

BBC Four biopics: Lessons in Trashy Respectability

The broadcast of *Burton and Taylor* in July 2013 marked the end of a decade-long cycle of feature-length biographical dramas transmitted on BBC Four, the niche arts and culture digital channel of the public service broadcaster. The subjects treated in these biopics were various: political figures, famous cooks, authors of popular literature, comedians and singers. The dramas focused largely on the unhappy or complex personal lives of well-loved figures of British popular culture. From the lens of the 21st century, these dramas offered an opportunity for audiences to reflect on the culture and society of the 20th century, changing television's famous function of 'witness' to one of 'having witnessed' and/or 'remembering' (Ellis, 2000). The programmes function as nostalgia pieces, revisiting personalities familiar to the anticipated older audience of BBC Four, working in concert with much of the archive and factual content on the digital broadcaster's schedules. However, by revealing apparent 'truths' that reconfigure the public images of the figures they narrate, these programmes also undermine nostalgic impulses, presenting conflicting interpretations of the recent past. They might equally be seen as impudent incursions onto the memory of the public figures, unnecessarily exposing the real-life subjects to censure, ridicule or *ex post facto* critical judgement.

Made thriftily on small budgets, the films were modest and spare in visual style but were generally well received critically, usually thanks to writerly screenplays and strong central performances. The dramas became an irregular but important staple of the BBC Four schedule, furnishing the channel with some of their highest ratings in a history chequered by low audience numbers. For BBC Four, the dramas were a key marker of their

public service brand: a sideways glance at the recent past, an invitation to reconsider a shared national history, and a reevaluation of the cultural figures that make up a cultural public sphere. This article will seek to uncover why the dramatic output of the minority broadcaster focused so intently on 20th century lives, why these dramas enjoyed a stronger critical evaluation than the genre has received historically on television, and the relationship between critical appraisal and institutional branding. In short, I will think about the dramas in relation to the reputation of the public service broadcaster for producing programmes which edify, which inform, and which are of high quality. Do these dramas fulfil these key promises of public service broadcasting, and what does it mean that this is the chosen dramatic genre through which the broadcaster's niche digital channel operated?

Table 1.1 Biographical Dramas on BBC Four¹

<i>George Orwell: A Life in Pictures</i>	Saturday, 14 June 03
<i>Kenneth Tynan: In Praise of Hardcore</i>	Wednesday, 2 March 05
<i>Elizabeth David: A Life in Recipes</i>	Tuesday, 3 January 06
<i>Kenneth Williams: Fantabulosa!</i>	Monday, 13 March 06
<i>Stan</i>	Tuesday, 6 June 06
<i>Beau Brummell: This Charming Man</i>	Monday, 19 June 06
<i>The Secret Life of Mrs Beeton</i>	Monday, 16 October 06
<i>Fear of Fanny</i>	Monday, 23 October 06
<i>Miss Marie Lloyd: Queen of the Music Hall</i>	Wednesday, 9 May 07
<i>The Curse of Steptoe</i>	Wednesday, 19 March 08
<i>Hancock and Joan</i>	Wednesday, 26 March 08
<i>Hughie Green: Most Sincerely</i>	Wednesday, 2 April 08

¹ My definition of 'biographical dramas' includes feature-length one-off dramas that take as their principal subject the life of, or specific moment in the life of a well-known subject. Some dramas based on fact, such as *Micro Men* (tx 09 October 2009), *Canoe Man* (tx 31 March 2010), *The Road to Coronation Street* (tx 16 September 2010) or *Holy Flying Circus* (tx. 19 October 2011) have been excluded. Although they contain biographical representations of known individuals, they are more easily understood as docudramas, dealing in the dramatic representation of real events that concern groups of people rather than individuals. Such distinctions are, of course, an inexact science, and many of my observations and analyses of biographical dramas and their relationship with the niche broadcaster may apply here as well.

<i>Frankie Howerd: Rather You than Me</i>	Wednesday, 9 April 08
<i>Margaret Thatcher: The Long Walk to Finchley</i>	Thursday, 12 June 08
<i>In Love with Barbara</i>	Sunday, 26 October 08
<i>Enid</i>	Monday, 16 November 09
<i>Gracie!</i>	Monday, 23 November 09
<i>Margot</i>	Monday, 30 November 09
<i>Mrs Mandela</i>	Monday, 25 January 10
<i>Lennon Naked</i>	Wednesday, 23 June 10
<i>Hattie</i>	Wednesday, 19 January 11
<i>We'll Take Manhattan</i>	Thursday, January 26 12
<i>Best Possible Taste: The Kenny Everett Story</i>	Wednesday, 3 October 12
<i>Wodehouse in Exile</i>	Monday, 25 March 13
<i>Burton and Taylor</i>	Monday, 22 July 13

Branding BBC Four – Everybody Needs a Place to Think

Growing competition in the television market has rendered careful consolidation of audiences for TV products through specialised practices of branding essential for survival for commercial and public service broadcasters alike. In her pioneering work on UK television branding, Catherine Johnson discusses the critical debate around the use of the commercialised techniques of positioning, promotion and marketing in conjunction with public service broadcasting, noting concerns around these techniques amounting to a decline in the public purpose of PSB:

