

**THATCHER'S THRILLERS**  
**British Television Thriller Serials of the 1980s**

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*For Mum and Dad*

## Abstract

*Thatcher's Thrillers* is a cultural-materialist account of the development of a television drama genre in Britain during the 1980s.

The thesis initially addresses the fast-changing legislative context of television broadcasting during the Thatcher era and outlines developments in drama formats and programming during this period. It then explores the defining characteristics of the thriller genre as evidenced in a range of texts from different media (short stories, novels, films and television dramas), in order to identify 'abstract' elements of the genre.

Centrally, the thesis examines the 1980s and early-1990s thriller serials themselves, arguing that these constitute one of the most significant forms of television drama during the period. The pre-eminence of a number of these programmes was recognised by the television industry: *Edge of Darkness* (1985), *A Very British Coup* (1987), *Traffik* (1989) and *Prime Suspect* (1991) all won the BAFTA award for Best Drama Series/Serial for their respective year of transmission. These and a number of other serials constitute an identifiable genre addressing issues of public concern (such as the power of the hidden British establishment, the growth of the nuclear threat and conflicts between large business corporations and ordinary citizens) and contemporary formations of subjecthood (through protagonists whose experiences profoundly alter their sense of personal identity).

Individual chapters of the thesis are devoted to the most noteworthy of these programmes, exploring their aesthetic characteristics and cultural resonances. The thesis also examines the contributions of key individuals, including writers such as



Troy Kennedy Martin, Alan Bleasdale, Lynda La Plante and Dennis Potter, who in different ways challenged conventional representations and redefined the form of television drama.

The thesis addresses in conclusion the relationship between narrative and ideology in contemporary thriller serials, arguing that there emerges a set of responses critical of the new imperatives of Thatcherism.

## Contents

	<i>Abstract</i>	page 3
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	6
<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>British television broadcasting in the 1980s</b>	<b>33</b>
	i) The legislative and institutional context	
	ii) Developments in drama programming and production	
<b>3</b>	<b>An approach to genre</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>The thriller genre: a theoretical account</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>British thriller serials of the Thatcher era: the evolution of an historical genre</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>The defining 1980s political thriller: <i>Edge of Darkness</i> (1985)</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Developments in television form: <i>A Very British Coup</i> (1988)</b>	<b>199</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Epic narration in the thriller: <i>Traffik</i> (1989) and <i>GBH</i> (1991)</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Re-presenting gender: <i>Prime Suspect</i> (1991)</b>	<b>269</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Deepening subjectivity: <i>The Singing Detective</i> (1986)</b>	<b>297</b>
<b>11</b>	<b>Narrative and ideology in British television thriller serials</b>	<b>322</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>Conclusion: Thrillers and Thatcherism</b>	<b>345</b>
	<i>Select Bibliography</i>	367
	<i>Select Programme List</i>	380

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Finally, many thanks to my parents for their quiet and consistent support throughout.

# 1 Introduction

It is not unusual to divide history into decades, for these provide a convenient way of marking shifts within society. This is an especially easy procedure with regard to Britain in the 1980s, for the decade coincided with the dominance in British politics of the most assertively right-wing Prime Minister to have governed the country this century. Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, won the general election of 1979 and remained in power until she was, in effect, deposed by her own party in November 1990. She was, as Dennis Kavanagh points out, 'the first woman Prime Minister in any major western industrial state; the first leader since Lord Liverpool in the 1820s to win three elections in a row, and Prime Minister for the longest uninterrupted spell in the twentieth century.'<sup>1</sup> By the middle of the decade Thatcherism – the raft of opinions and policies to which she gave her name – was in full sway, its author seemingly unassailable.

The *zeitgeist* over which she presided drew strong criticism, not least from members of the artistic community. For the playwright Howard Brenton:

If there is one insight that comes from the most noted novels, television drama series and plays of the 1980s, it is that during the decade we were overtaken by something malevolent. It may seem exaggerated, but it was as if some kind of evil was abroad in our society, a palpable degradation of the spirit. ... Writers felt driven to extremes as they tried to describe the banal desolation of what happened in our country in the eighties. Also, all this work has within it a sense of mourning, of grief for lost

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 243.

opportunities, that something loved between us was being strangled – our culture.<sup>2</sup>

According to another playwright, David Hare:

the facile, dishonest millennialism of the right tries to tell us that questions of social justice have been settled for all time. We live in a country in which there has raged for twenty years a civil war of whose ending we have given up any hope, in which our methods of dealing with physical pain and mental illness are strained to near breaking point, in which the poorest tenth of us have been effectively abandoned by the representatives of the majority, in which our educational system has become the laughing-stock of Europe, and in which our legal system is so fundamentally misdirected that it takes fifteen years to admit its own most disastrous mistakes.<sup>3</sup>

For the television dramatist Dennis Potter, the nation was defiled by an unsavoury form of materialism:

everything was given a price-tag, and the price-tag became the only gospel. And that gospel is very thin gruel indeed. If you start measuring humankind in those terms, everything else becomes less important, or laughable – all the things that bind us as a community.<sup>4</sup>

It is hardly surprising that writers known to be, broadly speaking, of the Left should react negatively to Thatcherism. These are clearly emotional as well as political responses, however. Thatcherism, by its nature, was always divisive, but the divisions it engendered were not simply theoretical disputations about economic policy, or about the role of the nation-state in an post-industrial world (although they embraced these issues too). They had a fundamental bearing on the very premises of 'good' government and on the sensibilities of individuals within society.

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Brenton, 'The art of survival', *The Guardian*, 29 November 1990, 25.

<sup>3</sup> David Hare, 'Looking Foolish: On Taking Risks', *Writing Left-Handed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 54-55.

<sup>4</sup> *Without Walls: An Interview with Dennis Potter* (LWT for Channel 4), tx Channel 4, 5 April 1994. A transcript of the interview is published in Derek Jones (ed), *An Interview with Dennis Potter* (London: Channel 4 Television, 1994); and in Dennis Potter, *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews and a Lecture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 1-29.

This study is not centrally about the Prime Minister, however, but about a remarkable group of television dramas which spoke – tangentially in some respects – about Thatcherism. These are mostly serials: in other words, dramas which run for a number of episodes – six is the most usual – but whose stories come to a conclusion. Victorian novels like *Hard Times* and *North and South*, published in episodic, serial form, charted for an eager public the contours of their age. Something similar is true of 1980s episodic television dramas: those soap operas, series and serials whose contemporaneity was a feature of their public resonance. In some respects the serial is the closest of these to the Dickensian novel, for it tells, over the course of some weeks, a story which is eventually concluded. The serials I shall address all bear a thriller inflection of some kind; and they emerge as a recognisable genre by the middle of the decade, once Thatcherism had become established as a significant phenomenon.

Jessop, Bonnett, Bromley and Ling note

the effective consolidation of Thatcherism in the spring and summer of 1982. Thereafter a third stage began: that of consolidated Thatcherism. It is only in this third stage that a coherent Thatcherite project has begun to emerge to remake the British economy, state and civil society. ... the third stage of Thatcherism is interested in striking deep structural roots to secure the survival of the Thatcherite project.<sup>5</sup>

Andrew Gamble describes the period between 1982 and 1987 as ‘golden years for the Conservatives. The Government won two general elections by comfortable margins and emerged victorious from a series of major confrontations with its enemies’.<sup>6</sup> I shall argue that the genre of British political thrillers crystallised in 1985 with paranoia dramas like *Edge of Darkness*, *Defence of the Realm*, *In the Secret State* and *The Detective*. Thatcherism, by then, was in full bloom. Although thriller serials are still produced, the genre seems to have lost a coherent thematic identity by about 1992, two years after Mrs Thatcher’s demise. One would expect a lag between the consolidation

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<sup>5</sup> Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley and Tom Ling, *Thatcherism: A Tale of Two Nations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 110.

of the phenomenon of Thatcherism, and the appearance of dramas which addressed its effects. Firstly dramatists can hardly be expected to anticipate social movements: instead they write *within* them. The components of Thatcherism needed to be in place before they could figure in drama of the period. Secondly, the nature of television drama production, where projects are usually mooted and developed long before their eventual transmission date, *mitigates* against absolute contemporaneity.<sup>7</sup> By the same token it is possible to think of programmes transmitted two or three years after Mrs Thatcher's departure from office as belonging, in terms of their themes and 'structures of feeling',<sup>8</sup> to her period of dominance. It is in this sense that I see *GBH* and the first *Prime Suspect* drama, both transmitted in 1991, as programmes which have their roots in the Thatcher era.

What was the nature of that era? Some resonant catchphrases indicate the particular dynamics of Thatcherism during the 1980s: 'the freedom of the individual', 'the right to choose', 'rolling back the frontiers of the state', 'no turning back', 'there is no alternative'. The rhetoric had a clarion brightness. The Thatcherite project was organised around a few crucial gestures. The first was to do with the 'freedom' of individual citizens, which correlated with a proclaimed anti-socialism. Mrs Thatcher equated socialism with the constraining grip of the state. As she explained at her first Conservative Party conference as leader:

Britain and socialism are not the same thing, and as long as I have health and strength they never will be. ... Let me give you my vision: a man's right to work as he will, to spend what he earns, to own property, to have the state as servant and not as master: these are the British inheritance. They are the essence of a free country, and on that freedom all our other freedoms depend.<sup>9</sup>

Thatcherism, then, projected the 'free' individual (rather than the family, or the

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<sup>7</sup> For a brief account of the 'Annual Plan' cycle in television production, whereby programmes planned one year are produced the next, see Keith Anderson, 'The Management and Organisation of BBC Television's Programme-Making Process', in Richard Paterson (ed), *Organising for Change* (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 7.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase is Raymond Williams'. See pp. 345-6 for a discussion of its implications.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London, Sydney and Auckland: Pan, 1993), 103-4.

corporation, or the community, or even the nation) as the most immediate social unit. This was summarised in Mrs Thatcher's notorious remark, 'There is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women, and there are families.'<sup>10</sup> Government intervention was thus, to quote Ruth Levitas, 'condemned as collectivist, socialist and economically misguided',<sup>11</sup> and a set of policies developed which were intended to secure a greater degree of autonomy on the part of individuals and business organisations.<sup>12</sup> The decade saw the sale of council housing to tenants at massively reduced rates, for instance. Thatcherite rhetoric claimed that the British had become a nation of home-owners and, through a vigorous programme of privatisation, a nation of share-holders. The Government's privatisation initiative was conceived not only as a means of realising assets by selling off costly industries, but as part of a transformed vision of the relationship between the state and the individual. As Andrew Gamble observes:

the denationalisations of the 1980s were a symbol of the changing political climate, and the shift away from collectivist solutions in public policy. The wider share ownership which the sales made possible became a central part of the project of popular capitalism.<sup>13</sup>

The mid-1980s were especially busy years in terms of privatisation. Government shares in British Airways and Cable & Wireless were sold in 1981; Sealink, Jaguar and British Telecom in 1984; British Gas in 1986; British Airways and Rolls Royce in 1987 and British Steel in 1988, to name only the more well-known companies and industries.<sup>14</sup> Such an extensive programme, with inevitable consequences in terms of industrial reorganisation and job losses, was bound to be marked by discord, and the period saw a number of confrontations between managements and trades unions.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Decade* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 171.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Levitas, 'Introduction: Ideology and the New Right', in Levitas (ed), *The Ideology of the New Right* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>12</sup> There are a number of striking contradictions between decreased state intervention and increased state supervision during the period; and between Thatcherism's espousal of individual freedom and the constraints it imposed on civil liberties. I shall discuss these in the final chapter of this study.

<sup>13</sup> Gamble, *The Free Economy*, 124-5.

<sup>14</sup> For a more comprehensive list, see Kavanagh, *Thatcherism*, 222.



The most conflagrational industrial disputes were those involving the miners (1984-5) and the print workers at Wapping (1986-7). Indeed the Government's eventual victory in the Miners' Strike was a defining moment. This, it seemed, was not a battle between the Coal Board and the National Union of Miners but between the Government and the entire Trade Union movement. In 1981, when the miners had refused to work overtime in response to planned pit closures, the Government had come to a compromise settlement, allowing 23 apparently uneconomic pits to remain in operation. By 1984 it was prepared for an extended dispute, with stockpiled supplies of coal in reserve should the miners again offer resistance. The ensuing strike lasted nearly a year and saw bitter and violent clashes between pickets or demonstrators and the police. The Government's victory was totemic. The erosion of trades union <sup>power?</sup> potency was further evidenced in the establishment, as a breakaway from the NUM, of the conciliatory Union of Democratic Mineworkers in Nottinghamshire. The British Left was not merely demoralised but comprehensively routed.

These developments underlined one of the dominant themes of the 1980s: that of the Government's intransigence in the face of opposition, howsoever it was expressed. In 1980 and '81, for instance, the Government refused to conciliate in the face of hunger strikes by IRA prisoners demanding that Republican inmates at the Maze be accorded political status, during which the Irishman Bobby Sands died. Now two years into her premiership, Margaret Thatcher stamped her own authority with a Cabinet reshuffle that removed a number of ministers who disagreed with her policies. 1981 also witnessed a number of disturbances and riots in inner city areas, in St Paul's (Bristol), Moss Side (Manchester), Brixton (London) and Toxteth (Liverpool). A widespread view (not only held on the Left) was that these incidents were the inevitable consequence of social deprivation and high unemployment within the communities in question. There were about 1.2 million people unemployed when the Government came to office, and the figure reached the politically and psychologically important mark of three million in 1982. The Government's reaction, however, was that the riots justified the more stringent law and order measures then being implemented. As Hugo Young notes, Mrs Thatcher commented after the events at Toxteth, 'We have increased the

police force in England and Wales by about 6,000, and thank goodness we did'.<sup>15</sup>

The upholding of law and order has always been a central commitment of Tory manifestos, and legislation during this period followed suit. The Criminal Justice Act of 1982 dealt with custodial sentences. The Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984 granted increased search powers and rights of detention to the police. The Public Order Act of 1986 granted new powers in the policing of crowds and demonstrations. Social order became partly a question of political obedience. Gamble comments that

Policing took on a more repressive character as opposition to the Thatcher Government came to be stigmatised as the "enemies within", likened to Argentinians and terrorists. ... By 1987 the police were equipped with massive force sufficient to restore public order whenever it was threatened, and it was clear that there were fewer restraints on its use.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly it became usual in the mid-1980s to see on the television news images of police dressed in riot gear, occasionally – as at disputes in London and at Orgreave – wielding their long batons with distasteful zeal.

Clashes with those ideologically opposed to the Government were often resolved through new legislation. This was the case as regards changes to local government, for instance. A number of local councils (usually Labour-run) were rate-capped after initially refusing to implement cutbacks in services, and the Government fought especially bitter campaigns against a number of these, notably the Greater London Council under its leader Ken Livingstone (later to become a Labour MP). The Conservative Party's 1983 manifesto pledged to abolish the GLC along with the other metropolitan councils, a commitment which was fulfilled in 1986, thereby disenfranchising a large number of people on the level of metropolitan representation. These highly public conflicts accompanied a more pervasive sense of division throughout the decade. At various stages during the Thatcher era the Government clashed with representatives of previously quiescent institutions – the Universities, the media, civil servants, and some representatives of the Church – indicating that the

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Young, *One of Us*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> Gamble, *The Free Economy*, 135.

implicit social consensus which had emerged in the mid-1940s was now dissolving. Indeed the supposed crowning achievement of the post-war years, the construction of a welfare state, was clearly under assault through the privileging of private medicine and insurance, and the erosion of various forms of income support.

The most serious confrontation during the period resulted in the country going to war, when Argentinian forces invaded the Malvinas/Falklands Islands, a group of islands in the South Atlantic under British sovereignty. The Government despatched a task force amid a resurgence of jingoistic fervour in Britain, predictably fanned by the tabloid press. The Falklands campaign lasted from April to June 1982, and its success contributed to the Conservatives' comfortable victory in the general election of June 1983. It also stamped an image of the nation and its leader as robust and decisive.

Further developments in terms of international politics saw a congruence between the New Conservatism of the Thatcher Government and that of <sup>the</sup> Reagan administration in America, as both pursued policies invoking free market principles and strong defence commitments. Indeed the 'special relationship' between the two administrations was partly forged through defence agreements: the British Government's decision to adopt US Trident missiles in British submarines was announced in July 1980, and by the mid-1980s Cruise missiles were deployed in US military bases at Greenham Common and Molesworth. The proliferation of nuclear weaponry met with extensive resistance from various pressure groups during the middle years of the decade and camps were established at these military bases by anti-nuclear protestors.

The Government developed a resolute and aggressive image in terms of its dealing with these and other opponents. There were implications in this regard for civil liberties within Britain, as became clear in a number of notorious incidents and revelations in the middle years of the decade. In 1984 the Government removed trade union rights from civil servants at the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham (an intelligence-gathering base), after a dispute with the union there, on the grounds that industrial action would have detrimental implications for national security. The Government brought prosecutions against Sarah Tisdall (in 1984) and Clive Ponting (in 1985); both of whom were civil servants who had leaked information. In 1985 Cathy Massiter, a former MI5 agent, alleged that the security services routinely spied on

members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, certain Trades Unions and other organisations deemed to have potentially subversive interests. Between 1985 and 1988 the Government attempted to suppress the publication in this country of Peter Wright's book *Spycatcher*, which contained revelations about the operations of MI5. The Charter '88 movement was established in 1988 as a response to the perceived erosion of civil liberties, and marked an attempt – in a period in which the Labour Party seemed especially ineffectual – to create a broad non-party-based opposition to Thatcherism.

Andrew Belsey argues that during the 1980s Britain was

one of the worst offenders against the European Convention [on Human Rights]. In recent years British law and practice has been found defective by Convention standards in many cases, including those concerning telephone tapping, corporal punishment, the freedom of the press, and the treatment of prisoners, immigrants, sexual minorities and mental patients. ... Unfortunately judges have proved to be no guardians of civil liberties, as on these issues they have accepted that national security is involved if the government says it is, an acceptance that gives an extraordinary privilege to executive actions.<sup>17</sup>

The conflicts mentioned above were covered on television, mostly in news and current affairs programmes and documentaries. Some of this coverage was highly critical of the Government, and where particular policies were at stake this raised questions of the broadcasters' 'loyalty' to the governing party, and indeed of their role. By virtue of its status as the chief conveyer of information in the modern age, television maintains an extremely sensitive position in the public sphere, as was evidenced in a number of confrontations between the Government and broadcasters over individual programmes, all of which had a factual basis (often disputed) of some kind. Some of these were critical of the Government or the security services. In general all these cases indicate an

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<sup>17</sup> Andrew Belsey, 'The New Right, Social Order and Civil Liberties', in Levitas (ed), *The Ideology of the New Right*, 169, 171. Belsey's latter point is less valid with regard to the 1990s, which have seen the release of the 'Birmingham Six' and the 'Guildford Four' (presumed IRA terrorists, proven to have been wrongly convicted); and the establishment of the Scott Inquiry into the 'Arms for Iraq' affair, and the Nolan Commission to examine questions of Parliamentary privilege.

assumption on the part of government ministers that they had jurisdiction over what the broadcasters broadcast. In addressing the relationship between the Government and the television industry during Mrs Thatcher's era, it is worth pointing to the most serious of these clashes.

