasting print in their memories. Places shown on screen serve a twofold purpose: to allow the addressees of the message to identify with characters and situations and to project onto them a specific impression meant to ease the reception of the message. In this respect these places contribute to projecting certain qualities upon the politicians (aura, ability to unite, etc.) or upon the party (order, fairness, etc.) and these projections might serve as a form of vote incentive when taken for a reasoned choice. Words and images therefore do not represent reality but rely upon shared sociocultural constructions and representations so as to convince the voters to adhere to a partisan and normative vision of society and have them support the party embodying this vision.

Bibliography


19. "We are image lovers given to impulsive and compulsive acts. We annoy them with our seemingly senseless quirks, but we please them with our growing docility in responding to their manipulation of symbols that stir us to action". Vance Packard, The Hidden Persuaders [1957], London: Penguin Books, 1968, 14.


CITIES IN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

An attempt at geographical analysis

Matthieu LEDOUX *

The geographical imaginary can be defined as a group of mental images in relation with each other which confer, for an individual or a group, a significance and a coherence with the localization, the distribution and the interaction of phenomena in space. The imaginary contributes to organizing spatial designs, perceptions and practices. The imaginary is a way of entering into relations with space and the matter which generates meaning, without strictly determining behaviors and configurations. Gaston Bachelard spoke about the imaginary as a capacity to dissociate oneself from the object while giving it meaning. Finally, it is advisable to take into account the fact that there are collective imaginaries which influence considerably both the ways in which societies are conceived and represented and those in which they design and represent their world.

The imaginary is not born of nothing; it is based on concrete phenomena. It cannot be conceived without relating to reality because it is closely dependent on the latter. Indeed, the images that we construct in our heads come from an observation of reality. This reality can be interpreted either individually in the case of the fantasized visions of ideal cities imagined by the authors of science fiction, or collectively in the case of a relation with the past like the history of mankind (through monuments) or the concept of heritage.

To begin with, let us examine the imaginary utopian cities of science fiction. The authors of this literary genre interpret reality individually. They present to us their vision of the city and consequently of the society, a vision in which underground spaces are a dominant feature of urban Utopias and “ideal” cities and are presented as an alternative to a situation of high density of population and buildings. In contrast to the picture in naturalistic novels such as Germinal by Zola, underground spaces quickly became “utopian” spaces in the literature of science fiction, a process which began in the 19th century when Jules Verne used them as the setting for one of his science fiction novels (Journey to the Centre of the Earth, 1864). Thereafter, this form of Utopia enjoyed its golden age throughout the XXth century, with science fiction novels such as The Time Machine (H. G. Wells, 1895) and The Time of the Great Freeze (Robert Silverberg, 1964).

* is preparing a PhD in Social Geography at the University of Caen, France.

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The utopian topic of the underground city is also approached in cinema. Let us quote for example *THX 1138* (G. Lucas, 1971), where all the action occurs in an underground city lost in the middle of nowhere. Here, underground space has a function of total social control. Indeed, the inhabitants of the city are permanently observed and studied by a kind of invisible central power. All the actions of the residents are calculated and analyzed by an enormous computer which punishes any anti-rational behavior such as love or depression. Underground space is also evoked in *Metropolis* (F. Lang, 1927), where Lang shows us an underground city of factory workers who rebel against the world “above”. More recently, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999), we are shown an underground city called Zion, where the last human beings have sought refuge. In the latter two, underground space, with its isolation and its “marginality”, is the place of revolution, which suggests that, in science fiction, underground space may also have an important political function. Furthermore, this space has a function as a refuge, in the event of a cataclysm for example. Silverberg’s *Time of the Great Freeze* is a good example in which the author shows a society which builds underground cities following a climatic disturbance of the Earth. Here, the subterranean becomes a space of safety.

**Questions on the imaginary in science fiction**

We may therefore wonder which images are conveyed by underground spaces. Underground spaces in science fiction often have a great importance in the life of the city. They can even have a strong political connotation. Why is so much importance given to underground spaces when, in reality, they are mainly functional spaces? Should we see in the think-tanks on society represented by the imaginary cities in science fiction, an ideal evolution of underground urban spaces, or, on the contrary, a warning of the potential excesses in urban life?

**Reading of an imaginary underground space: The case of THX 1138 (G. Lucas, 1971)**

We will try, through the analysis of the first film by George Lucas, to suggest a geographical reading of the director’s vision of imaginary underground urban spaces. At the end of this study, we will consider whether this full-length film can be used as a basis for a characterization of imaginary urban underground spaces in science fiction cinema.
Summary of the full-length film

Mankind lives underground depending on an authority which proscribes love and any emotion and which exerts total control over the lives of human beings. Reproduction takes place in laboratories and the individuals are named by job numbers. But one male, THX1138 and one female, LUH3417 do not absorb prescribed drug and make love. They are discovered and try to escape.

Here, the cybernetic city of THX 1138 is built around an artificial topology based primarily on the fact that the movement of the people is replaced by the circulation of the messages. In this design of a certain spatiality of the city, the downtown area is more a function than a place: it is the brain which commands and controls the messages. This cybernetic city exists in the era of information where new technologies are prevalent, thus alienating the individual human thought. One can interpret the town in THX 1138 as a sanitized prison-city in which a brain orders and controls the messages, making it impossible to know where the ruling power is located. “Prison-cities”, especially in the case of THX 1138, are characterized by the absence of limits. Generally speaking this type of city is a universe in itself, a closed world from which it is difficult to flee and in which all places look the same. The ruling power is not located at a precise point. One does not know where the Rulers live and one may even wonder whether they exist. Halfway through the film, THX is sent to a prison which appears different from the other areas of the underground city, but being incarcerated in a universe which is already a prison does not mean being locked up within four walls. This prison is a white space, without walls, without limits, where there are no more landmarks: being in prison means being nowhere.

The geographical reading of the underground space in THX 1138 is based on a grid which includes various sets of closely linked spatial themes as indicated below. It will explore the urban and architectural forms of the city, but will also attempt to study the practices of the residents within this underground cybernetic city (living space, movements in space, etc.).

1. General structure of the underground city:

- Circulation network
  - dense / not very dense
  - extended / restricted

- Physical limits
  - existing / unknown
  - accessible / inaccessible

- Urban functions
  - associated together around a center / widely dispersed
  - decision centre (where the power has its headquarters) visible / invisible
2. Urban forms and architectural surroundings:

- Urban structures
  - dispersed / concentrated
  - horizontal / vertical
- Architecture
  - angular / round
  - homogeneous / heterogeneous
- The role of light underground
  - presence or absence of natural light
  - artificial light and colours

3. The residents' practices in the public and private spaces:

- The spatial habits of THX 1138 (typical day)
  - places occupied or visited (home, work, recreation, etc.)
  - people met
  - time spent in each place
  - connection between various spaces
- The public spaces of the city
  - types of functions existing within public spaces
  - freedom of action in public spaces. Presence or absence of forms of authority (police, cameras, etc)
  - specific practices linked to being underground?
- The private space of THX 1138
  - description of his apartment
  - presence or absence of personal objects
  - privacy respected or not

We now will apply each point of analysis of this grid to the film, proceeding in three sections, supporting our remarks with images taken from the film.

The whole structure of the underground city of THX 1138

Circulation network: The network of circulation does not seem very dense. The only vehicles shown in this scene are police cars.
The residents are restricted to the city, and only the authorities have access to the communication routes. Moreover, it seems to be the director's intention to avoid locating the city in a concrete space, in order to deprive us of spatial landmarks. The city is thus located in the middle of nowhere. It seems isolated from the rest of the world, with the feeling of isolation being accentuated by the fact that the setting is underground.

Even allowing for the fact that the director only shows us part of the underground city, (no doubt because of financial limitations as this was his first film), the circulation network does not look very extensive. The only time the action moves away from the city is at the end of the film, when THX 1138 escapes, driving through a long tunnel in one of the police cars. One thus has the impression that the city is hidden in the depths of the Earth.
Physical limits of the city: As the city seems lost in the middle of nowhere, it is impossible to apply physical limits to it. One neither knows where it stops, nor has any idea of its extent. This once more reinforces the feeling of isolation which emerges from the film, which is significant as isolation seems to be one of the characteristics of the underground cities of science fiction.

Urban functions: The functions of this cybernetic city are not associated around a well-defined center. As the movement of people has been replaced by the circulation of the messages, the various urban functions are dispersed. The place where the hero works is not located near where he has his food, nor is the administrative office or his apartment. To go to and from these functional spaces, inhabitants are obliged to walk along sanitized and interminable corridors.

The decision centre is invisible and therefore nobody knows where the ruling power has its headquarters. The orders are given by telecommunication. One can even imagine that those who control the city could be thousands of kilometres away.

In short, it is almost impossible to have a global vision of the city as too many elements of space are missing. The general impression which emerges from this underground city is the isolation and the absence of a precise situation.

Urban forms and architectural environments

Urban structures: If the urban network is extensive, the urban structures are concentrated and rather homogeneous. The dominant distribution is horizontal (because of the underground space), which does not exclude a certain verticality of the buildings as can be observed in the image below.
The architecture: The architecture of the city in THX 1138 is completely homogeneous. There are many receding lines, which makes it possible to partly destroy the feeling of containment inherent to underground spaces by giving volume to the buildings. Moreover, there is no “sharpness”, all the angles are rounded, as shown below.

The architecture is round rather than angular. It is a cold, sanitized and flavourless architecture. It is above all functional.

The role of light: Light plays a very important part in underground urban spaces. It brings “life” to a space which is dark and opaque by nature. The city in THX 1138 seems to be buried deep in the ground because one cannot see any natural light. Light is entirely artificial and very white. Moreover, the color which dominates the city is white: the walls are white, the clothing of the residents is white. Only the
police officers (who are not human beings but cyborgs) are dressed in black. The predominance of the white reinforces the loss of landmarks. In short, the colour white and the light contribute to the sanitized and homogeneous vision of the esthetics of the city.

The practices of the residents in public and private spaces

The spatial habits of THX 1138 (typical day): the main character seems to wander from one space to another like a ghost. So do his fellow humans. The dominant white colour reinforces this spectral and lifeless aspect. The first thing that the residents do when waking up in the morning is to swallow pills preventing them from having any "irrational" thoughts like getting angry or feeling desire. After eating a kind of food in the shape of cube on a meal tray, THX 1138 leaves his "cell" and moves towards his work which seems to be repairing faulty cyborg police officers. It takes him a certain time to arrive as the director shows us through a succession of static shots where we see THX 1138 walking along many corridors, as shown below.

![Image of THX 1138 walking]

timecode: 00 h 06 min 15 sec

The residents seem to work all day, but this cannot be definitely stated because the director does not give us any time reference. Social relations at work seem almost non existent. The protagonists are seen working on their assembly line without exchanging a glance or even speaking. Here, the workplace does not favour sociability. Moreover, the characters are spied on permanently via cameras by other residents, like LUH 3417, the future girl friend of THX 1138, whose job it is to do so. Once the working time is over, our main character goes back to his quarters.
Only then can the residents take part in recreational activities. It seems to be the only moment when they can communicate. Some gather in small groups to chat in what look like private lounges. Others, like THX 1138, prefer to evacuate their sexual frustration in projection rooms showing constantly repeated images of naked bodies performing sensual dances. There is also a special room where the residents can confess their unhealthy thoughts in front of a black and white photograph showing the face of a bearded man. These various recreation rooms are located close to the apartments. Finally, without ever giving us any time reference, the director makes everyone go to bed and the day finishes.

It is possible to establish an approximate map of the underground city of THX 1138. The director gives us enough elements to identify functional spaces as well as the distance between the various places frequented by the protagonists. Before attempting to create a cartography of the city, it is advisable to study initially the public and private spaces in order to highlight, amongst other things, the different functions within the city.

Public spaces: Initially, one notices many public places located at each crossroads, with many benches and places to sit down. Indeed, vehicles drive only around the periphery, in order to go from one end of the city to another. The circulation network inside the city is exclusively pedestrian, hence the existence of these numerous public places like the one presented below.

![Image of public space]

timecode: 00 h 18 min 16 sec

The various functions within these public spaces are surprisingly limited. Administrative functions are practically invisible and consist of terminals located at each street corner where the residents clock in for work. As complaints or demands are proscribed, administration only has a statistical value. Monetary value is also inexistent: there is no concept of money in the kind of prison city Lucas depicts. The individuals seem to only live to work and to ensure the self-sufficiency of the city.
Catering is also non-existent in public spaces: meals are provided individually in the apartments. Entertainment is also limited to certain specific places: the projection rooms, the lounges and the confessional.

However, there is one predominant function, which is related to control and security. There are cameras everywhere and the cyborg police officers patrol uncanningly, which is logical in what seems to be a prison-city.

It is worth emphasising that the residents take little notice of their fellow beings and nor do the police cyborgs. In the middle of a public place, a man lies unconscious and is trodden on by people who do not realize he is there. This emblematic scene is illustrated by the image below.

![Image](image.jpg)

timecode: 00 h 19 min 50 sec

In short, public spaces in *THX 1138* have the main function of enabling pedestrians to come and go. There are many large rooms where the residents circulate, like automata. If we look at the film as a whole, we notice that Lucas tends to show long, interminable corridors more often than real living spaces.
The private space of THX 1138: The private space of the main character is reduced to his apartment. Moreover, this is not, strictly speaking, an intimate space where the protagonist is on his own as there are cameras there too which spy on the individuals permanently. For example, one camera is located behind the mirror of the medicine cabinet, to check if the individual takes his “non-emotion” pill. Each apartment, or rather cell, is identical. The residents all have the same objects, namely, a bed, a medicine-chest, a glass and an aluminium meal tray. Nowhere in the underground city can the residents escape from the control of the authorities. This is why THX 1138 is caught making love with one of his fellow residents. He is put in prison and from then on, decides to escape from this city for good.
Schematic map of the underground city in *THX 1138*

On the whole, the underground city is a vast prison, a closed cybernetic world from which it is difficult to escape and where new technologies are prevalent, alienating individual human thought. It is a universe in itself, which cannot be located in space. Moreover, it becomes clear that it is an underground city only in the final scene, after the escape of THX 1138 when he is seen going up to the surface and contemplating a vast deserted area.