First, branding and marketing decisions are seen to dominate programme production over public service values. Second, branding constitutes an address to the viewer as a consumer, rather than a citizen. Third, branding reduces public service values to banal taglines and reductive logos. (2012: 86)

The creation of BBC Four as a rarefied space for the most traditional 'public service' programmes demonstrates some of these processes: the reduction of public service offerings to a specific consumer niche, the emphasis on particular styles of programming (such as the biopic) to suit this audience, and

the appeal to this audience through commercialistic branding strategies which narrowed the appeal to a particular audience niche. For Johnson, television channels 'historically act[ed] as the central site through which television was encountered', and thus has been key focus for broadcasters' branding strategies. (2012: 169) There is, then, a clear logic to analysing the branding of specific digital channels in relation to the programmes that are most associated with them. In the case of BBC Four, as their primary originated drama output, the cycle of biopics became part of the identity of the niche service, alongside their acquisitions of world cinema, stylish European crime dramas and arts documentaries.

BBC Four originated as replacement for BBC Knowledge, a pilot digital station that sought to become the 'Radio 3 and Radio 4 of Television' (Deans, 2001). Its primary function is as a repository for programmes that reflect key public service aims of education and provision of better access to arts, culture and knowledge for the general public. This is reflected in its standard remit, issued as part of the channel's service licence as outlined by the BBC Trust:

BBC Four's primary role is to reflect a range of UK and international arts, music and culture. It should provide an ambitious range of innovative, high quality programming that is intellectually and culturally enriching, taking an expert and in-depth approach to a wide range of subjects. (BBC, 2014: 1)

There was some controversy around the establishment of BBC Four. A prevalent fear emerged that BBC Four would become a glorified dumping ground for the arts, and that funding would be shrunk until it was no longer sustainable, then quietly dispensed with. Budgets for BBC Four were tiny by any television standards, starting at £31-35 million per year, roughly 5 per cent of BBC One's £731 million budget in 2002, or 11 per cent of the 2002 spend on BBC Two. Criticisms were also levelled at the BBC for reneging on

its key purpose of universal access to the best of knowledge and culture, given that, at the time, only a minority of licence-fee payers had access to the digital channels (Sparrow and Dunstan, 2002).

BBC Four began broadcasting on 2 March 2002, after a stylish, distinctive marketing campaign, led by the tagline 'Everybody Needs a Place to Think'. Luminaries of the British art and culture scene were invited to a launch party in late February via a handkerchief specially designed by conceptual artist Tracey Emin (Deans, 2002a). While the tagline hints at inclusion, of something for 'everybody', the channel was self-consciously branded as exclusive and high-brow. The launch night was simulcast with BBC Two, in what had become something of a tradition for British broadcasters introducing new digital services (see Andrews, 2012) in order to give terrestrial-only viewers a taste of what they were missing. Targeting the new channel explicitly to an arts-focused minority, in combination with the simulcast on a more established channel, resulted in BBC Four's viewing figures for launch night averaging at just 11, 000 (Deans, 2002b). Exclusivity had, apparently, been achieved.

Disappointing audience numbers continued, and for some programmes viewing figures were too small to be recorded by the BARB's traditional methods (Deans, 2002b). The channel was dogged by the problem of how to improve audience numbers without compromising its core remit, as expressed in the 2004-5 Annual Report:

Audiences to the channel have increased significantly during 2004/2005, but from a low base. We acknowledge and support the need to grow the channel's reach and we support management's efforts to secure a more welcoming tone for the channel. However, we do not support the suggestion that the best way to achieve wider reach is by making the channel more mainstream. This would threaten its

valued ability to take risks – and almost inevitably mean that BBC Four would start to encroach on the territory of other channels, a reduction of choice that would benefit neither licence fee payers nor the wider broadcasting market (BBC, 2005: 27).

These problems with attracting and maintaining reasonable audiences eased with the spread of the Freeview service, which allowed subscription-free access to all of the BBC's digital television services. Between 2004/5 and 2007/8 the average weekly 15 minutes + reach of BBC Four grew from 1.8 million to 4 million viewers, or from 4.8 to 7 per cent of digital homes (BBC, 2005, BBC, 2008). The modesty of this growth in numbers obscured the channel's unusually high Appreciation Indexes (an qualitative assessment conducted by Gfk-Nop on behalf of the BBC's Audience Research Unit). In other words, though watched by fewer people, BBC Four has consistently been valued more highly than other BBC services (Conlan, 2010). The branding, commissioning and scheduling strategy of BBC Four has always had to strike a difficult balance between attracting sufficient audiences to legitimate the service in terms of value-for-money, while at the same time retaining the distinctive, intellectually stimulating output highly valued by its core audience, and working within an average yearly budget that peaked at around £55 million (cut to just below £50 million in August 2012) (Sweney, 2012).

The size of the overall commissioning budget precluded BBC Four from broadcasting a large volume of original drama, especially not on the scale or standard generally associated with the BBC. However, the dramatic output of the opening night of BBC Four would provide an early clue to how drama on the channel might fulfil the remit to reflect international art and

culture. *Surrealisimo* was a fact-based comedy-drama centred on the 1934 'trial' of Salvador Dali (Ewen Bremner) by fellow members of the Surrealist movement including Andre Breton (Stephen Fry). Inventive choices are made to mitigate its small budget: it combines re-enactment of the 'trial' with animation, surreal imagery, and voice-over reflections by 'Dali' on his career and relationships with the surrealist movement. Not a conventional 'biopic', the film nevertheless uses dramatization to convey historical information in an amusing way.