Some of the more controversial programmes of the period were dramatised interpretations of actual events, with the concomitant problem that material of this nature can never, unquestionably and definitively, show what happened. *Death of a Princess* (ATV, 1980) was the odd one out in that it did not address British issues, but as it was the earliest I shall deal with it first. It reconstructed the executions in Jeddah of a Saudi dignitary, Princess Misha-al, and her lover on the grounds of adultery. The programme created a serious diplomatic incident when the Saudi Arabian Government found the programme offensive, threatening to break off international relations with Britain and impose trade restrictions. Members of the British Government, notably the Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington, attempted to placate the Saudis, and the programme itself was criticised in Parliament. One argument against it<sup>put</sup> forwarded by the Deputy Foreign Minister Sir Ian Gilmour, was that the mode of the film – dramatising an allegedly real event – was intrinsically irresponsible in embodying events which could not possibly have happened exactly as they were shown.<sup>18</sup> *Death of a Princess* does not touch on British experiences or social processes. It is relevant here, however, in that it raised questions to do with the drama documentary form familiar from earlier disputes about programmes like *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) and *The War Game* (BBC, 1966), and which would surface again in the controversies over *Tumbledown*, *The Monocled Mutineer*, *Shoot to Kill* and *Who Bombed Birmingham?*<sup>19</sup>

*Tumbledown* (BBC, 1988), written by Charles Wood and directed by Richard Eyre, tells the story of Lieutenant Robert Lawrence, an officer in the Scots Guards who was injured while serving in the Falklands. The programme recreates his experiences in

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<sup>18</sup> See "Death of a Princess" film criticised by Minister, Peers and MPs', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1980. For an account of the public impact of the affair, see Julian Petley, 'Parliament, the Press and *Death of a Princess*', in Andrew Goodwin, Paul Kerr and Ian MacDonald (eds), *Drama-Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 1983), 89-105.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of *The Monocled Mutineer* see pp. 249-52. For discussions of some of the issues raised by the drama documentary form, see the essays and excerpts collected in Goodwin *et al.* (eds), *Drama-Documentary*.

the Falklands and his subsequent mistreatment at the hands of the British Army which, he claimed, treated him shabbily at a memorial service at St Paul's Cathedral and showed little interest in him once he had made a partial recovery from his injuries. The film received a large amount of publicity and mobilised opinion which in general was either condemnatory, considering the programme an irresponsible slur on the Army, or approving, finding it a revealing account of one soldier's story, some time after the Falklands War itself had ended.<sup>20</sup>

*Shoot to Kill* (Zenith Productions for Yorkshire TV, 1990) and *Who Bombed Birmingham?* (Granada, 1990) were both drama-documentaries with an Irish reference, and questioned the extent to which the British Government was complicit in miscarriages of justice. *Shoot to Kill*, as the title implies, is concerned with an alleged shoot-to-kill policy operated in Northern Ireland by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in 1982. It details the killings of six unarmed men in County Armagh by members of the RUC's Special Support Unit; and the subsequent inquiry headed by John Stalker, who was then deputy chief constable of Greater Manchester, to ascertain whether such a policy had been in effect.

One of *Shoot to Kill*'s most controversial sequences suggests that the RUC sacrificed three of its own men to safeguard an IRA informer. Given this premise, and the fact that Stalker was removed from the inquiry in 1986, the programme's effect in part lies in its implication of disturbing lines of complicity between the RUC and British Government agencies. The programme's final caption notes bleakly that the DPP decided against bringing prosecutions, despite evidence of perversions of justice by RUC officers.<sup>21</sup>

*Who Bombed Birmingham?* is more explicit still. It concerns the bombings in 1975 of two pubs in Birmingham by the IRA, and the subsequent conviction of six Irishmen. The programme claimed that the men had been wrongly imprisoned, and the production company, Granada, named four of the five men whom it alleged were actually

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<sup>20</sup> For an account of the programme and of responses to it, see Geoffrey Reeves, 'Tumbledown (Charles Wood) and *The Falklands Play* (Ian Curteis): The Falklands faction', in George Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 140-161.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of the programme, including an interview with its director, Peter Kosminsky, see Hugh Hebert, 'Stalking truth among the deadmen', *The Guardian*, 24 May 1990, 25.

responsible for the bombings. The more shattering aspect of the programme was that, as its executive producer Ray Fitzwalter wrote in *The Listener*, 'It showed that the authorities had known the real names, though they had never acknowledged them, for fifteen years.'<sup>22</sup> Fitzwalter goes on in his article to detail his claims that the West Midlands Police Force and the Home Office failed to pursue the implications of key evidence, precisely because it threw doubts on the supposed guilt of those already imprisoned.

The evening after the transmission of *Who Bombed Birmingham?*, ITN's news programme led with a report on the controversy generated by the programme. It included denunciations of it by a number of influential people, including the Prime Minister herself. The criticisms of the programme were generally that it constituted 'trial by television', was inaccurate, and promoted the views of the IRA. The six prisoners were subsequently released when a judicial appeal upheld the validity of some of the new evidence which the programme brought to light. Writing in 1990 before the men's sentences were overturned, Fitzwalter suggests that

It is not surprising that factually-based drama documentaries should be controversial, but in the past they have normally been reserved for subjects that are in faraway countries and already safely concluded. This subject was at home, unresolved and reached into the heart of our system of justice. More disturbing still, the film also supplied a conclusion – one that few in authority wish to face up to.<sup>23</sup>

The above-mentioned programmes were all dramas with a variously defining documentary aspect. A number of current affairs documentaries were also among the most contentious programmes of Mrs Thatcher's era. Three in particular raise questions about the independence of the BBC during this period. To take first the incident at Carrickmore.<sup>24</sup> A team from the BBC current affairs programme *Panorama* had gone to Dublin in October 1979 to make a programme on the Provisional IRA. The

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<sup>22</sup> Ray Fitzwalter, 'Returning the Verdict', *The Listener*, 3 May 1990, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> For an account of this episode, see Bolton, *Death on the Rock*, 52-109 (Bolton was again the editor of the programme in question); and Michael Leapman, *The Last Days of the Beeb* (London and Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 65-79.

journalists were tipped off on 17 October to go to Carrickmore, a village across the border in Northern Ireland. They arrived to discover that the village had been 'seized' by IRA gunmen in a demonstration of their capacity to launch cross-border operations of some magnitude. The crew filmed, after which the gunmen dispersed.

Would broadcast of the programme be playing into the hands of the IRA, who had arranged a 'stunt' for the cameras? This was one disputed area, and the programme was never transmitted. The other was procedural and concerned lines of reference and responsibility within the BBC, whereby different departments and individuals must be consulted or kept informed about certain sensitive projects. The affair resulted in an internal inquiry and an official reprimand for John Gau, head of current affairs, and Roger Bolton, editor of *Panorama* (who was temporarily removed from the programme). The BBC's internal disorder was in part impelled by the vociferous reaction of the Government. William Whitelaw, the Home Secretary, had contacted Sir Michael Swann, the chairman of the BBC's board of governors, to demand action of some sort.<sup>25</sup>

A similar exchange occurred with regard to *Real Lives: At the Edge of the Union* six years later.<sup>26</sup> The *Real Lives* series sought to give a behind-the-scenes picture of public figures. *At the Edge of the Union* featured interviews with two people on different sides of the political divide in Northern Ireland: Martin McGuinness of Provisional Sinn Fein, and Gregory Campbell, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party on Derry's city council. The ensuing controversy centred on the rumour that McGuinness was chief of staff of the IRA and thus a terrorist. When the programme's existence became known the Home Secretary, Leon Brittan, called for it to be withdrawn on the grounds that, to use Margaret Thatcher's phrase, it granted the 'oxygen of publicity' to a terrorist organisation. Brittan repeated the request in a letter to the BBC's Chairman, Stuart Young. A merely sensitive issue had suddenly become a major test of the BBC's resolve.

The Corporation's Board of Governors decided to view the programme, a

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<sup>25</sup> See Leapman, *The Last Days of the Beeb*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> For an account of this episode see Leapman, *The Last Days of the Beeb*, 241-67; and Steven Barnett and Andrew Curry, *The Battle for the BBC: A British Broadcasting Conspiracy?* (London: Aurum Press, 1994), 29-34.



momentous decision given that the Board's working policy was to leave any decision-making over programming to the BBC's executives. After a heated meeting on Tuesday 30 July, the governors decided to ban the programme, and refused to relent in a second meeting hastily arranged to accommodate Alasdair Milne, the director general, who had been temporarily uncontactable while on holiday. Milne's view was that *At the Edge of the Union* should be broadcast. It eventually was, once the issue had cooled, on 16 October 1985.

The BBC's broadcasters and its governors were now seen to be divided, as was especially clear when BBC journalists staged a one-day strike on 7 August. This division seemed political in its nature. As Steven Barnett and Andrew Curry observe:

The government had had its way. Moreover, though it could be maintained that the Board of Governors had acted independently of government, its approach to the issues and its prejudices from BBC programme makers were barely distinguishable from the convictions of the Prime Minister who had approved ten of the eleven members. ... The governors may have been trustees of the public interest, but the 'public' they spoke for was a politically defined and deliberately restricted one.<sup>27</sup>

Similar outrage in Establishment circles was generated by *Secret Society*, a six-part series made by BBC Scotland and presented by the investigative journalist Duncan Campbell. The programmes examined covert surveillance activity on the part of the security services. One of them, *Cabinet*, alleged the manipulation of the British electorate by Government agencies, including members of the civil service who by rights should remain 'non-political'. *Secret Society* was scheduled for transmission in November 1986, but it was subject to repeated editorial checks and requests from BBC executives for re-editing. The delay meant that it was eventually deemed inappropriate for screening due to the impending general election.<sup>28</sup> (Of course there is an argument that if the programme's allegations were accurate, it would have been entirely appropriate for it to be screened before an election.)

Four of the six programmes were eventually shown after the election, in April and

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<sup>27</sup> Barnett and Curry, *The Battle for the BBC*, 33-34.

<sup>28</sup> For Campbell's account of these various delays, see Duncan Campbell, 'Filing Cabinet', *New Statesman*, 26 August 1988, 18-19.

May 1987. One of the remaining pair, *Cabinet*, was remade and shown in April 1991 as part of Channel Four's *Banned* season. The most notorious programme in the series, *The Zircon Affair*, was eventually screened separately in September 1988. It alleges that a £500 million defence project, featuring a new electronic surveillance system, was kept secret from Parliament. The programme was initially banned by the BBC's Director General Alasdair Milne on the grounds that transmission could be damaging to national security. It suffered the further indignation of being banned a second time when a scheduled screening for MPs in a committee room at the House of Commons was forbidden by the Speaker, Bernard Weatherill.<sup>29</sup> The affair took on additionally outlandish proportions when the police searched the offices of the *New Statesman* and the home of Duncan Campbell, looking for any evidence which might reveal the source of Campbell's information about the spy satellite.<sup>30</sup> Mrs Thatcher made the familiar correlation between the interests of the Government and the need to suppress certain kinds of programming:

Unfortunately there seem to be people with more interest in trying to ferret out and reveal information of note to our enemies, rather than in preserving the defence interest of this country, and thus the freedom which we all enjoy.<sup>31</sup>

The most inflammatory programme of the period was surely *Death on the Rock*, which was transmitted on 28 April 1988 as part of Thames Television's *This Week* documentary series. The programme deals with the shootings, that March, in Gibraltar of three members of the IRA. The original 'official' account was that the victims had just planted a car bomb and that, when challenged, their movements suggested that they might either have been armed, or might have immediately detonated the bomb. Once they had been shot it was discovered that there was no bomb, and that the victims had

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<sup>29</sup> See Richard Evans and Frances Gibb, 'MPs in storm as spy satellite film is banned', *The Times*, 23 January 1987, 1.

<sup>30</sup> See R. Barry O'Brien, 'Police kick in journalist's door', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 January 1987, 30. (The forced entry was apparently made with Campbell's permission as the lock on his front door had jammed.)

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Evans and Gibb, 'MPs in storm'.

in fact been unarmed. *Death on the Rock* presents evidence which suggests that members of the British security forces in Gibraltar had knowingly carried out the killings in cold blood.

The controversy surrounding the programme is interesting <sup>in</sup> for at least three different <sup>respects</sup> aspects. Firstly, the Government, through the Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe, tried (unsuccessfully) to have the programme withdrawn before it was transmitted. Here was a clear instance of politicians arbitrating over what was in the 'public interest' to broadcast and, furthermore, attempting to censor a discomfiting documentary report. Secondly, once *Death on the Rock* had been transmitted there was a systematic attempt on the part of sections of the press, the security services and some Conservative MPs to smear and discredit key witnesses interviewed in the programme. Thirdly, much of the criticism of the programme was explicitly politically aligned, in its assumption that the Government, as the repository of the national interest, was beyond reproach. The report of an inquiry into the programme, headed by Lord Windlesham and the QC Richard Rampton, was published in January 1989, substantially vindicating the integrity of the broadcasters.<sup>32</sup>

The point about all these incidents, and the reason for rehearsing them here, is that they indicate a fundamental shift in the relationship during the 1980s between the Government and the broadcasters. Two disquieting observations suggest themselves. Firstly that, if the allegations presented in *The Zircon Affair*, *Death on the Rock* and *Shoot to Kill* had any substance, the Government was engaged in sophisticated and vicious methods of surveillance and social control and concealing these from the public. Secondly that, given the nature of the furore over *Real Lives*, *Tumbledown* and *The Monocled Mutineer*, a number of these disputes were to do with the 'proper' observation of the boundaries of national interest and identity. The Government's intervention in these matters had a vividly coercive aspect. There is a sense that the national interest is gradually redefined so that it is synonymous with the Government's interest, to which the broadcasters are expected to accede.

These, then, were some of the programmes which divided members of the

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed account of the affair by the editor of the programme, see Roger Bolton, *Death on the Rock and Other Stories* (London: WII Allen, 1990), 1-14 and 189-301.

Government and members of the broadcasting industry. There were tensions between the two sectors on quite other grounds. The 1980s witnessed major changes to the broadcasting environment, many of them effected through Government legislation. A new broadcaster, Channel Four Television, came into operation in 1982. There was a proliferation of satellite and cable channels offering new services to viewers. A swathe of independent producers began making programmes, injecting fresh ideas into the programming field and effectively altering the in-house operations of the BBC and the ITV network companies. The BBC in any case came under repeated attack during the period, on the grounds that its funding via the licence fee was no longer tenable, and that it represented an outmoded view of public service broadcasting. The television industry, then, underwent the most extensive scrutiny and was subject to far-reaching structural alterations. Change was often accompanied – as elsewhere – by disputation and division.

It is not surprising to find the discord and anxiety of these years resonating in drama of the period. There is, in the programmes I shall address, a sense that society is in the midst of radical transformation and that old certainties are no longer secure. It is an orthodox move to suggest that drama articulates dominant currents and patterns within society: that groups of texts are inscribed with the tensions of their age. As Janey Place suggests, in an essay addressing *film noir*:

Film movements occur in specific historical periods – at times of national stress and focus of energy. They express a consistency of both thematic and formal elements which make them particularly expressive of those times.<sup>33</sup>

This is not to say that drama simply ‘reflects’ the culture in which it is made. In a much earlier study, Siegfried Kracauer argues that German films released in the period

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<sup>33</sup> Janey Place, ‘Women in film noir’, in E Ann Kaplan (ed), *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 37.

between 1918 and 1933 are organised around 'deep psychological dispositions' at work in Germany at the time. Thus the cinema of the period expresses 'those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness',<sup>34</sup> and reveal a structure of desire within the German nation which accords with the rise of fascism. I shall argue that British thriller serials are similarly revealing, shot through with a sensibility particular to Britain in the 1980s and '90s. In Kracauer's study this expression accords with the dominant culture. The 1980s and '90s thriller serials reveal structures of desire which are at best ambivalent about and sometimes clearly antagonistic to the dominant political culture. Hence they are not a mirror of their society, but a set of responses inscribed with deep anxieties about it. They form part of a countervailing discourse, however obliquely this is at times expressed.

My premise, then, is that this group of television dramas share significant aesthetic and narrational tendencies which can be related to developments within Britain's social and political spheres. It will be clear that the co-ordinates of the current study are those of genre, culture and ideology. Certain issues to do with critical procedure might usefully be addressed at this point. In places my discussion of thrillers considers novels, films and television dramas. I refer to all these as 'texts', a term which has most generally been applied to literary works. In its most neutral sense, however, it can refer not to a body of words but to any construction conveying meaning.<sup>35</sup> Thus entities as dissimilar as a Paris Metro ticket, the *Mona Lisa* and the glass pyramid in front of the Louvre can all be seen as texts, filled as they are with significations of varying kinds.

Some aspects of literary study – considerations to do with narrative, theme and characterisation, for instance – will be applicable to television dramas. But these programmes also depend upon aesthetic characteristics particular to their own medium, to do with camera focus, angle and movement, lens selection, the use of sound and lighting, *mise en scène* and editing. On balance I give rather less attention to these

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<sup>34</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: a psychological history of the German film* (Princeton University Press, 1947), 6.

<sup>35</sup> I owe this handy phrase to Brian Roberts, a colleague in the Drama Department, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

elements than to thematic considerations, but they are important nevertheless and merit some discussion in the pages that follow. In concentrating on theme I am aware of indulging in a slightly unfashionable pursuit. It is my belief, however, that addressing the semantic orientations of a text offers the most direct means of relating aesthetics, culture and ideology. 'Themes' are necessarily historically contingent, speaking as they do of aspects of life within a particular society. Any discussion of theme necessarily involves consideration of the text's construction of its own world, and the interplay between this and the 'real' world of which it speaks. Themes are in this sense always discursive.<sup>36</sup> In the programmes studied in the following pages, themes are presented through the actions and experiences of characters, more or less psychologically developed. There are implications here for constructions of subjectivity and individual identity, particular to a period in which the notion of the individual was subject to significant change. (This, indeed, is exactly one of the themes of British thriller serials.) Certain themes suggest certain appropriate styles of dramatisation. The manner of their expression; the invitation that the viewer adopt particular subject-positions with regard to them; the very fact that particular themes recur in the first place: all these have ideological implications, for they are to do with the shaping of meanings in society.

This suggests a critical approach perhaps best described as cultural materialist; but that does not preclude reference to theorists whose work falls within different schools of criticism. It might appear strange, for instance, to observe in places mention of the structuralist Todorov, the semiotician Barthes and the Marxist Williams. If the relationships between theme, textual structure and culture are deemed to be crucial, however, one must be heterodox in seeking out the tools with which to explore them. It is possible to adapt structuralist techniques, for instance, not in order to treat the text as a closed system unto itself, but to see how its structuration might be contingent on material circumstances.

There is an absence of a large body of academic material addressing the dramas central to this study. More to the point, the study of television drama is much less

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<sup>36</sup> My discussion here owes something to Michel Foucault's comments about discursive formations. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992), 29. Foucault nonetheless counsels against 'seeking the permanence of themes ... through time' (37).

developed than the study of literature or film. There is a sense that critics are still deciding how to engage with television drama. Can it be seen as 'great art' in an industry so <sup>given</sup> behoven to programme formulae and conventions? Can it be seen as art at all, given television's increasing commodification of its productions? Should it be related to a (short) history of television drama, or to a (much longer) history of dramatic representation? Should it be assessed for its status as 'popular' entertainment, by definition transient and of-the-moment, or do some programmes have deeper and more lasting identities?

○ These overlapping issues are not only relevant to television but connect with recent debates about culture more generally, and the current study will make its own perspectives clear with regard to at least some of the above questions. It seemed appropriate, early in the research stage of this project, to decide against interviewing writers, practitioners and producers. Their comments would certainly have allowed the presentation of some interesting case studies: but my intention has been to take a critically evaluative perspective, and it seemed that actual contact with the makers of the programmes, real people committed to real projects, would inevitably encourage a level of sympathy which might be counterproductive. That said, it will be obvious that I am extremely sympathetic towards a number of the programmes studied in these pages. I hope that this attraction has come about for 'textual' or 'cultural' reasons, however, rather than from the engaging accounts given by, say, a Troy Kennedy Martin or a Mick Jackson.

○ I have nonetheless referred to statements made by such individuals where I have come across them in the press or in other publications. The notion of the primacy of the author's 'intention' is now properly discredited, but having observed as much it is still the case that the author (or director, or producer, or whoever) is another commentating voice in the critical discourse which surrounds these programmes. The same is true with regard to journalists and reviewers, and I have referred to interviews, previews, features and reviews in the national press where these seemed appropriate. Some of the issues raised by newspaper critics indicates a programme's status within the public sphere; and they are in some instances relevant to an account of dramatic techniques and effectiveness. Previews and reviews are in the public domain as part of the extant,

discursive material about television drama.

As already noted, the broadcasting industry itself went through extraordinarily rapid change during the 1980s, partly in response to Government legislation and partly as a result of developments in the media worldwide consequent upon the communications revolution. The microchip facilitated the operations of international commerce, and satellite technology offered a new arena of operation to broadcasters and businessmen. I shall address the shifts within British television – which in some instances were seismic – in Chapter 2. In the same chapter I shall consider some significant developments in television drama of the period, which was itself subject to change and evolution.