Below is a schematic map of the town of *THX 1138*. It is impossible to establish a detailed map because the director shows us only the main places. The remainder of the map can be built gradually thanks to the narration of the main character or his journeys through the city.
This underground city has a unique urban morphology. The whole town is a pedestrian space. The vehicles circulate on a peripheral road. However, in spite of its specificity, we can stress that it contains what seem to be two characteristic elements of imaginary underground urban spaces. First of all, there is isolation. This underground city is isolated from the rest of the world. Then, there is the artificial white light, which in fact shows the closeness of the imaginary to reality. If one compares this type of light with those in actual underground urban spaces, one finds the same type of atmosphere. The photograph below, taken in the indoor city of Montreal, illustrates this resemblance. We see a corridor connecting two underground stations. The architectural surroundings, with the artificial white lights, are strangely reminiscent of the long sanitized corridors in THX 1138. The colours are very light as if to compensate the darkness inherent to underground spaces.
The isolation and the brightness of the architectural surroundings reinforced by the artificial light thus seem to be a constant feature of the imaginary underground urban spaces in science fiction films. However, in our geographical study of imaginary underground spaces, the analysis of *THX 1138* shows its limits. Indeed, the total absence of relations with the external world makes it impossible to study the relationship between underground spaces and those on the surface. This contrasts with other science fiction films such as *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), *The Matrix* (Wachowski brothers, 1999), or *Equilibrium* (Wimmer, 2002), where the study of the relations between the underground and the surface is possible. Here, underground spaces therefore take a political dimension as they are used to prepare a revolution, in order to overturn the authority in place at the surface of the city. This dimension is lacking in *THX 1138*. 
THEORIES, METHODS
AND EXPERIENCES
FROM THE MIRROR-SPACE TO THE SCREEN-SPACE

A media effect?

Benoît RAOUŁX *

Social geography can be defined through a three-pillar framework of interrelated epistemological notions which form a “tripod”.

The first pillar deals with space. Renée Rochefort (1963), who, in the 1960s, suggested a reversal in order between factors in space and in society, is often mentioned. The various contributions which have punctuated thought in social sciences (Lefebvre H., 1974), and especially in social geography, have studied this reversal at length. Space is viewed as a mirror of society and, in return, it has an impact on society. There is currently a consensus among geographers that the reversal in order between factors should be taken as established “once and for all”. Yet, such a standpoint leads to a deadlock in thought. What does this reversal suggest to us today? Does it simply lead to the conclusion that space is a social production? Let us start with a basic idea: society evolves; now, if space is a social production, then it means that the production of space itself evolves. Such an evolution draws much more attention today to the multiplicity of dimensions of space and time as well as to their articulation according to an implicit trialectic conception of reality (Space-Society-Time), to use E. W. Soja’s expression (1996). To me, the “reversal in order between factors” seems to serve as a postulate which, far from neglecting space, actually enables us both to emphasize its importance and to take an intellectual approach both in keeping with new constructions and contemporary changes in the world and with the way researchers ought to render reality. For space is an ever more complex construct on several levels.

Stating that the reversal in order between factors is an established fact occults the relationship of the researcher to reality. Social geography belongs to the field of social sciences: its object of study is society. Now, with social sciences, the construction of knowledge proceeds from an inner objectivation. Thought processes are introspective, which constitutes a second epistemological pillar. Academic activity is not fundamentally separated from one’s position as a citizen and condition as an individual. Experience fosters thought and the participation, both concrete and intellectual, of the researcher in a given society, together with his/her implication and objectivation, allowing a renewal of traditional themes and casting a whole new

* Associate Professor in Geography, CRESO – UMR 6590-CNRS, University of Caen, France. Translation by Amandine Ducray.

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light on social geography. This implies trying to keep scientific research in tune with the evolution of societies. Such a vision of scientific activity means constructing one’s methodology as close as possible to the object. To this should be added a third pillar, very much linked to the preceding one, which defines the researcher as a citizen who is sensitive to social inequalities. This leads to taking action towards greater social justice and, eventually, to restoring and circulating research to other citizens.

The construction of the object

The media, and particularly those which circulate images, are significant in the production of space. Many researchers attending a social geography conference held at the University of Caen in 1999 emphasized the necessity of tackling “new frontiers” in social geography, such as the media (Hérin R., 2001). Therein lies a new phenomenon, the scope of which is unprecedented in Europe compared with the 1960s or even the 1980s. Researchers in geography and in related subjects have mainly concentrated upon the relation between networks and spaces through the use of the technologies of information and communication. From this perspective, the medium (e.g. the Internet as a means of conveying information) is the particular object of focus as are – and this is obvious on the Internet – the relational network and their combined influence on the structuration of a given space. Some researchers have dwelt upon the social transformations triggered by technological, economic and spatial transformations; this is the case of Manuel Castells’ monumental work (1998). My approach deals with media and more specifically with images, which are central in this process; I shall study the production of content as a modality of the production of space rather than the media as a means of conveying information. Of course, this is but one aspect of the general process; as it follows the epistemological tripod of social geography, my object is bound to be different.

In English-speaking countries, the post-modern approach together with the influence of cultural studies on social geography have led several academics interested in space to look upon films and television as objects of study (Adams P. C., 1992; Soja E., 1996; Cresswell T. & Dixon D., 2002; Shield M. & Fitzmaurice T., 2001). The audiovisual mass media have indeed been tackled more forcefully in Anglo-Saxon countries, which is undoubtedly due to the precocity and importance of their media industries. In France, however, there has been a strong tradition of reflexions on cinema from a variety of points of view. As far as social sciences are concerned, ethnologists have had a long tradition of studying audiovisual images, which has led to the discipline of “visual anthropology” (De France, 1994); among historians, cinema studies are part of a wider approach to (the implications of) memory. Why then could social geographers not integrate research on audiovisual
media into the study of the passage from space to spatialities and multiple modalities in the production of space? France too shows an increasing interest in the media and, the study of the field being quite recent, often favours pluridisciplinary approaches (Maigret E., 2003). It also seems important not to restrict oneself to “highbrow” productions but to encompass various audiovisual media so as to be able to understand the transformations taking place both in the construction of space and in social relations. Social geography, the methodology of which consists in closely following contemporary changes and social relations as well as reconstructing the objects of research in line with the evolutions in society, cannot simply overlook what is at stake in the media. The transformations in the production of space lead to us taking into account the mediatisation of social relations which is largely based on audiovisual languages and broadcasting.

The production of time-space through images

The term “mediation” is increasingly used to signify the relation of societies to space. Space is then considered as an intermediary in social relations; it is constructed and deconstructed according to social issues and practices. The expression, which still suggests more than it states, seems to draw greater attention to the articulation of the mental and the material. It could be wondered if its circulation is not unconsciously linked to the ever-increasing importance of a form of “mediation” which has now become central to our society, i.e. the media. This emphasises the need to study the media and, especially, those which use images, as they are the crux of the transformations taking place today. In social geography, little has been done so far concerning images of the real whether as tools, methodology or as objects of study. For convenience, I use the expression “images of the real” to refer to photographic images, be they still or animated ¹, that is to say to all the forms produced by some recording of the real in a given medium according to a given point of view, which can then be reproduced and circulated. For an image never comes on its own. As Laurent Gervereau (2000) reminds us, it always comes with some sort of “gangue” in the form of a written or a sound text which presents it and thus favours one interpretation over another.

I shall use the example of a display in a public space to illustrate this evolution. During the summer of 2004, the gothic cathedral of Rouen became the backcloth to an audiovisual show organised by the Skertszò workshop thanks to European

¹. I do not look upon the relationship to the real as immutable. The real is more and more viewed as a construction through the visual. Contemporary artists, for instance, largely study the relationship of the visual and the real via the hybridization of images, of media and approaches, of art installations and performances, etc..
subsidies (*Intereg* programme) \(^2\) and entitled *From Monet to Pixels*. The show, which was targeted at the wider public, had recourse to Claude Monet’s series of paintings of the building at different hours in the day. The series itself was used as a referent in pop artist Roy Lichtenstein’s work, which broke up the printed version of the image into its component parts to reveal the colour dots of the printing process. One image was thus used as the medium for another (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). The designation of the building as a National Heritage site was not enough; it had to be represented to become visible. The show expressed both the touristic and media promotion of towns while highlighting forms of festive sociability and the increasing importance of urban night life.

![Fig. 1.1: Projection of a Monet painting](image1)

![Fig. 1.2: Projection of a Lichtenstein painting](image2)

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2. Apart from Rouen, the *Intereg* programme granted funds to other cathedrals, such as those of Amiens, Canterbury and Rochester.
From the Mirror-space to the Screen-space

Fig. 1.3: Schematisation of the installation.

All images are taken from *From Monet to Pixels, France 2 Télévision*, evening news, 1st September 2004.

Figure 1.3 shows several degrees in the construction of the relation to space and to time which all play on the materiality of space (e.g. the cathedral being used as a screen) and on the experience of memory through projected images. This evolution may well correspond to the transformations in our relation to space, which is now built up at various levels. It is based on a system of echoes between different degrees and resorts to the multiple dimensions of audiovisual images and their respective media. The example of the Rouen show underlines both the importance of images in the “mediation” of relations to spaces in society and the construction of a play between spatialities and temporalities which multiplies the existing referents.

The mediatisation of social relations through production-consumption

This evolution also corresponds to that of economic production: media belong to the material world and do not simply produce a representation just “in opposition” to reality. On the contrary, they draw greater and greater attention to the social relations in the consumption sphere or, rather, in a sphere where the articulation between production and consumption has changed. In 1963, Renée Rochefort’s text on social geography derived the idea of a reversal in order between factors in space and society from her studies of land relations in Southern Italy; fifty years later, media relations could partly be substituted for these. There has indeed been a shift of economic power towards the media sector, with its vast concentration of capital. The “time-space” of the screen can then be considered as a “good” and means of
production as the term "production companies", used in the audiovisual sector, clearly reveals.

Audiovisual mass media are everywhere, notably thanks to the boom in the market with the multiplication of TV channels and the development of the leisure industry. The expansion of the sport economic sector, for instance, cannot be accounted for without considering its mediatisation. The creation of a global consumption market goes hand in hand with the integration of various image-oriented media such as newspapers and the Internet, the phone industry (e.g. the income from text messages in some programmes) and other by-products (e.g. records, etc.). The Spanish firm Telefonica is a true example of such an integration; it is very present in "reality TV" production companies all over Europe (Endemol), as is the worldwide News Corporation, created by Rupert Murdoch, which encompasses newspapers, television and cinema production companies, etc..

Those macroeconomic dynamics convey points of view on the world. Global networks, especially news channels, provide a whole range of different languages or cultural versions according to the laws of the market. For instance, CNN (AOL Time Warner's cable unit and the number one global corporation in the media sector) has been preparing editions in other languages for quite a while, e.g. a successful Spanish version targeted at the Latino community in the US and at Spanish-speaking countries. Today, it faces competition both from the US (Fox News from News Corporation) and from all over the world, which is due to the multiplication of channels; CNN is therefore trying to reinforce its presence in the Middle East. Moreover, there is currently some sort of geopolitical rivalry over the Near and the Middle East. Al Jazeera (created in 1996 and half-owned by the Emirate of Qatar) is to launch an English-language service in 2006 with the name of Al Jazeera International, while BBC World (funded by the British Foreign Office) is planning to launch an Arabic service, BBC Arabic TV, a year later.

This ongoing battle can also be accounted for by the role television plays in our daily lives, which differs from one society to another. In France, according to a study of media consumption conducted in 1998, 78% of women and 76% of men watch television everyday; 23% of women and 18% of men watch it more than 30 hours per week (Glevarec H., 2003). Unlike cinema, television is mostly consumed at home, i.e. in the private sphere. There is thus a special combination of the private and the public sphere as TV news, for instance, constructs images which correspond to the social rhythm of towns, now turned into the "news space" per excellence (see figures 2 and 3).
Fig. 3: Soir 3 newscaster (Audrey Pulvar) in front of a twilight background
Both images taken from Soir 3, France 3 Télévision,
late evening news, 18 July 2004.

Not only does television punctuate our daily lives, it also structures public
debate, now transposed on screen. Once the most trusted source of information,
newspapers tend to come second. An innovative news architecture, focusing on the
audiovisual, is thus emerging with the rise of multimedia, which enables the
combination of chronological times and differentiated rhythms.
The spatial system of TV news

Audiovisual language is built up thanks to a “system” which is used both upstream (through filming) and downstream (where the term refers to the means, techniques and choices implemented to convey a specific intention). It seems particularly interesting to deconstruct the spatial system since it provides us with information concerning the modalities of the construction of space in contemporary society. Incorporating images while appealing to critical sense and intellect is one of the difficulties of the initiative. The screen can be considered as an a priori space which includes references to other spaces. To a certain extent, such an approach works well with that favoured in social geography where researchers often base their analysis on a given space, which they then deconstruct so as to study social relations.

Audiovisual images are subjective per se; the way they are put together constructs storytelling-like relations to time and space. The assertion of some point of view, which is integrated into a system and thus transforms an intention, is what provides the viewer with objectivation. TV news bulletins, the presentation of which is very standardized both in its spatial and temporal elements, are only objective once the point of view is taken out of the equation. Deconstructing the system of TV news therefore requires adjusting one’s gaze by taking the forms of enunciation into account. The representation of the world through globes and maps contributes to conveying an impression of objectivity. I suggest using the expression “media

3. Elisée Véron (1983) and François Jost (2004)”s respective frames of analysis are useful in this respect. My approach has more to do with the study of spatial dimensions.
maps” to refer to those representations of the globe and of space which participate in creating an impression of objectivity. The title sequence of France 2’s evening news (see figures 5.1 to 5.3) presents the viewer with a globe turning on its axis seen from some random point in space for about three seconds. The music further dramatizes the sequence. During the presentation of the news itself, the image of the globe serves to mark the introduction into the time-space of information. Showing a speeded-up revolving globe is here to signify covering (a term frequently used in the news media) the whole extent of the planet. It also gives an impression of instantaneous time. Time and space have become one and the same according to a relation I would describe as one of “ubiquity” or “instantaneity”. The initial shot of the globe is followed by one of the newscaster, who, after a brief appearance on screen, gives the news headlines through a voice-over while the music fades out.

