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### 3

JOHN CAUGHIE

## Television and serial fictions

Written in 1974, Raymond Williams's *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* was to become for many academics, and particularly for academics who approached popular culture from the perspective of the humanities, one of the foundational texts of the study of television, the first and even the only book on reading lists, the book which introduced the concept of 'flow' as a way of identifying 'the defining characteristic of broadcasting'.<sup>1</sup> While, almost forty years later, many of its formulations have worn thin with over-use, Williams's observation on the centrality of televisual dramatic fiction to modern experience still has the force of defamiliarisation: it is still surprising to consider, as if for the first time, how much of our time is spent with, how many of our references are drawn from, or how much the structure of contemporary feeling is shaped by television dramatic fiction in its various forms. 'It seems probable', says Williams,

that in societies like Britain and the United States more drama is watched in a week or a weekend, by the majority of viewers, than would have been watched in a year or in some cases a lifetime in any previous historical period. It is not uncommon for the majority of viewers to see, regularly, as much as two or three hours of drama, of various kinds, every day. The implications of this have scarcely begun to be considered. It is clearly one of the unique characteristics of advanced industrial societies that drama as an experience is now an intrinsic part of everyday life, at a quantitative level which is so very much greater than any precedent as to see a fundamental qualitative change. Whatever the social and cultural reasons may finally be, it is clear that watching dramatic simulation of a wide range of experiences is now an essential part of our modern cultural pattern. Or, to put it categorically, most people spend more time watching various kinds of drama than in preparing and eating food.<sup>2</sup>

Written by a Cambridge Professor of Drama on a Visiting Professorship at Stanford University, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* is informed by Williams's first encounter with American television. At a time when British television was still shaped by the principles of public service,

## Television and serial fictions

American television in 1974, increasingly shaped by commercial principles, represented a possible future. Read in 2010, Williams's conclusion is poignant. On the one hand, there is the possibility of the technology of television as an almost utopian force, one of the contemporary tools 'of the long revolution towards an educated and participatory democracy, and of the recovery of effective communication in complex urban and industrial societies'.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, such technologies

are also the tools of what would be, in context, a short and successful counter-revolution, in which, under the cover of talk about choice and competition, a few para-national corporations, with their attendant states and agencies, could reach further into our lives, at every level from news to psycho-drama, until individual and collective response to many different kinds of experience and problem became almost limited to choice between their programmed possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

Written twelve years before Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation moved into television in the United States, and fifteen years before he launched Sky Television in the United Kingdom, there is an uncanny prescience in Williams' worst fears.

Characteristically, Williams is engaged not simply by the number of hours that 'dramatic simulation' occupies in contemporary life, but by the qualitative change that this may make in the modern structure of experience. For Williams, the shift from a regulated public service of three channels to a deregulated and commercial future was not just about the structures of the industry but about the structures of feeling which new forms of drama brought into being and naturalised. Flashing forward to the twenty-first century, we discover not simply a proliferation but also a massive extension of dramatic simulation, accompanied by an erosion of the boundary between drama and actuality: the performance of the self as celebrity in reality television or the structure of the breaking story in twenty-four-hour news, in both of which lives, identities and events are shaped according to the same principles as simulated dramatic narrative. Even more than Williams could have anticipated, popular fiction has leaked out from between the covers of books, the instalments of magazines, or the darkness of cinemas. It is no longer a 'specialised activity', but has become a central, shaping component of the experience of everyday life.<sup>5</sup>

The forms of drama which Williams identifies as central to television are the serial, 'a dramatic action divided into episodes', and the series, in which 'the continuity is not of an action but of one or more characters'.<sup>6</sup> While his intellectual and political sympathies may lie with the single play which in

JOHN CAUGHIE

1974 was still at the cutting edge of British culture, he nevertheless recognised that ‘few forms of television have the potential importance of the original serial’.<sup>7</sup> Both serials and series have precedents – in cinema, radio, the comic strip and the novel – but television has given them new prominence, the ‘long-form’ narrative becoming the classic form of television dramatic fiction, representing a new and distinct chronotope in the long history of novelistic narrative.<sup>8</sup> In his writing in the 1920s and 1930s, the decades before television, Béla Balázs argued that ‘the birth of film art led not only to the creation of new works of art but to the emergence of new human faculties with which to perceive and understand this new art’.<sup>9</sup> Like the film invented at the end of the nineteenth century, television is a cultural form born ‘in the epoch of capitalism’,<sup>10</sup> but much more than film its particular force comes from its availability as a part of everyday life, structured within, and structuring, everyday domestic routines. It is this availability that raises questions of subjectivity and ‘human faculties’, and gives television and its serial dramatic simulations a particular importance in considering contemporary popular fiction.

