Sculptors and plumbers: The writer and television[1]

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I would like to begin by thanking the organizing committee for inviting me to deliver this keynote speech and I am delighted that the opportunity has led to its subsequent publication in this special edition of the *Journal of Screenwriting*.

I am acutely aware that I face you as a practitioner, albeit one who has transferred from industry to academia. In preparation, I have done my best to at least acquaint myself with some of the arguments and frameworks within which this group operates. To this end, I have elected the work of Messrs. Caughie, Maras, Price and MacDonald as my primary gurus and guides. Nevertheless, as a practitioner, it is inevitable that I will speak from a partial, personal point of view.

I will centre the framework of my thoughts around the position of the writer within television, as well as on my experiences in a particular period of the mid-1980s. This period saw the rise of what was known, at the time, as the television novel or authored serial, occurring before the contemporary incarnation of the 'ongoing series' that has achieved the position of global dominance that we observe today.

However, I began by wondering why my immediate response, when offered the opportunity to speak at the 2015 Screenwriting Research Network Conference in London, was to jump in and join the debate. The answer was simple. I felt at home within the SRN group, with its emphasis on unearthing the processes that contribute to the formation of a script and with teasing out an understanding of the place of the script in the process of production. Whilst the

script occupies a different place in television production to film production, partly due to the obvious structural differences and working practices derived from the epic nature of television narratives stretching over six to 60 (and more) hours of screen time, as opposed to the more manageable 100 minutes or so of the cinema, the structure and order of the process at work from idea to execution in both industries is essentially the same. However, one needs to remember that, within any one ongoing television series, the progress of idea to production occurs not only for the totality of the project, as in film, but is re-enacted within each section or unit of one or more smaller number of episodes. A variety of strategies have been developed to encompass this, to ensure quality and to conform to budgetary parameters. These range from the 'show runner' to 'the writer's table' and to the more disparate nature of the 'work group' as studied by Ian W. MacDonald (2013: 81–107). Most importantly, I was immediately sympathetic to the SRN's work in teasing out the place of the writer with the intention of at least recalibrating the academic focus within film studies of its favouring of the position of the director.

'Notoriously academic criticism values objectivity rather than subjectivity', John Caughie remarks (2007: 3), when analysing the television series *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985) and dealing with the slippery business of inserting 'production accounts and the seductiveness of anecdote' into 'critical analysis' (Caughie 2007: 21). Irritatingly, for that business of critical analysis, practitioners have a remarkable tendency to be anything but objective. There is some excuse for this since, although practice is surrounded by quasi-science – scheduling, budgeting, distribution, research – the decisions that culminate in success or failure largely prefigure any proof of the same.

Indeed the 'science' of television is notorious. Broadcasting organizations pour out swollen rivers of research. They exhort the creative community to engage with younger viewers, older viewers, male viewers, female viewers as well as increasingly disappearing

viewers. Then, after all this, up pops *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012–), one of the BBC's current popular television drama. A carefully made, lovingly created, classically constructed story of a group of nuns working in London's East End in the middle years of the last century. This programme is well aware of its antecedents, its history and its own sub-genre of semi-autobiographical, medically grounded mid-evening Sunday Night dramas stretching back to the ten year run of *Dr Finlay's Casebook* (BBC, 1962–1971), through the years in which *All Creatures Great and Small* (BBC, 1978–1980/1988–1990) dominated the schedules. It is a programme that, in the politest possible way, could have been present in the schedules at any point over the last 50 years. So much for research. So much for science.

Now I am not a particular fan of clothing the creative process in the cloak of magic. I rather incline to William Goldman's view that '… writing a screenplay is in many ways similar to executing a piece of carpentry…' (Field 2005: 142). He may be exaggerating for effect, but I am averse, in the spirit of enquiry, to creating private languages since both the inarticulacy of the practitioner and, on occasions, the baroque phraseology of the academic can, in their own ways, create worlds of exclusion. Particularly when we are dealing with a creative process, in this case, the generation and execution of ideas within television as part of a highly industrialized environment, which craves the double comfort of security and repetition in its end products and yet whose prime movers are in general antipathetic to repetition as a primary creative motivation.