This will provide the institutional context for the programmes which are at the centre of this study. All of these have, to a greater or lesser extent, a thriller inflection, which raises a number of questions to do with generic identity. I shall argue in chapter 3 that there are, broadly speaking, two approaches to genre which are relevant for my current purposes. The first asserts that the notion of genre refers to fundamental recurring aspects of textual organisation, so that one speaks of genres as they manifest themselves through time. The second holds that there is a more historically-bound understanding of the term: that genres form at particular historical moments, and can be seen to develop and perhaps then disperse. I believe that the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible. The first would suggest that there are certain fundamental aspects of the thriller genre which structure the effects of a wide variety of thriller texts. I shall explore these in Chapter 4. The deep structures of the thriller, however, are manifested differently at different times, and in different forms of literature or drama. In Chapter 5 I shall examine the shared themes and tendencies of British thriller serials, and suggest that these form a recognisable, historically-specific sub-genre in their own right – perhaps, rather, a genre within a genre.

Certain of these programmes seem to me more interesting and important than the others, and I address these individually in the chapters that follow. This kind of selection instantly raises questions of aesthetic quality and cultural value. Post-structuralist and deconstructionist criticism has shown that texts are definable according to systems or structures, that their ‘meanings’ are not necessarily transparent or fixed,



and that their readers (let us assume that this term also includes viewers of dramas on screen) are themselves an important component in the construction of such meanings. One of the paradoxical effects of much criticism in this vein (often extremely radical in its questioning of established practices and authorities) has been an emptying out of the notion of 'value', as if only a misguided simpleton would fail to see that all such questions are endlessly contingent and relative.<sup>37</sup> Indeed these procedures have led to a nervousness about committing to value-judgments at all.

A recent collection of essays by American critics entitled *Aesthetics and Ideology* effects a cautious reassessment of this situation, and make a case for what Peter Brooks describes as 'a reassertion of the historical and ideological coordinates of literature'.<sup>38</sup> As the title of the book implies, this renewed interest in cultural considerations is enacted through an orthodox engagement with aesthetics. George Levine notes

a consensus that the aesthetic needs to be recuperated, re-understood, and that far from being a bad thing, ideologically complicit with all that elitist oppression, it had from its very beginnings a very complex and potentially liberatory quality. ... The aesthetic matters. ... The problem is how to understand the aesthetic, with all its implications of value and all of its shady political history, as something valuable both politically and otherwise.<sup>39</sup>

The aesthetic is not innocent of politics or history. In recognising this the critic is thus in quest of what Stephen Greenblatt has described as a '*poetics of culture*',<sup>40</sup> an understanding of the intersections between artistic forms and social life. In that case concerns over, for example, the purpose of a police force, formations of masculinity and the relation of the individual to the state do not merely form the content of works but are figured within them in the most appropriate ways. The aesthetic determination

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<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of some of these issues, see Terry Eagleton, 'The Idealism of American Criticism', 'Frère Jacques: The Politics of Deconstruction' and 'Marxism, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism', in Eagleton, *Against the Grain* (London and New York: Verso, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> Peter Brooks, 'Aesthetics and Ideology – What Happened to Poetics?', in George Levine (ed), *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 153.

<sup>39</sup> George Levine, 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Aesthetic', in Levine (ed), *Aesthetics and Ideology*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Levine, *ibid.*, 7 [Greenblatt's emphasis].

of a text is not extraneous to its themes but is somehow interrelated to the cultural interests which shape it. Investigating that 'somehow' with regard to the thriller idiom is one concern of the present study. For a variety of reasons programmes like *Edge of Darkness*, *Prime Suspect* and *The Singing Detective* are more interesting for this purpose than the likes of *Confessional*, *Gallowglass* or any of the dramas screened under the collective title *Frederick Forsyth Presents...*

This is to assert that aesthetic issues and ideas of cultural value cannot easily be separated, but it does not quite answer whether there is, in the first place, such a thing as 'good aesthetics'. The term is perhaps misplaced. We should instead talk of 'appropriate' and 'effective' aesthetics, and it is in this respect that I choose to privilege the small number of dramas to which I give close individual attention.<sup>41</sup> My focus in Chapter 5 is on certain thematic tendencies in drama of the period. In the subsequent chapters on individual serials I shall also consider questions of narration, filmic style, gender and subjectivity. In each case the intersection of aesthetics and content is especially interesting.

Prizes are not necessarily the most trustworthy guarantee of quality, but it is worth emphasising that four of the six dramas which I centrally examine <sup>in detail</sup> won the British Academy of Film and Television Arts award for Best Series in their respective years of transmission. This indicates, at least, the esteem in which they were held by the members of the film and television industries who make such adjudications. The exceptions were *The Singing Detective* and *GBH*: the first was in any case commonly held to be an exceptional piece of work; the second was the subject of an unresolved controversy when it appeared that four of BAFTA's jury of seven had voted for it rather than for *Prime Suspect*, which was awarded the prize. BAFTA established an internal investigation which ruled that there were no irregularities in the voting procedure, but the matter remained baffling and was never properly explained.<sup>42</sup>

Whether one agrees that any particular programme is better than any other is not the only issue. These dramas all made an impact with the viewing public and within the

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<sup>41</sup> For an argument in favour of a notion of 'quality' television drama, see George Brandt, 'Introduction', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2-5.

<sup>42</sup> See 'Bafta stands by drama winner', *The Times*, 7 April 1992, 20.

television industry. Their currency derives not solely from qualities immanent <sup>in</sup> to the programmes themselves, but to a wider sense of their influence. To quote Richard Paterson:

the influence and effect of a programme does not end with its viewing – the proliferation of secondary discussion of it alters perspectives all of which have their effects. This is particularly the case with television series whose reputation is built up through review and word-of-mouth comment. The series or serial becomes public much more easily than the single play or TV movie.<sup>43</sup>

That is not to deny the importance of key individuals to the effectiveness of these programmes. Although the current study focuses on a particular genre, it has an auteurist tinge. The dramas to which I pay most attention were scripted by Troy Kennedy Martin, Alan Plater, Simon Moore, Alan Bleasdale, Lynda La Plante and Dennis Potter, among them some of the most celebrated dramatists of their period. At various points I give some account of the place each drama has in the output of its writer. The same goes for the contributions of other individuals, including Mick Jackson, for instance, who directed *A Very British Coup*; or Michael Wearing, who produced *Edge of Darkness*.

The work of particular individuals, in fact, goes some way to explaining the emergence of a group of programmes sharing similar themes and aesthetic strategies. Ron Hutchinson, for instance, wrote *Bird of Prey* and developed the storyline of *Final Run*. David Drury directed *Defence of the Realm*, *Children of the North* and *Prime Suspect III*. Sally Head produced *The Detective* and *A Very British Coup* and was executive producer of the *Prime Suspect* dramas and *Cracker*. Andrew Dunn was the lighting cameraman on *Edge of Darkness* and *Tumbledown*.<sup>44</sup> These initial overlaps between individuals and projects suggest a more extensive shared understanding, quite possibly unspoken and unformulated, with working practices and conventions common

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Paterson, 'Restyling masculinity: the impact of *Boys From the Blackstuff*', in James Curran, Anthony Smith and Pauline Wingate (eds), *Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 218.

<sup>44</sup> For a short interview with Andrew Dunn, see 'The Man Who Lit Darkness', *In Camera*, autumn 1988, 8-9.

to many thriller serials of the period. It is banal to suggest that the individuals who work on a project in themselves make no difference to its final identity.<sup>45</sup> They are among its determining elements and only the most committed structuralist would deny that some writers and directors work more effectively in a given medium or genre than others. It is the nature of that effectiveness which deserves especial scrutiny.

There is another side to the coin, however. As Stephen Hearst observes:

One cannot exaggerate the importance of team-work in quality television – and not just team-work but also the need for each member of the team to have considerable talent for his or her specific task. Technologically speaking, television is a difficult, complex and demanding medium, requiring a vast diversity of skills. The form is hard to handle, and unless you are very careful, it can easily dominate the content of programmes. ... For example, it is symptomatic of the difficulty that content permanently faces in asserting itself on television that playwrights complain of the vast teams that are assembled to produce the creative result of a single mind and sensibility, of a single pen and relatively few sheets of paper ... Shelley's poetry needed Shelley alone, the writing of *The Pickwick Papers* none other than Dickens. To put a single close-up of a face on television has, up till now, needed dozens of people.<sup>46</sup>

Those dozens, moreover, are not working in isolation in their garrets or editing suites, but within a powerful, well-financed and highly-organised industry. The dramas which form the subject of this study were all commissioned by broadcasting executives, made by production companies or by the production arms of the broadcasters themselves, and transmitted nationwide on one or other of the major channels. They were written about in the national press and occasionally debated in television and radio programmes and, in exceptional instances, even in Parliament. There is clearly a great deal at stake in terms of money, prestige and less easily definable cultural resonance. Television drama is a commodity: literally, in that it is a

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<sup>45</sup> For a collection of essays and excerpts addressing the disputed notion of authorship in film, see John Caughie (ed), *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Hearst, 'Cards on the Table', in Brian Wenham (ed), *The Third Age of Broadcasting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 118.

piece of 'product' for its owner first to broadcast and then, ideally, to sell abroad; and less tangibly, in that it exists as an entity filled with cultural value – a value only partly definable in economic terms. It is no wonder that these programmes are carefully handled by the institutions responsible for their transmission.

In the closing chapters I shall relate television thriller serials of the period more specifically to the discourse of Thatcherism. I shall address in Chapter 11 one of their most revealing tendencies: the fact that their denouements are so frequently marked with ambivalence, with a sense of failure, with the evocation of a lingering anxiety. Satisfactory narrative closure has, since Aristotle, been held to be one of the staples of a 'good' story. If 1980s thriller serials are in some manner documents of Thatcherism, their partial or pessimistic endings have profound ideological consequence. In the closing chapter I shall explore the ways in which these programmes indeed constitute a response to their age, and suggest that they can, in no frivolous sense, be seen as Thatcher's thrillers.

## 2 British television broadcasting in the 1980s

In 1982 Brian Wenham declared that the 'third age of broadcasting' was now upon us.<sup>1</sup> After a first 'age' dominated by radio and a second by 'rationed television' (as provided by the BBC and the ITV companies), the arrival of satellite and cable technology would surely 'administer drastic shocks to the traditional mechanisms of broadcast production, distribution and exchange and to the regulatory arrangements that have sustained them'.<sup>2</sup> Wenham was not mistaken in this prognosis. British broadcasting changed rapidly and irrevocably during the 1980s, in part due to the proliferation of transmission sources. This was an era of technological determinism whereby, to refer to Raymond Williams' formulation, new technologies set the conditions for social and cultural change.<sup>3</sup> Williams also describes 'symptomatic technology', whereby technologies are by-products of social process. This latter model was much less evident during the 1980s. Writing in the previous decade Williams laments the fact that technology is perceived as marginal to the operation of culture, and calls for a social practice which recognises its centrality and directs its development towards clear social needs. During the Thatcher era technological development was wholeheartedly embraced; but not in the benevolent terms which Williams advocates.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Wenham, 'Foreword: so as to Choose', in Brian Wenham (ed), *The Third Age of Broadcasting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 13. For a selective but useful chronology of British broadcasting, see Barrie MacDonald, *Broadcasting in the UK: A guide to information sources* (London: Mansell, 1993), 1-36.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Wenham, 'Into the Interior', in Wenham, *op.cit.*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television – Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 13.

<sup>4</sup> For an instance of Williams' distaste at the limitations of a deregulated broadcasting system, see Raymond Williams, 'Impressions of U.S. Television', in Alan O'Connor (ed), *Raymond Williams on Television* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 24-29.

Extensive developments<sup>with regard</sup> to the structure and strategies of broadcasting companies during the 1980s further altered the shape of British television. A new terrestrial broadcaster, Channel Four, came into existence in 1982, heralding the arrival of the independent production sector as an alternative source of programme material. Direct broadcasting by satellite, with the potential to beam a large number of channels into people's homes, saw the arrival in 1989 of Sky Television. The following year the company became the dominant partner in a merger with its only competitor in Britain, British Satellite Broadcasting. Broadcasting by cable also made headway during the decade, although the impact of this particular mode of transmission was barely felt during the 1980s and may only attain real significance towards the end of the 1990s as cable networks become more widespread.

Less concretely but no less significantly, there were marked shifts of atmosphere during the decade, from the pioneer-like vivaciousness of Channel Four's new team in 1982 to the sense of devastation felt by the employees of the ITV companies who lost their franchise bids in 1991; from the bullishness of the burgeoning independent production sector, to the resentment expressed by staff at the BBC as the demands of the Corporation's Extending Choice initiative came into operation in the 1990s. The emotional contours of the decade are not without consequence, for they give colour and texture to the radical transformations which the television industry underwent in this period. The sheer *speed* at which change was effected emphasised the divisions created, so that ideological differences were frequently stark.

The far-reaching nature of change divided people: it could hardly be otherwise. For Cento Veljanovski of the Institute of Economic Affairs, 'technology, attracted by the beacon of profits and the call of consumer demand, has been the saviour of the citizen and has broken the state's stranglehold on broadcasting'.<sup>5</sup> According to Richard Paterson, on the other hand, government policy in important areas was driven by 'economic dogma'.<sup>6</sup> Greg Dyke, the former Chief Executive of London Weekend Television, went even further in a speech to the Royal Television Society in 1994:

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<sup>5</sup> Cento Veljanovski, 'Competition in Broadcasting', in Cento Veljanovski (ed), *Freedom in Broadcasting* (London: The Institute of Economic Affairs, 1989), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Paterson, 'The Economic Organisation of Television Production', in Richard Paterson (ed), *Organising for Change* (London: BFI, 1990), 44.

Never has government done so much damage to one industry in such a short period of time as the Conservatives have done to broadcasting over the past 6-7 years. An industry created over 40 years ago has been crippled for no other reason than first, Thatcher's dogma, and, second, a series of unthought-out and badly compromised policy decisions culminating in the recent changes to the ITV ownership rules.<sup>7</sup>

These remarks have an added piquancy in that LWT, under Dyke, was seen as one of the ITV network's proudest successes in the run-up to and aftermath of the franchise round in 1991, the purveyor of a range of popular long-running programmes including *Blind Date* (1984) and *London's Burning* (1988). The company was subsequently taken over by Granada Television in 1994.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter will outline the political and industrial context of broadcasting during this period. It will consider institutional and structural determinants, and explore shifts in the relationship between the Government, broadcasting companies, regulatory authorities, commercial interests and the public. It will then examine significant trends in drama production and programming, some of which are directly related to structural changes within the broadcasting industry. It will of necessity consider the peculiar fact of legislated deregulation. Many of the restrictions binding British broadcasting were loosened during the 1980s by a government which seized the initiative in this field more vigorously than had ever before been the case. Paradoxically this involved, in many instances, structuring new boundaries. The characteristic mix – *laissez faire* principles in harness with eagle-eyed supervision – found its most robust expression in the Broadcasting Act of 1990.

## **1) The legislative and institutional context**

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<sup>7</sup> Greg Dyke, 'How to save British TV', *The Guardian*, 14 March 1994 (edited version of speech to the Royal Television Society).

<sup>8</sup> See p. 56.



One of the most significant tensions throughout the 1980s was that between control over broadcasting and the loosening of control. Should the emerging new system be structured according to paternalistic regulation or the operation of market forces? Should its putative proprietors be subject to constraints on cross-media ownership, or should they enjoy unrestricted opportunity as the pioneers of a new era? Should broadcasters be bound by tightly defined programme standards, or should they be free to transmit whatsoever they chose? The options were never quite this straightforward, of course. Although the free market argument seems consistent with the ideology of Thatcherite Tories, it would be wrong to say that divisions with regard to broadcasting policy were along clear party political lines. Indeed one can observe a crucial contradiction in government thinking throughout the period, between an espousal of free market principles and a commitment to a degree of 'paternalistic' regulation. As Hood and O'Leary note, this perceived split

can be defined in various ways as between Wets and Dries, the Tory grandees and the New Men, the landed interest and the City, the One Nation Tories and the Free Marketeers, the true Thatcherites and those who hanker after some sort of consensus on matters of public policy.<sup>9</sup>

It can also be seen, as the authors suggest, as a split between the economic orientation of the Department of Trade and Industry and a more supervisory tendency within the Home Office.

These apparent contradictions were in fact frequently reconciled, in ways which bring to mind the coercive tendencies of Mrs Thatcher's administration addressed in Chapter 1.<sup>10</sup> As Brenda Maddox tartly observed, 'Every time Mrs Thatcher's government sees a new source of choice in television spring up, it sets up a new authority to control it.'<sup>11</sup> The Cable Authority, the Satellite Broadcasting Board, the

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<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hood and Garret O'Leary, *Questions of Broadcasting* (London: Methuen, 1990), 80. See also Lord Annan on the two predominant casts of mind in government circles, in Wilf Stevenson and Nick Smedley (eds), *Responses to the White Paper* (London: BFI, 1989), 8.

<sup>10</sup> For a fuller discussion of the fundamentally contradictory nature of Thatcherism see pp. 347-51.

<sup>11</sup> Brenda Maddox, 'Coexistence: a survival strategy for public service broadcasting', in Colin MacCabe and Olivia Stewart (eds), *The BBC and Public Service Broadcasting* (Manchester University Press, 1986), 75.

Board of Film Censors, the Broadcasting Standards Council, the Broadcasting Complaints Commission and the Independent Television Commission – all established or redefined during the period – represent an extensive commitment to regulation of one kind or another. That said, these bodies have tended to be light-touch in terms of overseeing the economic activities of their charges, and rather more assertive in terms of vetting broadcast material. In any case, the pattern to broadcasting legislation throughout the 1980s was consonant with David Elstein’s call for ‘a *less* regulated system than the one we have now in Britain, “de-regulation” with a hyphen, rather than “deregulation” with its deceptive suggestion of free-market operation.’<sup>12</sup>

Divisions along the lines indicated above were looming even before Margaret Thatcher took office as Prime Minister on 4 May 1979. In an influential piece in *The Guardian* as early as 1972, Anthony Smith argued that British broadcasters would benefit by operating, at least in part, like a publisher.<sup>13</sup> Just as a publishing company does not write in-house the books it publishes, so broadcasters should not necessarily make the programmes they transmit. This idea became reality with the inception of Channel Four, operating as a ‘publisher’ of programmes and relying to a great extent on material supplied by a new swathe of independent producers.

Some of the institutional changes effected in the 1980s were also foreshadowed in the findings of an official body, the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting, chaired by Lord Annan, whose report was published in 1977. The Committee recognised the effect that advances in technology were likely to have on the broadcasting world. It argued that diversity – both in terms of outlets and programme types – was the key to a healthy broadcasting environment; but that this diversity was hardly likely to come about ‘if all developments are forced into the straitjacket of the existing duopoly of the BBC and IBA’.<sup>14</sup> To this end the Committee’s most comprehensively argued vision of diversity lies in its recommendations regarding the establishment of a fourth channel. It notes with due caution, however, that examination of the freer broadcasting environment in the United States reveals that ‘virtually unrestricted competition ...

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<sup>12</sup> David Elstein, ‘An end to protection’, in MacCabe and Stewart (eds), *The BBC*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Smith, *The Guardian*, 21 April 1972.

<sup>14</sup> Home Office, *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting*, Cmnd. 6752 (London: HMSO, 1977), 30.1, 471. Hereafter referred to as ‘the Annan Report’.

narrows the range of programmes'.<sup>15</sup> It concludes that changes to British broadcasting ought to be managed by a number of regulatory bodies. To this end it proposes redefinition of the responsibilities of the IBA under the new name the Regional Television Authority; the creation of a Local Broadcasting Authority to take responsibility for local radio broadcasting; and the creation of an Open Broadcasting Authority to oversee the new fourth channel.<sup>16</sup>

This plethora of new authorities never came into being – although others did – but their imagined presence suggests an overriding concern, at this stage, to ‘manage’ the expansion of broadcasting services. The Annan Report was submitted towards the end of James Callaghan’s Labour Government and its recommendations were not implemented nor even fully discussed. An important point emerges, however. For all its emphasis on the public service aspect to British broadcasting, the Report indicates a fundamental willingness, in a period of Labour government, to contemplate a challenge to the status quo represented by the ‘cosy duopoly’ of the BBC and ITV (to use Professor Alan Peacock’s subsequent formulation). Attacks on the BBC throughout the 1980s should not be seen as uniquely the instigation of Thatcherite dogmatists. They also relate to a broader questioning of the Corporation’s role.

The Annan Report, published at the end of Brian Wenham’s ‘second age’ of broadcasting, signals an intimation of far-reaching changes to come. Wenham dates the ‘third age’ from the inception of Channel Four, which represents ‘at one and the same time the final chapter in the old story and the first paragraph in the new’.<sup>17</sup> The establishment of the new channel marks the first major change to the broadcasting landscape under the Thatcher Government, and it was markedly to affect the entire broadcasting culture both in terms of programme provision and infrastructural organisation.