The practice of choosing a well-known figure from 20th century cultural history and dramatizing key moments in their lives would later come to dominate the dramatic output of the channel. In the January 2004 broadcast of *The Alan Clark Diaries*, a series based on the Conservative politician's published memoirs, this approach to drama on BBC Four proved to be a route to critical acclaim and increased audience size. Starring John Hurt and Jenny Agutter, the series adapted the published diaries of the extrovert minister, dramatizing his personal and professional relationships (though with rather more emphasis on the former than the latter). Basing the series on the memoirs allowed the programme to present a detailed, sometimes brutal account of the inner life of a public figure, useful not only dramatically, but also in terms of stirring audience interest. The series achieved around 846 000 viewers for its opening, a record for the channel (BARB, 2015). Though interest tailed off for subsequent episodes, *Alan Clark Diaries* was regarded as a hit (Singh, 2004). Dramatic reinterpretations of real-life subjects had a pedigree in the early years of BBC Four.

The Alan Clark Diaries was a favourite programme of Janice Hadlow, who replaced Roly Keating as BBC Four's commissioning editor from 2004, bringing with her a new approach to the arts and culture channel (Thorpe, 2005). Hadlow had been poached from her role as Head of Specialist Factual at Channel 4, where she had brought an audience-friendly approach to factual programming, with hits such as *Operatunity* (C4, 2003) and *1940s House* (C4, 2002) combining popular reality TV formats with arts and history content. She argued for stronger collaborations between BBC Two and BBC Four, and for BBC Four to be seen not as an 'arts' channel, but as an 'intelligent' one (Thorpe, 2005). In 2006, the channel's budget increased and image was revamped. The critical success of *Kenneth Williams: Fantabulosa!* inspired a new focus on dramatizations of real life subjects, and particularly on one-off biographical dramas. *Fantabulosa* had surprised critics and audiences alike with its melancholic representation of a well-loved comedian and a performance by Michael Sheen that managed to surpass a precise impersonation to reveal the complex, tortured psychology of the star. *Stan*, *Beau Brummell: This Charming Man*, *The Secret Life of Mrs Beeton* and *Fear of Fanny* would follow in that year. Though ratings for these dramas weren't consistent, they were consistently higher than other output on BBC Four (BARB, 2015).

Biopics would form an irregular but highly publicised part of the BBC Four schedules for the next seven years. Though these dramas were both made in-house and by independent production companies such as Wall to Wall and Carnival Films, and though a range of writers and directors were involved in these projects, they shared some characteristics beyond the

subject matter of the personal lives of popular famous figures. The dramas were usually dominated by dynamic central performances by stars from British television, such as Jane Horrocks, Phil Davis or Ruth Jones. Largely dictated by budget, a similar stark aesthetic was employed, with mise-en-scene less dense and rich than can be expected in more robustly funded dramas. Time period is invoked through judicious costuming and set design, and budget problems are also solved by careful narrative structuring. For example, much of *Hancock and Joan* is set in Australia, where Hancock (Ken Stott) eventually dies, but scenes that take place outside the UK are confined to indoor locations like studio rehearsals or hotel rooms, so there is no need to attempt to replicate the Australian climate or landscape on screen. Since many of the subjects are stage performers, a particular challenge for the directors of the drama is how to portray a theatrical performance with a diegetic live audience without the budget to pay for a large cast of extras. This is overcome in dramatic performance scenes in, for instance, *Gracie*, *Margot* and *Frankie Howard: Rather You than Me* by using strong spotlights on the actor, shrouding the stage in darkness and reducing the need to carefully dress the set. Rather than presenting a reverse-shot of the audience in performance scenes, their presence is alluded to through careful use of post-production sound. The onus in these scenes is on the actor to replicate as closely as possible the subject's performance style their subject in order to adequately meet a viewer's expectation of verisimilitude.

The similarities between these programmes contributed to their position as a particular 'genre' associated with the digital broadcaster, but in the scheduling practices for the biopics we can see their centrality and

importance to BBC Four. The dramas were always broadcast at peak time on their first run, and usually at 9pm, the slot favoured by mainstream broadcasters for flagship programmes, dramas especially. Biopics were sometimes broadcast as 'tentpoles' in seasons of programming, a scheduling method favoured by Hadlow. For example, recent *EastEnders* alumnus Jessie Wallace played music hall star Marie Lloyd as part of *Edwardian Season* in May 2007, and Christopher Ecclestone's turn in *Lennon Naked* was the centrepiece of *Fatherhood Season* in 2010. The season structure allowed channel schedulers to rebroadcast archive factual material alongside original drama, often achieving higher audience figures than could be expected for repeated programmes alone. For example, a documentary profile of Gracie Fields broadcast immediately after *Gracie!* on 23 November 2009 achieved viewing figures of 1, 016, 000, unprecedented for repeated documentary material on BBC Four.