![Fig. 5.1: Shot #1- 00.00 – 00.03 seconds](image1)

![Fig. 5.2: Shot #2- 00.04 – 00.51 seconds](image2)
The newscaster then makes eye contact with the audience and, with poise, starts developing the first topic. As Elisée Véron (1983) has clearly analyzed, the trust relation established with the viewer is all the stronger as the face is familiar and the framing technique recurrent – a close shot of the sitting character, which produces a reassuring effect of stability in contrast with the fast-paced editing of the news sequences themselves. A translucent sky blue map of the world appears in the background of the set. TF1 also dramatizes the introduction into the time-space of information by using a world map. Theirs is blue and reflective, blurred and animated; it turns while dates and figures appear on screen so as to indicate the speed of current events. The last shot presents the viewer with a big “20 heures” (8 o’ clock news) in front of the freezing map. Both channels thus develop the same language. TF1, however, distinguishes itself by its wall of screens in the background of the set. The technique creates a similar effect to the representation of the Earth through maps or globes; the repetitive use of screens suggests transparency as well as an all-embracing and instantaneous vision of the world through the news media.

France 3 has adopted the same title sequence for all its regional and national evening editions, thus establishing continuity throughout the 7 to 8 o’ clock time-slot. All the regional editions – starting at 7 p.m. – show a quick bird’s eye view of a town, for instance Caen in the France 3 Normandy news edition. The speeding up of the image avoids lingering on the town while the names of smaller towns from the
same region turn in the air. The national edition, which starts at 7.30, reveals a change in scale: an extent of the globe is shown while the names of big metropolises (Paris, London, etc.) turn in space. France 3 TV news thus takes the audience from Pontorson (Manche) to Moscow in the blinking of an eye. The construction of media scales does not act as a frame of analysis but, rather, as a means of enunciation for audiovisual images. The viewer seems to embark in some sort of space shuttle which draws closer to the Earth then lands “where things are happening” – “things” enunciated as real. Combining maps and zoom effects with the announcement of reports is a common practice (see figure 6).

Fig 6: A sequence from France 2 Télévision, evening news, 12 April 2004.
Total duration of the zoom: 7 seconds (8.06).
The map serves to introduce an incident in Lillers.
This time-space is characterised by fast-paced editing, by a "zapping" of images from all over the world. Since all this is a construction, I suggest using the expression "media space" to refer to those spaces built up through the TV system. As they are encoded through media production and enunciation and produce a sense of time as much as a sense of space, media maps contribute to the construction of media spaces. The framing of the world is indeed significant and even meteorological maps give us an insight into how the vision of society is being built (see figures 7 and 8).

Fig. 7: The weather forecast following TFI, evening news.
The map is very similar to an aerial photograph of the country and the frame focuses on France. The yellow dots represent a line of storms on 18 July 2004. The weatherwoman is omnipresent during the sequence; she gives advice and warnings to the audience.

Fig. 8: A map from Arte, weather bulletin.
The sequence is full of movements and zooms. Apart from France and Germany, the map focuses on Europe and most of the Mediterranean world (18 July 2004). There is no weatherman, just the familiar voice which serves as a trademark for the channel.

The frame, gestures and set phrases participate in creating a reference space and a narrative recognised as “ours”, as “endotic”; the off frame being relegated to the unknown and the “exotic”. Showing what the weather will be like is more serious than it seems.

The enunciation through images or, as some researchers in documentary cinema like Stéphane Breton (2004) call it, the “monstration”, allows little room for the viewer in the construction of news reports’ narratives, where the journalist indeed reports, i.e. gives a brief account of current events. The voice-over refers to the images shown on screen but has no organic relation to them; the latter are but a simple illustration of the former.

The myth of an open window onto the world

Fig. 9: A sequence from Euronews broadcast on France 3 Télévision, 28 June 2004.

The system used in Euronews (28 June 2004) contributes to fostering the myth of a permanently “open window” (see figure 9). The caption onscreen – “no comment”
(in English in the text) – is more than just a comment; it amounts to an enunciation. The top right-hand lines giving the time in three metropolises also facilitate a sense of transparency and instantaneity of the world. Yet there has actually been a cameraman and a sound technician standing behind the truck, on the side of (public) order, filming the rioters in front of them; this was followed by technical phases, such as editing, which implies some choices, and eventually by the broadcasting process. Enunciating, however, is ever more complex. Today, programmes, whether news-oriented or not, can no longer be studied without considering the whole programming context and its influence on the way systems are encoded. Such a negation of information is also to be found in “reality TV”, which borrows from TV news the myth of transparency and the absence of any point of view by multiplying the number of cameras and shooting angles.

The development of TV production has blurred the frontiers between one category and another but it has also brought new life to genres through received forms more than through innovation. In this blurring of genres, as in American infotainment, the presenter serves as an interface between genres and people. And indeed, some newscasters do present “reality TV” shows or even talk shows, which incidentally tend to use more and more the same encoding as “reality TV”. I suggest analyzing this in the light of the transformations in social relations, which are increasingly structured by the consumption sphere.

The media effect: an echo effect

In the 1980s, the contributors to the social geography book (Frémont A., et al., 1984) proposed a frame of analysis based on the effects of class, culture, place and mobility. It seems possible, today, to add a media effect to this list. The media effect works by echoing the other effects. The expression covers both the effect as a technical device and as a result.

It would be exaggerated to look for a direct influence of TV media on all behaviours. Yet, audiovisual images are always accompanied by some form of written, oral or sound enunciation, which leads me to examine the echo of media construction on other dimensions of reality. In some cases, it is even possible to see a direct impact on consumption (text messages in certain game shows or simply ads). Consumption thus triggers production, which contributes to creating a circuit in which production and consumption relations converge.

In “reality TV” shows, everything from the title sequence and logos, summaries, voice-overs and soundtracks to the other media circulating them, such as the press or TV, amounts to forms of enunciation which may reinforce either the reality aspect or the spectacle aspect, depending on the viewer’s position and his/her cultural baggage. The viewer-consumer may interpret images according to his/her own
values. Let’s take the example of Le Pensionnat de Chavagnes (The Chavagnes Boarding School), which was broadcast on M6 in September 2004. The programme was shot in an old primary school described as “the school of the Third French Republic” where child volunteers came to live and take their certificate (see figure 10).

Fig. 10: True geography at last.
Le Pensionnat de Chavagnes, M6, September 2004

Depending on one’s value system, the programme can be understood either as an apology for good old methods or as a parody – judging from the over-the-top quality of the surroundings and discourses – or even as an emblematic example of the commercial turn the French television industry is currently taking.

TV images work through multiple echoes between the images themselves and between the real (what is seen) and reality. I therefore suggest following a research approach which will decompartmentalize the various effects by looking upon the media effect as linked to all the others by a system of echoes. The media effect would then be found in the capacity to influence public debate by magnifying it. Le Pensionnat de Chavagnes was broadcast at a time when one of the many debates on school issues was taking place in France; this one concerned bringing back the uniforms and doubts as to what should be defined as “core subjects”. The media effect operates thanks to echoes where every medium (TV, newspapers, radio and the Internet) takes an issue and blows it up. This is also relevant concerning the modalities of public debate. Speech is now staged through “real life” testimonies in talk shows or game shows. Television has been turned into a therapeutic community where the individual is associated with a group of witnesses – the TV viewers. Family quarrels, psychological problems and feelings of injustice are expressed
through individual testimony which has thus moved on from the "intimate" to the "ex-timate".

The development of the audiovisual market is accompanied by the assertion of image rights. The blurring of images, whether applied to faces or brand labels, is indeed even more common nowadays. And yet such techniques as blurring or having someone making confidences with his/her back to the camera should be interpreted as "overexposure" in the encoding system of the TV world; by contrast, it conveys a touch of authenticity and truth since the face and eyes cannot be seen and the voice has been altered. The mediatisation of society thus leads to a reorganisation of the public and the private sphere. On the one side lies the overexposure of the private (the "ex-timate"), on the other, a kind of eclipse.

The media effect as an echo of the class effect

It seems possible to devise a frame of analysis by looking at the media effect. I suggest working on its echo function as regards the class effect. Past hypotheses need reformulating and transforming since studies on the consumption of audiovisual images should now be conducted focusing on the relations to space.

It is certainly possible, nowadays, to identify some sort of "media bourgeoisie" characterised by the power of images, in every sense of the word, and by its omnipresence in the media world, participating in all sorts of programmes and sometimes even boasting audiovisual properties, for privatisation has led to the development of production companies which are sometimes closely linked to star presenters. They possess all the attributes of a social group whose relation to the other classes is characterised by media "overexposure". Many programmes propose a visit to stars' villas or reveal their "life's secrets" in a most "obtrusive" way, as Sagar(s) does on TF1. This leads me to consider "reality TV" shows in correspondence with contemporary social relations. In order to exist as a new ruling class, one has to be admired from a distance. Today, television facilitates the construction of such a relation.
Fig. 11: A sequence from *Des Racines et des ailes*, France 3 Télévision, 13 October 2004. A televised visit of the Château de Jacques Cœur (in Auvergne) by the owners.

Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot (1989) have noted symbolical repercussions in the opening of family castles to the public. The authors insist upon the distancing of the “smart districts”: “Smart districts do indeed deserve their adjective; as in a painting or a work of art, those who do not fully participate in them cannot but contemplate them from the outside” (14). This reflexion could be applied to TV media today. Cultural entertainment programmes, like *Des Racines et des ailes* on France 3, show prestigious aristocratic residences such as castles in Sicily, Naples and Venice or in Auvergne, as well as Parisian private mansions and the like. The viewer-visitor is taken on a tour of the castle by the owners who present him/her with the genealogy of the family and give a few childhood memories (see figure 11). This social group is represented from a distance; they attract respect since what is shown is how deeply-rooted in time and space they are.

Television amounts to a staging of social relations, be it through popular “reality TV” entertainment in a holiday camp, cultural heritage (*Des Racines et des ailes*), exotic trips (*Thalassa*) or even through underground exhibitions in European capitals (e.g. on Arte). This opens up new vistas for a social geography of places and social groups on screen and, more generally, for a social geography applied to the media which integrates the study of TV representation, unequal access to the media (for an issue is more or less “audiovisible”) as well as the viewers’ relations to production-consumption and the role of the media in social positioning and collective identities. At the lower end of the social spectrum, the media construction of “banlieues” has become part and parcel of social relations. Audiovisual media have largely contributed to a normative approach to the names given to different parts of the town (e.g. “banlieues”); they have also reinforced the positioning of social groups through the construction of stereotypes. Yet, at the same time, television is a forum where claims are made particularly obvious. It seems interesting to examine the establishment of a new relation to the visible or, rather, to the “audiovisible”, in a society that uses space as a setting and stage. The “audiovisible” has become part and parcel of the construction of social relations, of relations to space and of democracy.
Fig. 12: Into the limelight: (Audrey Pulvar), The only newscaster from overseas.
She used to present Soir 3, the late evening news programme (see figure 3).
Image taken from 19/20, evening news, national edition, France 3 Télévision, 7 November 2005.

The claims of recent immigrants to access to the TV world at large – and not only, as they mostly do now, to Light Entertainment programmes – seem to highlight how important television is in the construction of one’s relation to the Nation. Their quasi-absence in France is felt as a form of discrimination and injustice (see figure 12).

The “media effect” as an echo of the “place effect”
Fig. 13: The Sacré-Cœur in Montmartre. Arrival of the Tour de France in Paris, live transmission (France 2 Télévision, 25 July 2005)

The echo between the media effect and the place effect is all the stronger as "patrimonialisation" and audiovisual language grant the same importance to the viewer’s gaze: both aim at making an object present and visible in space. In France, religious buildings and castles – which materialized and symbolized the powers of the Ancien Régime – have been looked upon as “National Heritage” ever since the 19th century. Since then, the term has been extended, both temporally and spatially, to the point where it now includes landscapes, technical tools and practical knowledge. This all inclusive approach to National Heritage necessitates informing the viewer’s gaze, as if former modes of designation were no longer sufficient today. The imaging of the Tour de France – an annual rite in the celebration of national territory – resorts to many oblique aerial views, which give a large perspective both of the cyclists and of the onlookers gathered along the roads as well as, albeit symbolically, of the TV viewers. In this all-encompassing movement of national celebration, the country itself ironically acts as a foil to commercial sponsors. When the Tour de France drama reaches its dénouement, it calls the aerial images celebrating the capital with views – oblique again – of Paris and its famous buildings. For a vertical view would indeed change the relation to the referent by making it more abstract. An oblique view from above guides the viewer’s gaze; it encourages more participation from him/her while monumentalising objects at the same time (see figure 13). The organisation of time and space thus creates an echo effect between material space and media image: the combination of oblique aerial views and live transmission reinforces the “presence” of the objects – which here means both “being spatially present” and “being temporally in the present”.

Social movements too are largely based on media representation, which, in return, gives them an existence in the political game. The best way is to ensure media coverage of a struggle is to inscribe it in a given place; it enables the activation and construction of a media memory. The Goutte d’or district in the 19th arrondissement of Paris, in the shade of the Butte Montmartre, has had a singular role in the Parisian urban order; it has acted as a sort of anteroom in the migratory route. Several waves of immigration have followed one another since the French Industrial Revolution; the latest from sub-Saharan Africa. The district has been characterised by successive struggles. It was home to the first Algerian nationalist movement before World War Two. During the Algerian War, the district became the theatre of operations between the colonial power and the Algerian independence movements. The marks left are hardly visible on the material space but the memories remain. In this case, the audiovisual is paramount in constructing memory. The district is a favourite scene in both documentary and fiction films on social exclusion and immigration. Saint-Bernard’s church, located in the Goutte
d’or, appears on no postcards and is not recognised as National Heritage by the Parisians, yet, since the 1990s, it has become a symbol of the movement of the sans-papiers (i.e. “people without legal documents”). The sans-papiers occupied the building in 1997, which led to mass mediatization, including images of the police breaking down the church door with axes to evacuate them. From then on, several attempts at occupation have been made and have ended up in the old presbytery being turned into a kind of base for local associations. The National Coordination of the sans-papiers, for instance, tried to occupy the church at the end of December 2001 to protest against the restrictions imposed on the regularisation of the sans-papiers. The place enables a re-activation and construction of a “media memory”. It therefore seems possible to make out a strong echo between the media effect and the place effect, which combine easily in the media system.

Media class struggles?