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<sup>15</sup> Home Office, *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting*, 7.5, 72.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.9-11, 73.

<sup>17</sup> Wenham, *Third Age*, 15.

The 1980 Broadcasting Act legislated for the inception of The Channel Four Television Company as a limited public company, a subsidiary of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (which was also responsible for the ITV companies).<sup>18</sup> From the outset, then, Channel Four was not entirely a free agent but had to account to a parent authority. The new broadcaster was financed by subscriptions from the ITV network contractors, who paid 17 per cent of their net advertising revenue (NAR) for this purpose to the IBA, in return selling Channel Four's advertising time in their respective regional areas. This funding arrangement was modified in the 1990 Broadcasting Act so that in 1993 Channel Four became a corporation selling its own advertising time and the ITV companies guaranteed to support Channel Four in the event of the latter suffering a shortfall of revenue. In return for this 'safety net', the ITC calculates 14 per cent of the UK's total terrestrial advertising income and takes for the ITV network half of any advertising revenue which Channel Four earns above this figure. A *Guardian* leader described the formula as 'a rigged botch of a simulated market'.<sup>19</sup> Given that Channel Four routinely exceeds the threshold, the payment is hotly disputed by the company's executives as a punitive 'success tax'.<sup>20</sup>

Channel Four's celebrated remit imposed a number of important obligations on the new broadcaster: it should cater to interests (especially those of minority groups) not served by the existing broadcasters; include a range of educational programmes in its output; encourage innovation and experimentation; and commission a substantial proportion of its material from independent production companies. While this latter requirement ensured that Annan's desire to introduce a 'third force' into British broadcasting would finally be met, it should be noted that Channel Four was also at liberty to commission and/or purchase programmes from the existing ITV network companies and to purchase material from overseas.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Home Office, *The Broadcasting Act 1980* (London: HMSO, 1980). For a useful chapter-length account of Channel Four, see Sylvia Harvey, 'Channel 4 Television: From Annan to Grade', in Stuart Hood (ed), *Behind the Screens* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1994), 102-132.

<sup>19</sup> 'Grade 4 and rising', *The Guardian*, 9 February 1995, 21.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, John Willis, 'What couldn't we do with £57 million?', *The Times*, 8 February 1995, 21.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion which emphasises the importance of this aspect of Channel Four's operation, see Richard Collins, Nicholas Garnham, Gareth Locksley, *The Economics of Television* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1988), 44-49.

In administrative and organisational terms, Channel Four represented a new model within British broadcasting. Unlike the BBC or the ITV companies which made – and still make – many of their programmes in-house, Channel Four had no production facilities of its own. Instead it commissioned and purchased the entirety of its output, thus operating as a ‘publisher’ of other companies’ work rather than as a producer in its own right. (This is not to say that the Channel would not become heavily involved as the leading financial partner in various productions.) In order to effect this *modus operandi*, the Channel depended from the outset upon a small number of powerful commissioning editors responsible for separate programming areas, with direct lines of communication to the Chief Executive (Jeremy Isaacs, formerly the Programme Controller of Thames TV), the Managing Director and Deputy Chief Executive (Justin Dukes), and the Channel Controller (Paul Bonner). In this respect Channel Four was much less vertically-integrated than the existing terrestrial broadcasters and its streamlined internal structure meant that decisions could be made with relative speed. Jeremy Isaacs states, for example, that he agreed to provide the entire funding (£650,000) for the film *My Beautiful Laundrette* two days after receiving the script.<sup>22</sup> Indeed both the BBC and the ITV companies would subsequently shift from a vertically-integrated, factory model towards a more lateral operation, involving increased contracting out of certain services.

It was of no little significance that Channel Four’s Chief Executive should have direct responsibility for the programmes themselves. As Isaacs notes, the IBA-appointed panel of consultants (eventually to become the board of Channel Four)

was not looking for a Managing Director with the editorial figure, a Director of Programmes, reporting to him. The advertisement was for a Chief Executive who would be responsible for the procurement of all programmes, with a Director of Finance under him.<sup>23</sup>

Isaacs had outlined his vision of the fourth channel’s character in his MacTaggart Lecture to delegates at the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 1980. The

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<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Isaacs, *Storm over 4* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 160.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

channel, he argued, should be one

which extends the choice available to viewers; which extends the range of ITV's programmes; which caters for substantial minorities presently neglected; which builds into its actuality programmes a complete spectrum of political attitude and opinion; which furthers, in a segment of its programming, some broad educational purposes; which encourages worthwhile independent production; which allows the larger regional ITV companies to show us what their programme-makers can do. We want a fourth channel that will neither simply compete with ITV-1 nor merely be complementary to it. We want a fourth channel that everyone will watch some of the time and no-one all the time. We want a fourth channel that will, somehow, be different.<sup>24</sup>

Not long afterwards, Isaacs had refined his ideas. His application for the post of Chief Executive includes the following priorities for the new channel: 'To encourage innovation across the whole range of programmes ... To make programmes of special appeal to particular audiences ... To provide platforms for the widest possible range of opinion in utterance, discussion and debate'.<sup>25</sup> This agenda was consistent with the early view of diversity expressed in the Annan Report, which noted that:

Our society is now multi-racial and pluralist: that is to say, people adhere to different views of the nature and purpose of life ... The structure of broadcasting should reflect this variety ... Moreover, we consider it important that there should be a number of sources of editorial judgment on broadcast programmes, particularly during a period of change ... There is no definitive production of *Hamlet*. Diversity of style, tone and texture in programming is just as important for variety and choice as a wide range of subjects.<sup>26</sup>

Diversity, however, could be interpreted in a number of ways, and this is where the personality and philosophy of the Chief Executive becomes crucial. John Birt, then working for LWT and subsequently to become the BBC's Director General, was

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Simon Blanchard, 'Where do new channels come from?', in Simon Blanchard and David Morley (eds), *What's this Channel Fo(u)r?* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1982), 18.

<sup>25</sup> Isaacs, *Storm over 4*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Home Office, *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting*, 4.5, 30.

interviewed for the post as Chief Executive at Channel Four. His vision for the new channel, according to Isaacs, imagined 'every programme aimed at a particular self-selecting interest group – birdwatchers, motorcycle enthusiasts, gardeners, anglers – the whole backed up by bulky research into specialized print magazine circulations and readerships'.<sup>27</sup>

The extent of differences in interpretation of the role of the new channel can be gauged by an account of the following exchange:

[Jeremy Isaacs] recalls "an absolute run-in" with Norman Tebbit at an embassy dinner party shortly after Channel Four went on the air. Tebbit told him: "You've got it completely wrong. When the Act said 'cater for interests not catered for by ITV, or be a distinctive service', we didn't mean you to put on left-wingers, or put on homosexuals, or put on trade unions, or put on any of those things. What you should be doing are programmes for yachtsmen and golfers."<sup>28</sup>

Channel Four began broadcasting on 2 November 1982. The 'third category' of programmes which the Annan Report had called for as 'a force for diversity and new ideas'<sup>29</sup> was brought into being. In 1982 the Independent Programme Producers Association (IPPA) was formed to represent this new sector of programme-makers. As John Woodward notes:

the Association immediately had a membership of 250 companies ... [a] second wave came pouring out of the BBC, ITV, academia, journalism, political and interest groups to stake their claim to a piece of Channel Four's airtime. It is true to say that in the early years of the channel's operation, this critical mass of producers was marked by an idealism and a commitment to programming not seen before or since.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Isaacs, *Storm over 4*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Reported in David Docherty, David E. Morrison and Michael Tracey, *Keeping faith? Channel Four and its audience* (London: John Libbey & Company Ltd, 1988), 18.

<sup>29</sup> Home Office, *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting*, 15.21, 237.

<sup>30</sup> John Woodward, 'Day of the Reptile: Independent Production Between the 80s and 90s', in Richard Paterson (ed), *Organising for Change* (London: BFI, 1990), 16.

There was an irony to this. A number of Conservative politicians had seen the 'third force' as an intrinsic extension of the logic of the free market, capable of breaking a broadcasting mould which depended on cosy reciprocal agreements between the BBC and the ITV network regarding the purchasing of programmes and films. But given access to the airwaves, independent producers provided programmes which in some cases were highly critical of aspects of government policy. Magazine series like *The Bandung File* (dealing with Asian issues) and *Out on Tuesday* (for a lesbian and gay audience), and the documentary strand *Cutting Edge* gave a public platform to views and experiences which had previously been insufficiently represented. These developments had a profound impact on the identity of BBC2, which renovated its profile during the 1980s to such an extent that, by the end of the decade, it was directly competing with Channel Four in the creation of new forms of programming and new initiatives to address 'minority' interests.<sup>31</sup>

If Channel Four and the independent sector seemed made for one another, a number of objections to the nature of their relationship quickly emerged. There was a sense that access to Channel Four by definition marginalised the work transmitted, in effect reinforcing the independent sector's exclusion from mainstream programme-making. With so many independent production companies vying for airtime this was definitely a publisher's market. In terms of commissioning power, lack of long-term commitment and ownership of programme rights, the advantage lay squarely with Channel Four. Moreover the channel quickly established a substantial commitment to a small number of companies, leaving meagre pickings for the rest. By 1985, for instance, Channel Four's output comprised 690 hours of new programming, of which 54 per cent was provided by only 14 companies.<sup>32</sup>

The independent sector nonetheless formed an increasingly powerful lobby throughout the 1980s. Its case was conclusively recognised in the publication of the Report of the Peacock Committee, arguing that 40 per cent of new programming transmitted by BBC and ITV should be commissioned from independent production

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of this development see Andrew Lavender, 'Channel Crossing', *The Guardian*, 23 December 1991, 21.

<sup>32</sup> London Centre for Information and Communication Policy Studies, 'The Economics of Television', quoted in Hood and O'Leary, *Questions of Broadcasting*, 62.



companies.<sup>33</sup> The terrestrial broadcasters vigorously opposed such a high figure, but the inevitability of a stipulated percentage was never at issue. In June 1986 'The 25% Campaign' was established by a group of independent producers arguing that their sector should provide a quarter of the terrestrial broadcasters' new programming. In November 1986 the Home Secretary endorsed this target, stating that it should be reached by 1992. While the date was subsequently altered to allow the BBC and ITV more time, the implementation of this percentage figure was established as a stipulation. When the Independent Programme Producers Association merged with The Producers Association in 1991 to form the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT), the new body numbered over 1,400 independent producers as members.<sup>34</sup>

The free market argument in relation to developments in broadcasting was breezily stated in a report on communications technology entitled *The Omega File*, submitted to the Government in 1984 by the Adam Smith Institute, a monetarist think-tank. *The Omega File* argues vigorously in favour of *laissez faire* in the allocation of broadcasting frequencies for two particular reasons. Firstly because 'it is the legions of entrepreneurs who, in a competitive search for profits, will seek out new opportunities and will provide them at least cost';<sup>35</sup> secondly because television 'must move towards the demands of its audience ... High ratings ought to be accepted as the yardstick of what the people want, and should not be regarded as the object of disdain [*sic*]'.<sup>36</sup> Under this analysis the BBC is clearly an anachronism, an institution funded by a 'television tax' (the licence fee) whose programmes are driven not by audience demand, but by a notion – suspiciously elitist, according to the authors – of quality. Thus the report recommends direct charging ('pay TV', based on some kind of subscription model, whereby the viewer pays only for the services s/he wants to watch) as by far the most

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<sup>33</sup> See below, pp. 43–44.

<sup>34</sup> MacDonald, *Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 124.

<sup>35</sup> The Adam Smith Institute, *The Omega File: Communications* (London: ASI (Research) Ltd, 1984), 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 40.

preferable method of funding the BBC, which should in any case be devolved into separate self-financing units.<sup>37</sup>

*The Omega File* predicates its analysis on the central concept of the sovereignty of the viewer, albeit taking a rather different perspective than does Dennis Potter in his conception of the 'sovereign self'.<sup>38</sup> The argument has a remorseless logic. The viewer is a consumer and should be treated as such, allowed to exercise choice in an unfettered marketplace. Pay-TV is intellectually consistent with the notion of the sovereignty of the consumer and as such is preferable to the licence fee, which operates like a regressive poll tax whereby everyone pays regardless of whether they partake of the service offered. Both 'pay-per-view' and advertising-revenue models of funding offer a true reflection of the volume of interest in each programme. In the former case, viewers select and pay for their preferences; in the latter case, advertisers will be more ready to display their wares in the windows provided by popular programmes. Thus the report calls for a (legislated) assault on the protected status of the BBC.

Short though it is, this document articulates very clearly a prevailing set of opinions throughout the 1980s. As Hood and O'Leary note:

What is striking [about *The Omega File*] is the animosity displayed by the authors of the report towards the idea of public service broadcasting and the populist scorn with which it is dismissed. The attack is launched ... from a position that uncritically embraces commercialism and market forces, making numbers the sole criterion of quality.<sup>39</sup>

Certainly those cautious of the effects of deregulation suggested that the proliferation of broadcasting sources may well offer more *quantitative* choice, but not more *qualitative* choice. In a system driven by economic considerations, competition for viewers might result in more game shows, sitcoms and soap operas, and fewer documentaries, educational programmes and single dramas. Certainly a glance at the schedules of BSkyB indicates the absence of the latter. If satellite broadcasting has extended the

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<sup>37</sup> The Adam Smith Institute, *The Omega File*, 41.

<sup>38</sup> For Potter's notion of the sovereignty of the individual, see pp. 319-20.

<sup>39</sup> Hood and O'Leary, *Questions of Broadcasting*, 86.

viewer's options, it has done so in a different way than did Channel Four only a few years earlier, when it offered a raft of new programmes and signally different perspectives and points of view. Writing in 1982, Stephen Hearst suggested that those engaged with British broadcasting should 'adopt the term "enrichment" as a national broadcasting objective in making use of the new technology in the late 1980s and early 1990s.'<sup>40</sup> In 1994 new services are still coming before the public, but it is a moot point as to whether the viewing experience has been enriched to the extent that Hearst might have hoped.

As the proliferation of broadcasting sources gathered pace throughout the 1980s, so the legislative process reflected the hardening of the Government's free-market attitude. In 1980 the Home Office commissioned a study of direct broadcasting by satellite (DBS). The ensuing report saw DBS in context with the BBC and the ITV network in a carefully proscribed realm of public service broadcasting.<sup>41</sup> Subsequent to this, Margaret Thatcher created an Information Technology Advisory Panel which was instructed to 'ensure that Government policies and actions are based on a close appreciation of market needs and opportunities'.<sup>42</sup> Its report on the potentialities of cable technology was published by the Cabinet Office in February 1982,<sup>43</sup> and pressed for regulations regarding programming on cable channels to be lifted. The Cable Authority was established under the Cable and Broadcasting Act 1984 (the Act also set up an authority to supervise broadcasting by satellite) and was made responsible for licensing and regulating cable broadcast services. In 1985 it began awarding franchises for new UK broadband cable systems.

Meanwhile the race to offer Britain's first satellite broadcasting service was joined between Sky Television and British Satellite Broadcasting. Sky began a DBS service on 5 February 1989. BSB's full DBS service began on 29 April 1990 and, weakened by the delay, the company was unable to stave off its rival. On 2 November 1990 Sky merged with BSB to form British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB).

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen Hearst, 'Cards on the Table', in Wenham (ed), *The Third Age of Broadcasting*, 127.

<sup>41</sup> Home Office, *Direct Broadcasting by Satellite* (London: HMSO, 1981).

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Stuart Hood, *On Television* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 114.

<sup>43</sup> Home Office/Department of Trade and Industry, *Report of the Inquiry into Cable Expansion and Broadcasting Policy*, Cmnd. 8679 (London: HMSO, 1982).

In March 1985 Professor Alan Peacock, an economist who was also, as Hood and O’Leary note, ‘vice-chancellor of Britain’s only private enterprise university’ (the University of Buckingham, 1978-84),<sup>44</sup> was appointed to chair the Committee on Financing the BBC. While the initial brief was solely concerned with the BBC, Peacock and his team found that in addressing the ‘cornerstone’ of British broadcasting, they could not very well ignore the other bricks in the edifice. The Committee’s report was published on 3 July 1986.<sup>45</sup> Contrary to expectations that it would endorse the drive towards a free market in broadcasting, it balances such prerogatives with a considered commitment to the public service ethos. The two aspects were very much in evidence, making the Peacock Report seem both radical and reserved. It paved the way for much of the legislation enacted in the Broadcasting Act of 1990; but the Report itself is worth examining in some detail as, midway through the decade, it clearly articulated the political and philosophical environment under which broadcasters were now working.

Despite the successful establishment of Channel Four, the Committee saw British broadcasting as still dependent upon a duopoly, in that ‘while Channel 4 ... provides an independently controlled television channel, its links with ITV are strong’.<sup>46</sup> Its argument for breaking up the duopoly is based on the now-familiar notion of the sovereignty of viewers and listeners, ‘who are the best ultimate judges of their own interests, which they can best satisfy if they have the option of purchasing the broadcasting services they require from as many alternative sources of supply as possible’.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, the Report rejects the ‘commercial laissez-faire model’ because it ‘is based on a small number of broadcasters competing to sell audiences to

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<sup>44</sup> Hood and O’Leary, *Questions of Broadcasting*, 91.

<sup>45</sup> Home Office, *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, Cmnd. 9824 (London: HMSO, 1986). Hereafter referred to as ‘the Peacock Report’ or simply ‘the Report’.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 592, 133.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 592, 133.

advertisers'.<sup>48</sup> For this reason, then, it rejects the idea that the BBC's finance should come from selling advertising as this would *reduce* in real terms the kinds of programmes available to viewers. This is an important argument, for while it asserts that choice is paramount, it develops an expanded notion of what 'choice' actually means: not just a selection between different channels, but between different kinds of output on those channels. As far as the Committee was concerned, this justified the maintenance of broadcasting regulation; but only until the proliferation of channels promised by new technology made a 'genuine market possible'.<sup>49</sup> Thus the Report recommends that the BBC should continue to be funded by the licence fee, which should be index-linked to the Retail Price Index as a guarantee against the effects of inflation; but that eventually the Corporation should move towards a 'pay-per-view' system of funding, as true consumer sovereignty can only be expressed through direct payment for desired services.<sup>50</sup>

This concern with the proper operation of market forces prompted the Committee's recommendation that the Government should institute a process of competitive tendering to determine the awards of franchises to ITV contractors.<sup>51</sup> The Peacock Report also acknowledged the arguments of the independent programme production sector, suggesting that within ten years the BBC and ITV should commission 40 per cent of all new programming from this source. It recognised and reasserted the importance of Channel Four's distinctive remit, but argued that the Channel should now stand on its own feet and be funded directly from the sale of its own advertising time.

These recommendations constitute a rather sophisticated redefinition of the 'public interest'. Collins, Garnham and Locksley discuss the Peacock Report in the light of the Pilkington Report on broadcasting, published in 1962, which had provided a closely-argued case for regulation in order to safeguard social values and guard against

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<sup>48</sup> Home Office, *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, 596, 133.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 596, 133.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 584, 132.

<sup>51</sup> At the time of the Peacock Report's publication these were due to expire on 31 December 1989. The Broadcasting Act of 1987 amended the length of the existing contracts from 12 to 15 years, so that they expired on 31 December 1992.

excesses that might otherwise creep in. For the authors, Pilkington's

conception of the audience as vulnerable and requiring protection is antithetical to Peacock's robust championship of the sovereign consumer. There is a fundamental difference in conception of the "polis", of the role and power of the individual, between Pilkington and Peacock.<sup>52</sup>

But this is a complicated issue. For all that the Peacock Report is couched in the ideology of the free market, it also insists upon its support of an older – one might almost say Reithian – form of paternalism. Indeed Peacock subsequently criticised the Government on the grounds that it 'has studiously avoided detailed consideration of the CFB [Committee on the Financing of the BBC] solution – public financing of quality programmes – and the bill contains no mention of it'.<sup>53</sup>

For its own part, the Peacock Report's conception of Public Service Broadcasting is founded on a commitment to 'Four key words ... knowledge, culture, criticism and experiment'. This formula is accompanied with the advice that 'There should be critical and controversial programmes, covering everything from the appraisal of commercial products to politics, ideology, philosophy and religion'.<sup>54</sup> The Report recommends that 'the fundamental aim of broadcasting policy' should be 'to enlarge both the freedom of choice of the consumer and the opportunities available to programme makers to offer alternative wares to the public'.<sup>55</sup> The 'one slogan' it chooses as a summary of its conclusions is 'direct consumer choice rather than continuation of the licence fee'.<sup>56</sup> This is the language of free market economics but, whatever else may be said of it, the Peacock Report by no means argues unequivocally for deregulation and for a straightforwardly commercial system. It is riven with internal tensions, and its

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<sup>52</sup> Collins *et al*, *Economics*, 114.