In these biographical dramas, the digital channel brand appeared to have found a recipe for attracting audiences within its particular remit. Promotional stills from the biopics illustrate BBC Four's output in BBC Annual Reports, and an image from *Fantabulosa* in the 2005-6 document is captioned with the heading 'drama to make you think', echoing the original tagline and aligning the biopic cycle with the identity of the channel. What is it about the biopic that made it a compelling genre for BBC Four commissioners? Arguably, the middlebrow 'respectable' profile of the genre suited the target demographic of this branded channel – older, better educated, and more selective than the core audience of other channels. As dramatic material, the genre allows for writers to concentrate heavily on the psychologies of the

subjects covered, and develop them into complex, rounded protagonists. The focus on an individual also allows for bravura performances by lead actors, of the kind usually lauded in critical opinion and by awards committees. Indeed, a number of the dramas were nominated for or received various national and international awards, which, of course, is expedient for developing the reputation of BBC Four.

There is also the reputation of biography more generally as a potent combination of entertainment - in the form of a story of a life, with all its intrigues, public triumphs and private agonies – and education or edification. As well-regarded biographer Hermione Lee points out, the genre is often regarded as a ‘useful one’, one that can teach us how to live our lives, or ‘open our minds to lives very unlike our own’ and is thus a ‘branch of history and of knowledge’ (2009: 16-17). For BBC Four, the connection between entertainment and knowledge formation is highly valuable. Biopics also suited BBC Four for the same reason that any piece of pre-sold intellectual property suits a media business – as a risk-reduced means of audience generation.

Hadlow’s replacement, Richard Klein offered this assessment in 2009:

As a small digital channel, it’s very hard to get anyone to come and watch pure fiction that no one has heard of before... Basing our dramas on factually based stories, we can re-examine and reinterpret but people already have an interest (Midgeley, 2009).

In the biopic, then, several factors important to BBC Four converge: the need for dramatic stories that can bring a pre-existing audience to them to justify even the modest spend on them, the need for output that fulfills the core remit of the channel to explore UK and international arts and culture in innovative ways, and the need to satisfy a loyal core audience that skews towards an

older demographic, whilst simultaneously attempting to find new viewers for BBC Four outputs. Attracting audiences to stories about famous lives and icons of popular culture is a far easier task to achieve than to promote original drama on the budgets for BBC Four. A combination of curiosity about the supposedly 'real lives' of famous individuals and nostalgia for the period in which they were in their prime combines to make biopics a winning formula for a channel requiring dramatic content on low budgets.

Trash TV versus public service respectability

Unlike cinema, biographical television has not necessarily been considered by scholars a form or genre of its own. Though it shares common characteristics with docudrama, a 'quintessentially televisual form' (2011: 127) according to Derek Paget's seminal work, the biopic is distinct as it is closer to the regime of fiction. It is instructive, then, to examine what has been said about television in works that deal with film biopics. The most prominent voice here is George Custen, who conducted a comprehensive analysis of the biopic genre in classical Hollywood. Custen is suspicious of the limitations of cinema's biographical narratives and anxious about their prominent influence over the public understanding of history, but he reserves greater reproof for television which he claims 'gerrymandered the cultural territory once occupied by the cinematic biography' (1992: 31). Custen equates American television biography with the gossip-driven agenda of tabloid newspapers, especially in their choice of sensational subjects: 'notoreity has, in a sense, replaced noteworthiness as the proper frame for biography; short-lived, soft news has replaced the harder stuff, history.' (1992: 216) This is not difficult to read as an uncritical denigration of a frequently devalued medium. The title of his chapter

on television, 'The Frame Shrinks' is telling in this regard. Television, it seems, has reduced the value and relevance of screen lives through both a literal shrinking in size of the image, and a figurative diminution in the importance and quality of the representation.

Custen attributes this shift in emphasis to differences in industrial structure and reception contexts for television - domestic, quotidian, immediate. The volume of material needed for television, and the speed of production for its output seem to necessitate a less rigorous, more lightweight approach to the lives of real people. Made-for-television movies became the equivalent in the US context in the 1970s and 1980s of the earlier B Movie, with smaller budgets than theatrically released films, but also shorter production schedules which allowed them to respond more quickly and to 'scoop' from cinema strong real-life story material (Gomery, 1999). Steven Lipkin found common among producers the mantra 'rootable, relatable, promotable' cited as the qualities of TV movies that render them useful in gaining strategic commercial advantage and 'recapturing lost demographics,' particularly the primary audience for network television, women aged 18 – 49 (2002: 56). The contemporary market leader in US television biopics is the female-oriented Lifetime Network, whose dramas about real people, including members of the royal family (*William and Kate: The Movie*, 2011), Hollywood stars (*The Brittany Murphy Story*, 2014), and (in)famous figures within news cycles, particularly in so-called 'true crime' stories (*Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy*, 2011) circulate in precisely the tabloid culture Custen describes. Biographical drama on television, often made about and for women, has operated largely under the critical radar, perhaps because of this association

with salacious, trashy forms of culture. Dennis Bingham (2010), reflecting on the biopic's reputation as a stolid, middlebrow form of filmmaking, describes it as cinema's 'respectable genre of very low repute'. It appears that this form of television biopic retains the low repute but dispenses with the respectability.