Just as the development of the serialised novel of the nineteenth century has to be understood in relation to the commercial interests of the publishing industry rather than by the creative aspirations of writers, so the development of the serial/series form of television drama has to be placed in the context of the history of broadcasting. In the postwar period in Britain, and particularly in the period after the Report of the Committee of Broadcasting – the ‘Pilkington Committee Report’ – of 1962<sup>11</sup> and the introduction of BBC2 in 1964, television drama in the form of the single play was a central component of British culture, extending the impulse of the theatrical, literary and cinematic New Waves of the 1950s and the spirit of engagement which they fostered. While we may be sceptical of ‘Golden Ages’, television drama in the 1960s and 1970s was as important to the culture as theatre, literature or art, and probably rather more important than British cinema. From its beginnings in ABC’s ‘Armchair Theatre’ in the late 1950s and early 1960s, to its peak in the BBC’s ‘The Wednesday Play’ and ‘Play for Today’ in the 1960s and 1970s, the work of Alun Owen, Dennis Potter, David Mercer, Jim Allen, David Hare, John Hopkins, Troy Kennedy Martin, John McGrath, Irene Shubik, Ken Loach and Tony Garnett (gender is inescapable) bridged the gap between popular television and ‘serious drama’. Much of the drama was forgettable and is forgotten, but plays like Potter’s *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* (BBC, 1965), or Mercer’s *And Did Those Feet* (BBC, 1965), or Peter Watkins *The War Game* (BBC, 1965), or John Hopkins *Talking to a Stranger* (BBC, 1967), or Ingmar Bergman’s *The Lie* (BBC, 1970), or the Loach/Garnett production of Nell Dunn’s

## Television and serial fictions

*Up the Junction* (BBC, 1965), or, perhaps most famously of all, their collaboration with Jeremy Sandford on *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) – all of these and many more became national events, embedded in the national culture as powerfully as the work of the poets, novelists and playwrights celebrated by literary culture.

It is worth pausing to consider the place of these single plays in the context of a discussion of popular fiction. In the late 1950s, ITV's 'Armchair Theatre', transmitted live on Sunday evenings, attracted an average audience of 12 million, and even in the 1970s a 'Play for Today' on BBC 2 could, on occasion, reach an audience of 10 million. With all the caveats surrounding the calculation of ratings and what constitutes 'viewing', this means that, in the days before time-shifting and multi-channels, around one-fifth of the British population might all be watching the same television drama at the same time; and watching, perhaps, plays written by Harold Pinter or Doris Lessing or Samuel Beckett or Ingmar Bergman. In 1959, a BBC 'World Theatre' production of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* had an audience of 9.5 million, and for its drama slot in the first week of its operation in 1955, ITV, *commercial* television, chose a production of Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*. In such a context, are the plays of Pinter, Gogol or Turgenev 'popular'? In what ways and with what effects might they be assimilated into popular fiction? While numbers may not define 'popularity', nevertheless, television inhabits the category of the popular in ways that unsettle easy distinctions.

The status of 'serious drama' on a popular medium in the period up until the 1980s was a condition of public service broadcasting, and was, of course, determined by the limited availability of choice in viewing. The decision to transmit Gogol or Pinter as 'popular television' speaks to the desire of television for prestige and to an explicit mission to 'improve' popular taste, and the audience figures may say as much about the absence of choice as about discrimination. In the terms which became fashionable in the 1980s, within the 'full broadcasting market' anticipated by the Peacock Report in 1986 in which the consumer was 'sovereign', choosing when to watch as well as what to watch, it became more difficult for television to sustain a public service which was defined by what the Reithian institution deemed to be good for the public, and the cultural forms of television came more and more to be shaped by demand rather than led by supply.<sup>12</sup>

The most visible sign of transition on the way to this new age in British television was the arrival of Channel 4 in 1982. In dramatic fiction, Channel 4 completed the long march of technology from live television, showing actuality and fiction as they happened on the street or in the studio, to film, a record of what had happened, with all the possibilities of shaping, editing

JOHN CAUGHIE

and structuring. Increasingly, in television drama, film was not only a recording technology, but also an aesthetic. Television drama increasingly aspired to look like cinematic film, and Channel 4 began a new alignment between cinema and television. Film on Four supplanted the Wednesday Play or Play for Today, and began the process of establishing new standards and new production practices, redefining the expectations of how television drama would look and how it would engage the viewer: reshaping television drama as ‘made-for-television movies’. The structural transition in broadcasting which Channel 4 marked in the UK in the 1980s, was the transition between an ‘era of scarcity’, in which broadcasting was available only through three terrestrial channels, and an ‘era of plenty’,<sup>13</sup> in which channels, their sources of production and their means of distribution, proliferate. The brief flowering of Channel 4 as an ‘alternative’, even ‘oppositional’, channel, enjoined by its statute to ‘appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV’ and ‘to encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes’, initiated a transitional ‘era of availability’. It is interesting and instructive to recall in 2010, from the perspective of an era of plenty, this distant era of only twenty-five or 50 years ago when television seemed full of creative possibilities and when television, by Act of Parliament, had a responsibility to be innovative, diverse and even radical. Television history, or at least the history of television drama, seems condemned to be elegiac.

