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Jonathan Bignell's conference: "Adventures between TV and film, and between Britain and America"

(Journée thématique GUEST-Normandie Séries/cinéma, Novembre 21st,
2014, Caen)

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**Jonathan Bignell's conference: "Adventures
between TV and film, and between Britain and America"
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Reviewed by Shannon WELLS-LASSAGNE

Jonathan Bignell's keynote address broached the central topic of the relationship between film and television by focusing on the link between Ian Fleming's iconic character James Bond and the adventure series of the 1960s. As his talk made perfectly clear, the topic is a very rich one, as it reveals largely unknown affiliations both between television and film and between British and American productions.

To a large extent, the overlap was due to practical circumstances. Though Ian Fleming's character has come to represent the height of Britishness, and at the time participated in the "cool Britannia" concept so popular in the 1960s, it turns out that transatlantic concerns have always had an important role in bringing Bond to the screen. In fact, his first screen appearance was not in film, but in a live TV broadcast in the US, where "Jimmy Bond" faced off against Peter Lorre playing "Le Chiffre"; the first film adaptation of the Bond novels, *Dr. No*, was originally developed as a treatment (and a pilot episode) for a new television series, called *James Gunn – Secret Agent*, where the title character was in fact an American; and before Daniel Craig and Martin Campbell finally brought the first Bond novel to the screen, the premise of *Casino Royale* was adapted for American television as *The Man from UNCLE*. Though today we may see Bond as a British film icon, his associations with television and with the US are undeniable.

Likewise, if we look at some of the British spy series that were so popular in the 1960s (*The Prisoner*, *The Persuaders*, *The Saint*, *The Champions*, *Danger Man*), we can notice a similar transatlantic bent. These series were all filmed largely in Pinewood and Elstree studios, in many cases sharing studio space with the Bond films and their like, and sought to emulate Bond by creating an international feel in their cosmopolitan plotlines – but this transnational sentiment extended also to production, where series were filmed rather than performed live so as to be able to export the series to the American market, and made use of Americans fleeing McCarthyism or the Vietnam War both in front of the camera and behind it. Indeed, series like *The Saint*, which was originally conceived by the head of the production company as a means of interesting an American audience in a British fiction, was filmed in color exclusively for American use, as Britain would not use color television until 1967.

Diegetically, these series had a distinctive spatial aesthetic, using outdoor local shooting (still a relative novelty at this time), and lots of stock footage of foreign locales. Place and movement between those places is a real attraction, creating a sort of transnational utopia, and focusing on "international non-places" like international hotels, highways, etc., where different cultures meet. From this perspective, Bignell suggests, these series were anticipating what we today refer to as media convergence, both in their close association with film sets and audiences as well as with film plots – international adventurers/spies who travel across space, police and manage space. As the 60s continued, television became increasingly similar to film, using more expensive locales (capital cities, Monte Carlo) and casting film stars (such as Tony Curtis in *The Persuaders*) with an increased emphasis on an international cast (as can be seen in the interaction between Roger Moore's Brit and Tony Curtis's Yank in that same series). *The Prisoner* seems particularly relevant here, as its outdoor filming in Portmeirion, with its medley of Mediterranean aesthetics seemed characteristic of the assortment of international locations typical of the spy fiction, while its interiors made use of the high-tech aesthetic recurrent in Bond films. As such, these spy series demonstrate a mixture of national specificity and internationalism, and of the profound interactions between television and film.