Recently, though, biographical drama has grown in repute as a form of television fiction, due largely to the highbrow reputations of the branded channels that have embraced biographical content as a means of producing 'quality' fictions, with examples like HBO's *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), Showtime's *Masters of Sex* (2013 -) and BBC America/Sky Atlantic's *Fleming* (2014 -). It is not only US premium cable networks that have recognised the value of the life-story as a means of producing apparently high-brow content for 'blue-chip' audiences. The BBC, as a public service broadcaster, has made extensive use of the genre during the course of the last decade or so. Belén Vidal suggests that we can see this approach to biographical content on 'quality' outlets as evidence of the growing convergence between film and television in contemporary media culture, arguing that the new respectability of television biopic means that its 'frame seems to be 'expanding' again in the era of medium convergence' (2014a: 21). The perceived convergence between film and television enables certain kinds of television, particularly those associated with established, highly valued brands, to co-opt the apparently higher cultural value associated with cinema. The branding of BBC Four may not be so contingent upon these 'cinematic' values, but is equally in thrall to ideas of quality, high culture, and class. But how might the distinctions between the devalued, 'trashy', made-for-television movie

versions of famous lives and the 'quality' fiction of BBC Four play out in the texts themselves?

Lifetime's *Liz & Dick* (tx. 25 November 2012) and *Burton and Taylor* (tx. BBC Four, 22 July 2013), a pair of biographical dramas with the same subjects, appeared within a year of each other. A comparison between these programmes, made in different national and institutional contexts, reveals this dynamic between trashiness and respectability, as well as demonstrating the influence of broadcaster branding on promotion and reception of biographical TV. Even the titles of these programmes are indicative of their divergent cultural expectations: where the programme housed within the highbrow arts and culture wing of the BBC opts for the formality of surnames, Lifetime's title inscribes its subjects with the intimacy of nicknames.

Liz & Dick was the subject of considerable pre-broadcast publicity thanks to the antics of its unpredictable star, Lindsay Lohan. A successful child actor, Lohan's transition to adult roles had been tricky and her career marred by a publicly messy private life. The suggestive similarity between this narrative and Elizabeth Taylor's was exploited in the official publicity for *Liz & Dick*, particularly in the film's poster, which lists attributes, like 'Child Star', 'Controversial Love Affairs' and 'Provocative' that could apply to either Taylor or Lohan. In promoting the film, the private exploits of its star were used in much the same way that Taylor and Burton (Grant Bowler) are shown as (sometimes unwilling) self-publicists in *Liz & Dick*. Publicity for *Burton and Taylor* was less dependent on trailers and promotional posters, opting instead for star-driven press promotion through interviews and profiles in mainstream British news outlets. In these, Helena Bonham-Carter and Dominic West

reflected frequently on the research and acting processes they underwent in order to transform themselves into the Hollywood stars. Just as the publicity for *Liz & Dick* suited the film's fascination with the glamorous and melodramatic aspects of Burton and Taylor's life, so too did the focus on the dramatic preparation process suit the backstage setting and theatre-driven premise of *Burton and Taylor*.

Both dramas display a fascination with the convergence between the private lives of these stars and their – particularly Taylor's - prodigious knack for self-publicity. However, only *Liz & Dick* invests energy in the overt *display* of the private stories, where key moments (the beginning of their affair, the death of Burton's brother, both divorces) are shown on-screen rather than alluded to in dialogue, as in *Burton and Taylor*. It opts for a more traditional biopic style of narrative exposition that dramatizes the relationship from beginning to end. In *Burton and Taylor* these aspects of the characters are refracted through a specific moment: their commercially lucrative but critically denigrated run of Noel Coward's *Private Lives* in 1983. One of the central dramatic tensions of *Burton and Taylor* revolves around Burton's distaste for the extent to which the play has become a pantomime of their private lives. The theatrical setting of the film – even in a performance widely considered to be tasteless – hints at the participation of the couple in the 'legitimate arts' and at Burton's reputation as one of Britain's greatest stage actors. Evoking artforms higher up the hierarchical chain is a well-worn means of demonstrating cultural value (Brunsdon, 1997). The combination of the legitimate theatre and the Hollywood movie star might in fact be seen as the ultimate expression of trashy respectability.

Burton and Taylor's focus on a punctual moment rather than an expansive life story lends it the ability to tell the story in tightly focused ways that allow room for greater character development. Convincing dialogue by believable characters tends to be central to estimations of the quality of filmed drama, and consistency of performance is easier to keep up in a limited timeline. *Burton and Taylor* was able to sidestep some of the aspects of biographical drama which reduce its credibility and leave it open to critique. Chief amongst these is ageing the actors over the lengthy story-time of the drama, which presented a problem for *Liz & Dick*. Where Bowler can play a man in his 50s, Lohan's youth renders her performance of a woman of advancing years less convincing. This is particularly evident in the final scenes of the film, in which Elizabeth visits the grave of her ex-husband. The costuming here approximates the well-known garish personal styling of Elizabeth Taylor in the 1980s, but there is little difference in the *face* or, indeed, of the performance style of the actor from earlier scenes. Budgeting in this film may have allowed for replicas of Taylor's famed jewellery collection, but not, apparently, for high quality make up to be used to age the actor. Lohan is simply not believable as a middle-aged woman.