For David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), each separate episode aspires to be a 'mini-movie' (Martin 2013: 90). Here, the word 'movie' effectively becomes a synonym for what used to be called, before long form series became fashionable, the weekly 'A' story. This has a variety of effects: to draw attention to the so-called cinematic qualities of HBO's then new drama, to elevate the act of creating a one-hour episode to the higher cultural cache of the cinema and perhaps to distance that act of creation from television itself.

Additionally, this delineation of the individual episode within the multi-episodic construction of the long form series draws attention to the fact that these particles within the whole also strive for perfection. The creators of the overall construct have to be infinitely flexible in balancing the demands of the various developing narratives with the ambitions of its individual parts, particularly when these narrative complexities must be organized to thread themselves through the eye of the budgetary needle.

Nevertheless, in spite of all this talk of creative architecture, we will have to leave carpentry behind at some point and visit magic, confronting it face to face.

From the very beginning of my career, fresh out of university, I found myself engaged with the work of the writer in production. I have been brought up and educated to believe that the script and the creation of space for the legitimate expression of the writer's viewpoint were at the very heart of television drama and with, in retrospect, surprising consistency I have found that a belief in the writer is carried by most practitioners of television drama as an act of faith.

This, as you might expect, from someone with a literary education – but a non-academic background – caused me immediately to reach for the idea of 'authorship'. However, even the most cursory of acquaintanceships with the academic literature had me, equally immediately, running for the hills.

The highways and byways of procedural analysis of the generative process by which the script accrues influence – and at the same time suffers from and equally benefits from a whole spectrum of interventions, is formed and unformed, acts or does not act as a list of production requirements, as an underpinning ideal for the process of production, a guide, a route map, a blueprint, this analogy being admirably examined by both Steven Price (2010: 44–47) and Steven Maras (2009: 38/39 et *passim*), or even in Jean-Claude Carriere's oft-

quoted aphorism where he so graphically describes the screenplay as a ‘caterpillar before its transformation into a butterfly’ (1995: 150) – are so contested and contentious as to make one wonder whether the word ‘author’ would not be better locked in a cell with the key thrown away.

And yet… and yet… rather than breaking the script apart into separate components, constantly returning to the idea of its ‘provisionality’ and ‘intermediality’, might one also be permitted, at the same time, to look on the script as a thing of wonder?

E. M. Forster, talking of the structure of the novel, says:

> Memory and intelligence are closely connected, for unless we remember, we cannot understand… Every action or word in a plot ought to count… It may be difficult or easy, it may and should contain mysteries, but it ought not to mislead, and over it, as it unfolds, will hover the memory of the reader… and the final sense, if the plot has been a fine one, will be of something aesthetically compact. We come up against beauty here: beauty at which a novelist should never aim, though he fails if he does not achieve it. ([1927] 2009: 88/89)

Beauty and memory. It seems to me that it is possible to think of the script as an amazing elasticated being, capable of seemingly endless assimilations and amputations, a shape shifter (at times a caterpillar, certainly, but also a caterpillar that is itself a butterfly). One might come face to face with wonder that something subject to so many levels and degrees of interference and transference can end up as a thing of beauty.

Certainly, the preparation of a script for that crucial moment prior to the production process involves the creation of an ideal. The script is not, as some academic commentary would have it, an absolutely clear visualization of the not-yet-existent film, neither is it, as William Goldman would have it, primarily a shape (Maras 2009: 72), but something in between, something that has balance and equilibrium, something in which the auditory response suggests rhythm and pace, something that evokes the temperature of space and something that – although it may not be literature – is undoubtedly literary.