<sup>53</sup> Sir Alan Peacock, 'Search for the freedom of the air', *The Guardian*, 11 December 1989, 21. Peacock discusses his vision of public service broadcasting at greater length in 'The Future of Public Service Broadcasting', in Veljanovski (ed), *Freedom in Broadcasting*, 51-62.

<sup>54</sup> Home Office, *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, 563, 137.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 547, 125.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 711, 151.

contradictions are at least as notable as its espousal of any one particular policy.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to recognise the seriousness, in both intellectual and political terms, of Peacock's scrutiny of the BBC. It sits comfortably alongside an analysis of British culture which finds the notion of diversity more striking than that of a shared national identity. William Maley, responding to Anthony Smith's proposals for a national programme-making centre, suggests that:

There exists a case for combating the concept of national programmes as such. ... There exists a case for ... disintegration rather than assimilation. ... The BBC is based upon centralisation and censorship, built upon complete control of the primary channels of culture and communication in a heterogeneous society which belies the homogeneous image of that church whose mission is to create the illusion of unity where none exists in practical terms.<sup>58</sup>

The argument is carried out in exaggerated tones, but it indicates the belligerence with which the spotlight was swung on to the BBC. And it is true that, in a multi-racial, multi-cultural society, the BBC's claim to represent the nation rests upon an increasingly shaky conception of united national identity.

Structural changes within the Corporation can be assessed in the light of criticisms of this nature. John Birt became Director General of the BBC in December 1992, after being announced as Michael Checkland's successor eighteen months previously.<sup>59</sup> The BBC's Chairman, Marmaduke Hussey, had refused to extend Checkland's contract beyond one year, after the latter had been in the job for the relatively short time of only four years. Birt was thus understandably seen as Hussey's acolyte. While he was still Deputy Director General he launched 'Extending Choice', a strategy for internal reorganisation which led to extensive job losses and introduced a more

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<sup>57</sup> Samuel Brittan, a member of the Committee, argues on the other hand that 'In putting forward the idea of a free broadcasting market without censorship, Peacock exposed many of the contradictions in the Thatcherite espousal of market forces.' For his discussion of these contradictions, see Samuel Brittan, 'The Case for the Consumer Market', in Veljanovski (ed), *Freedom in Broadcasting*, 40.

<sup>58</sup> William Maley, 'Centralisation and censorship', in MacCabe and Stewart (eds), *The BBC*, 43, 44.

<sup>59</sup> For interviews with Birt on his assumption of office, see Georgina Henry, 'Man with a taste for quality street', *The Guardian*, 28 November 1992, 25; and Melinda Wittstock, 'Birt rejects Lenin label to pledge open management', *The Times*, 28 November 1992, 3.

competitive environment within the Corporation.<sup>60</sup> Under 'Producer Choice', the programme-making area of the initiative implemented in 1992, individual producers were now free to use non-BBC facilities and services. This in turn meant an increasingly finance-oriented culture within the BBC as departments faced the consequences of a shrinking demand for their services and streamlined their operation in order to become more cost-effective. These changes were deeply unpopular among BBC staff and attracted criticism from outside the Corporation.<sup>61</sup> They betoken a broadcasting environment increasingly determined by cost-considerations, but they must be seen in the context of a challenge from outside the organisation to its function within British society. By 1986 it seemed quite plausible that the Corporation would be obliged to forego the licence fee and become subject to some other form of funding, probably on a subscription basis. John Birt's structural alterations to the BBC were partly made in preparation for this unquantifiable future, in which the BBC must be competitive or die. Of course this ethos came about in the first place through shifting perceptions of the nature and desirability of protected public service broadcasting.

This is not to say that the BBC represented all that was noble about public service broadcasting, while the commercial and nascent satellite and cable channels represented a perfidious lower form. Definitions of the public interest are various and complicated. David Elstein's sardonic comments in relation to the BBC's championing of the American soap opera *Dallas* are a pertinent caution against over-simplification of this issue:

the BBC's virulent attack on cable television was spearheaded by the derisive phrase "wall-to-wall *Dallas*" – *Dallas* being, of course, the programme transmitted and shamelessly hyped ("who killed JR" made it on to the *Nine O'Clock News*) by the BBC for years, moved around the schedule to shoot down potential ITV hits, and the prospect of whose loss to Thames caused a collective heart attack within

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<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of the BBC's booklet *Extending Choice* which criticises its implications for public service broadcasting, see Brian Winston, 'Public Service in the "New Broadcasting Age"', in Hood (ed), *Behind the Screens*, 23-31.

<sup>61</sup> See Paterson (ed), *Organising for Change*, for a series of essays which argue coherently for a broadly paternalistic framework for British broadcasting, and assert, in Richard Paterson's summary, 'the importance of the medium-sized vertically integrated TV enterprise to the cultural health and economic strength of the British television industry' (59).



BBC management.<sup>62</sup>

The Peacock Report had framed the terms of debate about the BBC's future, and set in process a period of far-reaching reorganisation within the Corporation. There was otherwise no legislation directly affecting the BBC's status until the decision, announced in a White Paper published on 6 August 1994, to extend the BBC's Royal Charter – thus its right to charge a licence fee – until 2001. This represented a partial victory for those seeking to preserve the BBC's central role in British Broadcasting, but it was clear that this particular debate had been postponed rather than settled.

In the legislative process leading up to the 1990 Broadcasting Act the BBC was therefore, in Stuart Hood's phrase, a 'structuring absence' and the Government's focus moved to other elements within the broadcasting landscape. The Conservative Party won the general election of 11 June 1987. Its manifesto had promised a Broadcasting Bill which would provide a legislative framework establishing the 25 per cent quota in terrestrial broadcasting of independently-produced new programmes. In this case – and along with the continued pursuance<sup>ack?</sup> of the proliferation of broadcast channels – sources of programme provision would be expanded and the viewer's 'choice' broadened. The Government was clearly influenced in this respect by broadcasting models in other countries, notably the US, France and Italy, which offered viewers many more channels – and thus, it was argued, greater choice – than was the case with the British system; although again there is evidence of a division in government thinking in this respect. In June 1988 the Home Affairs Committee on Broadcasting published a document entitled *The Future of Broadcasting*. This struck a cautionary tone, recognising that British television was possibly the best in the world, and asserting the need to preserve 'the ethos of high quality television'.<sup>63</sup> By the same token there is a clear indication that in both the US and Italy increased competition for the acquisition of

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<sup>62</sup> David Elstein, 'An end to protection', in MacCabe and Stewart (eds), *The BBC*, 82-3.

<sup>63</sup> Home Affairs Committee, *The Future of Broadcasting* (3rd Report, session 1987-88), para 192, quoted in Stevenson and Smedley (eds), *Responses*, 4.

programmes increases their cost to the purchaser.<sup>64</sup> It is also debatable whether an increase in the number of channels means that proportionately more interests are represented as reflected in terms of ownership. As Collins, Garnham and Locksley note, 'Technology may provide an escape from spectrum scarcity, but economic forces will ensure that the ownership and control of channels will be concentrated in a relatively small number of enterprises.'<sup>65</sup> The examples provided by Silvio Berlusconi and Rupert Murdoch in Italy and Britain – whose companies control not just a number of television channels but newspaper publications as well – demonstrate this to be the case, although to advocates of free market principles they were hardly cautionary.

Indeed some members of the Government were prepared to go to extraordinary lengths in pursuing the possibilities of new broadcasting technology. Lord Young, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, proposed in 1988 that BBC2 and Channel 4 should both occupy the spare channels of the British DBS system and be operated on a Pay-TV basis. Thus at a stroke the two 'minority' terrestrial channels would be turned into subscription-based satellite services, while their juicy terrestrial frequencies would become available for more commercially-oriented operations. The scheme was widely attacked and indeed ridiculed, but it was not without a darker resonance. The following excerpt from Peter Fiddick's article in *The Guardian* gives a flavour not just of the kind of policy initiative emanating from the DTI, but of the style of implementation which accompanied it:

Simultaneously lunatic and sinister, in a way it typifies the way the Government has conducted a lot of the policy debate in the two and a half years since it launched the Peacock Committee. The fact that, some six weeks later, the plan has formally been withdrawn, amidst a load of blather about its having been examined by the experts and so forth, should not diminish our alarm that it was ever put up in the first place.

The Industry Secretary's own brainchild, it was launched in the most formal way imaginable, by his summoning the chiefs of the BBC and IBA to hear of his requirement that they look into the matter, followed by a joint announcement from the DTI and the Home Office. Even by then, we later

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<sup>64</sup> See Collins *et al.*, *Economics*, 24.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

learned, he had been dissuaded from his original idea that the terrestrial transmissions of BBC2 and C4 be switched off within three years – to pressure us all into buying satellite dishes (“encouraging the new technologies”) while releasing the earth-based channels for more commercial television. So short a horizon, it was pointed out, would in the real world deprive tens of millions of the two services.

It was instantly obvious to virtually everyone who knew anything about broadcasting that the idea was nutty, that it would not achieve its desired objectives, and that it would almost certainly have a totally undesired effect on the broadcasting we would be left with.<sup>66</sup>

In November 1988 a White Paper was published under the title *Broadcasting in the '90's: Competition, Choice and Quality*. The order of the latter three nouns was noted, and indeed the White Paper attracted substantial criticism on the grounds that it put the imperatives of the market before those of the public good. Lord Bonham-Carter's response is representative:

the intention [behind the White Paper] seems to me to be transparently obvious. It is ideological and political. The ideology is yet another obeisance to the market place. The political element is to gerrymander the control and the ownership of television in this country. The purpose is to produce an ownership of television much like the ownership of the press; that is, overwhelmingly controlled by supporters of the present Government.<sup>67</sup>

The Broadcasting Bill was published on 7 December 1989, and on 1 November 1990 it received Royal Assent. The Act replaced both the IBA and the Cable Authority with the Independent Television Commission (ITC), a light-touch regulatory body. It legislated for competitive tendering for the ITV franchises, which were to be awarded by the ITC to the highest bidder. Opposition to this latter stipulation was so vociferous that the government subsequently allowed programming quality to be taken into account by the ITC in 'exceptional circumstances' (the nature of the exception was not clearly delineated). The Act also altered the funding arrangements for Channel Four, which

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Fiddick, 'Loony tunes and summertime blues', *The Guardian*, 8 August 1988. See also Samuel Brittan, 'The Case for the Consumer Market', in Veljanovski (ed), *Freedom in Broadcasting*, 45-46.

<sup>67</sup> Lord Bonham-Carter, House of Lords debate on the White Paper, 13 December 1988, quoted in Stevenson and Smedley (eds), *Responses*, 7.

was to become a corporation selling its own airtime, supported by a safety net provided by the ITV companies. Its remit was recognised and preserved.

Channel Four's success, indeed, ensured the continued high profile of the public service argument in British broadcasting. As Richard Paterson notes:

The very strong non-economic argument against pure market solutions to the production of a diversity of TV programmes has, it seems, been accepted. Channel Four could not be expected to maintain its remit within a reregulated structure dominated by market solutions. ... Analysis of the relationship between organisational structure and programme production in Britain shows the importance of a defined regulatory framework and the separation of revenue sources to the successful provision of a wide ranging programme service.<sup>68</sup>

In accordance with the Act, the new ITV licences were advertised on 15 February 1991 and awarded by the ITC on 16 October that year. There were four losers among the existing franchise holders: TVS, TSW, TV-am and Thames. The latter, replaced by Carlton, would have the most significance in terms of drama programming. Of all the ITV network companies, Thames came closest to the BBC in terms of sales of programmes abroad.<sup>69</sup> It is extremely ironic that the ITV company most successful in this sphere should fall victim to legislation designed to sharpen broadcasting competitiveness. On 14 May 1992 the ITC published details of the new networking arrangements for Channel 3 companies, whereby a new ITV Network Centre would operate as a central scheduling and commissioning directorate.

The ITV operation, then, was streamlined both in terms of the organisation of each individual company in the run-up to the franchise round, and the subsequent provision of networked programming, designed to enhance its competitiveness as a coherent single force. Writing before the franchises were awarded, Mark Oliver identified 'one overriding objective' in the strategic responses of the ITV companies to the new climate in which they were operating: 'to increase the value of the company. This is in turn

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Paterson, 'The Economic Organisation of Television Production', in Paterson (ed), *Organising for Change*, 45.

<sup>69</sup> Collins *et al.*, *Economics*, 65.

achieved if an ITV company can increase its profitability *and/or* reduce its risks.’<sup>70</sup> A curious contradiction thus comes into play. One would expect financial risks to be constrained if – as happened simultaneously within the BBC – network companies scaled down their in-house operations, and used services out-of-house as and when necessary. Oliver suggests, however, that integration between various internal departments can enhance the information flow within the company to beneficial effect:

Broadcasters attract audiences through a combination of scheduling, programme ideas and programme commissioning. Competitive advantage will be attained if the broadcaster can establish a unique brand image for the programming shown on his channel. The most important component of the brand image is likely to be the programme idea. The creative process for many programmes may necessitate close and ongoing co-operation between programme ideas divisions and programme production teams. The only method by which a broadcaster can generate unique value may be to integrate the commissioning, ideas and production process.<sup>71</sup>

The eventual mergers in 1994 of LWT with Granada and Central with Carlton indicates the extent of competitiveness even among ITV network companies themselves. It also makes something of a mockery of the initial competition for franchises: amid much po-faced scrutiny of the operative efficiency of applicants, the promises made in the franchise applications regarding the integrity of each individual company were quickly proven to be secondary to the commercial imperatives indicated by the takeovers. Whether these larger operations will develop in the way Oliver recommends remains to be seen.

In any event, the changes in corporate ownership and executive personnel during the period speak of an era in which only the fittest survived, where fitness was measured in terms of performability according to the new requirements of commercial and corporate efficiency. Sky was the aggressive partner in the merger with British Satellite Broadcasting. Granada was the predator in the merger with LWT. More insidiously, the BBC’s board of governors appeared to be formed increasingly of those

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<sup>70</sup> Mark Oliver, ‘Deregulation and the Organisation of ITV Companies’, in Paterson (ed), *Organising for Change*, 37.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

known to be friendly to be Government's ideas, to the extent that Stuart Hood could describe it as a 'quango' with no trace of irony or exaggeration.<sup>72</sup> This development was signalled as early as 1981 with the appointment as Vice Chairman of Sir William Rees Mogg, former Editor of *The Times*. His term of office ended in 1986, the year that Stuart Young was succeeded as Chairman of the Board by Marmaduke Hussey, an admirer of Margaret Thatcher. To some observers it was significant that when the Board replaced Alasdair Milne as Director General of the BBC in 1987 they turned to the Deputy Director General, Michael Checkland, who had had no programme-making experience.<sup>73</sup> In the event, Checkland continued to articulate a Reithian vision of the BBC. When he was pressured to leave the job before his contract expired – in order that Deputy Director General John Birt, formerly Director of Programmes at London Weekend Television, might quickly take over – this very British transfer of power indicated a more palpably cold-eyed aspect to BBC management tactics.

Similar patterns could be observed in the commercial sector. In February 1992 David Plowright, Chairman of Granada Television, resigned after refusing to carry out new policy initiatives instituted by Gerry Robinson, Chief Executive of the Granada Group since November 1991.<sup>74</sup> Another powerful television executive without programme-making experience (he came to Granada from the catering company, Compass), Robinson was known for his bracing commitment to corporate efficiency. George Brandt expressed a widespread view that Plowright, 'together with his predecessor in the post, Dennis Forman – had turned the company into "the BBC of ITV", that is, a bastion of quality.'<sup>75</sup> The business plan, it seemed, was superceding the programme idea as the central unit of television. No less disturbing, at least for advocates of provocative contemporary drama, were developments towards the end of June 1994, when Michael Wearing announced his resignation as the BBC's Head of Series and Serials. Head of Drama Charles Denton had appointed Nick Elliot as the

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<sup>72</sup> Stuart Hood, 'Introduction', in Hood (ed), *Behind the Screens*, x.

<sup>73</sup> See Hood and O'Leary, *Questions of Broadcasting*, 90; and George Brandt, 'Introduction', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>74</sup> See Graham Murdock, 'Money Talks: Broadcasting Finance and Public Culture', in Hood (ed), *Behind the Screens*, 155-6.

<sup>75</sup> George Brandt, 'Introduction', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 17.

new Head of Series without consulting Wearing. Elliot had been responsible for developing the popular drama series *London's Burning* for LWT. Wearing's track record as a producer includes harder-hitting serials like *Edge of Darkness*, *Boys From the Blackstuff* and *Blind Justice*. As Kenith Trodd, producer of dramas including *The Singing Detective*, remarked at the time, 'the symbolism of the BBC becoming a place where Michael Wearing cannot exist comfortably is very, very ominous'.<sup>76</sup> Peter Lennon summarised thus:

The issue now is the classic one of whether your aim is to deliver programmes worth doing to a potential audience, as was the old BBC way, or whether your preoccupation is uniquely to deliver audiences to programmes – the accountant's approach.<sup>77</sup>

Wearing was prevailed upon to withdraw his resignation. These events occurred some years after the resignation as Prime Minister of Margaret Thatcher, but their seeds lie in the newly competitive broadcasting environment which emerged during her premiership.

Broadcasting in the 1980s was thus subject to several crucial developments. Legislation passed in the period was designed to introduce a more *laissez faire* broadcasting system. The imperatives of free-market thinking underlie the various key debates concerning the financing of broadcasting institutions; the increased provision of services through the establishment of cable and satellite channels; and the transmission of a wider variety of programmes. The pursuit of 'freedom' in broadcasting, however, is accompanied by an anxious concern to provide a regulatory and indeed supervisory framework.

The programmes centrally examined in this study were made within this context. The inception of Channel Four is especially significant in this respect, giving rise to new energies and ideas with regard to programme material. Three of the serials examined individually in subsequent chapters – *A Very British Coup*, *Traffik* and *GBH* – were commissioned by and broadcast on Channel Four. All the terrestrial

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<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Peter Lennon, 'A crisis out of a drama', *The Guardian*, 4 July 1994.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

broadcasters participated in an ongoing ~~change~~ exchange during the period about the role and nature of public service broadcasting. The serials principally addressed in this study – contemporary dramas dealing with public issues – are among a tapestry of programmes which are central to this debate. As serial dramas they connect most immediately with developments in dramatic form during the period, as I shall indicate in the second part of this chapter.

## ii) Developments in drama programming and production

Drama does not account for a large percentage of transmitted material. The nature of ITV, formed of different companies operating different schedules for at least part of the day, means that figures relating to the network as a whole are difficult to produce. But given substantial overlaps in the programming policies of both BBC1 and ITV, statistics relating to the BBC should indicate general trends across terrestrial broadcasting as a whole. In the year 1982/3, drama accounted for 419 broadcast hours on both BBC1 and 2: 4.2 per cent of all broadcasting on the BBC's channels (BBC1: 254 hours, 4.6%; BBC2: 165 hours, 3.7%).<sup>78</sup> The overall percentage was the same in the year 1985/6 (BBC1 295 hours, 5.2%; BBC2: 144 hours, 3%; total 439 hours, 4.2%),<sup>79</sup> although by the year 1987/8 it had dropped fractionally to four per cent (BBC1: 320 hours, 5.1%; BBC2 139 hours, 2.6%; total: 459 hours, 4%).<sup>80</sup> ITV scores rather better. In the year 1984/5 its new own-produced drama accounted for 8.1% of all transmitted material.<sup>81</sup>

To this relatively small percentage of programming, however, attaches a disproportionate prestige and cultural importance. A broadcaster can acquire an identity through its drama, as Channel Four's *Film on Four* strand has proved, while the ITV network company Granada has gained credibility as a producer of popular and

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<sup>78</sup> BBC, *Annual Report and Handbook 1982-3* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1984).

<sup>79</sup> BBC, *Annual Report and Handbook 1985-6* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1987).