Although *Burton and Taylor* was also set in the 1980s, Bonham-Carter's costuming is more muted than the *Liz & Dick* version of this period and, indeed, than the real life wardrobe of Taylor at this time, as Rachel Cooke notes in her review of the film for the *New Statesman*:

naughtily, the BBC costume department had made Bonham Carter look more Taylor circa 1973 than Taylor circa 1983. No cliff-sized shoulder pads, no megaperm, no radar-sized dangly earrings: this was a good taste version of Eighties Taylor and it made you feel sad for her, rather than – as was really the case – ever so slightly repulsed. (2013)

As Cooke's idea of a 'good taste version' of a particular period suggests, the costuming and make-up choices of *Burton and Taylor* deliberately moderate some of the more outrageous aspects of their lives, opting for tasteful restraint over glamour and vibrancy. This is in keeping with the aura of respectability at the heart of both BBC Four and, more generally, middlebrow British culture.

Although the budget of *Liz & Dick* exceeded that of *Burton and Taylor*, its ambition of scope, particularly in its emphasis on the excess to which their lives were lived, sometimes makes the film appear cheap. Indeed, the replica jewellery frequently prominently featured throughout can be seen as a metonym for the aesthetic problem the film suffers from – it looks small and second-rate in comparison to the famous diamonds belonging to the real life Taylor. To argue that the film is superficial, though that would be to assume its task was to look beneath the surface of the stars, when, in fact, its main thrust is to explore the public way in which their private life was lived. The film's aesthetic replicates a US daytime soap opera; it is dominated by orange light, soft focus lenses and a peachy colour palette. *Burton and Taylor*, by contrast, is colder than *Liz & Dick*, steely, spare and bright, more in keeping with the aesthetic of BBC Four biopics described earlier.² The action largely takes place either in the hidden spaces of the entertainment industry: in a large, well-lit rehearsal room, or in the backstage areas of the theatre. The implication is that the drama gives the viewer access to the genuine people behind the façade of glamour and celebrity: intelligent, fascinating, complex characters.

² Given that the drama was made in collaboration with BBC America, it is safe to assume that its budget was more generous than other BBC Four biopics.

The differences in critical reception of *Liz & Dick* and *Burton and Taylor* highlight the extent to which expectations are moulded by the reputation of the personnel and network. For most reviewers of *Liz & Dick*, Lindsay Lohan's sub-par performance was the key focus, a response to the pre-broadcast expectations set up by Lifetime that the film would constitute a 'comeback' for the star (Anon., 2012). Reviewers like *The Hollywood Reporter's* Tim Goodman even acknowledged in their critiques the expectation prior to watching the film that it would be bad, citing Lifetime's overhyping of Lohan's performance as evidence of the film's poor quality (2012). Most of the American reviews for *Burton and Taylor* (which was broadcast on BBC America on 16 October 2013) compare the drama favourably with *Liz & Dick*, in some cases to a hyperbolic degree. The prestige of the BBC is often invoked as directly influencing the quality of the programme, put as starkly as this in the *Los Angeles Times*:

It will come as a surprise to absolutely no one that the BBC's Elizabeth Taylor/Richard Burton biopic, "Burton and Taylor," is much better than Lifetime's "Liz & Dick," which aired last year (Macnamara, 2013)

The assumption here was that the product made for the BBC is uncomplicatedly, even *naturally* better, and higher class than that of Lifetime. For British critics, the prevailing sentiment was that *Burton and Taylor* was a worthy, if flawed, farewell to the BBC Four biopic tradition, a sad case of budget cuts depriving the public of strong, interesting dramas. Ben Lawrence of the *Daily Telegraph* was typical in this regard, noting the influence of the BBC Four dramas on a new raft of biopics produced for commercial rivals ITV and Sky Atlantic:

It seems, then, that the demand is there, but with BBC Four withdrawing from the dramatic arena, it has lost ownership of a genre that it crafted so brilliantly, and clearly made its own.(2013: 8)

The implication here is that the values of BBC Four - intelligent, thought-provoking, high-quality - are both reflected *onto* the programmes and exhibited *by* the programming. The brand of the broadcaster endows its products with values, and the products support and underline the image and reputation of the brand. Where *Liz & Dick* demonstrates the strong association between television biopic and tabloid trash, the reception of *Burton and Taylor* reveals the extent to which choices in story, aesthetic and promotion can endow biographical television with an aura of respectability crucial to its broadcaster's reputation.

Unsafe returns? Nostalgia, revision, revelation

The case of the Taylor and Burton dramas demonstrates that the association between biographical television and 'trash' television drawn by George Custen is one that is largely culturally specific. Biographical television in the US is the child of the Hollywood biopic, but in the British television context, the familial relationship is with docudrama. Docudrama is at once a useful genre for public service broadcasters, as it simultaneously performs their core function of informing, educating and entertaining, but at the same time can tread on the dangerous dividing line between truth and fiction which can result in a loss of public trust, ultimately damaging the reputation of the broadcaster. The same dynamic is at play in biopics, even though biopics are often assumed to be closer to fiction than fact (Paget, 2011). I want to conclude

here by considering this relationship between fiction and fact in terms of a specific feature of the BBC Four biopics: their treatment of the past.