Through the script's use of words, it is composed of form and rhythm. The script engages both the imagination and the emotions. It needs to be, has to be, felt as much as understood and, like all the greatest prose it weeps, at its best, to be read aloud.

At a basic level, I would suggest that a script cannot be read less than twice: once to find out where it is going and once to understand where it has been. Of course, scripts on their journey to production are read any number of times: to judge whether they have improved, to ensure that they have not lost their original sense of excitement and discovery and that the coin has not become tarnished by the many fingers that have touched it. However, above all, scripts are read to create as vivid a memory as possible of something that does not yet exist because without that memory there is no touchstone by which to judge the emerging work.

That said – it is my intention now to talk about why television craves, needs and requires – if not authorship then certainly the presence of an author.

Let me go back to the beginning and reflect for a moment on the importance of the word ‘authorship’ within television and television drama particularly. There are any number of intersecting histories that lead to common ground amongst both practitioners and academics that television is, in the oft-quoted phrase, a writer’s medium.

Many of these histories are well rehearsed. During the late 1950s, television drama found its earliest expression in the live broadcast of theatre plays (in particular, productions at Studio One in the United States and productions at the BBC in the United Kingdom), which came at first from the theatres themselves and later from within its studios. This connection to the theatre both privileged and embedded the writer at the heart of the process. Equally, from its beginnings it utilized the writer as a signifier of prestige, as John Caughie points out, ‘Drama lent prestige to a public service television whose cultural credentials were sometimes in doubt’ (1991: 26).

Television drama was also, from its beginning, encapsulated with its narratives confined by the physical space of its studios. One of the primary functions of the writer was (and remains) the organization of narrative within the limits of the industrialized space of the studios and, in the early days, the very limited allocation of filmed locations. This physical need for the creative re-conceptualization of grand narrative – or indeed the expansion of small narrative into available space – often leads to the imposition of circular or loop models of narrative, placing the writer at the heart of the process both creatively as the touchstone of quality and industrially as the organizer of material.

From these functions of the writer stem two of the important stories that have come to characterize the development of television drama.

First, the organization of narrative into the repetitive episodic structures of the long form returning drama series, often loosely referred to as ‘precinct drama’ (this term is used in the

United Kingdom to refer to any drama built around the workplace of its cast or a drama focused on a limited space (Fowler 2014). This form has been with us since the beginnings of television as a staple of the dramatic portfolio but only gained its current cultural prestige and international supremacy in recent interrogations, beginning with HBO's *Sopranos* and spreading through any number of interpretations from *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–2015) to *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013). In these projects, you can see the writer/creators adopting a variety of different strategies to overcome, adjust to, incorporate and develop creative responses to the formal restrictions imposed by the economics of this form of dramatic expression.

Second, another of the characterizations of television drama is that it is, in most cases, a tool for the revelation of character. If television drama has its roots within a world of interiority, its setting by and large domestic (in the widest application of the word), and its narratives circular so that its stories are prevented and circumscribed from developing out into unlimited space, they have to find their forward journey inside the minds and psychologies of the characters that inhabit them.

There, in a sense, we find TV, from its earliest days, entering into a dependent and dysfunctional relationship with the position of writer. On one level, the writer is crucially positioned outside the industrial complex, as creative outsider, storyteller, mystic, romantic, hunter-gatherer and deliverer. Take, for instance, the working practices of David Simon, creator of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008); he took two years to write his book of reportage *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (Simon, 1991) which became the TV series *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993–1999). Simon spent further years writing *The Corner: A Year in the Life an Inner-city Neighbourhood* (Simon and Burns, 1997), the TV series of *The Corner* ran for six hours in 2000 on HBO. Out of both of Simon's original materials came *The Wire*.

It is this depth of immersive research that UK Television producer, Tony Garnett, renowned for his pioneering work in the dramatic portrayal of society's less advantaged, most notably in the TV film *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) referred to as 'News from the Front'.

