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CLASSIC TELEVISION: A MATTER OF TIME

'television is a somewhat difficult object, unstable, all over the place, tending derisively to escape anything we can say about it: given the speed of its changes . . . its interminable flow . . . its quantitative everydayness . . . how can we *represent* television?' (Heath, 'Representing Television' in *Logics of Television*, Indiana University Press, P. Mellencamp (ed), 1990, p267)

It seems appropriate to start a *Screen* conference on television with a quotation from one of its luminaries. As someone whose interest in television studies was nurtured in the theoretical maelstrom of the Society of Film and Television, I owe *Screen* a lot but I think it is true to say that *Screen* was always less comfortable with television, its production situations and its audiences, than it was with film and cinematic apparatus. And if Stephen Heath couldn't work television out no wonder that some of the rest of us had problems. So it is an honour, albeit a rather nerve-racking one, to have been asked to open this conference and I can already see from the abstracts that there are many interesting points of intersection and difference. Heath's question may be applied I think to our topic of today – 'how do we represent classic television'? And we might come back to that question of representation. For what we are doing here is not, I think, identifying particular classics, though there may be some entertaining arguments about particular programmes. We are rather considering how we, as television scholars, represent a television classic and for what purpose – how do we define it, rate it, use it, promote it, teach it and why might that be an appropriate task? What is our role in the making and remaking of classic television?

I have framed this paper around the concept of time and the use that has been made of time in thinking about television. In the first part of the paper I want to consider two approaches to the term 'classic' which hinge on

time and its passing. In the middle section I will consider briefly some changes in our experience of television time brought about by changes in viewing practices. In the final part of the paper, which acts as something of a coda, I want to consider the demands television makes of our time and what that means for television studies. Overall, I want to reflect on how the concept of time has been important in defining television as classic and how that use/understanding of time is changing.

The first way in which we might define classic television is by relating it to quality. Classic television implies good television, programmes which have been assessed as being better than other examples of their kind. I am going to leave debates about quality and the possibility of a canon to others. Here I want to note that surviving the passing of time, establishing longevity, is one important way in which quality is traditionally established. By some arguments, something can't really be considered as a 'classic' until it has at least outlived its first arrival and reception. This was the position with the development of the BFI Film Classics series when David Meeker argued, according to Ed Buscombe, 'that a film could not acquire classic status overnight. But increasingly the authors we wished to contract wanted to write about more recent films, and . . . readers wanted to read about them too' (Edward Buscombe, *Cinema Journal*, 48, no 2, 2009, p.162). There were complications for the establishment of a canon of film classics with this approach but it seems to me that the notion of longevity may have even less purchase with television where it immediately comes up against the emphasis on the contemporary, the sense that to study and in particular to teach television is to work with what television is currently doing. Although British scholars such as Lez Cook, Helen Wheatley, and Su Holmes have recently been making highly effective interventions to demonstrate the importance of historical work, conferences and publishing illustrate how television studies still tends to congregate around the new and indeed the future.

I want to take an example from another discourse to think about what this process of demonstrating longevity is meant to do. In the world of fashion journalism, we are told, at times of recession, to buy classics and what this means is buying a garment which is deceptively simple, sleek, dateless. The function of the passing of time is to smooth out anything which references the

garment to a particular time, place or event; it is streamlined, the snags and frills fall away to leave us with the perfectly cut lines of a dress or coat that will continue to be what it now is. It will continue to last. I can see that metaphor working with a film classic, I might not agree with it and there be other ways of defining a classic but I can see how it could apply; the film of *Atonement* (2007) recently quoted from the classic *Le Quai des Brumes* (1938) for this purpose, to demonstrate the timelessness of cinema. But somehow it doesn't seem to work with television – or not with my version of a television classic. It can indeed be the snags, the frills, the lack of smoothness which, for me, marks classic television.

Perhaps I can put this in a different way. Glasgow University has a wonderful library and one of its virtues is that it is full of old and irrelevant books; I take them out every now and then to try and stop the librarians getting rid of them for something new. Thinking about this talk, I found in my browsing a tome named 'Television Today and Tomorrow' – an entirely typical title for Television Studies. This turned out, however, to have been published in 1933 so its usefulness was limited. But, in a chapter which included a description of an experimental live showing of a street in West London, one of the headings was 'people easily identified':

Chapter 10 Daylight Television and Phonovision

Reversing the process – The same final result – A milestone of progress -- A street scene by television -- People easily identified – The Derby of 1931 – Preliminary tests -- . . .

Sydney A Mosely and H J Barton Chapple, *Television Today and Tomorrow*, (third edition) Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1933, p138.

Identification here involves the facility of seeing clearly – a driver still in television technology – but also the recognition of their individuality, the signifiers that made them themselves. People easily (or perhaps clearly) identified seems to me to be the essence of classic television. It has a documentary flavour but is not confined to documentary. Soap opera, police series, games shows, reality tv, can all offer us people seen more clearly. But we do not necessarily require longevity to establish that; we might do better with criteria like closeness, presentness, the complications of context, the snags that give you a little jolt of recognition. *Coronation Street* is classic

television for me for all sorts of reasons and the first episode (1960) illustrates this brilliantly; in a live moment, the actress playing Elise Tanner (Pat Phoenix) appears to sort out a wardrobe malfunction in a tender gesture which illuminates the relationship between mother and daughter, lets us identify them more easily.