In the context of popular fiction, in the 1980s the single play migrates to cinema, or at least, to the cinematic, and it is the serial which moves into the heartland of television drama, defining our expectations of what television drama is. If one conjures up a list of titles from the 1980s and 1990s to compare with the list above from The Wednesday Play and Play for Today, it will include dramas like *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada, 1981), *Smiley’s People* (BBC, 1982), *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982), *The Jewel in the Crown* (Granada, 1984), *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (BBC, 1986), *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1986), *Tutti Frutti* (BBC, 1987), *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (BBC, 1990), *GBH* (BBC, 1991), *Our Friends from the North* (BBC, 1997); and that is before we consider such ‘classic serials’ as *Vanity Fair* (BBC, 1987), *Middlemarch* (BBC, 1994), *Martin Chuzzlewit* (BBC, 1994), *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (BBC, 1996), *Bleak House* (BBC, 2005); crime series like *Prime Suspect* (Granada, 1991–2003, and, finally, 2006) or *Cracker* (Granada, 1993–5, 1996 and, finally, 2006), or spy/security series like *Spooks* (Kudos for BBC, 2006–). Building on the acknowledged attractions of British and American soap operas and crime series, the 1980s was the period in which serials and series, both adaptations and original dramas, came to establish themselves as the core of television’s

## Television and serial fictions

narrative form. The serial and the series, rather than the single play, became the classical form of television dramatic narrative.

Historically, what is at stake in this is a final separation of television drama from the theatrical model from which it had grown in the days of live television drama. From the 1980s, one path leads away from a theatrical aesthetic to a cinematic aesthetic in the form of *Film on Four*; the other path leads towards an aesthetic which popular television had already claimed as its own: the form of soap opera and sitcom, the form of the serial and the series. The narrative fictions of these televisual forms owed less to the theatre and more to the novel, and, in particular, to the multi-character, multi-plot, temporally extended, interrupted narratives of the nineteenth-century serialised novel.

The increasing dominance of the serial/series form can be explained on a business model. The one-off play has a high unit cost and is difficult to market on the overseas market. Even the play series like *The Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today*, uneven in quality, did not command the viewer loyalty which the competition for audiences required in an era of increasing availability and choice. The serial, on the other hand, benefits from economies of scale which produce a lower cost per hour, commands audience loyalty during its run, and is more attractive internationally, particularly in the US where Cable and Public Service Broadcasting in the 1980s had low production resources of their own. UK drama was well placed to satisfy the international appetite for 'quality'. Presales, co-production and sponsorship across the Atlantic, and to a lesser extent with Australia, permit a level of investment in production values which could not be supported by BBC or ITV budgets alone, and this investment (both in visual style and 'talent') shows on the screen in a way which secures not just audiences, but respect, enabling the BBC, in particular, to demonstrate that it is honouring its public service obligations. The serial, rather than the original, awkward and only occasionally astonishing single play, becomes the marker for 'that strange quality known as "quality"'.<sup>14</sup>

While cost-per-hour and the demands of the international market, however, may go some way towards explaining the attraction of series and serials for broadcasters and producers, the serialisation of drama seems also to follow the logic of the everyday consumption of television, tuned to its place within the routines of everyday life rather than within the 'specialised time' of the cinema or the theatre. The centrality of serialisation is adapted to one of the defining characteristics of television as a domestic technology: its interruptibility and the possibility of distraction. Though it may often get the undivided attention of its audience, television cannot assume it. It still has to work on the assumption that it is open to distraction: externally,

JOHN CAUGHIE

by the interruption by other routines of domestic life, or, internally, by the intrusion of commercial breaks. Just as Virginia Woolf distinguishes the 'long drawn continuities' of the novel from the compressed time of the play in the theatre,<sup>15</sup> so it is possible to distinguish the time of television from the time and space of the cinema in which both are organised to ensure unbroken attention and absorption.