<sup>80</sup> BBC, *The Annual Report and Accounts 1987-8* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1988).

<sup>81</sup> Collins *et al.*, *Economics*, 42.



substantial drama through serials like *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) and the *Prime Suspect* dramas (1991, 1992, 1993). Indeed these and other dramas can be seen as a strategic attempt on the part of ITV network companies to challenge the BBC's reputation as the bastion of 'quality' drama. The imperatives of domestic competition did not abate throughout the 1980s. Richard Collins reports that by the end of the decade the UK and Germany were the only European countries where more than 50 per cent of broadcast drama was home-produced.<sup>82</sup>

While drama on BBC1 and BBC2 accounts for only around four per cent of the total number of hours produced, it represents 21 per cent of the expenditure on programmes.<sup>83</sup> Estimates of the cost per hour vary, and of course depend on the particular project. Collins Garnham and Locksley show that the average cost per hour of drama on BBC1 and BBC2 between 1978/9 and 1984/5 ranges from £89-278,000, making it easily the most costly programme category.<sup>84</sup> Writing in 1993, Jeremy Tunstall estimates the average cost per hour of television drama as £481,000; three times more expensive than the next most costly area of programming, light entertainment.<sup>85</sup> Clearly the executives who commission television drama are charged with great financial as well as artistic responsibilities. In a period during which broadcasting is increasingly defined by financial parameters, increased cost consciousness might be expected to alter levels of acceptable artistic risk.

The rest of this chapter will examine four particular issues: the status of the single drama during the 1980s; the emergence of the series and the serial as dominant modes of television drama during the period; the dissolving of firm generic distinctions between a number of programmes; and the differing cultural significations of costume and contemporary dramas. I have not attempted an exhaustive overview of television drama throughout the period – even if such a survey were possible in so short a space. Thus the evolution of sitcoms and soap operas is not addressed; nor the development of daytime television drama; nor the move towards comedy drama as distinct from

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<sup>82</sup> Richard Collins, presentation at the Department of Communications, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 7 December 1992.

<sup>83</sup> Jeremy Tunstall, *Television Producers* (London: Routledge, 1993), 20.

<sup>84</sup> Collins *et al.*, *Economics*, 36.

<sup>85</sup> Tunstall, *Television Producers*, 20.

situation comedy. So broad an analysis might allow only the most general conclusions, and in any case is not directly relevant to a study devoted to thriller serials. But forms of programming other than serials demand some examination at this point, as they illustrate trends throughout the decade which directly bear upon thriller serials themselves. Let us turn first, then, to the single drama.

Jeremy Tunstall notes that in the year 1969/70, the ITV network companies made 152 single dramas. In 1979/80 that figure was down to 50. In 1990 it was none. Even the BBC, traditionally more friendly towards the single play, showed only 20 in the year 1992/3.<sup>86</sup> In the year 1980/81 ITV transmitted 94 single plays, or single dramas within a 'themed' strand.<sup>87</sup> A year later, the figure had dropped to 38.<sup>88</sup> This certainly seems compelling evidence of the most drastic demise in the form; but 1982 was also the year that Channel Four began broadcasting and its film policy, pursued from its inception, was to alter existing emphases on the format and transmission route of single dramas.

Prior to the inception of Channel Four there had been a traditional separation between television drama (made specifically for the small rather than the large screen) and cinema films (which, to protect the interests of cinema exhibitors, could not be shown on television until three years after their first screening in the UK). Jeremy Isaacs was impressed, by contrast, at the more symbiotic relationships between the film and television industries in Germany and Italy. As he notes, the German TV companies ARD and ZDF had helped fund films by Herzog, Wenders and Fassbinder, while RAI in Italy had provided funding for films by Fellini, Bertolucci and the Taviani brothers.<sup>89</sup> He committed Channel Four to involvement in feature film production, a policy pursued with great distinction by David Rose who, as Senior Commissioning Editor, Fiction, was among the first commissioning editors appointed to the new channel. Rose left in 1990, to be replaced by David Aukin, previously Executive

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<sup>86</sup> Tunstall, *Television Producers*, 109.

<sup>87</sup> Independent Broadcasting Authority, *Annual Report and Accounts 1980-81* (London: Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1981).

<sup>88</sup> Independent Broadcasting Authority, *Annual Report and Accounts 1981-2* (London: Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1982).

<sup>89</sup> Isaacs, *Storm over 4*, 146. See his chapter 'Film on 4' for a discussion of some of the films and of the principles underlying the strand.

Director at the National Theatre.

Isaacs' decision to prioritise funding for 'films of feature length for television here, for the cinema abroad' meant that, for financial reasons, Channel Four would make much less original drama in other formats. It would therefore buy in series and serials from abroad, or acquire for repeat transmission series and serials already transmitted by ITV. Indeed acquired programming has always formed a significant part of the channel's output. In 1985/6, for instance, it accounted for 1,768 hours of transmitted material, as against 2,145 hours of commissioned programmes.<sup>90</sup>

Eventually, in the period from Channel Four's first broadcast in 1982 to the end of 1991, 136 feature films were transmitted in the *Film on Four* slot, with funding from Channel Four ranging from two per cent to 100 per cent.<sup>91</sup> The channel eventually negotiated a deal with cinema exhibitors whereby any film that cost less than £1.25 million to make could be shown on television at any time within the three-year embargo,<sup>92</sup> although the intention was rigorously to pursue theatrical release before television screening on account of a number of tangible benefits. Firstly, theatrical release gave a film the status of being 'cinema', with the connotations of special and single event that apply to this medium more readily than to television, where drama is always part of the flow of an evening's schedule. It also brought, as David Rose points out, 'serious consideration by film critics, recognition at film festivals in the five continents – and subsequent sales opportunities. The free passage of writers, directors and technicians between the two industries was both welcome and healthy.'<sup>93</sup> As an added benefit the channel accrued, over the years, a substantial library of films to which it owned the transmission rights – an increasingly significant resource given the value of movies to schedulers. As Isaacs notes:

Each of these films would find an audience on television not once but thrice and, in the end, more often. Three million viewers each time – and some reached very many more – add up to nearly ten

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<sup>90</sup> Collins *et al.*, *Economics*, 49.

<sup>91</sup> John Pym, *Film on Four: 1981/91: A Survey* (London: BFI, 1992), 7.

<sup>92</sup> See Isaacs, *Storm over 4*, 150.

<sup>93</sup> David Rose, 'Foreword', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, xvi.

million in all. At a cost of £1 million [a round investment figure – many *Film on Four* films cost the channel much less], that was 10p per viewer. Cheap entertainment, by any standard.<sup>94</sup>

While this arrangement was clearly to the broadcaster's benefit, it is true to say that Channel Four has provided unquantifiable nourishment to the meagre body of the British film industry: not only through financing, but through enhanced opportunities for writers, directors and other artists and technicians, and through increased exposure for British films.

Rose inclined towards projects for the most part set in contemporary Britain and rendered in realistic mode. The list includes films like *Angel* (written and directed by Neil Jordan, 1982), *Dance With a Stranger* (written by Shelagh Delaney, directed by Mike Newell, 1984), *A Private Function* (written by Alan Bennett, directed by Malcolm Mowbray, 1984), *A Letter to Brezhnev* (written by Frank Clarke, directed by Chris Bernard, 1985), *My Beautiful Laundrette* (written by Hanif Kureishi, directed by Stephen Frears, 1985), *Wetherby* (written and directed by David Hare, 1985), *Mona Lisa* (written and directed by Neil Jordan, 1986), *Playing Away* (written by Caryl Phillips, directed by Horace Ové, 1986), *Prick Up Your Ears* (written by Alan Bennett, directed by Stephen Frears, 1987), *Paris By Night* (written and directed by David Hare, 1988) and *Riff Raff* (written by Bill Jesse, directed by Ken Loach, 1991). Films such as these – and one could cite many more – presented discrete and particular visions of aspects of British society. Indeed *My Beautiful Laundrette*, shot on 16mm film due to budgetary constraints, became emblematic of the *Film on Four* project. It centred on the relationship between two young men: a Pakistani from a family enjoying the material opportunities presented by Thatcher's Britain, and an Englishman with erstwhile National Front sympathies. It explored contemporary issues relating to class, race and sexual experience in Britain, and its uniqueness lay in the vividness and irony of its juxtapositions. Its popularity earned *My Beautiful Laundrette* a prolonged life in the cinema after its release in 1985. The film was transmitted on Channel Four in February 1987; a defining moment, according to Jeremy Isaacs, who felt that 'with this

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<sup>94</sup> Isaacs, *Storm over 4*, 159.

transmission Channel 4 itself had come of age'.<sup>95</sup>

The success of *Film on Four* had an influence, albeit through a rather slow osmosis, on the BBC, which moved towards making drama on film with theatrical release in mind. This development was confirmed in the year 1985/6, when seven of the 24 British films shown at the London Film Festival were made by the BBC. In the year 1989/90 four BBC films were first given theatrical release. Anthony Minghella's *Truly Madly Deeply* (1990)<sup>96</sup> is probably the best-known of these.

This general trend was in any case consonant with developments in technology, which made shooting on film less unwieldy. As Brandt notes:

Multi-camera shooting, which had been the early way of doing TV drama (whether transmitted live or recorded on tape), gave way increasingly to single-camera production. The old-style studio with four or more cameras on the floor may have had some advantages, such as operational speed and enabling the actor to give a (more or less) continuous performance. Against that, the rather general-purpose, never quite satisfactory, lighting, not to mention the often slightly hit-and-miss framing and editing, made it a less subtle and precise technique than that of traditional film-making. The general though not universal switch-over to single camera work was to move TV drama largely out of the studio and bring it closer to the cinema.<sup>97</sup>

Brandt goes on to raise a political point. The single play, he argues, 'has conventionally been seen as the best vehicle for asking awkward social questions. Was that the reason for its diminution during the Thatcher era?'<sup>98</sup> A number of *Film on Four* films, however, *did* raise 'awkward social questions'. Consider the depiction of urban deprivation in the North-West in *A Letter to Brezhnev*, for instance; or the presentation of a Conservative ruling class corrupted by power in *Paris By Night*; or the critique of racism presented in *Playing Away*. Nor was *Film on Four* the only place where the viewer might find trenchant analyses of contemporary society. Trevor

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<sup>95</sup> Isaacs, *Storm over 4*, 160.

<sup>96</sup> Transmitted in the *Screen Two* strand, 1 March 1992, BBC2.

<sup>97</sup> Brandt, 'Introduction', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 12.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Griffiths was responsible for three such dramas on the BBC and ITV: *Comedians* (BBC, 1979), a televised version, directed by Richard Eyre, of his stage play; *Country* (BBC, 1981), also directed by Richard Eyre; and *Oi for England* (Central Independent Television, 1982), directed by Tony Smith. One of the most notable (and indeed political) dramas of the era, in terms of both its public and dramatic impact, was Charles Wood's *Tumbledown* (BBC, 1988), a television film directed by Richard Eyre. It is true, however, that provocative single dramas like these stand out as exceptions rather than the rule.

When critics mourn the passing of the single play, it is often because in the past individual dramas have provided a critique of contemporary society. This is not an *inevitable* function of the single play's form. Strands like *Armchair Theatre*, *The Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today* contained compelling accounts of contemporary Britain because of an initial commitment to interrogative dramatic work on the part of their commissioning executives. Sydney Newman's role is crucial here. He established *Armchair Theatre* (ABC 1956-69, Thames 1970-74), then moved to the BBC where he initiated *The Wednesday Play* (BBC, 1964-70). Celebrated dramas in this period, including *Up the Junction* (1965), *Cathy Come Home* (1966) and *The Big Flame* (1969), as well as Dennis Potter's plays *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* (1965) and *Vote, Vote, Vote, for Nigel Barton* (1965), explored aspects of contemporary life which had not previously been featured on mainstream television. They can be defined by their content as much as their form.

The respective freedoms enjoyed by writers in different periods is an important consideration. As Anthony Smith, writing about television drama in the 1960s, suggests:

Rather than searching for writers who would work within the system of prescribed values, the new BBC of the 1960s, competing with the first commercial channel, reversed the doctrine and sought out the writers, in the knowledge that they would shape a new set of cultural values for the institution. Johnny Speight could not be truly co-opted. Nor could David Mercer. The BBC started to work within the community of writers as a great impresario, and with remarkable results. *The Wednesday Play* was

the Globe Theatre of the period.<sup>99</sup>

There were still strands devoted to the single play in the 1980s: *Play for Today* (BBC, 1970-84), *Playhouse* (BBC, 1970-79), *Screen One* (BBC, 1989- ), *Screen Two* (1984- ), *Theatre Night* (BBC, 1985-90) and *Screen Play* (BBC, 1986-93), and these provided a number of substantial single dramas of quite different natures. *Theatre Night*, for instance, presented productions of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (1990), Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1987) and David Hare's *Knuckle* (1989). *Screen Play* presented the first television project by the influential theatre company Theatre de Complicite, *Burning Ambition* (1988), as well as more 'writerly' pieces like Michael Wall's *Amongst Barbarians* (1990).

Single plays drawn from the theatre were much in evidence. In the year 1979/80 the BBC produced a season of theatre plays including Shaw's *St Joan*, James' *The Wings of the Dove* and Coward's *Design for Living*. A year later, Granada Television produced versions of plays in the National Theatre's repertoire, including Ayckbourn's *Bedroom Farce* and Maugham's <sup>for</sup> *Services Rendered*. The same year saw a production from Yorkshire Television of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* in a version by John Osborne. In the year 1982/3 Channel Four televised the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*, while the National Theatre's production of Stoppard's *On the Razzle* was also screened. Plays by Harold Pinter and Howard Barker were transmitted in 1985/6, and the theatrical legacy was endorsed with the institution of the *Performance* strand in 1991 on BBC2 under Simon Curtis, formerly a director at the Royal Court Theatre. These projects indicate a continued willingness on the part of television executives to contemplate programming deemed to be culturally important, even though viewing figures could be expected to be small. The 'theatricality' of these dramas – invoking a recognition both of theatrical style and tradition, and of the theatre's role as a forum for the exploration of social processes – contributes to that notion of cultural value. Even so, these strands appear extremely muted when compared with the more polemical and interrogative strands of the 1960s.

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<sup>99</sup> Anthony Smith, 'Licences and liberty: public service broadcasting in Britain', in MacCabe and Stewart (eds), *The BBC*, 15.

Moreover, none of the plays they featured had anything like the impact, when televised, of the thriller serials centrally examined in this study. As programme forms developed, the television drama which captured the public imagination during the 1980s was delivered in the quintessentially televisual formats of the series and the serial.

It is unquestionably the case that opportunities for interrogative or controversial drama suffered a diminution during the 1980s. Where *The Wednesday Play* had been established as a strand committed to abrasive depictions of contemporary life, there was no such strand during this period and dramas which were explicitly political were made in isolation. It would not be stretching the point to suggest that in this respect Michael Wearing was the Sydney Newman of the 1980s. He produced a number of programmes which explored hidden or largely unreported aspects of British society: the extensive effects of unemployment on individuals and a community in *Boys From the Blackstuff* (BBC, 1982) for instance; government secrecy and covert connections between government and the business community in *Edge of Darkness* (BBC, 1985) and inadequacies and inconsistencies in the British judicial system in *Blind Justice* (BBC, 1988).<sup>100</sup> Here was decisively contemporary drama – in series and serial form. The single play is not uniquely the mode in which to present interrogative social drama. Indeed during the 1980s and '90s the television drama which responds directly to contemporary issues and asks 'awkward social questions' is most often found in serial form. *Edge of Darkness*, *The Detective* (BBC, 1985), *The Monocled Mutineer* (BBC, 1986), *A Very British Coup* (C4, 1988), *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1990) and *GBH* (C4, 1991) – to name but a few – are impressive testaments to 'awkwardness'.

Thus it is only partially the case that, as Millington and Nelson suggest, the demise of the single play (and with it innovative and progressive drama) is attributable to an ideological shift from a Reithian conception of public service broadcasting to an accountant-driven conception of cost-effectiveness.<sup>101</sup> Established writers were in any event turning to the serial in preference to the single play, among them Dennis Potter (whose serial *Pennies From Heaven* [BBC, 1978], with its now-celebrated use of

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<sup>100</sup> Other serials produced by Wearing include *Bird of Prey* (1982), *Bellman and True* (1989) and *Children of the North* (1991). He became Head of Serials at the BBC in 1989.

<sup>101</sup> Bob Millington and Robin Nelson, *'Boys From the Blackstuff': the Making of TV Drama* (London: Comedia, 1986), p17.



songs from the 1930s ‘lip-synched’ by the performers, was the first of a number of highly innovative serials from this writer)<sup>102</sup> and Alan Plater (with adaptations including *A Very British Coup* and *Fortunes of War* [BBC, 1987] and his three *Beiderbecke* series [Yorkshire Television, 1985, 1987 and 1988]). A number of writers who came to prominence during the 1980s did so through their work on series and serials: Lynda La Plante (*Widows* [Euston Films, 1983] and the *Prime Suspect* dramas), Andrew Davies (adaptations including *A Very Peculiar Practice* [BBC, 1986] and *House of Cards* [BBC, 1990]) and Alan Bleasdale (*Boys from the Blackstuff*, *The Monocled Mutineer* and *GBH*) are among the most obvious examples.<sup>103</sup>

In the terms established by the terrestrial broadcasters, both series and serial formats are crucial to a balanced schedule. Alasdair Milne, formerly Director General of the BBC, argued in 1992 that the BBC, although pre-eminent in the areas of the single play and the serial, had fallen behind ITV in the provision of strong drama series:

the series is the heart of the matter. From *Maigret* through *Z Cars*, *Softly Softly*, *Dr Finlay’s Casebook* and *All Creatures*; these are the real drama bankers around which a controller of BBC can build a strong schedule. Ideally he needs two or three of them a week.

The BBC has *Casualty* ... *Lovejoy* is back, quirky but somehow slight and missable; I have yet to come to terms with *Spender*; *Specials* is no replacement for *Softly* or even *Juliet Bravo*; *Trainer* seemed to me unbelievably wooden and unappealing. ... I found *The House of Elliott* lovely to look at but wholly resistible dramatically ... the BBC needs to beef up its drama series ... what it needs is an unmissable police series.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> See pp. 299-304 for a discussion of Potter’s work. For Potter’s comments on the greater freedom and complexity offered by the serial form, see Graham Fuller (ed), *Potter on Potter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 93.

<sup>103</sup> That said, Bleasdale initially broke into television with a *single* play, the one-off drama *The Black Stuff* (BBC, 1980), about the group of motorway workers who would subsequently feature, now unemployed, in *Boys from the Blackstuff*. It is beyond dispute that the single play provides a smoother and more accessible testing ground for writers and directors, especially those new to television. The decline in the number of single dramas made during the period is to be regretted mostly for this reason.

<sup>104</sup> Alasdair Milne, ‘The serial killers’, *The Guardian*, 20 January 1992.

It was not to get one until *Between the Lines* (1992- ), a drama about internal investigations in the police force. The programme's executive producer, Tony Garnett, had been responsible for influential dramas in the 1960s including *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966), *The Big Flame* (BBC, 1969) and *The Spongers* (BBC, 1978).

Milne is right in his implication that ITV was the home of the most innovative and popular series on television during the latter part of the 1980s. There were strategic reasons for this increased pre-eminence, which became especially clear towards the end of the decade. As Jeremy Tunstall suggests:

The reorganisation of ITV in the years around 1990 led to growth in the budgets put into continuing series; increasingly outspending the BBC, ITV in general (and LWT in particular) stressed its dedication to "quality-popular" drama in continuing-series form. Much of this quality-popular material featured detective stories, but reflected an effort to reduce the Hollywoodesque and violence-on-the-streets overtones of early police series ... [New series included] *Inspector Morse* (Central Television), *The Ruth Rendell Mysteries* (TVS), *Taggart* (Scottish), *Poirot* (LWT) ... The ITV network planners, in considering how to attack the BBC's mid-evening schedule, also decided to make some 2-hour episodes for the 8-10pm slot.<sup>105</sup>

One might date this trend from earlier than 1990, with series like *Minder* (Euston Films for Thames, 1979-94; sponsored by Central TV after 1992), *Poirot* (LWT, 1989-93, 1995), *Taggart* (Scottish TV, 1985- ) and *London's Burning* (LWT, 1986, 1988-94).