In November 2005, riots starting in Clichy-sous-Bois spread across France following the death of two young men fleeing from the police who took refuge in an electrical sub-station where they were electrocuted. This sad news story can illustrate the stigmatization of working-class categories. The term used by Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy to refer to the youth in the suburbs — “racaille”, i.e. “rabble” or “scum” — largely contributed to sparking off a series of troubles. Those riots were designated as “violences urbaines”, i.e. “acts of urban violence”, an expression which tends to restrict the very acts to their common place of enunciation in space. Several sociologists have shown an interest in the media, focusing on social relations rather than on the events themselves, which gives a different view in the study of the media (Champagne P., 1993; Beaud S. & Pialloux M., 2003; Lochard G., 2002). What I suggest here is a complementary approach, which is still at a preliminary stage, and consists in taking into account the mediatisation of social relations or, in other words, the transposition of struggles into the media space, by deconstructing and tackling the concept of TV time-space. This leads to studying the way audiovisual images are organised and enunciated while examining both chronological time (from second to second) and narrative time.

The title sequence of France 2’s evening news on 3 November 2005 is a good example (see figures 14). The sequence is structured by the expression “urban guerrilla conflict”, which is enunciated by the newscaster and appears on screen with pictures of burnt out cars and shapes silhouetted against the glow. The term “guerrilla” belongs to the vocabulary used by the police, where it designates a
degree of violence (level 8). “Guerrilla” implies an organised movement, an argument which was subsequently disproved.

Fig. 14.1: *France 2*, evening news titles. The voice-over goes as follows:
“... Far from calming down, the urban guerrilla conflict has spread further across the Paris region...” (Shot #1- 00.4-00.6 seconds; starting from the title sequence)

Fig. 14.2: “... but at the same time, indignation grows amongst the inhabitants.”
(Shot #2- 00.21-00.22 seconds).

4. In the French Special Branch (*Renseignements Généraux*) terminology, level 8 covers: “devastation and looting; assaults on individuals; confrontation with police officers; guerrilla; riot.”
Riots and setting fire to cars in underprivileged districts are nothing new; this has been happening from time to time since the 1980s. What is new, however, is the convergence of several factors. The mass media coverage and mimicry in the circulation of these events across France is worth mentioning. The TV system has become an integral part of those practices: through the acts and the types of media space where they happen, through the use of social time (night scenes and the evocative power of flames) as well as through the characters (the hooded silhouettes opposing the helmeted ones). The rioters and police officers confront each other; the whole scene inscribes itself in TV time-space. Nights are counted like episodes in a serial or a “reality TV” show. Those scenes also revive the dichotomy between the capital and the province as broadcasting is organised from the centre – where the impetus was given by rioters in suburban Paris – to the periphery. It therefore seems possible to make out a construction of media distances based on a spatial system which sustains a narrative and results in the creation of an apocalyptic aesthetic.

5. Newspapers and the Internet press have largely emphasised such a dramaturgy. On 8 November 2005, for instance, the headlines of the regional daily Ouest France read “Acts of Urban Violence - 11th night of arson attacks”.

Fig. 14.3: “… Order and justice will have the last word, Dominique de Villepin asserts.”
(Shot #3- 00.23-00.25 seconds).
Fig. 15: Agence France Presse (AFP)’s website, 9 November 2005, multimedia animation.

The globe in the right upper hand corner serves as a form of enunciation of news, while the text puts the events into perspective.

The combination of TV language – constructed upon a distance from a given point of view – and a vertical map emphasises the discrepancy between the local and the national (see figure 15). The echo between various media, which is made possible through the convergence of various means of communication (e.g. the press, TV and the Internet) and various languages (e.g. pictures, audiovisual, text), reinforces the presence of these events, giving them considerable importance. The riots have had a global media resonance. Showing foreign media coverage is a recent practice: TV viewers have thus been made aware of the difference between points of view on news, particularly as similar behaviours have been observed in neighbouring countries. The globalisation of the market of news images does not amount to homogenisation for each piece of information is produced from one specific point of view. In this case, however, French TV evening news expressed a point of view on a point of view, with France 3 offering a critical look at its foreign counterparts’ coverage of the events, highlighting their spectacular vision and revealing the system used, which tended to favour the critical stance taken by the
inhabitants (fig. 16), thus suggesting bias on the part of foreign media and objectivity on that of French media.

![Image of a Parisian suburb](image1.png)

**Fig. 16:** An inhabitant from a Parisian suburb testifying to the existence of discrimination in France (9 November 2005, interviewed by BBC World Service, broadcast on 19/20, France 3 Télévision evening news). Shot: 10.20-10.23 seconds.

This spectacular vision of the French riots is evidenced on Figure 17, which shows images taken from Google Earth to which 24-hour news channel CNN has added flames on French towns. The stock exchange indexes of the main money markets of the world, turned into the pulse of the planet, slide by in the lower right-hand corner. This produces multiple levels of enunciation corresponding to a variety of points of view: the broadcasting of those images by France 3 Télévision evening news (9 November 2005), which is targeted at a French audience, produces a whole different interpretation.

![Google Earth image](image2.png)

**Fig. 17:** Image first broadcast on CNN and taken from 19/20, evening news, France 3 Télévision, 9 November 2005. Shot: 10.26-10.33 seconds.
The implicit point of view is used to express new forms of social relations. Not only has the position in space become central to the establishment of social categories, but the mastering of the media system in space has also been given paramount importance. The point of view clearly shows a certain social relation. In French reports dedicated to the riots, it has almost become a general rule for the journalists exclusively to take sides with public order. This echoes both their social positions and the logic of news, which largely conforms to existing norms and the way order is perceived by the dominant society; to that should be added differences in political points of view. Rioters are but silhouettes in the distance. While filming, some technicians had their car seized and destroyed by rioters, which led the journalists in charge of the report to be explicitly included in the narrative (figure 18). The journalists get involved at last, but only because of the risk they are taking. Giving a point of view from the distance and from one side only tends to “exoticise” the populations. The distancing is reinforced by the introduction of a curfew which reactivates colonial memory as it is reminiscent of that of 1955, introduced at the beginning of the Algerian War. This wholly contributes to the media effect. From a dialectical view, however, the system has been upgraded: those riots have enabled the opening of a debate with contrasting opinions, including interviews with academics specialising in such questions, who only rarely appear on TV. It is through the circulation of different points of view that the viewer can get involved; appealing to his/her criticisms helps to create an effect of distancing.

![Image](image.png)

Fig. 18.1: The rioters block the journalists’ car. Shot: 05.14-0.5.25 seconds.
Have the riots of November 2005 revealed a new form of class struggle transferred into media production? More than the mediatisation of class struggles, what is shown here seems more to be a “classification” of media struggles, where the audiovisual relies upon a dialectical relation in which TV news’ encoding can be reversed so as to promote or demote the dominant social order. Following this hypothesis, the French riots could be read as a crystallisation of both the class and the place effect through the media effect. In this process, the spatial dimensions of the TV news system (place, staging and point of view) and the enunciation mode are crucial. As a result, TV narratives can construct the social categories and frontiers of contemporary France, themselves based on spatial dimensions.

**Back to the social geography project**

**Gazing at the gaze**

The development I have just made is not at all based on an iconoclastic vision of the world; as M.-J. Mondzain (2004) underlines, images *per se* are neither true nor false. It is the way they are enunciated and the link between enunciation, audiovisual images and the viewer which matter and can vary according to the type of media used. Following the idea that audiovisual images are constructions, one needs to deconstruct them to try and understand what lies beneath and put them in perspective with other social constructions. Unlike fieldwork, which implies meeting other groups and other places than those to which academics are accustomed,
studying TV images requires an objectivation of practices; the researcher has to make efforts to take some distance and be able to “gaze at the gaze” television casts on the world. This directly and deeply interrogates the researcher and his/her social position.

Such an approach, however, does not totally replace first-hand experience of places. If we return to the example of the Rouen Cathedral, it seems that, today, images need to inscribe themselves in a given place to be able to be sustained by reality and be granted some materiality and a unique character, such as that of the artists’ video installations. It seems the audience is no longer simply looking at a representation, i.e. an image projected on a screen, but at a re-presentation. I suggest reading this as an articulation of the concept of both spatial and temporal presence, which facilitates the experiencing of the diversity of spatial and temporal dimensions and allows them to be linked.

For experience is acquired through looking and being able to construct and deconstruct representations. The more technology develops the ability to grasp or to represent the real, the more gazes are constructed. Such transformations are inevitably the product of technological evolution, but they are also of a social quality. The role attributed to images (and the way we look at them) constantly evolves; they are digested as soon as they become commonplace. The mimetic relation to images has been replaced by a much more constructed relation. As they rely on constructions, media are part and parcel of social relations; they call for a form of incorporation which integrates our relation to space. As a result, I suggest integrating media in the whole approach to spatial capital.

This leads to studying space in a whole new light. In the 1980s, French social geography was very much representative of the times; it was a period when maps were not commonplace yet and geographers shared the concern with better showing social inequalities, which had so far been neglected. Consequently, maps have certainly influenced the binary conception of the relation between space and society; used a common tool by geographers, they imply mental reflexes in the way society at large understands space. From the 1960s to the 1980s, geographers put forward a binary conception of the relations, not only between space and society, but also between representation and reality and between infrastructure and superstructure, etc. A map reveals a conception of space as a mirror of society; it echoes the state of society. Without disregarding the importance of maps, which contribute to the production of knowledge and raise many questions, I would like to lay emphasis on the shift that has occurred in the construction and circulation of knowledge because of the rise of image-circulating mass media.

Nowadays, the expression “mirror-screen” could easily be replaced by the “space-screen”. The screen is both a frame (real and metaphorical) and the medium of relations to time-space. The audiovisual narrative constructs, multiplies and organises time-spaces. A screen takes into account both the material and mental
dimensions of the real; it shows as much as it “screens” off. Studying this evolution also requires working in a field where anthropology and social sciences converge. In order to understand the mediatisation of social relations, one should start with the individual/viewer and end with the object. For audiovisual images rely upon the incorporation of relations to space: they cannot do without the gaze, speech and body. Setting images in movement and adding sound and speech participate in constructing a language.

Practising the gaze: documentary cinema

The risk is the confusion of dominant televisual media and audiovisual language, which opens up an array of possibilities. Documentary cinema, for instance, offers many contrasted visions of the world: it does not illustrate a discourse which has already been constructed, but a point of view on the world. More often than not, it serves as a counterpoint to TV language since it stems from an intention where the director takes on a certain position and works on an organic relation between voice, sound and image, etc. The relation to space is not constructed from above, as it is in most TV news through the use of maps, but at the human level. Documentary cinema as I have been practising it, i.e. as a method of investigation, enables us to discuss ideas, to inform and to act on reality. *Traplines in Vancouver* (Raoulx B., 2003), for instance – dedicated to the homeless can collectors rummaging through bins in Vancouver – was not only meant to focus on a certain relation to space (practices, movements and speech, etc.) which had not been academically studied so far, but the film also aimed at suggesting a method integrating the epistemological “tripod” afore mentioned. *Traplines in Vancouver* has enabled us to go on with research and circulate results, to raise public debates and accompany social interventions.

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6. Michel Chion (2003) who has been focusing on sound in cinema, uses the expression “audio(logo)vision”.
Fig. 19.1 and 19.2 Images taken from the documentary Traplines in Vancouver (2003)

Deconstructing images to in-form them (i.e. putting them in form) in order to analyse our relations to contemporary world, both as a citizen and as a researcher, has become urgent today. There is no equivalent of “illiteracy” concerning media. Could not we talk of “immediacy”? Circulating knowledge in society amounts to changing relations to space and social relations; it can somehow result in emancipation and requires some sort of education in images.

Documentary references


VIDEO ETHNOGRAPHY
Contextualizing language learning

Catharine Mason *

Methodology

Two interrelated factors important to an understanding of language and language use are missing from much of foreign language instruction. The first of these involves an applicable theory of culture inasmuch as language use is a culture-specific phenomenon. The second missing element is a model for dealing with the diversity of languages, including that of any specific language – in our case the English language – throughout the world. It is, in fact, a horrendous intellectual task to lead foreign language students to a working knowledge of the links between culture and language if we confine our encounter with the language being studied to the two-dimensional surface of books. More disastrously, the establishing of objectives limited to manual norms, evaluations based solely on content and exclusive pronunciation patterns (whether they come from BBC or CNN news reporter diction) have led a majority of language learners down the disappointing path of never having the opportunity of exercising more than a minuscule portion of what they have endeavored to learn.

This is not to say that we must throw away grammar manuals, dictionaries and the treasures of literary works that have provided the foundation of elaborate language study for several centuries. Learning a foreign language involves, most generally, practice in comprehension and expression – understanding what is spoken or written, and being equipped for speaking and writing in comprehensible (and appropriate) fashion. Video projections have been exploited to these effects in the classroom with invaluable success for some years now as complementary exercises to classical methods. Whether they be fiction films produced for a wider audience, or language methods on film, such projections serve to reinforce grammatical concepts for interpretation and application, vocabulary use, listening comprehension and pronunciation practice. Nevertheless, cultural patterns in speaking and linguistic diversity have continued to be left aside.

In this article, I will demonstrate methodological steps towards the development of video techniques for seeking an anthropological approach to foreign language

* Associate Professor, University of Caen, France.

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study. Such an approach focuses on language as socially and historically constructed. It also makes room for a holistic view and appreciation of the diversity of language use as opposed to dependence upon language standards as (sterile) models towards which students must constantly strive. In shifting our attention from abstract categories of pre-defined linguistic units to speech communities, individual speakers and their particular communication strategies, the student will ultimately view linguistic diversity as a natural expression of social life as opposed to an impossible barrier to be overcome.

Much of the thrust of this type of language instruction has been informed by the widespread applications of Dell Hymes’s ethnography of communication. Hymes, an eminent pioneer of sociolinguistics as well as of ethnopoetics, has provided models, concepts and long-reaching goals for dealing with the evolution of language(s). In addition to his most rigorous empirical approach to language research, he has made important contributions to an understanding of the history of linguistics, of how scholars perceive language, and most especially of how semantic-based linguistics has ignored particular forms of speech for the comfort of universals. In an enlightening discussion of language diversity in *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality*, Hymes writes:

> In Western civilizations the dominant intellectual response to the existence of diversity has been to seek an original unity, either of historical or of psychological origin (sometimes of both). The dominant practical response has been to impose unity in the form of the hegemony of the language or standard. The presence of the Tower of Babel story in the civilization’s sacred book legitimated, and perhaps stimulated, efforts to relate languages in terms of an original unity and played a great part in the development of linguistic research (Hymes 1996: 28).

By contrast, the work of Hymes and other linguistic ethnographers has placed emphasis on the plurality of context-related ways of creating and re-creating meaning in speaking. Researchers seek to demonstrate how verbal form, rhetorical structures, vocal textures, cultural references, interpersonal relations, dialogical inferences, preferences in speech styles, etc., prove tangible and concrete as integers for a community-based understanding of language use. In applying such an approach to foreign language learning, students come to better understand communication as a social process as opposed to relying on the memorization of pre-determined formulae and paradigms which too often fail to leave room for human subjectivity.