Discussing a cycle of political docudramas written by Peter Morgan and starring Michael Sheen as Tony Blair, Belén Vidal argues that recent British biographical dramas demonstrate a growing hybrid space between television docudrama and cinema biopic. Vidal revisits Custen's ideas about the 'shrinking frame' of the television biopic thus: 'the shrinking frame should not be understood purely in the negative sense of loss, but as a compression manifested in spatial, temporal, and affective terms.' (2014b: 143). The immediacy of television renders its biographical treatments closer in time and space to the figures represented onscreen, hence the events and actions portrayed in television biopics represent 'a tension between timeliness and timelessness' (2014b:144). BBC Four dramas challenge this conception of the contemporary television biopic, given that the representations therein are distinctly past tense: Enid Blyton *wrote* her works, Margaret Thatcher *campaigned* for a seat in Finchley. Indeed, for some critics precisely this *lack* of compression renders these dramas less provocative socially useful than British television drama has historically been. Gerard Gilbert for example, described them as 'safe and unchallenging' television, entreating BBC Four to 'engage with the here and now, rather than examining past lives' (2010). Gilbert's objection is based on the assumption that dramatic works by public service broadcasters should have a timely social function, and the political urgency that Vidal admires in the Morgan/Sheen cycle. We can dissect this claim that BBC Four biopics were 'safe and unchallenging', by considering them as a contradictory response to the contemporary trend of nostalgia

television. There is, in fact, a paradox at play in these dramas, of both exploiting and undermining cultural memory by presenting revisionist versions of the past through the lives they tell.

In her careful dissection of the trend for nostalgia and television, Amy Holdsworth highlights underlying economic logics, particularly in the digital age:

A competitive television market highlights the tension between creativity and tradition, and here, nostalgia emerges as a formula that offers another form of safe return. (2011: 112)

Programmes from broadcasters' archives, particularly ones that are popular and have an ongoing cultural resonance, can be re-used at very little cost to fill schedules on digital channels. This approach has been used on BBC Four, which frequently rebroadcasts archival material. The idea of the 'safe return', then has a double meaning in terms of risk reduction; very little is spent on these rebroadcasts, and, provided the programmes are carefully selected, this material is unlikely to provoke offence and may provide pleasurable enjoyment for those wishing to revisit television memories of the past. Although the BBC Four biopics constitute original rather than archived material, the use of cultural memory as an incentive to view suggests a similar approach, another form of 'safe' return.

For Holdsworth, the representations of the past delivered through nostalgic forms of television may also be 'involved in the process of 'taming' more difficult histories and memories, couching the past in the safety of the anodyne' (2011: 101). Nostalgia television tends to work by propounding ideas of a safe, contained version of the 'past', albeit one that may also be the

cause of embarrassment, as attitudes, fashions and cultural norms evolve. As

Tim O'Sullivan has suggested:

There are deep forms of cultural and emotional (in)security in play here often in tension with the 'kitsch', slightly disturbing or comic-archaic qualities revealed in the juxtaposition of the 'dated' old within the flow of the new. (1998: 203)

As in the above discussion of the Burton/Taylor programmes, much of the pleasure to be had from the TV biopic is in recognising the iconography of a bygone era in fashion, costume and dialogue. However, the biopics also demonstrate self-awareness about the nostalgic desire to compare past with present. For example, in *Hughie Green: Most Sincerely*, Green's (Trevor Eve) insistence upon using ordinary people rather than glamorous models in the popular game shows he hosts is explicitly compared with the television industry of the 2000s' dependence upon 'reality television', to the extent that the term is used anachronistically by Green's producer, with such obvious irony that it is almost accompanied by a knowing wink. As with other BBC Four biopics, then, the past is read through the prism of the present, lending credence to former channel controller Richard Klein's idea that they can work as re-examinations or reinterpretations (Midgeley, 2009).

A key thrust of these dramas is in revealing 'truths' about their subjects that had previously been concealed for reasons of cultural sensitivity, fear of recrimination or career preservation. By questioning the version of the past that television presented to us through our screens, the BBC Four dramas exist in ambivalent relation to the nostalgic impulse, as they in fact begin to 'untame' that couching of the past in the 'anodyne'. Fanny Cradock's hidden children, Wilfred Bramble's proclivity for cottaging, Hattie Jacques' unusual domestic arrangement with husband and lover: the suppression of

inconvenient (usually sexual) truths is the key plot driver for most of these dramas, explicitly framed as problems of their particular time and social milieu, alongside generic 'it was different back then' explanations for lifestyle choices or individual psychologies. Returns to the past in the BBC Four biopics entail facing up to uncomfortable aspects of social and cultural life in these eras. This tension is neatly summed up by Frankie Howerd (David Walliams) in *Rather You Than Me*. Discussing the necessity of discretion, of hiding his relationship with his lover Dennis (Rafe Spall), he tells him "If anyone knew I was queer, it'd do for me." As in *Fantabulosa*, where Kenneth Williams's agonising relationship with his own sexuality is a primary psychological driver of the drama, so here the idea is propounded that in the past, that a career in showbusiness was not compatible with homosexuality, even within the confines of a relatively stable monogamous relationship. Nostalgia in these programmes is complicated by the assumption of a more liberal point of view from the audience than that demonstrated by characters in the text itself. Rather than simply playing on the nostalgia for past pop cultural forms these dramas suggest that major figures from our shared cultural heritage are not what they appeared to be, and the values that produced them should be questioned. We are invited to judge the actions of these subjects by the standards of the present. This is precisely the 're-examination' that Klein suggested BBC Four was uniquely placed to offer in its representations of past lives.