This possibility of interruption draws television's narrative form towards an organisation around segments rather than towards the sequence of causality in which each unit is only meaningful when it leads to a narrative effect and in which missing a causal link – through inattention or interruption – can be fatal to the coherence of the narrative. As John Ellis argued in 1982, the characteristic point of engagement in segmented narratives is not the narrative goal which exists only to be closed when the mission is accomplished, but the 'dilemma' which may be re-opened week after week.<sup>16</sup> Serial narrative, whether it be soap opera or thriller, trains its viewers to retain narrative links over extended periods of time, using the modes of understanding of multiple implication and dilemma which are the commonplace of daily life rather than the specialised form of deductive understanding demanded by the uninterrupted sequential causality of the 'goal-oriented' narratives of classical cinema.

The *locus classicus* of the 'long drawn continuities' of television narrative serialisation is in the continuous serial, best represented on British television by the longest drawn continuity of all: *Coronation Street* (Granada for ITV, 1960–). *Coronation Street* is an essential point of reference in considering popular fiction on television, and it is frequently in critical writing on the soap opera, particularly by feminist writers, that the importance of the relationship between the everyday regularity of television and the everyday time of domestic life is most sharply drawn. In her essay on the continuous serial in the groundbreaking collective BFI monograph on *Coronation Street* published in 1981, Christine Geraghty draws particular attention to the ways in which serials negotiate the passing of time, populating the interval between episodes or between plots, with what she calls, drawing on Carl Grabo, 'an unrecorded existence'.<sup>17</sup> 'The characters in a serial', she says,

when abandoned at the end of an episode, pursue an 'unrecorded existence' until the next one begins. In other words, we are aware that day-to-day life has continued in our absence even though the problem we left at the end of the previous episode has still to be resolved.<sup>18</sup>

The absence of a tight causality in which narrative logic follows the hermeneutic chain along a narrowing horizon of possibilities towards resolution, permits a narrative, she argues, 'whose future is not yet written':



## Television and serial fictions

The apparent multifariousness of the plots, their inextricability from each other, the everyday quality of time and events, all encourage us to believe that this is a narrative whose future is not yet written. Even events which would offer a suitable ending in other narrative forms are never a final ending in the continuous serial: a wedding is not a happy ending but opens up the possibilities of stories about married life and divorce; a character's departure from a serial does not mean that s/he will not turn up again several years later.<sup>19</sup>

Though death may be a special case, and is frequently memorialised as such in the long historical imaginaries of committed viewers, even death may not be the end.

The accumulation of memory in a long-running serial and the absence of an already determined future means that the viewer has a relationship to the fiction which is similar to her or his relationship to the communities of everyday life. It is distinct from other forms of narrative in that knowledge is differential: some viewers will have a complete history of, for example, Ken Barlow, one of *Coronation Street's* longest running characters, and his marriages and relationships since the 1960s, whereas others will only have a knowledge of his recent past. (His remarriage to Deirdre Langton in 2005 had an audience of thirteen million; the actual marriage of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles the following day had nine million.) There is no definitive, shared knowledge which can be assumed by producers or claimed by viewers. Consequently, producers must find ways of filling in any backstory that is essential to a plot move, through, for example, the exchange of gossip in the pub, and viewers may constantly debate likely outcomes depending on the degree of knowledge of past behaviours which they bring to the historical 'life' of the serial. In a narrative whose 'future is not yet written', this predictive speculation is central, demanding an open and adaptable engagement. As Geraghty points out, some characters will behave according to type; others, more individuated, are there precisely to overturn expectations and upset routines.

In a narrative in which we bring to the dilemmas of the fiction the same personal skills and differentiated knowledge that we bring to the dilemmas of the everyday life-world, our engagement with the fictional characters and their lives can no longer be described in the language of identification and distanciation which forms the currency of the classic realist text. Instead, it is an engagement of familiarity and recognition that may transcend the mechanistic requirements of 'passive subjectivity'. In a highly influential article published in 1983, 'The Rhythms of Reception: Daytime Television and Women's Work', the American feminist critic Tania Modleski argues that 'the flow of daytime television reinforces the very principle of interruptibility crucial to the proper functioning of women in the home',<sup>20</sup> and

JOHN CAUGHIE

she borrows from Luce Irigaray the term 'nearness' to describe the form of engagement and the mode of attention: 'The viewer does not *become* the characters . . . but rather relates to them as intimates, as extensions of her world.'<sup>21</sup> This 'nearness', a mundane, ordinary, and sometimes banal familiarity based on a history and memory of characters and on a narrative for which the future does not seem to have been written, is one of the dominant and specific modes of experience in the popular fictions of everyday television.

But not all television is everyday. While the continuous serial of soap opera may provide the classical ground for popular serial fiction on television, it is the variations and innovations on this ground which occupy the prestige slots in the schedules and in the critical press: the crime series, the classic serial adaptations, authored serials, HBO. Characteristically, the continuous serials are scheduled to fit the routines of domestic life; the prestige serials are shown in primetime, typically the 9pm slot, and, increasingly, they are consumed and watched in DVD box sets – television serials, in other words, which have become almost independent of everyday television, designed to be viewed within a more or less 'specialised time', controlled by the viewer rather than by the schedules.