This leads us into my other definition of classic television which is television which is typical of the medium. Since *Screen* and others were in the 1970s outlining the specificity of film and its relationship with the spectator, it seemed necessary for those concerned with television to do the same with this relatively new and relatively unsettled medium. In this work, television was frequently thought about in terms of time. Television was defined by Williams's flow, Ellis's glance, the emphasis on liveness, on interruptability; the schedule not the programme should be the focus of analysis, it was argued, with the emphasis on how an extraordinary range of genres and modes was transformed into television by the organisation of time. This grounded even textual work into thinking about television in terms of its relationship with its audience – not necessarily studying what the audience did (though that of course came) but how it might be engaged by what was offered. And as Heath indicated, it led into thinking about how television organised time in everyday life, the work of Paddy Scannell for instance, and how that was gendered. In this version of classic television, soap opera briefly ruled.

Its importance was not just the way time was handled in the text but how the time passing in the text was imbricated into the lives of those who watched. 'Soap operas invest exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman's life: waiting' wrote Tania Modleski, 'whether for her phone to ring, for the baby to take its nap or for the family to be reunited shortly after the final soap opera has left *its* family still struggling against dissolution.' (*Loving with a Vengeance*, Methuen, 1982, p.88). Modleski's psychoanalytic account of how the characteristic deferral of the ending responded to a need in its female viewers was controversial but its emphasis on the way story time and everyday time made sense of each other was hugely important. The convention of 'unrecorded time', the fact that soap narratives often did not return to the cliffhanger moment on which the previous episode ended, meant

that viewers and characters lived lives in parallel, catching up with each other at the appointed time: 'the characters in a serial, when abandoned at the end of an episode, pursue an "unrecorded existence" until the next one begins . . . Day-to-day life has continued in our absence'. (Christine Geraghty, 'The continuous serial – a definition', *Coronation Street*, BFI, 1981, p10) It was this that was important about soaps as television. The interweaving storylines, the segment as the block of narrative, the character types, the social problems were all consequent on this relationship in time.

Now of course television is different and that takes me into the middle section of this talk. The very notion of an 'appointment to view' is distinctly old-fashioned given that it is now possible to take programmes out of their time. The timeshifting that came in with VCRs has gained in sophistication and popularity. Recent BARB figures for January and February 2009 indicated that in Sky households in the UK more people recorded than watched the first episode of the fifth series of *Lost* and 22% of soap viewing was time-shifted (The Guardian, Media, 16th March, 2009). And of course we can go further back and now recover lost programmes. Horace Newcomb, one of the key early figures in television studies, has commented recently on finding programmes he had enjoyed and written about being reshowed on internet sites. Of his re-viewing of programmes like *Ironside* and *St Elsewhere*, he says, 'To me they are somehow reflections of what they were, incomplete images and imaginings of time, place, significance, pleasure' ('My media studies = My TV' *Television and New Media*, 10, no 1, 2009, 117). Perhaps, in this re-viewing, people are not so easily identified, these classic series not so clearly seen when taken out of time.

This would fit John Ellis' suggestion that 'the older the material that is being considered, the clearer it becomes that television programmes are temporarily meaningful, and are designed to be so.' (in *Re-viewing Television History*, H. Wheatley (ed), I B Taurus, 2007, p.19) Most programmes have been made for a particular moment and are required to be topical, to emphasise the recognisability of the world they show by making their references contemporary, understandable and everyday. They have been designed for a particular purpose in the schedule, whether it be the 'warm bath' drama of a Sunday night or the competition over realism conducted by

British soaps in the 1980s. Old programmes 'slip over a receding horizon of everydayness', Ellis continues, and much work on context is required if their meaning is to be restored.

This change in viewing possibilities has generated much discussion about the death of television or at least of the kind of broadcast, channel-based television which I have been discussing so far. And this change in viewing possibilities gets us into a different relationship with time. On the one hand, there is the total immersion of the DVD box set, television designed, like the feature film, for a much longer life than the typical programme. Unlike broadcast television, this takes us out of everyday time; we can create special circumstances by watching for much longer periods of time – and set it up so that we are not interrupted. This quotation from an article about classic box sets illustrates what is involved:

Closing the shutters, switching off the phone and pressing "play all episodes" is one of the simple but glorious indulgences of modern life. It is quite different from watching live or recorded TV.

Tim Lusher, *The Guardian*, G2, 6/3/09, p9

DVD viewing invites us to breach television's rules about time and is associated with metaphors of gorging and bingeing as if the possibilities of endless television viewing have not yet overridden our sense that the pleasures of television may have relied on it being rationed.