To this end, video technology provides not only the opportunity for a three-dimensional view and hearing of the social context in which language is used. The study of film-making as a medium of communication – both fictional and ethnographical – leads students to situate language practice at its very core, that is in a study of human life. A fully developed program also gives students the possibility of using inexpensive and uncomplicated video cameras for a more thorough exploration of language/culture relations in order to pursue their own intuitions or
more formal inquiries. We will see that such an exploration may include an investigation into their own cultural practices and ways of speaking as a means to obtain a more intimate view of how language and culture correlate.

In what follows, we will look more specifically at how filmed dialogue may serve as documentation of language as socially constructed. Then we will see how collecting and interpreting one's own data with the aid of a digital camera and a simple TV screen may be used for more active and elaborate forms of language and culture study. More broadly, but also more concretely, this paper will serve as a call for resources in developing video techniques as a pluri-disciplinary endeavor in collecting and interpreting data in language and culture as well as an opportunity for intercultural exchange through language discovery and learning.

Context and Culture in Ethnographical Interpretation

Let's begin with an example taken from a film entitled *Chulas Fronteras* by independent filmmaker Les Blank. Greatly inspired by the cinéma direct of Richard Leacock, Blank has focused much of his camera work on two cultural themes – food and music – and seeks to let his subjects speak for themselves without the aid of off-screen narrators. His spontaneous interviews, from which he has edited performances of socially embedded anecdotes, provide cultural indices to language use as well as an intercultural view of community-based language study. The latter point is largely due to the fact that the filmmaker comes onto the scene as an outsider. But it is equally important to note that the filmed subjects are fully conscious that most of Blank's viewers are not going to be members of their own community. Many participants in the events that are filmed ultimately come to ignore the presence of the camera, while some will avoid it. Others, however, may seize the opportunity to communicate with "the outside world". This is the case for Willie Lopez, a Mexican disc jockey living on the Mexican side of the Texas-Mexico border. Blank's *Chulas Fronteras* provides viewers with a virtual encounter of social and cultural activity on this frontier between nations. Lopez offers a depiction of the type of human barrier which extends beyond a national one. His narrative is transcribed in analyzed verse form 1 here:

1. Ethnopoetic interpretations of oral discourse as innovated by Dell Hymes and Dennis Tedlock have revealed stylistic form built upon structural units of lines and groups of lines which practitioners call verses. Larger units are referred to as stanzas, scenes, acts, parts, etc., according to the internal logic of the spoken "text". Such form is an integral part of the speech act, whether conscious or unconscious, and has cultural bearing. Ethnopoeticians insist on the fact that, as in written texts, form and content go hand in hand in the creation of meaning.
A Couple a’ Hamburgers
Willie Lopez

Transcribed from *Chulas Fronteras* by Les Blank

A/ Opening  
We came from Indianapolis to Lubbock.  
And uh, I was driving the truck, uh  
belonged to my brother-in-law  
And uh, there was the family in the truck and the  
kids was crying because  
they were hungry.  

B/  
So I stopped in the restaurant  
and I went in there  
and just asked for a couple of hamburgers  
And then the waiter came to me and say,  
“What do you want?”  
I say,  
“Well, I just want a couple of hamburgers for my kids,  
“who’re crying.  
“I want something to eat.”  
And he say,  
“Well, let me talk to –  
“I don’t know if I can –  
“but let me talk to my boss.”

C/  
So he went back  
and then a bigger man came through  
the back door.  
And he say,  
“What the hell you want?”  
I say,  
“Well, I just wan’ a couple of hamburgers.”  
And he say,  
“Can you read?”  
“Yeah.”  
“Can you see that sign?”  
“Yeah, I can see it alright.”  
“What it say?”  
“It say, ‘No Mexican allowed.’  
“Then why don’t you get out?”  
“I just want a couple of hamburgers, sir.”  
“I said get out and stay out!”  
And just pushed me through the screen door.

D/ Closing  
Oh boy that made me feel  
terrible.  
I was about uh,  
ready to –,  
to drive the truck and then drive,  
over the whole restaurant.
It seems perfectly safe to assume that Lopez was conscious of Blank's interest in cultural manifestations of border life, and that the subject matter and details of his narrative were selected accordingly. As a competent speaker of English (hence my choice of our d.j. as a model speaker for my students) as well as Spanish, as a voice which crosses cultures radially, linguistically and culturally, Willie Lopez can be held in high esteem as performer and bearer of his tradition(s).

Before moving forward here, the notion of performance needs some illuminating. "Performance", as it is discussed in traditional linguistics, refers to speech as it is used, to be distinguished from the linguistic economy available to speakers for use. In community-based linguistics, performance is defined as a specialized use of language. For the Mexicanos of New Mexico, sociolinguist Charles Briggs tells us, "A great deal of respect is accorded to those members of the community who are skillful in using language aesthetically and persuasively..." (1988: 2). This statement has general application. Indeed, Briggs' 1988 study of Mexicano performance is useful to us, not only for his insights into cultural and context-related speech patterns of Mexicans living inside the U.S., but also for its theoretical contributions to a fuller understanding of how linguistic anthropologists are to measure the competence of a given performer. Space will not allow a discussion of such theoretical considerations here, except to say that the quality of a verbal performance is based on the criteria, values and tastes of the community being studied. In the case of Willie Lopez, we may hold with some certitude that he is recognized as a competent verbal artist from the fact of his profession: a radio announcer requires audience approval to be successful.

Communicative competence thus provides a revealing indicator of essential links between cultural codes and patterns and verbal expression. A quick reading of Lopez's narrative as a two-dimensional text allows us to decipher an incident of blatant racist discrimination. But it does not provide the context in which the story (the events as they unfold), the narrative (the configuring of the events for effect) and the narration (the actual telling)\(^2\) concur. The performer's role in the community, his linguistic economy and the filmmaker's (ethnographer's) inquiry as audience participation all play a role in the emergence of the performance. Lopez's narrative presents a Mexican family inside American territory as they confront racist barriers and human alienation. Lopez tells this story to an American filmmaker inside Mexican territory where his voice represents both cultural authority and regional entertainment. The analogy between the US-Mexican border and the restaurant screen door establishes a rhetorical and dialogue-richness impossible to capture on the page.

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2. For a detailed description of the interworkings of these aspects of the narrative reality, see G. Genette, 1972. For a performance-based approach, see R. Bauman, 1986.
If I have reached such conclusions from a methodical approach to performance competence, my students nonetheless manage to pose related questions without such theoretical guidelines. Well-trained in semantic-based language study, they often begin with comments on the content of the story. However, they are quick to respond, in detail, to the question "Do you find Willie Lopez to be a good storyteller?" They describe, for example, his calm temperament as a way of allowing the events to be perceived and not pre-interpreted (showing vs telling as a narrative strategy). They point out his use of intonation and gestuality when enacting the dialogues. Interestingly, too, very few students note Lopez's grammar deviations before being presented with the transcript of the text (usually after two viewings). Once the habitual debate over correct and incorrect forms has concluded (my credibility as an English teacher has at times seemed to be at stake), a number of topics relating to language diversity may ensue: the diffusion of (the English) language, American English varieties and their history, Hispanic populations in the U.S., the diffusion of Spanish in the US, etc..

Lopez’s national identity is commonly questioned by students who remark that his outward appearance is not clearly Hispanic. This observation often leads to a discussion of Hispanic-influenced pronunciation of English as a factor involved in racist discrimination. Examples of this phenomenon in the countries of origin of my students help us to broaden our understanding of how language is involved in the hierarchism of communities and nations across the planet. All of these topics – Lopez’s general effect as a storyteller, his grammatical deviations and his national identity – arise as spontaneous discussion allowing for a more systematized understanding of relations between culture and language.

Once such context-related factors in language use are exhausted (which, of course, they never truly are), a closer look at the stylistic features of Lopez’s oral narrative gives way to a more intricate view of how linguistic choices for meaning-making cannot be reduced to grammar, syntax and dictionary definitions. The matter becomes more a question of how a performer conveys meaning than of what she or he means. I refer back to Roman Jakobson’s demonstration of the poetic function of communication which helps us to momentarily set aside the referential content of hamburgers and race prejudice to focus on the design of the narrative as a necessary and integral part of Lopez’s use of language.

The verse transcription provided above points to a number of design factors that obtain meaning. Most apparent is that the text is divided into 4 parts: 2 dialogues are framed by an opening and a closing. The opening establishes the setting as one of stress and parental responsibility. Line 5 adds an emotional tinge – that of children crying. The importance is placed, however, not on the distress of the hungry

3. For a general discussion of bringing oral poetics into foreign language classes, see C. Mason, 2003.
children, but on the role of the father-narrator who must resolve the crisis. In just a few lines, Lopez draws in his listening-viewers to feel the personal burden of what he is about to recount. He then enacts two dialogues without any judgment or analysis whatsoever. These are followed by a closing which finally expresses, again in but a few succinct lines, the human emotions of such victimization. What begins as a long, tiresome drive back towards Lubbock with his family ends on this focal point: the location of a restaurant whose racist policy prevents him from doing his fatherly duty, and the likes of which he wishes to demolish but can’t.

These emotional cues, however, do more than heighten the effect of hungry children and a defenseless father; their framing position serves to state the obvious – namely, that such a situation is intolerable -- in order to place the dialogues in the forefront. This strategy is confirmed by the quiet, seemingly unaffected tone of the storyteller which is almost always commented upon by students in my class.

The bulk of the narrative is indeed formed by the 2 dialogues, and it is in these (narrated) verbal exchanges -- first between the narrator and the waiter and then between the narrator and the “boss”-- that the performer encloses the message intended for the filmmaker and his listener-viewers. Faced with flagrant race injustice which involves hungry children, the traveller applies a verbal strategy which reverses the roles of dominant and dominated. This inversion comes clear when the boss asks the traveller if he can read the sign. The traveller responds that he can read the sign with no problem 4, and the narrative immediately shifts the focus back to one of basic human need. The contrast between the raging racist and the dutiful father, the bold-lettered discrimination of the sign posted on the wall and a humble request for “something to eat”, the physical aggression carried out by the American and the respectful interpellation of “sir” pronounced in line 34 by the Mexican combine to overturn any white authority that might possibly be sensed by an attentive listener of this tale.

Anglo-Saxon dominance is undermined most especially by the stylized refrain “I just want a couple a’ hamburgers”. This line is uttered 4 times, creating rhythm as well as rhetorical stress and, in its final occurrence punctuated with the ironic “sir”, a bit of comic relief. We can now clearly see that the events of the story (whether or not they reflect the exact details of the incident), the narrative configuration and the telling itself converge as necessary and interdependent parts of a full performance. Lopez’s artistry emerges as poetic dissension as he belittles cultural dominance and subtly points to the utter stupidity of a racist mindset (“Do you see that sign? ’/’Yeah, I can see it alright”), despite his helplessness and fury when faced with material injustice (“And just pushed me through the screen door”).

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4. It is the intonation that Lopez employs that indicates this meaning of “alright”, insisting on the fact that the sign is clearly displayed. In its written form, the meaning is ambiguous and could signify “that’s for sure”, implying the blatantness of the absurd injustice.
The kind of study proposed in the above demonstration has involved the interpretation of oral discourse with the aim of providing a systematized description of cultural phenomena, hence an ethnographical inquiry based on an audio-visual document collected by another field researcher. We have looked at modes of cultural investigation, narratological structuration of a real-life event, contextualized forms of meaning, cultural instance of voice, use of stylistics in meaning-making and the emergence of performance. The document examined has been taken from a documentary film which provides spontaneous interview techniques. It is, however, equally possible to use scripted movie dialogues for the kind of study proposed here. In a study of censorship in language selection in Hollywood films, R. Paul Murphy specifies the value of film archives for sociolinguistic research:

[...] a Hollywood director must attend to the minute details of everyday human interaction as he creates their semblance for the screen. Situational variables of nearly any sort have appeared on film and so has a correspondingly rich catalog of small-group and individual speech behaviors. In some film genres (documentaries, for example) the director will try for the closest thing to reality that can be reproduced on celluloid. In other types of films (perhaps musicals) the conventions of real conversation are deliberately distorted to some extent, but even here the 'imaginative' effects cannot be carried too far - conventions may be refashioned but not destroyed entirely (Murphy 1978: 226).

To give but a few examples, I have screened excerpts of Randa Haine’s Children of a Lesser God, in which American Sign Language is a primary mode of communication for discussion of communication codes and metalinguistic discourse strategies in the construction of personal identity and relation-building. Betty Thomas’ Dr Doolittle provides an interesting and entertaining illustration of contextual code-switching. A conversation between the psychiatrist and his son in an early evening traffic jam in Harold Ramis’ Analysis This allows for a rich investigation of the phatic function in strategies of persuasion.

We will now turn to the use of video ethnography in inquiries formulated and conducted by students themselves.

Practicing Video Ethnography

Franz Boas, father of ethnolinguistics, changed the shape of American anthropology in the early 20th century by insisting on the importance of practicing the language of a culture group in order to penetrate the world view of that group. The use of video ethnography as demonstrated in this paper points to the necessity of a cultural dimension in the study of a language. Debates over the interrelatedness of language and culture continue to bring new insights, polemics and questions, which often have theoretical import. I press my students, however, to concentrate on
empirical evidence of language/culture relations. Such evidence is to be sought out in one's own life and social groups as well as in individuals and groups foreign to the student.

Ethnographical inquiry indeed strengthens a person's ability to cross cultural barriers without losing touch with one's cultural values, principles and identity. Understanding a foreign culture requires a willingness to investigate the patterns, references, codes, rules and systems involved in one's own verbal expression. The objectives of foreign language learning -- whether for major or non-major studies -- cannot provide the adequate training and research necessary for full-fledged linguistic ethnography. However, language training guided by ethnographic principles cultivates open-mindedness, interest in others and personal flexibility such that the student will naturally be more attentive to the complex dynamics of interpersonal communication.