As different series proved popular, so the distinctions between programme categories became increasingly blurred. This is indeed a defining feature of television drama during the 1980s. Stuart Hood makes the point that the settled production rhythm established by long-running series has become a preferable means of drama production, making exceptional programmes difficult to accommodate and leading to an increasingly homogenised output.<sup>106</sup> This may be true with regard to production processes but there was also a considerable loosening of generic boundaries during the

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<sup>105</sup> Tunstall, *Television Producers*, 112.

<sup>106</sup> Hood, *On Television*, 36.

period. *Minder* drew on the tough-guy image of Dennis Waterman, previously the streetwise Carter in the police action drama *The Sweeney* (Euston Films, 1975-79), but paired him with George Cole who played Arthur Daley, a disreputably low-life businessman. The programme had many of the narrative characteristics – serious situations, chases and plot twists – of earlier police and action series, but its prevailing identity was as a new kind of comedy drama. John Thaw, who had played the central character, Regan, in *The Sweeney*, was cast as the eponymous *Inspector Morse* (Zenith Productions for Central Independent Television, 1987-93), thus featuring in another series which realigned genre conventions. Rather than depending on the fast pace and aggressive action of series like *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* (Avenger Mark 1 Productions for LWT, 1977-83), *Inspector Morse* featured an Oxford-based detective notable for his morose manner, his methodical process of crime solution, and his liking for real ale, opera and his Bentley (evocative signifiers for a ‘tasteful’ Englishness). Furthermore *Morse* established a powerful precedent, which initially seemed extremely audacious: a series-formatted drama running, at a leisurely pace, for two hours across peak time.<sup>107</sup>

The merging of genres forms an identifiable pattern throughout the 1980s, as was further demonstrated by a convergence between series and soap operas.<sup>108</sup> *The Bill* (Thames Television, 1984- ), for instance, was initiated as a series concentrating on the staff of a police station. It was subsequently transmitted in three half-hour episodes a week, effectively becoming identifiable as a soap opera, although the programme’s makers still claim it as a series. The decision to increase the number of weekly episodes speaks of the fierce competition between BBC1 and ITV, who rely on the regular mass audiences delivered by popular soap operas. The ongoing narratives of these programmes induce great loyalty among their followers, which accords them a powerful presence in an evening’s schedule. *Brookside* (Mersey Productions for Channel Four) was first transmitted in 1982, the BBC’s *EastEnders* in 1985, and the

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<sup>107</sup> For an account of *Inspector Morse* and an examination of one episode of the series, see Richard Sparks, ‘*Inspector Morse*: “The Last Enemy” (Peter Buckman)’, in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 86-102.

<sup>108</sup> For an account of soap operas which considers their ‘mixed’ generic nature and their capacity for ‘positive’ representations, see Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

short-lived *Eldorado* in 1992 (ending in 1993). Australian soap operas including *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* were familiar to British viewers by the end of the 1980s. Their more glamorous American counterparts *Dallas* and *Dynasty* were transmitted in Britain from 1978 and 1982 respectively. These were only a few of the American and Australian soap operas that became popular in this country throughout the 1980s. As Vera Gottlieb notes, this was, indeed, 'the *decade* of soap operas, whether of the escapist or of the socially reflective kind'.<sup>109</sup>

Gottlieb's distinction cautions us against treating the format monolithically, as if every species of the genre evokes the same meaning-effects. Whether escapist or issues-based, however, soap operas were conspicuous precisely by their presence, a trend consolidated in the 1990s. The ITV schedulers increased the number of weekly episodes of *Coronation Street* (1960- ) from two to three in 1989, a threat which the BBC could not eventually ignore, treating viewers to three weekly episodes of *EastEnders* from 11 April 1994. Meanwhile the BBC's hospital drama *Casualty* (1986- ), a series of hour-long episodes, proved popular enough to provoke rumours that it was to be made as a soap opera, with a greater number of shorter episodes shown every week. This change was never made, but even in series form the programme has many characteristics of a soap opera: an extended cast, a tight focus on one community, an emphasis on personal issues and relationships and, not least, a seeming permanence in the schedule, given that it first appeared in 1986.

While the half-hour soap proved an especially robust form during the 1980s, there was a concomitant movement in a number of British series towards soap opera's characteristic multi-narrative mode. This can be traced to the influence of American television drama. The authors of *East of Dallas* observe that while audiences across the world prefer programmes made in their own country, their second choice is for American programmes.<sup>110</sup> The obvious implication for British programme-makers is that the closer their product conforms to the modes of American television drama, the

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<sup>109</sup> Vera Gottlieb, 'Brookside: "Damon's YTS Comes to an End" (Barry Woodward): Paradoxes and contradictions', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 41.

<sup>110</sup> See Alessandro Silj, with Manuel Alvarado, Jean Bianchi, Régine Chaniac, Tony Fahy, Michael Hoffman, Giancarlo Mencucci, Barbara O'Connor, Michel Souchon, Antonia Torchi, *East of Dallas: The European challenge to American Television* (London: British Film Institute, 1988), 199, 211-12.

more purchasable it becomes overseas; a not inconsiderable aspect of the Americanisation of British programme forms. That said, American television drama itself – at least as experienced by British viewers – underwent significant shifts during the period. Police and action programmes like *Starsky and Hutch*, *Hawaii 5-0*, *Kojak* and *The Dukes of Hazard* were superseded by series featuring more complicated, multi-stranded narratives. *Hill Street Blues* (first British transmission: ITV, 1981; first shown on Channel 4: 1984), devised by Steven Bochco, was pioneering in this respect.<sup>111</sup> Its intertwined storylines followed an extended cast of characters both at their police duties and in their private and domestic lives. There was a sense of observing ‘real’ people at work, and the programme developed a number of other realist effects. Actors frequently moved in and out of the frame, so that the camera seemed to be ‘catching’ the action rather than observing a staged performance. Sound and lighting were treated in a more naturalistic way than was usual: dialogue would not always be clearly audible, and some scenes were played in dim lighting states. Bochco also wrote casual, ‘realistic’ dialogue whereby throwaway lines or conversations allowed the viewer slowly to piece together details about individual characters.

Bochco was dismissed from *Hill Street Blues* in 1985 due to cost overruns, but went on to develop *LA Law* in 1986, a series about a legal practice which has elements of upmarket soap opera in the ongoing personal stories of the attorneys. *LA Law* was influential in its concentration upon ‘promotable’ issues, where the narrative would revolve around a matter of contemporary public interest and present various sides of the argument through well-researched and tightly-written storylines. For all its glossy accessibility *LA Law* is a social-issues drama, with a heritage which reaches beyond the television series. For Andrew Billen, it returned ‘to American television the virtues of denouement and character development found in the long-abandoned single play’.<sup>112</sup> Bochco went on to sign a ten-series deal with the ABC network in 1987. Subsequent programmes from his production company include *NYPD Blue* (C4, 1994- ),

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<sup>111</sup> Bochco was one of the more interesting and important figures in US television drama during the 1980s. For interviews with him, see Andrew Goodwin, ‘From bad boy to golden boy’, *The Listener*, 12 May 1988, 14-15; and John Lyttle, [interview excerpted by BFI Library Services], *The Independent*, 11 January 1994, 22.

<sup>112</sup> Andrew Billen, ‘Long charm of the Law’, *The Times*, 11 January 1988, 12.

especially noteworthy for its belligerent use of hand-held cameras, evoking documentary filming techniques but also making the drama appear deliberately stylised.

These American series – and one might add *St Elsewhere* (1983-89) and *thirtysomething* (1989-92), set respectively in a hospital and in a middle class suburb in Philadelphia – all contributed to an important extension of the series format which connects with developments in the serial during the period. They showed that television drama could be muscular in terms of characterisation and dramatic incident and simultaneously complex in its presentation of certain themes.<sup>113</sup> Their multi-character casts, rolling storylines and episodic narrative conclusions, combined with realistic filming techniques and rapid editing, offered new potentialities for popular television realism.

The British series *Capital City* (Euston Films, 1989-90) was directly influenced by these transatlantic forebears. Its central setting is the London office of an international merchant bank, peopled by characters who are mostly young, ambitious and extremely rich. The programme's plotting is organised conventionally around personal and professional relationships, but its 'issue-based' storylines also deal with alcoholism, heroin addiction, and unethical banking practices. The broadcaster, Thames, spent £500,000 on an advertising campaign for the series, an unprecedented marketing budget for a British programme. While viewing figures were not especially high at around 8 million, the all-important demographic profile – 51 per cent ABC1 viewers with an average age of under 45 – was especially pleasing to advertising executives and commissioning editors alike.<sup>114</sup>

*Hill Street Blues*, *St Elsewhere*, *LA Law* and *thirtysomething* were all purchased by Channel Four. As already discussed, the largest part of Channel Four's drama budget for original programming was committed to *Film on Four*. The purchase of American imports represented a relatively cheap form of programming as a counterbalance to this expenditure. It provided, moreover, a secure raft of ratings-boosting drama to schedule alongside the minority-oriented programming Channel Four was obliged to broadcast. As an example of the differential between production and purchasing costs for British

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<sup>113</sup> A fuller analysis would also consider their conservative tendencies in the representation of various characters and themes.

<sup>114</sup> See Emily Bell, 'How Capital's campaign paid off', *The Observer*, 28 January 1990, 49.

broadcasters, Richard Collins points out that one episode of the series *Miami Vice* cost its producers around \$1.2 million to make, and the BBC between \$45-50,000 to purchase.<sup>115</sup>

Channel Four's dependence on programming acquired from the American market is evident with regard not only to series, but to sitcoms including *Roseanne*, *The Golden Girls*, *Cheers* and *The Cosby Show*. Original British drama, by contrast, is much less conspicuous. As Tunstall observes, Channel Four's 'total output of original non-soap drama is only about one hour per week'.<sup>116</sup> While its continued reliance on transatlantic programming received occasional criticism in the press, Channel Four could counter that, although it did not commission a great deal of original British drama outside the *Film on Four* strand, it concentrated its resources on major and impactful projects like *The Manageress*, (1989), *A Very British Coup*, *Traffik* (1989) and *GBH*. Indeed the latter, comprising seven long episodes, cost £6 million – half of Channel Four's entire serials budget for 1991.

Channel Four was not alone in favouring imported drama. The BBC purchased two innovative series, *Cagney and Lacey* and *Miami Vice*. The former was notable for featuring two female protagonists in a genre – the police procedural – previously geared towards male characters.<sup>117</sup> The latter was markedly postmodern, applying the filming techniques of pop and rock videos (along with numerous visual references to popular culture), to a more conventional police action drama. Again not the least interesting aspect of these programmes is their mutation of existing genre conventions.<sup>118</sup>

Other British series did not bear all the hallmarks of the American programmes mentioned above, but a pattern in British and US drama becomes evident towards the end of the 1980s. In both cases there is a shift in mode, from a dependence on action to

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<sup>115</sup> Richard Collins, presentation at the Department of Communications, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 7 December 1992.

<sup>116</sup> Tunstall, *Television Producers*, 112.

<sup>117</sup> For a discussion of *Cagney and Lacey* in relation to the *Prime Suspect* dramas see pp. 271-3.

<sup>118</sup> For a good historicist account of British and American television series, emphasising their ideological strategies (an issue I have not discussed here), see David Buxton, *From The Avengers to Miami Vice: Form and ideology in television series* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990).

a concern with personal issues in both domestic and professional spheres. In Britain, for instance, action series like *The Professionals* and *The Sweeney* were superseded by character-based (and therefore slower-paced) series like *Inspector Morse*, *Poirot*, and *Bergerac* (BBC, 1981-91). These programmes, along with a great number of British series and serials produced in the 1980s, need careful definition: they are recognisably genre-based (*Capital City*, for instance, evokes the style of *LA Law* and the setting of films like *Dealers* and *Wall Street*); recognisably formulaic in terms of genre-plotting and recurring stylistic and thematic elements; but nonetheless distinctive in terms of characterisation and tone. British thriller serials of the period are a part of this pattern, and are notable for their play between established conventions and more individual characteristics.

The British soap operas, series and serials referred to above are mostly contemporary in their settings. Of course it is (over)simplistic to suggest that any contemporary drama by definition interrogates the society in which it is set, just as it is a mistaken assertion that drama set in the past – costume drama – is intrinsically nostalgic and conservative. That said, I shall argue at various points in this study that 1980s television thrillers gain an overtly political inflection in part through their contemporaneity: they engage directly and explicitly with contemporary society, in contrast to a number of costume dramas made during the period which constitute a *flight* from contemporary realities. The latter point has been made by a number of critics. Stuart Hood, for instance, notes a nostalgic trend towards period drama by the end of the 1970s (programmes like *The Forsyte Saga*, *The Duchess of Duke Street*, *Edward and Mrs Simpson* and *Brideshead Revisited* spring to mind) in which the period in question is an eye-catching backdrop for the ‘timeless’ conundrums of personal relationships. The historical process is dominated not by anything as drab as socio-political circumstance, but by affairs of the heart. Moreover in turning to the past for seemingly stable images of British society and for apparently more secure sets of values, these programmes reveal a deep insecurity with regard to the present. For Hood this bespeaks an economic crisis structurally



endemic to late capitalism, inducing the desire to look back wistfully to an era of a 'greater' Britain.<sup>119</sup>

The first half of the 1980s saw no abatement in the presentation of period drama drawn from literary sources. A glance at television adaptations of Dickens' novels indicates the popularity of these treatments: versions of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1980/81), *Dombey & Son* (1982/3), *The Pickwick Papers* (1984/5) and *Oliver Twist* (1985/6) were joined by adaptations of novels by Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope and Charlotte Bronte. Many of these serials were commissioned for the early evening slot on a Sunday evening, and they are not among the main body of primetime television drama of the period. Even so, they connect with the powerful presence of the costume drama genre in the 1980s, evidenced by the popularity of cinema films like *A Room With a View* (1985) and *Maurice* (1987), both adapted from the novels by EM Forster, produced by Ismail Merchant and directed by James Ivory, and *A Handful of Dust* (1987), adapted from Evelyn Waugh's novel and directed by Charles Sturridge (the director of *Brideshead Revisited*). Writing in 1991, Cairns Craig suggests that 'this genre is in danger of turning into a parody of itself' through its obsession with the surface details of period recreation.<sup>120</sup> 'It is film as conspicuous consumption', especially invidious in that 'the unity of style denies the difference of culture'.<sup>121</sup> Craig echoes Hood's analysis when he asserts that

The dominance and success of this particular brand of film-making in the past ten years is symptomatic of the crisis of identity through which England passed during the Thatcher years. ... The films ... reflect the conflict of a nation committed to an international market place that diminishes the significance of Englishness and at the same time seeking to compensate by asserting 'traditional' English values, whether Victorian or provincial. If for an international audience, the England these films validate and advertise is a theme park of the past, then for an English audience they gratify the need to find points of certainty within English culture.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Hood, *On Television*, 27-8.

<sup>120</sup> Cairns Craig, 'Rooms Without a View', *Sight and Sound*, v1, n2 (1991), 10.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

This argument is persuasive, but it does not follow that *all* costume dramas subscribe to Craig's model. George Brandt's account of *The Jewel in the Crown* in *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, for instance, treats the programme as something tougher than the 'nostalgia drama' which Brandt criticises in his earlier book.<sup>123</sup> Adapted from Paul Scott's novels forming *The Raj Quartet*, *The Jewel in the Crown* is indeed notable for its complexity in depicting the last years (1942-47) of the British Raj in India. As well as exploring vexed relationships between an extended cast of characters, it makes more explicit than many costume dramas the defining nature of its political and historical contexts. In an essay largely critical of costume dramas Tana Wollen rightly cautions that, however nostalgic these films and serials might initially appear, 'a more complex set of political relations between past and present can be traced in them'.<sup>124</sup>

There is a commercial aspect to costume drama. It often presents an idealised image of Britishness, suitable for export to overseas markets. In many instances these projects attract initial investment from abroad. *The Jewel in the Crown* cost Granada Television £5 1/2 million to produce, but the company had no co-production partners. The serial recouped the initial outlay even before the end of its first run on British terrestrial television, and it sold to 40 markets abroad.<sup>125</sup> It was commercially successful, then, but also demonstrated that period drama could achieve such market value without falsifying less palatable aspects of the British imperial adventure. By the same token the programme's success makes evident the enticement that costume dramas offer to foreign co-producers. *Brideshead Revisited* was notable in this respect. It was co-produced by Granada Television, WNET from America and NDR from West Germany and subsequently sold to markets the world over, becoming the highest-rated drama serial to have been shown up to that point on channels as far apart as PBS in America

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<sup>123</sup> George Brandt, 'Introduction', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 21. See also Brandt, 'The Jewel in the Crown (Paul Scott – Ken Taylor): The literary serial; or the art of adaptation', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 196-213.

<sup>124</sup> Tana Wollen, 'Over our shoulders: nostalgic screen fictions for the 1980s', in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of national culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 179.

<sup>125</sup> Brandt, 'The Jewel in the Crown', 199.

and ABC in Australia. With its lugubrious pace, its lulling neo-classical soundtrack, its slow tracking shots and soft-focus long-shots, *Brideshead Revisited* falls readily into the category of 'heritage' programming, evoking nostalgia for the peculiar (but transcendent) characteristics of a previous era. On a slightly different note, however, *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Jewel in the Crown*, both produced by Granada, demonstrate a desire on the part of a major ITV network company to steal a march on the BBC, given that costume drama had always been fertile territory for the Corporation.

Collins, Garnham and Locksley observe a relationship in costume drama between programme content and circumstances of production:

A condition of consistent success in the international market is the production of programmes that appeal to international tastes and with a national content that is confined to the internationally current stereotypes of individual national histories and formations. Thus British television presents to the world a costumed image of Britain as a rigidly but harmoniously hierarchized class society in, for instance, *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* and *Upstairs, Downstairs ...* the quantity of co-production and joint ventures and the importance of foreign markets is such that it is unimaginable that the anticipated requirements of the most important market, the USA, have no impact on editorial and creative decisions.<sup>126</sup>

Co-production should not be seen as a dilution of the project's national character in every circumstance; and it is true that it allows the originating producer to corral a larger budget than would otherwise be the case. As Jeremy Isaacs observes, co-produced programmes seen on Channel Four in the year 1984/5 cost a total of £23 million, of which £11 million was supplied by Channel Four itself. Thus the larger cost of this programming, transmitted by a national broadcaster, was provided from

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<sup>126</sup> Collins *et al.*, *Economics*, 57, 75. See also 65-72. For a discussion of issues surrounding co-production, see Margaret Matheson, Jeremy Isaacs and John Caughie, 'Co-production in the next decade: towards an international public service' in MacCabe and Stewart, *The BBC*, 92-105. For a warning against the dangers of 'internationalised' TV drama, see Bob Woffinden, 'Dramatic decline at the BBC', *The Guardian*, 15 May 1989, 21.

elsewhere.<sup>127</sup> It is significant that 1980s thriller serials did not usually depend upon any co-production finance from abroad. They, too, depict various images of 'Britishness' – but these, as I shall argue in subsequent chapters, are circumscribed with an anxiety even more marked than that of 1980s costume dramas.

Mrs Thatcher's era witnessed significant shifts in the style and texture of television drama. The developments noted above have direct relevance to 1980s thriller serials. The expansion of genres characteristic of the period applies just as readily to the programmes examined in the following chapters, which draw on a range of genres and conventions. The trend in the series towards dramas bearing multiple narrative lines is also borne out in the extended complexity of serial narratives, which develop characters and storylines in depth. The multi-episode drama (whether in soap opera, series or serial form) became the dominant mode in comparison with the single play. This was not necessarily at the expense of an engagement with contemporary social issues. Instead the serial replaced the single play as the vehicle for resonant, interrogative television drama, and the *contemporaneity* of thriller serials is intrinsic to their effectiveness. It initially appears that there were far fewer 'awkward' British television dramas than in the 1960s and 1970s; but various thrillers serials of the period do indeed raise pertinent questions about the society in which they are set. In a number of cases the thrillers are as disquieting as they are exciting.

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<sup>127</sup> Jeremy Isaacs, 'Co-production in the next decade: towards an international public service', in MacCabe and Stewart, *The BBC*, 99.

### 3 An approach to genre

A study which has as its object a group of fictional dramas defined as ‘thrillers’ immediately invokes the concept of genre.<sup>1</sup> Before addressing the salient characteristics of the thriller, let alone as manifested in a specific group of programmes, it is necessary to begin with the notion of genre itself. What principles relating to genre underlie the subsequent analysis of TV thrillers? In the following pages I shall explore the relationship between a ‘theoretical’ and an ‘historical’ understanding of genre. I shall examine in broad terms how genres ‘work’, and suggest that a full engagement with genre-texts will inevitably deal with cultural as well as aesthetic considerations.