The Singing Detective (BBC, 1986), the ground-breaking television series written by Dennis Potter, may not be autobiography, but it draws quite clearly and explicitly on the author's lifetime experience of suffering. The writer is necessary to the process, not only for inspiration or magic – and in some cases for sacrificing to public view a life-long experience – but also as the problem-solver. The writer is William Goldman's 'carpenter', contributing to and creating for the industrial process, the possibility of story, the organization of narrative and its transmission primarily through character.

The essential and intrinsic qualities that have driven the development of television drama in the United Kingdom were spotted and elegantly encapsulated early on when, in 1936, one of the most formidable pioneers of broadcasting in the nation, Grace Wyndham Goldie, summed up its essential properties – 'it has a vividness we cannot get from sightless broadcasting and a combination of reality and intimacy which we cannot get from the films' (Higgins 2015: 75) or, as John Corner at the University of Leeds puts it, 'it is through speech that television addresses its viewers' (1999: 37). It is easy to forget, when thinking about the position of the writer in TV drama that television, in the United Kingdom, has its origins in the word, beginning its life born out of the radio.

Words press up hard against the skin of broadcasting, capable of haemorrhaging easily and with considerable force. It only took one phrase to ignite an epic battle between Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government and the BBC around the nomenclature used to describe the British Forces in the Falklands conflict. An internal BBC memo, to all its staff, entitled 'Not Our Troops' read: 'We should try to avoid using "our" when we mean British:

we are not Britain, we are the BBC'. The rejoinder from the Prime Minister was unequivocal: 'The BBC has a responsibility to stand up for our Task Force, our boys, for our people and the cause of democracy' (Seaton 2015: 175).

And so when an organization like the BBC sits within a regulatory framework with its responsibilities for balance, impartiality and independence enshrined within a complex system of regulation and legislation, the script itself becomes a vital staging post in the exercise of hierarchical control, not only in the supervisory process through which judgements of quality are reached, shared and assured, but also in the equally critical process of political, legal and regulatory compliance.

This aspect of the script within television is a part of its important function. By and large, all TV programmes are commissioned for a schedule and they have to turn up on time and be appropriately fashioned, reflecting the behavioural aspects of the characters in a manner appropriate to the intended time and date of transmission. A network must have absolute security and trust in the reliability of its supply line, particularly in the case of drama that may be commissioned one or possibly two years ahead. The close examination of the script and an adherence to it ensure that the supply line is secure. It has been shown that drama is as capable of creating trouble as news and current affairs – *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966), *The War Game* (BBC, 1965 withdrawn, 1985), *Tumbledown* (BBC, 1988), *The Monocoled Mutineer* (BBC, 1986) to name but a few – and, of course, the script plays the most important part in flagging, or in some cases, deliberately not flagging, potential controversy. The script, from the beginnings of television in Great Britain, has always been key in the downward cascade of responsibilities for adherence to television's legal, moral, social and regulatory responsibilities. This may help to explain why there is perhaps a more clearly differentiated gulf between the twin stages of conception and execution than is to be found in the developmental progress of film.

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The 1980s in Great Britain, as a decade, is neatly delineated by the rise and fall of Prime Minister Thatcher. Her relationship with Broadcasting, as with so many other institutions in British Life, was one of destabilization out of which emerged both predictable and unpredictable consequences. The BBC with its, on occasions, infuriating air of superiority found itself directly in her sights. Those of us present at the time were in no doubt about her desire to dismantle it. Hatred emanated from her and her lieutenants on the few occasions when they entered its doors. Its sense of entitlement, its perceived espousal of views left of Centre, its inefficiency were, literally, red rags to the bull. The various iterations of deregulation that derived from her regime – the formation of Channel 4 with its new model of Independent production, the subsequent requirement for all broadcasters to give over 25 per cent of their production to this new sector, the introduction of Satellite broadcasting destabilized the institutions of television both in terms of the cultural assumptions behind its commitment to Public Service Broadcasting and the vertically integrated industrial structures that had grown up to deliver its output.