Clearly, this changes forms of attention. Engagement can no longer be described using the terms of nearness and familiarity that characterise engagement with the routines of domestic television. An aesthetic dilemma, however, rather than of cause and effect ordered around closure may still be mobilised to explain one of the curious features of the contemporary prestige serial: the pleasure of bafflement. Despite the fact that she 'missed the first two episodes and couldn't follow the plot sufficiently to work out who the baddie actually was!', a viewer writes to the *Radio Times* that she found the Troy Kennedy Martin serial, *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985) 'one of the three most exciting thrillers I have ever seen on television'.<sup>22</sup> This is a significant shift in our expectations of popular narrative form: a new-found pleasure in losing one's bearings; an openness to – or appetite for – forms of narrative which sustain attention and pleasure without all the narrative links being in place. Whether it be *Spooks* or *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8), complex narratives, complete with indeterminate motivations and loose inconclusive endings, once the territory of the European art movie and the guarantee of intellectual standing, have been the increasingly common currency of prestigious popular television crime and conspiracy serials since the 1980s. Far from being an impediment to enjoyment, deciphering untidy narratives has become part of the increasingly inductive skill of making sense of popular fiction, and being baffled by narrative has become part of its enticement.

## Television and serial fictions

In a sermon at Rugby Chapel in 1839, now much quoted in accounts of nineteenth-century serialisation, Dr Thomas Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby School, reformer of public school education and the model of progressive education in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, friend of Coleridge and father of Matthew Arnold, laments the rising appeal of the popular, affordable novel in serial form, warning against its capacity for 'dwelling upon the mind'.

The works of amusement published only a few years since were comparatively few in number; they were less exciting, and therefore less attractive; they were dearer, and therefore less accessible; and, not being published periodically, did not occupy the mind for so long a time, nor keep alive so constant an expectation; nor by thus dwelling upon the mind, and distilling themselves into it, as it were drop by drop, did they possess it so largely, colouring even, in many instances, its very language, and affording frequent matter for conversation. . . . They are of that class which cannot be actually prohibited; nor can it be pretended that there is a sin in reading them. They are not the more wicked for being published so cheap, and at regular intervals; but yet these two circumstances make them so peculiarly injurious.<sup>23</sup>

Writing only two years after the huge success of *The Pickwick Papers* (Dickens, 1836) in serial form, the power of serialisation, Arnold believes, was derived from the extension in time of the serial, which 'occup[ied] the mind for so long a time', and kept alive 'so constant an expectation'.

This points to serialisation not simply as a narrative form but also as an epistemology. Writing about the beginnings of the serialised narrative form, Caroline Levine, in her book, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt*, identifies the suspense and the extension of time associated with serialisation not simply as a way of organising narrative but as the manifestation of an epistemology which was cultivated by the scientific as well as the imaginative writing of the Victorians. 'Nineteenth-century scientists and philosophers', she says,

insisted that a doubtful pause was absolutely essential to the pursuit of knowledge. If we were not compelled to suspend judgement, they argued, we would simply rush to assume that our prejudices were true and right, and we would fail to open ourselves up to the possibility of unexpected truths and surprises. From this epistemological perspective, novelistic suspense performed a critical cultural role: narrative enigmas and delays could help to foster habits of hesitation and uncertainty. In the space between the mystery and its revelation, audiences were forced to wait and wonder, unable to say for sure whether their assumptions would fit the facts. Novelistic mysteries thus seemed to demand a kind of cultural and ideological self-restraint: they asked readers to ready themselves for the potential failures of belief and tradition when set against the surprising, unconventional otherness of the world.<sup>24</sup>

JOHN CAUGHIE

The form which this suspension took in the quest for scientific knowledge was the experiment, which held belief and speculation in suspense while they were verified against the evidence of the world: ‘the imagination was a necessary but disorderly force in science, the activity of experimentation alone could ensure that it was put to good use’.<sup>25</sup> The nineteenth-century novel, then, belonged to a much wider ‘episteme’, a way of understanding the world through experiment and through making connections. In her major work, *Darwin’s Plots*, Gillian Beer also emphasises the links between scientific and imaginative literature in uncovering connections and establishing the connectedness of worlds.