In practicing video ethnography, my students may focus on the verbal expression of subjects from anglophone cultures or on a verbal pattern or strategy identified in their own culture. The advantage of working with anglophone speakers in English language learning is evident, while the justification of investigating one's own linguistic culture may seem necessary. I will not dwell here on the latter point in hopes that readers have already been persuaded of the importance of a working knowledge of language/culture relations _en soi_ for grasping the elements and processes of another culture's speaking habits and for developing strategies for personal, satisfactory and appropriate expression in that language. I would also like to point out the general benefits of understanding oneself as an aid to acquiring insights into the motives, attitudes, influences, needs, constraints, obligations and strategies of others in communicating. We will see below how this process may unfold in the classroom.

**Students as Filmed Subjects**

Much of my endeavor to place cameras into the hands of my students has been inspired by the work of pioneer visual anthropologist Sol Worth. In _Through Navajo Eyes_, Worth outlines the motivation and guidelines of his innovations in teaching film techniques to members of the cultures he studied: "We reasoned that if a member of the culture being studied could be trained to use the medium so that with his hand on the camera and editing equipment he could choose what interested him, we would come closer to capturing his vision of his world" (Worth 1972: 4). Interpreting the films produced, Worth could better see how participants structure their own reality with image-making. Worth calls these films Bio-documentaries and informs us of the intercultural process involved in interpreting them:
The Bio-documentary teaches the maker of the film to search for the meaning he sees in the world, and it encourages the viewer to continue that search by comparing his values with the values expressed by the filmmaker in the film. The Bio-Documentary method suggests that at times it is fruitful to get away from an examination of man as object and try to learn more about him as subject (Worth 1972: 26).

Although my application of video techniques in teaching English as a foreign language has not aimed at a study of language students themselves, Worth’s experiments and fundamental principles have inspired in my work a more student-based approach to language learning. I have found that filming students in class, as a basic and simple exercise, places them in the role of both subject and interpreter. The valuable lessons of seeing one’s own image, hearing one’s own voice and perceiving one’s own difficulties and accomplishments in foreign language use are manifold. In addition to providing their own critique and suggestions for improvement, students can perceive themselves as cultural beings and in turn, better understand the dangers of reifying foreign cultures and their members. Worth’s methods and guidelines for interpreting cultures through the eyes of individual members help students practicing video ethnography to think more clearly about the complex processes of inquiring and informing/explaining/performing, of interpreting and constructing audio-visual documents, of defining objectivity and subjectivity, and of the functional roles of listening and speaking in cultural and cross-cultural exchange.

Sol Worth’s work in visual ethnography has shifted the focus on the members of a culture from objects of study to seeing subjects. In the same way, the video camera can be used to help students think of themselves as communicating subjects. Watching themselves in speaking exercises, students have a more objective view of their speaking activity. Videotapes of students giving presentations to a group or in classroom conversation allow students to think about their own communicative objectives and strategies. We often focus on how forms acquired from one’s own culture may “translate” more or less appropriately into the language being learned. Feedback from other students leads filmed students to reflect on the conative and phatic functions of language, on public speaking skills and, more generally, on the types of forums in which one will be practicing the language which is being learned.

In the specific case of English, which is no longer the sole “property” of native speakers, it is important to redefine speaking forums to avoid the traps of Anglo-Saxon-centered (ethnocentric) communication constraints. This is not to say that Anglo-Saxon communication strategies and objectives are more constrained than any other, but that, due to the global use of the English language, it is necessary to build communication models that are adaptable to speakers of a vast variety of cultures. In classrooms where students come from different countries, this type of “lesson” is much more easily integrated. Filmed conversations between North Africans and Chinese speakers, for example, provide first-hand data for identifying
cultural codes in speaking and the adaptability of the English language for respecting those codes.

Participating in cross-cultural conversations in English also liberates students from thinking that to speak English, one must behave English (or American). It is clear that certain forms of behavior are intimately tied to the language spoken ("Mind your Ps and Qs", I never hesitate to repeat to my students). As we have seen, language is conducive to ways of perceiving, reasoning and, I will add, believing. But, as students become more and more conscious of such links, and of themselves as culture-bearing beings, they are better equipped to make speaking choices which will respect newly-shaped values as well as those which derive from long-held traditions. (The study of documents with non-native speakers of English often inspires students to experiment with the inherent linguistic flexibility of English).

It is for these reasons, which relate to the complex choices of personal expression, that self-discovery plays a central role in any form of foreign language learning. Beginning students who are, for the first time, confronted with the arbitrariness of linguistic signifiers, with exotic forms employed for such a common human activity as talking, and with an all but complete loss of references may feel a deep loss of self. An adequate language program should help students to compensate for this feeling of loss with new ways of thinking about themselves. It must allow for the process of self-discovery by encouraging students to identify their own cultural references, to comprehend in what ways they are suddenly different in relation to their newly wedded "significant other", and to renegotiate their identity and thereby overcome the inevitable culture shock of not understanding. Like all learning, incorporating a language is highly subjective. It is indeed the cultural dimension of this process which poses the most interesting and rewarding challenge.

Students as ethnographical "filmmakers"

The success of filmic communication for beginners is most often far more dependent on practical considerations than on theoretical ones, and quite often depends on the student's capacity to master on his or her own the necessary technology. Possibilities for technical assistance and training in camera and sound techniques, and student collaborations, allowing them to take turns interviewing and filming, always make for more successful and useful footage. The incredible facility of capturing images and uninterrupted sound on small digital cameras makes close-up interviews, however, relatively easy and most of the work that I will describe here is based on such one-on-one exchanges between interviewer and interviewee.

This method is comprised of four basic steps as follows:
1. Defining the inquiry. Students are asked to focus on the matrices, objectives and strategies of communication, dialogue patterns, ways of speaking, verbal artistry, or any such manifestation of language use as culturally informed and as it unfolds in a given community. Investigators seek out informants of that community to provide insights, examples about underlying values and principles, verbal connotations and play, motives, etc. It is possible to focus on one or more of the functions of communication as defined by Jakobson and deciphered in audio-visual documents during class. Any and all of these categories of speaking put student-investigators onto an empirical path of gathering data. Theoretical and ideological considerations often arise, and may lead to interesting discussion. However, they will often cloud the field of pragmatic approaches to language, and it is important in such instances to remind students of the scientific values of observation and description. It may occur, too, that students with little or no training in anthropology or linguistics have difficulty identifying a linguistic community. The important thing here is to focus their attention on cultural identity. Does an individual feel social “kinship” to a specific group? How does he or she relate to the other individuals? How does the member benefit from contact with other members? Such matters are a preliminary part of practicing linguistic ethnography but will also prove integral to questions concerning verbal expression and hence to the inquiry itself.

2. Preparing the interview. The above questions will therefore come into play when preparing the interview. An act of communication itself, a successful interview demands that the interviewer know as much as possible about the person to be interviewed. When interviewers are anglophone, much of the preparatory work involves basic lessons in the grammatical structures of question forms, discourse markers including phatic and conative matrices, vocabulary for inciting elaboration or bringing the speaker’s attention back to the topic of investigation, formulas for politeness and other such cultural codes. In the case of interviews in which the student will use a foreign language, it is also necessary to make time for pronunciation practice and, when possible, listening exercises using tapes with speakers who use a variety of that language as close as possible to the interviewee’s. (Once again, the wealth of film archives – fiction and documentary – provide valuable resources).

3. Conducting the interview. The goal, I remind my students, is to get the interviewee to speak about the topic of interest. It is not recommendable that teachers participate in the interviewing process. The experience itself is a most revealing one to the students as they are obligated to develop
their own techniques and style for getting community members to speak, whether it be in their own language or in a foreign language. It is also important for the student to realize that the collection of data and the presentation of data are two different processes. It is a matter of distinguishing between what is clear in one’s mind and what one is able to demonstrate.

4. Interpreting the data. Students have been warned all along of the traps of imposing value judgments in culture studies. Elaborate discussions about stereotypes, taboos and morality as a culture-specific system of behavior codes and rules discourage students from modalizing their inquiries. Is it “in bad taste” to speak about one’s personal life with a stranger? Is it “a good thing” to look down when an elder speaks to you? “Should” women in a given society refuse to keep quiet in the presence of men? All of these questions distract students from collecting data which can be used in the more far-reaching goals of ethnographic science which involve relating the phenomenon studied to other cultural systems in the same group or in other groups.

The immediate objective, then, is to describe the data gathered in the field study in systematic fashion. This is perhaps where video becomes the most useful. Some students, before carrying out their field study, are frustrated by such empirical constraints. They long for the wide-reaching applications and conclusions of theoreticians and philosophers. Once data has been collected, however, the experience of field practice, the success in overcoming communication barriers and the satisfaction of presenting one’s work on the screen have never failed to provide student-investigators with personal satisfaction as well as new insights into scientific method and experimentation.

To sum up, American folklorists and linguistic anthropologists have provided descriptive speaking-based categories for exploring linguistic phenomena as they are linked to social life. We have seen how studies of style, performance, diversity and voice can contribute to an applicable knowledge of the interdependence between language and culture. An application of linguistic ethnohistory in foreign language learning and practice develops the concepts of appropriateness, forum, intercultural language evolution and community identity. The video techniques presented in this article provide teachers and students with the opportunity to observe the minute details of language use and communication strategies close at hand. They also provide tools for an autonomous and ongoing development of cross-cultural communication, including, of course, foreign language practice, outside the classroom.
Bibliography


ORAL TRADITION AND INTERNET TECHNOLOGY

John Miles FOLEY *

The present contribution suggests that the new technologies associated with digital encoding and the internet offer unprecedented opportunities for understanding and representing our oldest and most pervasive thought-technology, oral tradition. Precisely because both of these bookless media operate by navigating pathways, the internet (IT) is uniquely suited to serve as a vehicle for oral tradition (OT). In what follows I will describe two initiatives designed to take advantage of the dynamic correspondence between these technologies: first, the eCompanions and eEditions developed at our Center for Studies in Oral Tradition (www.oraltradition.org); and, second, the Pathways Project (www.pathwaysproject.org), now underway, that explores the OT-IT homology through the creation of a multidimensional "media suite".

Putting the analogy into action

On careful examination, the OT-IT analogy turns out to be more than merely an unexpected correspondence. The natural confluence of OT and IT offers us new opportunities for deploying media strategies. Consider an old and stubborn problem faced by scores of fieldworkers who collect oral traditions. We undertake a careful, well organized field expedition to collect precious specimens from a culture's ecology of oral traditions, employing the very latest technology to record as many live performances as possible. We then return to home base, intent on delivering to all interested parties as much of this content – along with accompanying context and analysis – as possible. But what's our first move? We represent and analyze oral tradition by textualizing it – by denaturing the emergent, multimedia event and collapsing its living shape by reducing it to an item. Diluting the experience into a form suitable for the page and the book necessarily means eliminating voice, melody, instrument, gesture, movement, audience, and whatever other features of live performance don't translate to the designated medium for communication. Ironically, a large percentage of what we sought and recorded is in the process stripped out of our edition and analysis. And why? Simply because these aspects

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* Curators' and Byler Professor of Classical Studies and English at the University of Missouri-Columbia, United States.

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can’t be contained between the covers of our default communicative medium – the conventional book.

Here’s where the special relationship between OT and IT can help to accomplish what books aren’t equipped to support. One of the methods developed at our Center for Studies in Oral Tradition for taking advantage of this relationship is the eCompanion. This electronic, online facility supplies audio, video, photographic, and data-base support for text-based discussion and explanation, and it does so by utilizing the ePathways of the internet. Instead of simply perusing a print narrative that describes an oral tradition (very much a second- or third-hand experience), readers can supplement the text by listening, watching, and researching the very same oral performance that had to be reduced in order to fit it into a book. With the paperback in one hand and a mouse in the other, the reader/user can see and hear beyond the page; he or she can, to a degree, join the audience at the performance. I introduced this strategy in association with my book, How to Read an Oral Poem (2002), whose eCompanion (www.oraltradition.org/hip) presents video of a slam poetry performance by Lynne Procope as well as audio of various orally performed genres acoustically recorded in the Former Yugoslavia. We have recently extended the concept of the eCompanion to augment some of the articles published in our journal Oral Tradition, adding audio, video, and other “reading aids” as free, publicly available partners to the journal text (www.oraltradition.org/ecompanion). The eCompanions restore at least some of the dimensions of oral tradition that are characteristically deleted as part of the “media compromise” mandated by the book format, and it does so by observing what I take as the golden rule of media strategies – let the book and the internet do what each does best, and, where possible, seek creative ways to use them in tandem.

Another strategy that I have developed to assist in restoring the reality of oral tradition is the eEdition. Again, consider the challenge. Even if you have access to an eCompanion with audio or video to accompany the text, the parts of the book remain irretrievably segregated. Granted, the original-language transcription and the translation may be juxtaposed on the same printed page, but you still have to confront the inconvenience of the introduction, commentary, glossary, and any other sections of the apparatus residing at different physical locations in the volume. Do you need to consult the commentary? Then it’s necessary to leave the work itself, transfer your exclusive attention to another part of the book, locate the required information, and then return to the text of the work to resume your interrupted reading. Do you want to check on the idiomatic meaning of a particular phrase? If

1. In April 2006 Oral Tradition – the entire journal as well as the eCompanions – will begin its second incarnation as a web publication, free of charge and available to anyone in the world with an internet connection. Its electronic home will be our Center web page (www.oraltradition.org). Eventually, all of the back issues of the journal, established in 1986, will also be made available there as gratis internet publications.
the volume contains such a resource, you can certainly examine its contents and profit from the additional information, but once again the price of such an investigation is (at least a temporary) fracture of your core engagement with the work. You simply have to stick your thumb in one section, make the journey to consult the appropriate appendix, and then trek back to the original thumb-marked spot. Because books organize themselves by spatial segregation along a linear axis, they operate by separating the various facets of representation, isolating each of them in its own place. Referral between and among the parts makes for a staccato re-experiencing of a performance that was once fluid and continuous.

Here again IT can help, this time by "resynchronizing the performance". In the eEdition of The Wedding of Mustafbey's Son Beirbey as Performed by Halil Bajgøri (www.oralltradition.org/zbn), which also exists as a conventional book (Foley 2004), we have reconstituted as much of the event as possible by making the full 75-minute audio available online and by electronically linking the several parts of the apparatus to the transcription-translation page. Thus the main page, itself scrollable and accompanied by the acoustic record of the performance that can be played concurrently, contains three sets of built-in links that allow users to consult various parts of the apparatus without ever leaving the work itself. Click on the lines highlighted in the English translation, and the idiomatic meaning of those phrases and scenes will appear in the box to the right of the translation. Select the orange "C" button, and whatever is contained in the edition's commentary (chiefly performance-based notes, but also occasional philological and comparative observations) will appear in the box. Click on the green "NVR" button, and the differences (if any) between my transcription of that line and the rendering done by Parry and Lord's assistant Nikola Vujnovi will pop up, again in the same circumscribed area. Other sections of the volume, such as H. Wakefield Foster's chapter on the role of music and R. Scott Garner's analysis of performatives, are also linked to the main eEdition page as whole items that can be quickly accessed. Most importantly, the entire eEdition, with all of its parts electronically re-integrated and interactive, is freely available online to anyone with a connection to the web. Thanks to the fundamental homology of OT and IT, any user can now resynchronize the performance and, to an extent impossible within an exclusively textual environment, join Halil Bajgøri's performance.