At the same time and in an almost exactly parallel development in Great Britain, TV and TV drama in particular, was freeing itself from the increasingly outdated and cumbersome paraphernalia of the TV studio by moving into the less controllable but more expressive space offered by the use of film as the primary mode of production. 1982 saw the launch of a new national channel – Channel 4 – that immediately innovated by creating Film 4, a separate brand under which all its single feature-length dramas were made, not for television but for cinematic release. *Play for Today,* the BBC's distinguished anthology strand which, for many years, had hosted the work of Tony Garnett and Ken Loach in particular as well as a litany of other consecrated writers including Dennis Potter, David Mercer, John Hopkins, Alan Bleasdale, Willy Russell and Alan Bennett, came to an end in 1984. Its successors

Screen One and *Screen Two* limped through the remainder of the decade until the formation of BBC Films in 1990. The conflicting claims of cinema and television can be seen in the choice of the word ‘Screen’ indicating the unease surrounding the natural home of the feature-length single drama and the dropping of the word ‘play’ delineating a break with its long theatrical history and provenance.

These claims occasioned a number of skirmishes that were enacted in what was a decade-long conflict around the importance of the single drama. On the one hand, increasing competition in the television marketplace highlighted the unreliability and unpredictability of its ratings performance alongside the increasingly uneconomic costs occasioned by the use of film for the production of these prestigious single events. On the other hand its long and prestigious history, enhanced by its cinematic ambitions, brought into ever starker relief the conflicting claims of economic and cultural value. In addition, a fundamental battle was taking place between writer and director, and, by inference, a deep resistance to the influence of ‘auterial’ approaches to filmmaking with its subjugation of the prestige, power and influence of the writer.

This was, in a sense, a battle for the soul of television drama as a writer or director’s medium.

As a result, the feature-length single film was ushered from the halls of television into the arena of the cinema. Within the politics of television, this was a victory for the word over picture.

Dennis Potter, never one to mince his words, put it thus -

> … in the end we’ll get a director’s television more than a writer’s television and everyone will say: ‘why is there nothing you can get your teeth into? Why is it all so bland? Why are these issues being shirted? Mostly because directors are on the

> whole...not so much interested in content as in that word which covers a multitude of sins – style'. (Cited in Cook 1995: 209)

Up to this point, the world of TV drama in Great Britain had been intensely hierarchical with the makers of feature-length single dramas as its entitled aristocrats, owning and jealously guarding the territories of its 'cultural capital' whilst the makers of its more utilitarian projects, the serials and episodic series, tended to the crops and stoked the economy on which they flourished. In a sense, this period from the mid-1980s onwards can be seen as a long Darwinian struggle for cultural supremacy fought on the battleground of deregulation, competition and prestige between the three forms of drama – the single play, the serial and the series and which has seen the ongoing episodic series rise to the top. But at the time of which we are speaking the vacuum of prestige created by the withdrawal of the single play/film became largely colonized by the enclosed serial, for example, the grandly ambitious and enormously expensive serials *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada/ITV, 1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (Granada/ITV, 1984): two productions that challenged the BBC's long commitment to this genre and came at a time, the beginning of the 1980s, with the BBC increasingly under political and economic threat.

Although often subject to the condescension of critics and commentators as heritage drama or simply televisual theme parks in search of the American dollar, these enclosed serial dramatizations performed a number of different and important functions with regard to the internal aesthetics of drama production. They sustained and extended the capacity for story developed over time. They opened up the largely insular worlds explored within television drama to depictions of a variety of cultures in epic versions of *War and Peace* (BBC, 1972/1973), Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* (BBC, 1970), Zola's *Germinal* (BBC, 1970), Graves'

I, Claudius (BBC, 1976), as well as maintaining an adherence to the British literary canon of Dickens, Trollope, Austen, Eliot. In short, they expanded television's capacity for narrative.