Darwin’s theories profoundly unsettled the organizing principles of much Victorian thinking but it is all the more worth registering, therefore, the extent to which the relations of structures in his work initially share common concerns, and draw on orderings of experience learnt from other writers of the time. The sense that everything is connected, though the connections may be obscured, gave urgency to the enterprise of uncovering such connections. This was a form of plotting crucial to Dickens’s work, as we can see, for example, in *Bleak House*, where the fifty-six named – and many more unnamed – characters all turn out to be related either by way of concealed descent, (Esther and Lady Deadlock) or of economic dependency ... As the book proceeds the immense assemblage of apparently contingent characters is ordered and reordered into multiple sets of relations so that we discover that all of them are interdependent. What at first looks like agglomeration proves to be analysable connection.<sup>26</sup>

The contemporary serial or series, then, cannot simply be explained formalistically, but draws on an epistemology which it shares with the serial novels of the Victorian period, an epistemology of experiment which seeks ‘analysable connections’ between worlds and the people who inhabit them, rather than the linear drive of deductive investigation which reduces the world to clues. Think of those new totems of quality popular television: *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) and *The Wire*. Each uses the long form of the serial to allow itself a configuration of space, time, characterisation and performance which is not reducible to narrative causality, but which describes worlds and maps the connectedness and entanglements between them. Episodic time is not simply a narrative structure, a hook to bring the audience back week after week, but an experimental epistemology which sets in motion little dramas of connectedness, and asks viewers, in Caroline Levine’s terms, ‘to ready themselves for the potential failures of belief and tradition when set against the surprising, unconventional otherness of the world’.<sup>27</sup>

On British television, a particular trajectory within the serial form can be traced to a group of television dramas from the late 1970s to the 1990s:

## Television and serial fictions

*Pennies from Heaven* (BBC, w. Denis Potter, 1978), *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC, w. Alan Bleasdale, 1982), *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, w. Troy Kennedy Martin, 1985), *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (BBC, w. Fay Weldon, 1986), *The Monocled Mutineer* (BBC, w. Alan Bleasdale, 1986), *The Singing Detective* (BBC, w. Denis Potter, 1986), *Tutti Frutti* (BBC, w. John Byrne, 1987), *GBH* (Channel 4, w. Alan Bleasdale, 1991), *Shooting the Past* (BBC, w. and d. Stephen Poliakoff, 1999). Each of them can be placed in the category of ‘authored serials’, a category which is largely responsible for the displacement of ‘seriousness’ in television drama from the single play to the serial. Thematically, however, they seem also to share a particular epistemology, a way of knowing the world that is unfolded through serialisation. Each of them uses the long form of the extended narrative to chart the erosion of every day normality by unreason, irrationality and even magic. Each traces the gradual, sometimes almost imperceptible intrusion of the psychosis of institutions and individuals into the social realism and everyday worlds of the serial form, slowly turning the comedy black, the musical discordant, or the investigative thriller apocalyptic: the increasingly neurotic twitch in Robert Lindsay’s eye in *GBH*, for example, the steady downward spiral from musical comedy to self-immolation in *Tutti Frutti*, the ‘promise’ of ultimate suicide in *Shooting the Past*, or the movement from corporate rationality to mythical irrationality in *Edge of Darkness*. The effect of serialised time is to begin from what are taken to be social realities or generic norms and then slowly undermine and overturn them by infiltrating the conventions with madness or magic: social and political rationalities spin out of control into irrationality; administrative rationality is exposed in all its destructiveness and danger. The serial form, often regarded as comfortable and reassuring, is what makes these dramas subversive. The fact that they take time, ‘occupying the mind for so long a time . . . distilling themselves into it, as it were drop by drop’ is precisely, as Thomas Arnold knew, what makes them ‘so peculiarly injurious’.

The connection between the form of the ‘prestige serial’ and the form of the continuous serial of soap opera was quite self-consciously exploited in the 2005 *Bleak House* adapted by Andrew Davies. After an initial one-hour episode, this eight-hour ‘classic serial’ was transmitted over eight weeks in fourteen half-hour episodes on BBC 1 (the 1853 novel was published in twenty monthly instalments), appearing twice weekly on Thursdays at 8pm and Fridays at 8.30pm, immediately following the BBC’s most popular long-running continuous serial, *EastEnders* (BBC, 1985–). The BBC’s press pack encouraged the association with the soap opera format under the headline, ‘Bleak House gets the soap opera treatment for BBC ONE’:

JOHN CAUGHIE

It's a new way of doing the classic adaptation, reinvigorating our approach to the serial form, matching it to the serial structure and narrative development of the original – and the way that it was originally published. The Dickens novel was very much the soap opera of its day, and we hope to emulate those same cliffhanger emotions in televisual terms.<sup>28</sup>

'If Charles Dickens were alive today,' said producer, Nigel Stafford-Clark, 'he would probably be writing big signature dramas like *State of Play* or *Shameless*. He would be writing for television because he recognised a popular medium when he saw it.'<sup>29</sup> This position was taken a stage further by Andrew Davies himself, who suggested 'If Dickens was alive today, he'd be writing for *EastEnders*.'<sup>30</sup>

This appropriation of Dickens into the ranks of popular television is, of course, good marketing and the easy critical response is to dismiss it as such. It does, however, raise interesting questions about the historical nature of popularity, about the difference between monthly instalments and twice-weekly episodes, and, fundamentally, about the difference between television popular drama and literary fiction. The well-established tradition of the 'classic serial', translated into American television as 'Masterpiece Theatre', raises the question of television drama both as popular fiction and as the popularising of classic fiction.