2. As explained in the prologue to Nikola Vujnovi's Resinging (Foley, 2004: 144-56), this table chronicles the ways in which the transcriber Vujnovi, also an epic singer himself, remade the song within his own traditional idiolect. Even when he was putatively rendering in written form exactly what he heard from the recording, the systemic pliability of the oral traditional method of composition led to inevitable "departures" from the original. While acting as a scribe, Vujnovi was in effect re-creating the performance.
The Experiment: A Media Suite

Sometimes we can profit from reexamining assumptions submerged in well-established procedures. When I first began to think about the analogy of and potential connections between OT and IT, and then about exploring and explaining the phenomenon, I of course turned immediately to the representational vehicle we are culturally trained to employ: the default medium of the printed book. Old habits die hard, media-wise as in the rest of life, and my reflex reaction was to start by constructing a linear list of perceived correspondences between these two thought-technologies. From this starting point, supported as always by the ritual citation of other relevant writings, I planned to produce a narrative that “told the story” of how OT and IT, strange bedfellows though they might seem, functioned in arrestingly similar ways. Such a book would, if convincingly pieced together, draw the comparisons I wanted to describe as well as make a persuasive case for the mental activity of navigating pathways as the most basic of human cognitive processes. It would also increase understanding of each of these thought-technologies by revealing what it shares with its shadow-medium.

The joke was of course on me. Blinded by culturally rooted assumptions, I didn’t at the outset glimpse the irony underlying my carefully wrought plan—namely, that the envisioned procedure would amount to using only the book to explain two bookless media. It would in effect be the equivalent of employing only oral tradition to explicate the tablet, papyrus scroll, vellum manuscript, or paperback. The internet might fare slightly better than oral tradition as a vehicle for divulging the secrets of the book, but only to the extent that it presented a static electronic page, a cybernetic facsimile of the textual platform; the web’s core identity as a network of linked pathways just doesn’t mirror the spatial linearity of inscribed surfaces. Use only the book to explore the cognitive dynamics of oral tradition and the internet? What a fundamental error in understanding media! But of course this is the precisely the blind-spot and the reflex that our unthinking devotion to the religion of the written or printed page has induced.

The question thus arose—how could I escape the default cultural settings of the book medium in order to give the OT-IT comparison the depth it deserved? The general outlines of an answer seemed ready at hand: enlist the power of the internet and digital configuration to enhance the presentation, much as the eCompanion and eEdition enhanced page-driven reductions of oral performance. The next step was to imagine not what was physically feasible to mount on the internet (a backwards strategy, in my opinion), but instead to inquire what the internet could uniquely do to make the book presentation fuller, more meaningful, less constrained by the abstract dynamics of the page. If we aimed to invent a network or suite of electronic appendages that truly cooperated with the book, then the emphasis should be on the
golden rule cited above: namely, ask each medium to do not what you can force it to do, but rather what it does best; and then seek creative ways to integrate the individual tools into a useful kit.

With these guidelines in mind, then, I conceived of a media-suite that consisted of a conventional, brick-and-mortar book combined with several integrated e-facilities. The book, provisionally entitled *Pathways of the Mind: Oral Tradition and the Internet*, is under contract with the University of Illinois Press and scheduled for publication in 2007. Why include a conventional book at all? First, because this part of the network will attract its own audience to the larger Project, providing them a narrative account of the OT-IT comparison in the terms and form they expect. More comprehensively, I see no reason to adopt a purist or absolutist position that unreflectively bars the book, no need to altogether abandon a proven, established communicative channel en route to enhancing the default mode of presentation. To the book node in the network I am adding five electronic appendages to constitute the overall network: a developmental blog, eCompanions, eEditions, a tagged database, and an aggregator. Together these six linked entities constitute the Pathways Project (www.pathwaysproject.org).

The Blog

Given the broad scope of the OT-IT analogy (the comparison) and the counter-conventional nature of the Pathways Project enterprise (the experiment), it seemed logical to begin by putting incipient ideas into the form of a developmental blog, entitled “Oral Tradition and the Internet” (www.otandit.blogspot.com). Since February 2005 I have been logging a series of brief entries on such topics as “Reaching beyond the stand-alone book”, “The irony of Proteus”, “The oAgora and the eAgora”, “Media suites”, “Networking past, present, and future”, “Filing versus tagging”, and various approaches to oPathways and ePathways. My aim has been twofold: to put some basic ideas into preliminary shape and to elicit comments from readers of the blog. And the process has succeeded in ways I couldn’t have imagined, with extremely helpful messages sent both publicly through the site and privately via personal e-mail. In response, I have, for example, registered the blog under a Creative Commons license (http://creativecommons.org) to encourage (not prohibit) use according to applicable rules, as well as thought through suggestions for and challenges to the OT-IT model. As the book proceeds, I will expand on various subjects covered in the blog, but it is already clear that the blog must remain a current and permanent partner in the overall project, one of the appendages that both explains and embodies the importance of pathways in both media.
eCompanions and eEditions

eCompanions and eEditions, which will be linked to the Pathways Project home page, are two more of these appendages. Once again, as in the case of the developmental blog, users will be able to experience the connection directly rather than merely read an abstract account of how it works. With eCompanions they will be able to supplement numerous articles in the journal Oral Tradition, the book How to Read an Oral Poem, and other textual resources by clicking on applicable audio, video, photographic, and bibliographical support. Via eEditions they can resynchronize the oral performance and gain online admission to the audience; in addition, everything they need to increase their fluency in the performance idiom will be available at a single click and on the same ePage, rather than ostracized to another section of an unwieldy, hard-to-manage text. These two electronic facilities image the reality of the OT-IT connection as well as show how that connection can more meaningfully support the representation and understanding of oral tradition through internet-based and digital strategies.

A tagged data-base

Conventionally, academic books are buttressed by a bibliography, exhaustive or selected, that serves two functions: as supporting evidence for the arguments proposed in the book's narrative and as further reading for those who wish to pursue the arguments beyond the present exposition. Occasionally these lists of references are annotated with at most a few sentences per item, in order to increase their usefulness. Often, however, the financial stringencies associated with publication limit the length and fullness of such bibliographies. With these concerns in mind, the Pathways Project will offer a comprehensive online digest of related books, articles, and websites that will not be constrained in size or coverage by the requirement that it fit between the covers of a book, nor for that matter by the publication date of the Pathways of the Mind book (see the Aggregator below). In addition to its size, coverage, and annotation, this database will be multiply tagged (rather than divided into sections) so that the interested user can quickly and deftly locate all those resources relevant to whatever topic he or she is pursuing. Thus an entry might well be tagged for a dozen or more topics, such as a book, article, or website that features information on music, epic poetry, politics, Slavic languages, oral performance, accompanying instruments, Balkan history, or whatever. This digest, freely and publicly available, will also contain contributions suggested by other users of the Pathways Project, and thus will function as a kind of group, open-source repository.
An aggregator

The Pathways Project as a whole will be set up as an RSS website, so that modifications to any part of the site—whether updates on the database, additions to the eCompanions or eEditions, new blog entries, or whatever—will be reported to anyone who subscribes to the feed. We are also experimenting with the creation of a freestanding, robotic aggregator that would periodically search the internet for new information and sites relevant to the OT-IT analogy and report them to subscribers. In both of these ways, as through the tagged and updatable database, the Pathways Project will continue to evolve beyond the publication of its brick-and-mortar component, the book. In the end, the goal is to use electronic tools and strategies to escape the endemic spatial and temporal limitations of the page and book, both by converting the reader's experience into a coordinated, multimedia event and by fostering a cybernetically powered brand of “continuing education” on the subject.

Bibliography


CONCLUSION

Food for thought for future research

Renée DICKASON *

Benoit RAOUIX **

By exploiting different points of view, this study entitled Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Visual Media Studies, Screening Social Spaces opens the way for interdisciplinary cooperation. While focusing on the English-speaking world and television, it offers more generally pertinent reflections. The reference to "social space(s)" relates both to the idea of differentiation within society and to that of the production of space which are integral to the audiovisual media. This conclusion proposes possible transdisciplinary lines of research combining different approaches in a comparative methodology.

Television programmes and cultural diversity

The question of screening cultural diversity is becoming increasingly important. In France, the subject arose in the political debate over the role of "immigrants" within society.

This study has indicated how soap operas and sitcoms reflect changes in British society. In France, the choice was made to set the popular series Plus belle la vie (which began in 2004) in Marseilles, a port which has seen several waves of immigration and shows a certain diversity of population. We may then wonder how (far) television bears witness to the evolution of French society and reflects its norms, or, more widely, how each society constructs its own televised image of diversity. In Canada, The Little Mosque in the Prairie (first broadcast in 2007) seeks to promote the country’s multiculturalism, in which ethnic groups do not remain isolated. By its apparently different approach, the programme has attracted a degree of interest in the French press.

* Professor of English Studies, LSA, University of Caen, France.
** Associate Professor in Geography, CRESO - UMR 6590 - CNRS, University of Caen, France.

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Comparing various English-speaking countries, such as Canada, the UK and the USA, with other cultures helps us to a better understanding of how the televised image constructs norms and defines citizenship.

Geopolitical dimensions

The boom in satellite broadcasting in the 1990s was accompanied by the proliferation of 24-hour news networks. Before then, CNN (a cable channel in 1980, before its worldwide expansion, and now part of AOL Time Warner), had a monopoly. Since the 1991 Gulf War, the Middle East and the Arab World have become the scene for media competition. Al Jazeera, created in Qatar in 1996, is a leading player and now broadcasts also in English. It has recently diversified by offering thematic channels. In turn, this has led Anglo-Saxon broadcasters to propose Arabic programmes (e.g. BBC Arabic TV, initiated in 2005). In 2007, the French government launched an international news channel, France 24, transmitting in several languages. The geopolitical dimension of 24-hour news broadcasting should not be overlooked. In a context of convergent technologies and diverse means of communication (the internet), such programming is part and parcel of geopolitical influence.

The explosion of TV news has not eliminated differences of point of view and it would be a valuable exercise to examine the representation of the world from a geopolitical perspective, at all levels, including that of individual societies. For instance, political and social issues are being increasingly mediatised in France, with the 2007 presidential elections marking a new stage, while this tendency arose earlier in many English-speaking countries.

Fig. 1: Media election coverage. An extract from the debate between the prospective socialist presidential candidates in 2007, first televised on the Parliamentary Channel and rebroadcast by the evening news Soir 3 on France 3, 7th November 2006. The candidates’ use of the internet (blogs, videos, etc.) increases the mediatisation.
Similarly, we have mentioned the importance of place in linking social movements and mediatisation. There is another current example. In December 2006, the association The Children of Don Quixote (Les enfants de Don Quichotte) set up brightly coloured tents along the Canal Saint-Martin in Paris. The occupation of a physical space and the media image it offered gave visibility to a social issue. It contributed to the passing of a law giving the “enforceable right” to housing.

![Fig. 2: Sunday 28th January, 8.44 p.m. Evening news bulletin on TFI, France’s main privately-owned channel.](image)

**Beyond the divide between fiction and reality**

Relations between fiction and reality reflect transformations in societies and cultures. Television genres are partly determined by cultural policies, media organisation and the assistance given to artistic creation and audiovisual production. Here, too, a comparative approach seems fruitful.

The differentiation between genres (information, fiction, entertainment, etc.) is generally defined by the dominant medium of television. In Britain, as we have observed, docudrama is an established formula, strengthened by the involvement of directors and film-makers in both television and cinema. In France, production is organised differently because of the subsidies for creation and production and of the concept of the film-maker as auteur. French cinéma documentaire de création tends to transcend boundaries between fiction and reality, as do other increasingly hybrid forms of expression in contemporary art, such as photography or video films.

Rather than limiting ourselves to the fiction versus reality debate, it is therefore relevant today to tackle the role of the narrative in the relation between the real and the imaginary. This does not mean neglecting major social questions but
raising them in new ways. In France, docufiction is not a common phenomenon but examples can be found. Philippe Triboit’s *L’embrasement*, shot at Clichy-sous-Bois, near Paris, and broadcast by Arte in January 2007, re-examines the riots in November 2005\(^1\). Fiction thus establishes critical distance from the confrontation depicted on television and enables a better understanding of reality.

**Spatial dimensions**

Fig. 3: The view of Marseilles in *Plus belle la vie*: from the old port towards the Cathédrale de la Major and the Panier district with, in the foreground, flats constructed soon after WWII. The logo evokes the fictional Marseilles district, le Mistral, where the action is centred. The *Plus belle la vie* website offers archive footage of past episodes, shows the decors and settings and promotes spin-offs. *France 3*, 2007.

Audiovisual images use every spatial dimension with several possible orientations. It is interesting to examine both the links between audiovisual productions and places, for instance towns and cities, in the light of certain cinematographic studies, and narrative space as suggested by André Gardies\(^2\). Finally, screen space itself deserves as much attention as any other kind of space, bearing in mind, in particular, the differences between the cinema and television.

Because of the dominant position of the cinema, recognized as art and therefore of greater value, there have been few studies in France of space on television. A geographical analysis of a TV series such as *Plus belle la vie* nevertheless offers

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1. Tony Richardson’s *Momma Don’t Allow* (1956). The riots in November 2005 began at Clichy-sous-Bois when two teenagers tried to escape the police by hiding in an electricity sub-station where they were electrocuted. The riots should be placed in a longer perspective showing the structural factors marginalising some young people from working class areas.
several possibilities. A geographical viewpoint can cover, in the same piece of research, such diverse elements as the audiovisual industry as a contributor to urban economic, social and financial dynamics, the promotion of a town or city, the place of the town in narrative, screen space, social and cultural relations, etc. In this perspective, spatial dimensions are one of the keys to understanding the contemporary world. They do not depend on a single disciplinary approach, but may serve to further different research and pedagogical techniques.