These revisions of the past take on added ethical (and sometimes legal) risk for the broadcaster when the private stories of real people are exposed to public scrutiny. The removal of agency in the creation and

maintenance of public image from the real people involved and, more usually, their families has caused some controversy, particularly around 2009's *Curse of Comedy Season*. Frankie Howerd's sister Betty Howard publicly spoke out against the BBC for the portrayal in *Rather You Than Me*, accusing the filmmakers of overemphasising the more lurid elements of his private life and failing to account for his talent (Hoyle, 2008). The programme had clearly become part of an ongoing squabble between Howerd's family and his partner Dennis Heymer, who accused Howard of trying to 'airbrush' him from history. There were no further ramifications for the BBC on this occasion, but complaints were upheld by the BBC Trust against the drama *The Curse of Steptoe* on behalf of the family of Maureen Corbett, Harry H. Corbett's second wife. Their grievance centred on the programme's representation of Maureen, a minor character, as having had an extramarital affair with Corbett, and having conceived his child as a result of a casual rather than committed relationship. The family also objected, on Corbett's behalf, to the programme's suggestion that his relationship with Wilfred Bramble was hostile rather than courteous and professional. In other words, the family objected to all the major dramatic points in the programme! The end result of the complaints procedure was that the drama had to be clearly signposted as an interpretation rather than faithful and factual account of events on rebroadcast. All subsequent BBC Four biopics were broadcast with captioned disclaimers that made explicit the fact that the dramas were *based* on fact only, and that some events may be invented by the writer, though the BBC Trust also emphasised 'that the use of captions such as this should not be regarded as a 'blank cheque' for the indiscriminate and excessive use of

dramatic licence' (BBC Trust, 2009). It appears, from the censure directed at these programmes, that 'dramatic licence' is incompatible with 'television licence'. Because of the BBC's institutional requirement for fairness and accuracy, biopics may provide a less than 'safe' return to the past.

It is unsurprising that the *Curse of Comedy* season was heavily critiqued by sections of the (right-wing) press that tend to scrutinize the BBC, on the basis of the factual inaccuracies in these programmes. The claim was made that truth was sacrificed for sensationalism in a bid for audience attention, and that the dramas represented unedifying assaults on cultural icons that are portrayed. While the critical reception of these television films was usually positive, some reviewers pointed out that in their rather prurient interest in the personal lives of well-loved icons of 20th century British popular culture, the distance between these BBC Four biopics and the tabloid-ised biographies Custen describes is arguably not as great as their presence on the arts and culture focused channel would suggest. For example, Paul Whitelaw's review of *Enid* suggested that:

...there is something unedifying about films in which dead celebrities are exposed as drink-sodden misery-guts with dysfunctional sex lives. It's not that the truth should be ignored, it's just that screenwriters are usually morbidly overeager to wallow in the sordid details, often at the expense of accuracy. (2009: 46)

The focus on accuracy here might be attributed both to the expectations of biography as a genre – at the least we expect the 'facts' to be right - and to the BBC as an institution that is expected to maintain balance, impartiality and truthfulness, even in its fictional output. However, the term 'unedifying' is also a curious one, inasmuch as it implies an expectation that the opposite should be the case: that we should find educative or inspirational value in these life

stories. To account for the paradoxical use of these biographies to both uphold the branded value of the arts-based digital channel and to wrestle audience attention from a myriad other digital options, we might use the term 'trashy respectability'. Here is a combination of the gossipy desire to see how favourite figures really lived, to view the private life of the public figure – including scandal and melancholia – and a dramatic and educational impulse to represent 20th century culture and reintroduce these figures into public attention.

Though the cycle of BBC Four biopics has concluded, thanks to budget cuts, salutary lessons can be derived from them. Goodwill toward a brand, particularly one as well-regarded as the BBC, may go a long way in the reception of their products, as in the case of *Burton and Taylor*. At the same time, if fact-based programmes are seen as inaccurate, and particularly if this can be read as deliberate and sensationalising, then the institution's reputation is left vulnerable to attack, to accusations of trashy exploitation rather than respectable artistic interpretation. The balance between dramatic licence and accuracy is crucial to dramas produced by PSBs. Biopics may seem like a relatively safe genre for original drama, which has the capacity to build upon pre-existing interest in cultural figures and the nostalgia associated with their past, as well as to perform the key function for contemporary public service broadcasting of enlightening and offering space for reflection as well as entertaining – a 'place to think'. However, in its historical association with the undignified processes of raking through the private lives of public figures, and in the legal and ethical quandaries that may be encountered when these personal stories are released into the public domain, biopics may offer

challenges to equal the rewards they can accrue to the reputation of the broadcaster.

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