This mode of viewing can make us feel very superior to the traditional television viewer as the quotation from a study of the X-Files illustrates:

This allowed me to view the episodes . . . more carefully, rewinding when necessary . . . I saw, in the course of eighteen months, over 190 different episodes, many of them multiple times . . . This is surely different from the experience of the presumed 'normal' viewer who sees one episode a week, 25 or so weeks a year.

K.M. Booker on *The X-Files* cited in Matt Hills, 'From the box in the

corner . . .' *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 5,1, 2007, p 48

As Hills among others has suggested, DVD television, taken out of the flow of ordinary viewing and packaged into discrete commodities, is a prime candidate for canonisation.

On the other hand, the television experience can be turned into something even more fragmentary than scheduled television, occupying time in a different way. My students illustrate their class presentations not with extracts from the videos in our library but with clips from YouTube. Alexandra Juhasz, writing about the experience of teaching a course about and on YouTube, concludes that 'YouTube functions best as a postmodern television set' describing it as 'an at-home or mobile, viewer-controlled delivery system . . . which is really good for wasting time'. Here identification really does become easy as 'an already recognizable bit of media serves as the best videos' iconic center.' (*Cinema Journal*, 48, no 2, 2009, p.147) This is the making and remaking of classic television with a vengeance. In the reverse of the devoted obeisance of DVD viewing, television's gobbets, taken out of context, become an element in a self-referential parody.

But the internet does involve waiting and our expectations of its speed sometimes makes that wait seem much longer than sitting through the adverts while reading the newspaper. I was intrigued by this example from Flow, the television on-line forum published by [Department of Radio, Television, and Film](#) at the [University of Texas at Austin](#). Flow's mission is to provide a space where the public can discuss. Ethan Thompson reflects on the practice of receiving television clips posted by 'friends' on Facebook and comments that when someone has sent us something that is supposed to be striking or amusing 'we watch more attentively, knowing all along how much longer the video has to play, determined that it's there if we just stick it out.' ('Facebook and the Return of the Repressed', flowtv.org, 20/2/09) He adds that the punchline or payoff of the posted extract is thus 'more cruelly performed via Facebook post' because expectation is increased. The few minutes of waiting are anxious ones as you wait to establish whether a fragment of television has a payoff and find out whether your friend, intending to send you something classic, has sent you instead something awful or embarrassing. This is a kind of stretching out of time different again from the intense concentration of DVD viewing or the in-and-outness of television scheduling.

This takes me to the question of *our* time, whether spent at the computer, in a darkened room with the complete X-Files or watching television. Derek Kompare has argued that with DVD box sets, 21st century

television may have found its apotheosis in which the 'flow of television is not only measured in time but in physical commodities' ('Publishing flow', *Television and New Media*, 7, 4, 2006, p.353) I am not sure how piles of DVDs constitute a flow but he is right that time is still a factor. The time demanded by the study of television can be a real problem.

Ellis follows up his argument that the temporarily meaningful nature of television requires explication through detailed contextual work by asserting that much television programming poses problems for textual analysis: 'the long term series presents even more problems for purely textual approaches. . . They are simply too big to be encompassed by close reading techniques'. (*Re-viewing Television History*, I B Taurus, 2007, p.25) These techniques are of course the very techniques associated with the creation of a canon and the claim for aesthetic value. There is much detailed work on television series which confirms that this is not the case though the focus of much of it on US high-end drama might support the argument that these programmes are 'not television' in a different way from that intended by the famous HBO slogan.

But there is no doubt that work on television is time-consuming and has got more so. In my own experience, working on *Women and Soap Opera* in the 1980s, it was possible for one person to watch most episodes of up to four soap operas and two primetime series and still have a life. This seems to me less likely now – you'd probably need AHRC funding for a network. And the problem is not so much the programmes you like but those you don't but which it might be necessary to study. How much do you have to watch in order to make the evaluative judgement that one programme is better or worse than another? Soaps are at one level notoriously easy to understand. A competent viewer can pick up the storylines and conventions quite readily. But if you don't watch the programme regularly, it is also easy to miss the moments when, as an engaged and interested viewer, you see people more clearly and get the kind of pleasure and understanding that is the reward of ordinary television. If you are writing about *Scrubs* or *The Sopranos* or even *Brideshead Revisited*, how much do you need to have seen of *Casualty* or *EastEnders* before you can make some kind of evidential comparison which won't make the experts in those programmes wince? And is it a problem that there are classic programmes (in one sense or another) which it would seem

don't warrant study – *The Bill*, *Top Gear*, current soap operas? At the very least we should take care that our judgements we make about such programmes have a basis in what we have studied.

I have in the past argued that a canon of classic television would be useful or at least that the process of establishing criteria for such an evaluation would be instructive for the discipline. Really valuable work has been done in this area by many people, some of whom are here and some who are not such as Sarah Cardwell. So we have moved forward. But I am still not satisfied. It seems to end up, not so much missing the programmes I enjoy or think are important (which is not particularly relevant here) but actually to turn television into something different. Does that matter? Is it inevitable? I am sure, at least, that the papers and discussions today will help me think through some of this again in a fruitful way.

Professor Christine Geraghty
Theatre, Film and Television Studies
University of Glasgow
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