This tradition, of which I was a part, was certainly instrumental in enabling me to pursue the production of John Le Carre's 1974 novel *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. The novel itself was a valuable property with a commercial worth far beyond the BBC's notoriously parsimonious pockets. The Corporation had spent some time negotiating for the rights to *Brideshead* and, at the last moment, the Waugh estate granted them to Granada. It was this hole in the schedule and the sudden need for a major attention-grabbing property that enabled me to approach Le Carre regarding his novel that was to become, amongst other things, the first time that a major novel adaptation had been realized entirely on film.

Insert Photo #1

Figure 1: Alec Guinness as George Smiley in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (BBC).

The proposition to Le Carre was that we would treat the production with the same integrity that would be accorded to Dickens or Dostoevsky, that we would adhere to the complex narrative of Smiley's quest, that we would reflect the nuances of his picture of England, both in the depiction of his characters and the detail of background, and that we would also reflect the overall time scale against which the story is played out. Our desire to encompass the shape of Smiley's journey through Autumn into the dark of winter, a journey so important to the novel and to the nature of his quest with its Conradian sense of a heart of darkness. Our intent was, it turned out, in sharp contrast to a recently collapsed attempt to create a scripted version that was deemed unacceptable by Le Carre. This previous attempt had tried but failed to satisfactorily rework the novel's narrative into a linear time line. Our promise to reflect its

notoriously complicated time-structure proved to be a winning approach and became one of the hallmarks of the production's success.

The production of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (BBC,1979) is characterized by an elegiac sense of England's past, a Dickensian precision of character as well as the preservation of the novel's formal complexity. 'Will you do it George?' says Oliver Lacon, the government minister, 'Go backwards, go forwards, do whatever is necessary'. At the heart of it, actor Alec Guinness was accorded the space to fully inhabit the character of Smiley, described by Le Carre as 'an abbey, made up of different periods, fashions, and even different religions', but also as 'a guilty man, as all men are who insist on action' (Seaton 2015: 301).

The production entranced its audience that embraced the crossword nature of its plot, happy to have its complexities unravelled by the masterly economy of Guinness' performance.

Some years later, in the early 1980s, I found myself lunching with Dennis Potter. By this time I had progressed, if you can call it that, from being a producer to a new role as the executive in charge of all the BBC's serials and series. There was a deep sense of crisis around the organization. The main channels' ratings had fallen to an all-time low. The reputation of the BBC, in spite of the success of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy,* was still overshadowed by the reverberations of Granada's *Brideshead* and *Jewel* and lurking like a storm cloud was the Thatcher government. The brief was simple. Originate popular drama to underpin the schedules of BBC1 and restore the reputation of BBC drama. Potter had not worked for the BBC for some years.

My pitch was simple and direct: we at the BBC are in deep trouble and we need you, Dennis, to help us out. Readily, he proposed a thriller called *Smokerings*. The story concerned an American serviceman who returned to England, just after World War II, to search for the girl he loved. A thriller. A love story. A period drama. An American. On the basis of a

conversation, a prestigious Sunday night transmission was agreed. We raised money from America and Australia, but there was, of course, a sting in the tail. Potter required all six scripts to be commissioned at the same time, all the money to be paid up front and I was not allowed to talk to him until he delivered them. When the scripts arrived they were not about an American serviceman in search of his lost love in post war Britain, but about a man, confined to his hospital bed, suffering from the acute and disfiguring disease of psoriatic arthritis, surrounded by fantasy, memory and delusion. It was called *The Singing Detective*. Did I understand it? No. But if, as I remarked earlier, a script needs to be felt as much as understood, then this was clearly quite exceptional and in terms of originality, it was off the scale. Did I think we should make it? Yes. Why? Well, as they say, be careful what you wish for.

Insert Photo #2

Figure 2: Michael Gambon as Philip Marlowe and Joanne Whalley as Nurse Mills *The Singing Detective* (BBC).