In a rather ill-considered article in *The Guardian*, the novelist, Philip Hensher, declares that he has not and will not watch this adaptation of *Bleak House*. He proceeds, on the basis of not needing to watch it, to review its assumed deficiencies and omissions; and concludes, '*Bleak House* only lives as 400,000 words, in paperback or hardcover. That is all it is.'<sup>31</sup> The omissions, he assumes, will include 'Krook's list of the names of Miss Flite's twenty-five pet birds'. In fact, had Hensher watched the adaptation, he would have found the list of names intact – Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon and Spinach – all are there, lifted from the page and transformed in a performance of such mounting ferocity by Johnny Vegas/Krook that one is driven back to the pages of the original to reassure oneself that Dickens really was so much a surrealist *avant la lettre*. As his contemporaries in the theatre recognised, often at the expense of Dickens's intellectual property rights, and as Dickens himself discovered to his immense profit, Dickens performed is something more than words in paperback or hardback.

'I've heard', says Hensher, 'that there is no fog to be seen anywhere, which seems rather like filming *Moby Dick* without the sea.' It is true that fog is notable by its absence – according to Andrew Davies, in a disarmingly temperate response to Hensher's haughty provocation, because the producers

## Television and serial fictions

could not find a way of stopping the attempts at fog from being blown away by the slightest breeze<sup>32</sup> – but the mannerism of Dickens's allegorical invocation of the fog is replicated in a highly mannered visual rhetoric. The cramped darkly lit spaces, damp muddy streets, cuts in location without establishing shots, swish pans, rapid zooms, jump cuts and a highly elaborate and expressive soundscape create that same Chancery world which has, 'in the course of time, become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means'.<sup>33</sup>

Hensher's somewhat throwaway judgement is merely an extreme form of a prejudice against television adaptation which is often shared, on one side, by literary scholars who believe that television debases literature and, on the other, by television scholars who believe that literature 'elevates' television to an elite culture which betrays its popular roots. What both sides seem to miss is the extent to which serial adaptation allows us to delineate more clearly the contours of the popular and 'popularisation', and the determinate specificities of the literary and the televisual. If Dickens were alive today, he would probably not be writing scripts for soap operas because his fiction is literary and depends on a literary language whose literariness is, as Roman Jakobson explains, 'language calling attention to itself' where 'the emphasis is placed on the form of the utterance rather than on its referential capacity' (see Belen Villasur Vidal for a discussion of literariness in television adaptation<sup>34</sup>). In Dickens's *Bleak House*, this literariness is apparent in the rhetoric and the layering of narrative voices: the narration is divided between 'Esther's Narrative', told from the first-person, limited and sometimes cloyingly naïve perspective of Esther, and a worldly-wise, omniscient authorial voice whose perspective is, unusually, always told from a perpetual present tense. The complexity of the Dickens' narrative, a value much treasured by Philip Hensher, is a literary complexity of voices, language and perspective which cannot be translated literally, and would be simply inappropriate to the specific signifying systems of television.

But it can be adapted. There is in this television *Bleak House* a process of translation which replaces verbal mannerism with visual and aural density and replicates the hesitations and uncertainties of the serial form. It is dependent on the doubtful pauses that Caroline Levine speaks of, and pursues the orderings into analysable connections which Gillian Beer finds in Dickens's novel. While the literariness of literature resists adaptation, the epistemology of serialisation and suspense, and of the montage of time and space, is the determining form of a television long-form narrative which respects complexity. Visually, the complexity is dramatised in the televisual rhetoric of swish pans and zooms; the three-shot pattern to establish a new location (cut to still; cut to still; cut to action); a soundscape which gives

JOHN CAUGHIE

expression and emphasis to the action rather than simply accompanying it. The steadicam, particularly in close-up, gives fluidity to the movement, but, at the same time, in its slight shake it gives an impression of immediacy in which the frame seems to discover the scene rather than simply to enclose it.