The audiovisual image in research and education

In some countries, like Germany, courses on the mass media are well-established. The French viewpoint is different: an education programme in cinema has been developed in schools, but is unfortunately not available to all pupils. It is regrettable that training and research in the whole range of audiovisual media are not common practice in each discipline in social sciences and the humanities, for it is difficult to deny the place of audiovisual images and the media in contemporary society. This leads us to suggest the integration of the audiovisual image as an object of study in each discipline, and to include it in various fields in order to encourage reflection (for example, in geography, a study of the audiovisual media can assist in work on heritage making, social movements, marginality, electoral geography, tourism, sport, etc.).

As we have mentioned, video can be used as a tool or a means of making research work more available. It is also of great interest to develop the documentary film as a fully-fledged method of research. This involves recognizing the role of subjectivity – the gaze – in the construction of awareness, a stage which precedes objectivization: practical experience of filming gives a greater understanding of the various challenges posed by images. Finally, to complete the process, research must be accompanied by making the results available to the different groups which have provided input, in the spirit of the reflexive dimension of social sciences and of the desire for active citizenship. Studying the audiovisual image leads to the reassessment of established disciplinary boundaries by emphasizing the need to adapt one’s approach to the cultural and social issues of the contemporary world.
Fig. 4: Image taken from a video on the memory of a new town, Hérouville-Saint-Clair, near Caen (France). The twenty-minute film Hérouville, trait pour trait was produced by BA geography students (University of Caen) and was first shown to accompany a public debate (B.R, M.C. 2006).
ABSTRACTS IN FRENCH

Elizabeth DE CACQUERAY : p. 13-30

Art with a Social Conscience: The origins and early days of drama-documentary in the United Kingdom (1930s-1940s)

Art cinématographique et conscience sociale : les débuts du documentaire fictionnalisé au Royaume-Uni (années 1930-1940)

Cet article présente une réflexion sur une forme cinématographique particulière, le docudrame ou documentaire fictionnalisé, telle qu’elle se manifeste au Royaume-Uni à partir de la fin des années 1920 jusqu’à la fin de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. S’agissant de films qui incluent des faits réels dans une trame fictive, il existe un nombre conséquent de termes différents les désignant. L’article offre un repérage de ces divers termes et, à travers les définitions de chacun, cherche à déterminer si les objets filmiques qu’ils désignent se différencient de façon significative. Les caractéristiques du documentaire fictionnalisé sont étudiées, par rapport au contenu et à l’esthétique, en se référant aux films issus du mouvement des documentaristes réunis autour de John Grierson, au Royaume-Uni : Man of Aran, de Robert Flaherty (1934), Fires Were Started, de Humphrey Jennings (1943), In Which We Serve, de Noel Coward et David Lean (1942). Quelles que soient les différences entre eux, ces films partagent une préoccupation avec le destin de l’être humain « ordinaire » : les personnages, ou participants, font plus appel à la notion de l’« homme de la rue » qu’à celle du héros, « surhomme » de l’univers du cinéma de fiction. Dans de nombreux films des réalisateurs du « mouvement des documentaristes », on perçoit l’influence esthétique des réalisateurs russes des années 1920-1930, notamment à travers l’utilisation du principe du montage, aussi bien sur le plan visuel que sonore. Ces films, cherchant ainsi à faire connaître le destin de l’homme ordinaire mais vouant une attention particulière à l’esthétique filmique, nous semblent offrir des exemples d’un art du cinéma qui se double d’une conscience sociale. Ce phénomène disparaît quelque peu à la fin de la guerre, 1939-1945, mais se manifeste de nouveau à partir du milieu des années 1950.
Susannah O’CARROLL : p. 31-48

_from We are the Lambeth Boys to The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner: New portrayals of working class Britain on the big screen?

de We Are the Lambeth Boys à The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner : une nouvelle vision de la classe ouvrière britannique à l’écran?


Georges FOURNIER : p. 49-66

_Drama-documentary and British Television: A quest for legitimacy_

Le « drama-documentaire » à la télévision britannique en quête de légitimité

Les documentaristes de l’entre-deux guerres ont largement façonné la télévision britannique. Pendant de nombreuses années, celle-ci trouve dans le documentaire la réponse à sa vocation première, qui est d’instruire et d’informer tout en distrayant. Toutefois, l’éclatement du paysage audiovisuel contraint très rapidement les chaînes à trouver des modes d’expression qui leur permettent de survivre dans un environnement concurrentiel. C’est ainsi que la télévision devient un formidable terrain d’expérimentation. La fiction documentaire, que les Anglo-Saxons nomment « docudrama », semble alors être en mesure de relever ce défi. Création télévisuelle dans laquelle ils excellent, elle adopte le format du documentaire pour mettre en
place une fiction dont l’objectif, à l’origine, était d’aborder l’actualité. C’est grâce à la fiction documentaire que dès les années soixante la télévision rend compte des débats concernant notamment la précarité, ainsi C\textsc{athy} C\textsc{ome} H\textsc{ome} de K\textsc{en} L\textsc{oach}, ou bien encore le nucléaire, comme c’est le cas dans T\textsc{he} W\textsc{ar} G\textsc{ame} de P\textsc{eter} W\textsc{atkins}. Alors qu’en France elle est instrumentalisée par les chaînes commerciales qui la confondent avec la télé-réalité, la fiction documentaire outre-Manche permet, chaque année, le traitement télévisuel d’enjeux politiques et sociaux majeurs.

\textsc{Renée Dickason} : p. 69-96

\textit{Through the Social Looking Glass: Fiction depicting society in British soap opera}

\textbf{Les soap operas britanniques : entre fait social et fiction}

Les notions d’espace et de parole, très intriquées dans la problématique de cet ouvrage, sont au cœur de multiples réflexions sur la représentation du « réel » et d’une réalité que l’on souhaite vraisemblable, plausible ou authentique. La spécificité des soap operas à l’anglaise mérite d’être soulignée de par son format, les thèmes abordés et le choix d’une construction sociale qui séduit les nombreux téléspectateurs friands de ce genre de spectacle en prise avec des préoccupations contemporaines. Après avoir cerné les caractéristiques de ces « séries » télévisuelles, cette étude offre une approche diachronique et synchronique de thématiques illustrant des constantes et des mutations sociales à travers plusieurs exemples, en particulier le désormais incontournable \textit{Coronation Street}. Les frontières entre les « faits réels » et la fiction oscillent au gré des émissions qui trouvent leur originalité dans des variantes spectaculaires plus ou moins fidèles au modèle social existant. Les registres (sensationnalisme, réalisme psychologique ou de situation, idéalisation) de chaque soap opera se déclinent autour de notions qui s’opposent et/ou se complètent.

\textsc{Amandine Ducray} : p. 97-122

\textit{Comic Constructions and Social Realities: The case of the British black sitcom (1972-1998)}

\textbf{Réalités sociales et constructions comiques : le cas de la sitcom ethnique britannique (1972-1998)}

Cet article vise à cerner le genre de la sitcom ethnique (\textit{black sitcom}) à travers cinq cas d’étude, diffusés sur quatre grandes chaînes nationales britanniques de 1972 à 1998 : \textit{Love Thy Neighbour, It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum, Mind Your Language},
Desmond's et Goodness Gracious Me. En dépit de conventions communes à la «comédie de situation», au sens large, les sitcoms ethniques possèdent leur propre style. Alternant entre un rire de moquerie, jadis le fait de scénaristes blancs, et un rire de connivence, favorisé par l'apparition de scénaristes noirs ou sud-asiatiques, elles sont en tout cas construites selon une perspective largement communautaire, où la norme et le hors-norme, comme dans la comédie en général, jouent un rôle prépondérant et contribuent, dans ce format, à délimiter les contours, mouvants, d'une certaine identité britannique. Étudier la sitcom ethnique britannique des débuts de Love Thy Neighbour à ceux de Goodness Gracious Me devrait alors permettre de voir se dégager une représentation en diachronie des minorités ethniques Outre-Manche dans un support télévisuel où l'Histoire, réelle, du pays, côtoie les histoires fictives qui nourrissent les intrigues.

David HAIGRON : p. 123-130

Room for Speech: The rhetoric of places in Conservative Party Political Broadcasts

L'espace de la parole : la rhétorique des lieux dans les spots politiques télévisés du Parti conservateur britannique

Quelle place accorder à la parole et comment mettre en images le discours politique ? Ces deux questions accompagnent l'écriture des spots politiques télévisés britanniques. Par sa collaboration étroite avec le milieu de la publicité, le Parti conservateur y répond d'une manière particulière. Par leur mise en scène, ces émissions (produites par les partis et diffusées sur les chaînes hertziennes) superposent un discours politique sur des images de lieux. Quelle fonction sémantique peut alors avoir la représentation de ces espaces ? En quoi participent-ils à la (co-)construction du message politique et sur quels postulats socioculturels se réalise cette (co)construction ? Enfin, à l'intérieur du cadre dessiné par l'écriture filmique, comment sont représentés et mis en scène les enjeux du débat électoral ?

Mathieu LEDOUX : p. 131-144

Cities in Science Fiction Films: An attempt at geographical analysis

La ville dans les films de science-fiction : un espace de réflexion sur la société urbaine

Dans cet article, l'auteur s'intéresse à une analyse géographique des villes dans les films de science-fiction. Il s'agit de proposer une grille de lecture de l'organisation fonctionnelle, morphologique et sociale des villes imaginaires en y

Benoît RAOUŁX : p. 147-177

*From the Mirror-space to the Screen-space: A media effect?*

De l’espace-miroir à l’espace-écran : un effet médiatique


Catharine MASON : p. 179-192

*Video Ethnography: Contextualizing language learning*

*Ethnographie et vidéo : l’apprentissage des langues en contexte*

Les nouvelles technologies et l'Internet offrent des opportunités énormes dans le phénomène de la compréhension et de la représentation d'une « technologie » plus ancienne mais néanmoins efficace : la « tradition orale ». C'est parce que l'Internet communique en direct qu'il est un véhicule privilégié pour transmettre la tradition orale. Deux expériences menées au Centre d'études sur la tradition orale seront au centre de cet article, la première concerne l'élaboration de « eCompanions » et la mise en place de « eEditions », la seconde qui s'intitule Pathways Project explore les similitudes entre l'Internet et la Tradition Orale dans un contexte multimédia.
Elizabeth de Cacqueray read English at the University of Sussex and is now Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Toulouse – Le Mirail (France). Her doctoral thesis focuses on the relationship between cinema and society in Great Britain. She has written a number of articles on this topic, published by Les Presses Universitaires du Mirail, Les Presses Universitaires de Rennes, La Licorne (Maison de Sciences de l’Homme et de la Société, Poitiers), le GERB (University Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux III) and CinémAction (Corlet éditions).


Susannah O’Carroll completed her thesis, entitled “Le regard critique de Ken Loach sur la société britannique contemporaine”, in 2004, on Ken Loach’s work as a director for both the cinema and television over the past forty years. She currently teaches English language and British civilisation in Higher Education and is focusing her post-doctoral research on representations of work and social conflicts in British film and television.

Georges Fournier is Lecturer in English at the Department of Information & Communication (Jean Moulin University, Lyons, France). He is currently doing research in the field of British television under the supervision of Prof. Renée Dickason.

Agrégé d’anglais, Georges Fournier enseigne au Département Information & Communication de l’Université Jean Moulin de Lyon et rédige une thèse sur la télévision britannique sous la direction de Renée Dickason.

Renée Dickason is Professor of English Studies at the University of Caen (Normandy). Her field of research lies in the cultural and social history of the British Isles as viewed through visual and broadcast media. Author of several studies and books, founder of La Revue LISA/LISA e-journal (http://www.unicaen.fr/mrsh/lisa/), she has recently published La Société britannique à travers ses fictions télévisuelles (Paris, Ellipses, 2005). She is currently director of the research centre dealing with British media and cultural studies (LSA, "Littératures et Sociétés Anglophones").


Amandine Ducray has recently completed her PhD on “Ethnic sitcoms on British Television (1972-1998)” under the supervision of Prof. Renée Dickason. She is a senior lecturer at the University Paris X - Nanterre, has published several articles on British black sitcoms and is preparing a book on the subject.

David Haigron teaches at the University of Caen. He has recently completed his PhD on the British Conservative Party’s Election and Political Broadcasts (1951-1997) under the supervision of Prof. Renée Dickason.

David Haigron est maître de conférences à l’Université de Caen. Il a récemment soutenu une thèse sur les spots politiques télévisés du Parti conservateur britannique (1951-1997) sous la direction de Renée Dickason.

Matthieu Ledoux is a PhD student in Social Geography at the University of Caen (Normandy). He is preparing a thesis on underground spaces in the city of Montreal (Canada) under the supervision of Benoît Raoulx. He belongs to the CRESO.

Matthieu Ledoux prépare une thèse en géographie sociale à l’Université de Caen Basse-Normandie sous la direction de Benoît Raoulx. Ses recherches actuelles portent sur l’imaginaire perçu et vécu au sein des espaces urbains souterrains, le cas de la ville intérieure de Montréal, Canada. Il est membre du Centre de Recherche sur les Espaces et les Sociétés (CRESO).

Benoit Raoulx is Associate Professor in Social Geography at the University of Caen (Normandy). He belongs to the CRESO, a research centre specialising in societies and spaces. His research is centred on the questions of marginality and inequality in French and North American cities and the audio-visual media. He has produced several documentary films, among them Trapolines in Vancouver (37 minutes, 2003, in English with French sub-titles), Hérouville, trait pour trait (co-direction, 2006, 20 minutes in French).

Catharine Mason is Associate Professor of English studies at the University of Caen. Her research focuses on linguistic ethnography and oral poetry including song.

Catharine Mason est maître de conférences à l’Université de Caen. Sa recherche porte sur l’ethnographie linguistique et la poésie orale y compris la chanson.

John Miles Foley is Curators’ and Byler Professor of Classical Studies and English at the University of Missouri-Columbia (United States) and director of its Centre for Studies in Oral Tradition (www.oraltradition.org). He is also the editor and founder of the journal Oral Tradition.

John Miles Foley est Professeur à l’Université Missouri-Columbia (États-Unis). Directeur du Centre d’études sur la Tradition Orale (www.oraltradition.org), il est également responsable de la revue Oral Tradition.
Les documents de la Maison de la recherche en sciences humaines
Interdisciplinary perspectives in visual media studies
Screening Social Spaces

Renée Dickason, Benoît Raoulx
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