In resetting our strategy away from classic adaptations as indicators of quality simply because projects on the scale of *Brideshead* and *Jewel* had become virtually unaffordable, I had argued, within the organization, to align our fate with the aims, aspirations and voices of television's consecrated authors and *The Singing Detective* was both a direct challenge to that ambition and, as it turned out, its unforeseeably popular fulfilment.

The television novel had been emerging for some time. Its origins are in, amongst others, John Hopkins' *Talking to a Stranger* (BBC, 1966), Potter's own *Pennies From Heaven* (BBC, 1978), Howard Schumann's *Rock Follies* (Thames/ITV, 1976) and Frederick

Raphael's *Glittering Prizes* (BBC, 1976) but during the 1980s, as the single television drama lost its lustre, writers became increasingly ambitious to write outside the restrictions of the single script, to invest their narrative ambitions with the scale of the novel and to create stories using the qualities of film.

Of the three projects, *The Singing Detective* most acutely reflects this tipping point in the mode of production. As is well known, Potter wrote it with the intention that it should be shot in the studio, but was persuaded by his producer Ken Trodd and director Jon Amiel to allow it to be realized on film. Within it, you find a structure that distils the relative strengths of these two opposing forms of production. The body of the text is set within Marlow's hospital ward, delighting in the verbal play of its dialogue, utilizing with glee the conventions of the situation comedy and enthusiastically aware of television's addiction to medical drama. The imaginings and memory are contained within the film noir re-enactments of his real and imagined novel and, in what are perhaps the most successful and moving parts of the story, the memories of childhood where the protagonist unlocks his predicament and finds the seeds of healing. Structurally, these strands intrude on and muscle their way into the body of the piece, entering through his mind, challenging him, exactly as the medium of film was, at the time, intruding on the certainties of the writer's position within television. The piece finds exuberance in its word play, literally in the confrontations with the psychiatrist, joy in its basic forms of hospital drama and sitcom and its most troubled elegy in the more cinematic memories of childhood. Looking back, one can see in it, clearly reflected and defined the industrial past and future of the medium.

If Potter resisted the attractions of film, then screenwriter Troy Kennedy Martin embraced them. With his background in the original formulation of *Z Cars* (BBC, 1962–1978), his experience on the fast paced action series *The Sweeney* (Thames/ITV, 1975–1978) and his natural affinity for the sweep of cinema – remember *The Italian Job* (1969) starring Michael

Caine and all those little mini cars, so fashionable at the time of its writing? Of the three writers, Troy is perhaps the one most at home with the texture, flexibility and fluency that film brings to a production and that television was still investigating. He had the experience with narrative in cinema, the ambition to write, as he says himself, on the scale of the nineteenth-century novel, and the skill to lift a story that could have been little more than a superior generic thriller onto another level. He achieved this through his ability to indicate texture within the body of the script, to place at the heart of the story an extended study of grief, to play fast and loose with the revelation of character, to begin with and then break free from television's naturalist tendencies and to encompasses and contain characters like Darius Jedburgh, the CIA agent with his white Stetson and white Rolls Royce, built on a scale to stand alongside the novel's finest. When I approached him he had already written two episodes of a project entitled *Magnox*, the working title of *Edge of Darkness,* and of it, he says this:

> It was Thatcher's Britain, and I was really depressed about it as indeed were other writers that I knew. And so I said to my closest colleagues that the only thing one can really do is to actually write the stuff that we know is not going to get made, but at least we'll get it out of our system. And that's how I started to write Edge of Darkness. I didn't really think it stood much of a chance of being produced. (Cited in Caughie 2007: 9)

Luckily, as executive in charge of production at the BBC, I was in a position to oblige.