At the end of Episode 2, there is a sequence which begins with Krook, talking to his cat while examining what he believes to be love letters found in Nemo's trunk, and cuts without establishing shot to Chesney Wold and to Lady Dedlock, indistinct behind the light of candles, walking in medium close-up right to left; cut to close-up of Tulkinghorn, lit by candlelight in his office, facing right; cut back to Lady Dedlock in big close-up facing left; cut to close-up of Tulkinghorn; cut to Lady Dedlock, in big close-up facing right, her eyes glinting in the light of two candles; cut to frontal shot of Lady Dedlock in medium close-up, the camera holding as a tear runs down her cheek; cut to long shot of Lady Dedlock from same angle, isolated in a pool of candlelight within a dark frame; the frame loses focus and fades to black; end of episode and the credits role. The parallel editing, the device which Eisenstein says D. W. Griffith learnt from reading Dickens,<sup>35</sup> is accompanied by a music and electronic soundscape which unites the action in time, but offers no speech to explain it. The close-ups on both Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock, and their juxtaposition, are full of meaning, but none of it is verbal. It depends on a visual language in which 'the emphasis is placed on the form of the utterance rather than on its referential capacity'.

Visually complex, the adaptation nonetheless has clear roots in popular fiction. Early in Episode 1, in the scene at Bleak House in which Skimpole is introduced, Skimpole, Jarndyce, Richard and Esther are gathered round the piano on which Ada plays. There are two intense and signifying looks: first Richard looks at Ada; then John Jarndyce looks at Esther. Richard's look is reciprocated by Ada, Jarndyce's look is not registered by Esther. Nothing is said, but a relationship of looks is established which is repeated at intervals from episode to episode. The fact that Jarndyce's interest in Esther goes beyond that of a guardian is signalled much earlier in the television narrative than in the novel. In the novel, rather later than in the adaptation, Esther, in her naïve first-person narrative, 'mistakes' Jarndyce's feelings for her when she expresses her gratitude for 'a guardian who is a Father to her'.

At the word Father, I saw his former trouble come into his face. He subdued it as before, and it was gone in an instant; but it had been there, and it had come so swiftly upon my words that I felt as if they had given him a shock.<sup>36</sup>

The scene is faithfully repeated in the adaptation, but here the discomfiture of Jarndyce is physical and visible, there to be read not only by Esther, who, naïvely, does not understand it, but also by the viewer who, knowingly,



## Television and serial fictions

does. On television, Esther's reaction is visible, and whereas in the first-person literary narrative it only has meaning in the externalisation into language, in the visual narrative its meaning is inductive, read in the rhetoric of the image, more immediately available to the viewer than to Esther. Reading the romance through signs and gestures which are unacknowledged or misunderstood by the fictional characters is one of the skills we have honed from our viewing of everyday popular television. We are able to read the narrative of Jarndyce's attraction to Esther quite independently of Esther's voice, but dependent on our familiarity with the convention of meaningful but silent looks which we have learned from popular fiction on film and television.

Despite its scheduling and its segmentation into half-hour episodes and its use of actors who are already familiar from popular television (Gillian Anderson and Johnny Vegas), and despite its own self-promotion and marketing, *Bleak House* is not soap opera. But there are both continuities and differences between *Bleak House* on television and *Bleak House* as 400,000 words in paperback or hardback which it is genuinely illuminating to engage with on an analytical level. Such analysis, rather than dismissive judgements, might allow us better to understand the literariness of literature and the visuality of television, and the possibilities of translation between them. In particular, it might open up questions of the popularity of popular fiction in a historical way; of the forms of attention and modes of understanding which we bring to long-form and continuous narratives which 'dwell upon the mind, and distil themselves into it, as it were drop by drop'; and of the 'new human faculties', the 'structures of feeling' and the subjectivities which popular fiction and serialisation might bring into being. One of the 'fundamental qualitative changes' which Williams anticipated in 1974, a small, ambiguous and tentative step in the 'long revolution', may indeed be an almost unnoticed extension of the critical and perceptive reading of television's popular fiction as an everyday activity rather than as a specialised professional practice. The viewer in the age of electronic dissemination, as Walter Benjamin might have said, is a critic, even when distracted.<sup>37</sup>

## NOTES

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- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 See Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1991), p. 97.

JOHN CAUGHIE

- 6 Williams, *Television*, p. 60.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
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- 26 Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 47.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 28 BBC Press Office, 19 December 2003.
- 29 BBC Press Office, 4 October 2005.
- 30 Quoted by Robert Giddings (undated), 'Soft-soaping Dickens: Andrew Davies, BBC 1 and *Bleak House*', on David Purdue's Charles Dickens Page, [http://charlesdickenspage.com/Soft\\_Soaping\\_Dickens.html](http://charlesdickenspage.com/Soft_Soaping_Dickens.html), accessed 11.01.10.

### Television and serial fictions

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