Reflection and the relationship of past to future is a key aspect of all three constructs that I have cited. Smiley, in *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, reimagines the past of the secret service as he searches for the traitor at its heart and tracks down the betrayal of a nation. At the same

time he faces up to his own past, betrayed both personally and professionally by those he trusted most. Craven also, in *Edge of Darkness*, moves from an investigation of the grubby world of trade union politics, through an international conspiracy, conducted by the denizens of George Smiley's world into a mythic projection, with which he aligns himself, of the end of humanity. He is accompanied by the corporeal ghost of his murdered daughter and by her younger self, and so, in a sense, his daughter is twice murdered. He, too, faces his past as, like Smiley, 'a guilty man, as all men are who insist on action'. Marlowe, in *The Singing Detective*, faces multiple pasts and multiple betrayals as he slowly emerges into a state of physical and mental equilibrium, the better able to fulfil his destiny as writer and thus to comment on whatever it is that the future will bring.

Insert Photo #3

Figure 3: Bob Peck in *Edge of Darkness* (BBC).

The circumstances of their production sit within a context of aesthetic and technological change and were made possible only within the freedom offered by moments of great institutional anxiety. We can find connections in a number of other stories around television's relationship with the writer at pivotal moments in time. Todd Gitlin outlines Steve Bochco's demands for autonomy as a precondition of producing the pilot for *Hill St Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987) when NBC was on the floor (1985: 281); HBO, at a time of significant change, reinvented the long form series, including David Chase's *The Sopranos* and Alan Ball's *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–2005), re-engineering its possibilities by consciously inserting authorship into the heart of the process and all have developed questions about the relationship between televisual and filmic narrative.

Above all, these three productions move through complex iterations of the past within the present, their heroes at its tipping point, dealing with various levels of betrayal. All three reflect, at an important and subconscious level, albeit in very different ways, an elegiac relationship to the past, an awareness that society was in a fundamental process of realignment and that the fictions themselves are born against a backdrop of irreversible change, challenge and renewal. These are themes that emerged independently in each at the time and have become more apparently linked in retrospect as, in the words of T. S. Eliot, their 'footfalls echo in the memory' (1941: 9). Above all, they stand as examples of how television craves, needs and requires its acts of authorship: and how whilst, of course it may choose its consecrated authors, it is also, on occasions, consecrated by them in return.

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The Sweeney (1975–1978), Cr: Ian Kennedy Martin, Wr/Dir: various; UK; Euston Film/Thames TV for ITV; tx. 50 mins×53 eps.

Talking to a Stranger (1966), Wr: John Hopkins, Dir: Christopher Morahan; UK; BBC; tx. 90 mins x 3 eps, 100 mins×1 ep..

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Tumbledown (1988), Wr: Charles Wood, Dir: Richard Eyre; UK; BBC 1; tx. 100 mins.×1 eps.

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Jonathan Powell is a professor of Media at Royal Holloway, University of London. Prior to this, he spent many years working as a Drama Producer and Executive in the BBC and ITV. As Producer of the 'Classic Serial' at the BBC between 1977 and 1985, he was responsible for a number of novel adaptations including *The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Barchester Chronicles, Pride and Prejudice, Therese Raquin, Testament of Youth, Crime and Punishment, The Bell, Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, Smiley's People* and *The Old Men at the Zoo*. He was also the executive producer of *A Perfect Spy*, *Bleak House* and *Tender is the Night*. As Head of Drama Series and Serials and subsequently Head of Drama at the BBC, he was responsible for introducing *Casualty* and *EastEnders* and for commissioning *The Singing Detective, Edge of Darkness, The Life and Loves of a She Devil* and *A Very Peculiar Practice*. He spent five years as Controller of BBC 1 before moving to ITV where he was Executive Producer of the International Emmy award winning adaptation of *Dirty Tricks*. Over his career he has received a number of Royal Television Society, BAFTA and Emmy awards and nominations. He was awarded the RTS Silver award for creative contribution to the industry and received a Peabody award for *Smiley's People*. In 2015, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of East Anglia.

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Note

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