My conception of genre owes a debt to Tzvetan Todorov’s influential account in *The Fantastic*. Todorov suggests that ‘we should posit, on the one hand, *historical genres*; on the other, *theoretical genres*. The first would result from an observation of literary reality; the second from a deduction of a theoretical order.’<sup>2</sup> Theoretical genres are accounted for by reference to elements or traits which ~~cohere~~ *cohere* any given body of texts across history. Aristotle, for example, divided ‘the various kinds of poetry’ into epic, tragic and comic genres, identifying qualities immanent to each.<sup>3</sup> Indeed poetry itself can be thought of as a theoretical genre, as can drama. Historical genres, by

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful collection of essays theorising genre with regard to cinema (but with more general implications), see Barry Keith Grant (ed), ‘Part One: Theory’, *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas, 1986). This also contains a good bibliography. For short theorised accounts of genre with regard to television, see Jane Feuer, ‘Genre Study and Television’, in Robert C. Allen (ed), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled* (London: Routledge, 1992), and John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 109-115.

<sup>2</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, translated by Richard Howard, *The Fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 13 [Todorov’s emphases].

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, in Aristotle/Horace/Longinus, *Classical Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1965), 31.

contrast, are observable at specific points of time and are more tightly constituted. The Hollywood gangster movie, for instance, or the Jacobean tragedy, are historical genres, their texts definable according to crucial shared characteristics. The comic, in an Aristotelian sense, is a theoretical genre, whereas Restoration comedy is an historical genre. As Todorov goes on to say, 'Everything suggests that historical genres are a sub-group of complex theoretical genres.'<sup>4</sup>

There are obvious idealising implications to this position, for it appears to suggest that every actual genre is but a tributary to some grand Platonic ocean. In a later study Todorov emphasises the primacy of historical genres, which are historicised in two ways. Firstly, they participate in the inevitable chronological process by which genres are formed. 'Where do genres come from?' Todorov asks. 'Quite simply from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several ... it is a system in constant transformation'<sup>5</sup> Genres are thus subject to their own historicity, to continual development and reconstitution. Secondly, Todorov points up the cultural and political specificity of historical genres: 'each epoch has its own system of genres, which stands in some relation to the dominant ideology, and so on. Like any other institution, genres bring to light the constitutive features of the society to which they belong.'<sup>6</sup>

This precisely describes my understanding of 1980s television thriller serials; but that is not to diminish the importance of the notion of theoretical genres. In referring to the thriller in the first place we are using a term which can easily apply to James Bond novels, hard-boiled detective stories and a number of films by Alfred Hitchcock. My contention in the following pages is that one can talk in theoretical terms about the thriller genre, structured according to several fundamental principles; and then subsequently of historical manifestations of the thriller – of groups of texts which participate in 'thrillerness' but with revealing particularities. This is not to say that

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<sup>4</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, translated by Catherine Porter, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

genres exist as shadows of their larger Platonic ideal.<sup>7</sup> One must indeed formulate abstract generic principles, but only in order to show how these are figured in culturally specific manifestations. This, I would argue, is the task of genre criticism.

The notion of theoretical genres poses the problematic that such criticism becomes obsessed with classification, whereby texts are 'categorised' according to their aesthetic organisation: a task which may well be feasible, but which has little to say about the interesting questions to do with the relationships between texts and the societies in which they are produced and received. The most massive instance of a 'categorising' approach to genre is Northrop Frye's restatement of Aristotelian poetics in *The Anatomy of Criticism*.<sup>8</sup> Frye divides fictional work into different modes, accounting for them according to a variety of registers. He proposes fundamental distinctions between, for instance, the comic and the tragic; or between texts which observe the rules of nature, and texts whose characters can behave magically. These may or may not be the most coherent means of classification,<sup>9</sup> but a still greater problem suggests itself. The entire assumption of Frye's work is that no value-judgments on the part of the critic should taint the high seriousness of literary study. Literature is accountable according to its particular modes and patterns rather than its representational relationship to culture. It thus operates according to systems of textual organisation which only the informed critic can elucidate. Nowhere in Frye's (impressively) substantial book do the notions of historical specificity or cultural context disturb the author's magisterial approach to poetics.

An obvious tendency in addressing theoretical genres is that one's work stops at being a classification project, as if in the worst cases the critic is nothing more than a kind of philatelist of culture, sticking artworks into his or her album according to which section they belong. But in accounting for the ways in which genres 'work' one must address a cultural exchange to do with the response of a particular audience to a particular text. This necessarily entails discussion of historical, political and ideological co-ordinates. Genre study in this respect is not a *post-hoc* form of categorisation, but

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<sup>7</sup> For a brief criticism of the conception of genres as 'Platonic categories', see Rick Altman, 'A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre', in Grant (ed), *Film Genre Reader*.

<sup>8</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> Todorov criticises Frye's classifications as not logically coherent. See Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 12.

an activity of cultural signification.

How, then, do genres 'work'? According to Jerry Palmer, 'genre, as a level of textuality, has a reality: far from being an artificial device created by critics, it is part of the author's and reader's competence'.<sup>10</sup> The reader understands in accordance to what s/he already knows. Genre operates within the reader's 'horizon of expectations', an important phrase which signifies the cultural 'competency' which a reader (or, indeed, a viewer) brings to a particular text.<sup>11</sup> Competency in this sense is not a value-judgement, but simply a way of assessing a reader/viewer's familiarity with genres, and with the social and textual codes in operation. We might substitute Raymond Durgnat's 'network of assumptions'<sup>12</sup> as a preferable phrase to 'horizon of expectations', in that it suggests a less enclosed field of reference and a less active and intentional role on the part of the reader/viewer. But the principle remains the same. A genre is composed of a number of texts which readers understand according to their commonality, and this very multiplicity is intrinsic to their individual effect.

While genres depend upon recurring elements, these are modulated from film to film or programme to programme. As Stephen Neale suggests, there are no such things as 'generic essences'.<sup>13</sup> Instead there are variations and developments of certain shared thematic or aesthetic components. Neale insists that

The notion that "all westerns (or all gangster films, or all war films, or whatever) are the same" is not just an unwarranted generalisation, it is profoundly wrong: if each text within a genre were, literally, the same, there would simply not be enough difference to generate either meaning or pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

Texts in a genre thus participate in essential patterns of repetition and difference, where the latter are not polarities but instead form a continuum. Neale expresses this as follows: 'repetition is never simply the return of the identical and difference is never

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<sup>10</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Potboilers* (London: Routledge, 1991), 116.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 113, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 32.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 48.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.



simply the eruption of the absolutely new. ... Difference is absolutely essential to the economy of genre. ... There is ... not repetition *and* difference, but repetition *in* difference.’<sup>15</sup> As it stands this is a rather dry formulation. In fact the crucial point about such a process is not the importance of repetition and difference in themselves, but the ways in which the elements which are repeated or transformed bear meaning within the text.

Questions of this nature are relevant to genre texts in any medium. By way of a straightforward example, let us take the settings, costumes and props typical ~~to~~<sup>of</sup> the Hollywood Western film. The largely outdoor settings and the expanses of plains or deserts form the unyielding frontier territory which the settlers must conquer. Stetsons, leather chaps and work shirts typically represent both practicality and – because gender roles in the Western are firmly delineated – masculinity. The visibility and lethality of the gun signifies individual potency and is an emblem of the Western’s negotiations between imposed discipline and dangerous disorder. Once one has seen more than a couple of Westerns and learnt to understand the codes of representation involved, these elements acquire, by nature of repetition, an iconic force.

This suggests two very obvious pre-requisites for genre: firstly, that an audience must, on some level, be aware of the work’s genre identity; and secondly, that in order for this to be the case, the audience must be confronted with a recurring set of elements or characteristics. Edward Buscombe notes that, ‘constant exposure to a previous succession of films has led the audience to recognise certain formal elements as charged with an accretion of meaning’.<sup>16</sup> But genre recognition is not simply a case of continued exposure, of seeing the same elements appear again and again, but of understanding (perhaps learning) the ways in which their meaning is modulated by the text in question. One might, for instance, have seen a hundred horses in programmes to do with the rag and bone trade, eighteenth century farming techniques and equestrian showjumping, but none of these will excite the same primordial feelings as the sight of a horse in a western film. The viewer responds not to the thing ‘Horse’ but to the icon

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<sup>15</sup> Neale, *Genre*, 13, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Buscombe, ‘The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema’, in Grant (ed), *Film Genre Reader*, 34.

'Horse-within-a-Western-film', which because of its context is charged with meanings relating to speed, pursuit, escape, long-distance travel and a life of rugged self-sufficiency.

It would be limiting, then, to assert that the potency of genre elements comes about simply by their repeated presence, by always being there. Instead they are encoded within the drama in a particular way. Colin McArthur argues that 'The responses of film-makers and audiences to ... genres seem to offer a good prima facie case for believing that they are animating rather than neutral, that they carry intrinsic charges of meaning independently of whatever is brought to them by particular directors.'<sup>17</sup> If genres are 'animating', however, we must assess precisely what it is that they animate. If they carry 'intrinsic charges of meaning', these still surface differently in different films. It is incidentally worth observing that some of the most influential writing on genre in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s (McArthur's work included) emphasised this fluidity, generally in terms of a mesh between genre considerations on the one hand and the work of cinema auteurs on the other.<sup>18</sup> For all these writers genre is a field within which rewarding (auteurist) films can be made. It needs adding that movies are also subject to the institutional, commercial and technological pressures particular to the cinema industry, and that these too account for the particularities of any given text.<sup>19</sup>

Questions of both particularity and difference are thus as important to a notion of genre as those of immanent characteristics and repetition. This is implied in Robert Warshow's celebrated essay, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner'. Warshow discusses the connotative significance of land and horses in the Western, ascribing to them 'a moral significance: the physical freedom they represent belongs to the moral "openness" of the West – corresponding to the fact that guns are carried where they can

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<sup>17</sup> Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 19.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, McArthur, *Underworld USA*; André Bazin, 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema', in Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 1* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 23-40; and Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Studies in Authorship in the Western* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Neale emphasises this aspect in his booklet, *Genre*, 10 and 19-20.

be seen'.<sup>20</sup>

Warshow notes, however, that as the genre develops, land and horses can bear a very different connotation:

Once it has been discovered that the true theme of the Western movie is not the freedom and expansiveness of frontier life, but its limitations, its material bareness, the pressures of obligation, then even the landscape itself ceases to be quite the arena of free movement it once was, but becomes instead a great empty waste, cutting down more often than it exaggerates the stature of the horseman who rides across it.<sup>21</sup>

There is an internal contradiction here: Warshow points to 'the true theme' of the Western, where his argument in fact suggests that the themes the genre deals with are inflected differently at different periods: there is thus no 'true theme' which runs unchanging through all the Westerns ever made, but various treatments of recurring themes, deriving their shifting effect from the already-understood loose significations of genre elements.

The implication is clear: if it is possible to isolate genre elements, great care is needed in defining their effect. Genres may well intrinsically motivate audience response, but they will do so in different ways in different films. Genres work not simply by sharing elements, but by displaying these in a particular combination and with variable emphases, all within a certain ideological frame which, as Warshow's observation demonstrates, itself can change as the genre develops.

Indeed the link between a genre and its audience is extremely flexible. Just as individuals can become more 'sophisticated' in dealing with genre, so the response of an audience to a genre text can vary. The film *Shane* was hugely popular when it was released in 1952 and has since been accorded the status of an archetypal Western. I have shown it to students in the 1990s, when the response has been rather indifferent. What was then perceived as noble and heroic – Shane's relationship with the admiring young Joey, for instance – now seems archaic<sup>handic</sup> and meets with quietly amused derision.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Warshow, 'Movie Chronicle: The Westerner', in Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 438.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.

Low-angle close-ups of the blond young Joey against the backdrop of a blue sky seem redolent of the type of imagery found in Nazi propaganda films of the 1930s. In fact *Shane* is an ideologically-inscribed hymn to the achievements of American homesteaders, staking out their own *lebensraum*. This is alas not an entirely outdated theme, but the particular organisation of thematic and aesthetic elements in the film does make it seem dated, and inappropriate to the concerns of a 1990s audience. The movie has not changed, but the audience's perception of its meaning-effects has.

This is one way in which, to use Jerry Palmer's succinct phrase, 'genre is a dynamic construct':<sup>22</sup> for one's own response to genres can be expected to develop through time. Part of the dynamic, then, is provided by the reader/viewer, not just by the text. The more obvious application of Palmer's comment relates to the developing *interior* structure of any particular genre. Texts which are generically connected cannot, by definition, be identical. Instead they display differences, which might be very slight, in their organisation of genre elements. In cases where cultural products are widely disseminated these differences are partly explained as a response to preceding works within the same genre, replicating (or moderating) their patterns. A genre, as suggested above, does not come ready-formed but accretes a particular set of meanings. Any genre is therefore historically determined, developing in time and quite probably intersecting with other genres and forms of cultural production.

Of course this is an argument that could not be made about the Western, for example, if these films were all made independently, perhaps by different studios in different parts of the world and at different times. If this were the case we would have to explain the existence of genres in terms of essential<sup>(st)</sup> doubtless primal, tendencies within art and within the human mind. But because the actors, directors and producers of Westerns operated within the same industry, were familiar with each other's work and shared (broadly speaking) both a cultural and cinematic heritage, it is perfectly feasible to plot the development of the Western as an ongoing engagement with the genre, from the early films of the Twentieth Century (themselves derived from the romances and adventure stories of nineteenth century Wild West literature), to the classic Hollywood movies of the 1930s and '40s, to the later Spaghetti Westerns with

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<sup>22</sup> Palmer, *Potboilers*, 127.

their elements of pastiche, to the recent reformulation of the genre in films like *Dances With Wolves* (USA, 1990, directed by Kevin Costner) and *Unforgiven* (USA, 1992, directed by Clint Eastwood). Genres have their own matrices and their own history.

Genre study necessitates that the critic pays close attention to text. This is not only in order to *categorise* artistic production, however. We must look too at context, at the time and place in which a work is produced and received, for it is here that its charges of meaning become most pertinent and most available to us. The point of interest, then, is not merely to ascertain whether a particular programme is a police procedural drama, or a detective thriller, or a narratively-closed serial with shades of *film noir*; but to map the significant effects which its genre elements provoke. In this case the critic seeks to assess the ways in which individual texts emphasise, neuter or transmute the residual charge of genre elements; and account for various responses – both emotional and ideological – this assemblage might trigger in the audience.

Such a task demands a degree of caution, for one's findings will automatically be prefaced by the rider, '*in this particular text, at this particular time, for this particular audience*'. Genre elements may well be 'active', but their effects will slide according both to their formulation in any one text and their reception by any particular viewer. This does not mean that we need succumb to the most hapless relativism, in which nothing can be asserted because infinite possibilities (however unlikely) must be allowed. In fact the opposite is the case. It should be possible to draw firm conclusions about the effect of a genre, given that genre elements are always in need of the closest historically- and culturally-specific definition.

In *Television – Technology and Cultural Form*, Raymond Williams developed his celebrated concept of the 'flow' of television, recognising that viewers normally watch more than one programme at any one viewing session. As he explains:

In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organisation, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow ... There has been a significant shift from the concept of sequence as *programming* to the concept of sequence as *flow*. Yet this is difficult to see because the older concept of programming – the temporal sequence within which mix and proportion and balance

operate – is still active and still to some extent real.<sup>23</sup>

In addressing the issues raised by this concept, Williams notes the strategic and competitive dimensions to scheduling, where it is in the interests of a broadcasting organisation to encourage the viewer to remain with that station for as long as possible. He also notes the significance of the various ‘interruptions’ or connecting elements in television’s ‘planned flow’, the advertisements, trailers and news of other programmes. In this he is of course dealing with both the structure of a television schedule (an institutional phenomenon) and with the viewer’s experience of television-viewing (a sociological phenomenon). The important elements here are the physical ‘connectedness’ of the programmes and their determination according to institutional factors (television’s construction of a schedule).

It is possible to appropriate this conception of television flow and apply it in slightly different terms to an analysis of development within a genre. Just as the experience of any one television programme is usually as one item in a flow of programme material,<sup>24</sup> so one’s experience of a text in a genre is as one item connected to the flow of that particular genre’s heritage, necessarily ‘read’ against its predecessors. I have suggested above that this notion of connectedness applies to the Western, and this is clearly true of other cinema genres like the *film noir*, the action movie and the horror film. It applies as readily to British television dramas.

Television is still, relatively speaking, a young medium, and perhaps for that reason its history in this country is in some senses more monolithic than that of theatre or film. The British experience of television was, until the recent arrival of subscription-TV, a shared national experience, with programmes transmitted only on BBC1 and 2, ITV and, from 1982, Channel Four. In addition there has been a far greater centralisation and standardisation of production practices than exists, say, in the theatre. It is inevitable, then, that there should be a concomitantly uniform understanding of programme types.

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<sup>23</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television – Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974), 86, 89 [Williams’s italics].

<sup>24</sup> One must acknowledge, however, the increased use of video recorders, allowing viewers to pre-select material which they can then watch in isolation from other programmes.

Television executives construct their schedules around thirteen-week seasons, with summer traditionally being the most somnolent period in terms of the appearance of new work; but the viewer's experience is of uninterrupted provision of television, day in, day out, from one year to the next. This apparent seamlessness applies to programme types too. These change, but they change partly in response to the respective popularity and effectiveness of programmes that had gone before. Although nowadays you can always turn on the television and find something to watch – television is nothing if not a medium of present experience – the programmes themselves inevitably refer back to an ever-growing ancestry. I can think of no drama programme made in the 1980s or 1990s and transmitted in primetime – say between 6pm and 10pm – that is completely new and free of forebears.

This connectedness is what I mean by television flow in the broader generic sense. To take the thriller serials that form the subject of the current study. They were mostly developed by producers already with track records in drama production. They were commissioned by executives for particular transmission slots, thereby assuming that certain conventions governing the relationship between drama and audience would come into play. They were made by directors who had generally learnt their trade on other kinds of television drama; and starred actors many of whom were familiar to the audience through their work in other television programmes, thus bringing to the role an extrinsic trace of 'personality'. In addition, the production team responsible for shaping the serial even before filming began – importantly not only the writer is involved here – would be familiar with the conventions employed by successful programmes connected with the genre in which the team was working.

Subconsciously, perhaps, those who work in the television industry are shaped by the modes of operation of the industry itself. There is a sense of an inexorable aesthetic pressure, as well as the industrial-political one of making programmes which are 'appropriate', which 'fit' their particular place in the schedule. Television drama productions connect with the patterns and processes of previous drama productions – even if there is a conscious effort to disrupt those patterns. The programmes depend on conventions – understood by cast, production team and viewer – familiar from previous television drama. Bob Millington makes the point that this is the case even with

'serious' television drama: while 'emphasis is often placed on the work's artistic uniqueness or its realism in relation to a world "out there", its meaning is ultimately anchored in generic similarities and conventions – indeed, its readability depends on these'.<sup>25</sup> Because of the flow of television, programme-makers and viewers have a shared recognition of programme types, a knowledge of what has gone before, forming the 'cultural competence' which ensures the effectiveness of genre elements in television programmes.

The process is in a sense organic, for programme types are mutated over the years in accordance with the necessary fact of genre development: where a genre has continuing cultural resonance, it never stands still. As Antony Easthope suggests:

The transformations of a genre from text to text, its rise and fall in relation to other genres, how it splits and combines with others to form new genres, its mutations into a new kind, in all of these genre may be said to be acting according to an "inward" determination, the autonomy of signifying practice. But not only thus. Generic development, why a genre moves in a certain direction, also requires historical explanation.<sup>26</sup>

Critics may well find themselves engaged with a curious phenomenon: in some cases generic development means that genre products both reflect and exceed conventions of the genre to which they belong. In his essay '*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation' John Cawelti notes rich results when this happens. Cawelti describes a 'close resemblance' between Roman Polanski's film, released in 1974, to other films from the hard-boiled detective genre. *Chinatown*, he suggests, trades on the mythic structures of American films noirs of the 1940s; but 'the film deviates increasingly from the myth until, by the end of the story, the film arrives at an ending almost contrary to that of the myth.'<sup>27</sup> This leads to a significant observation regarding the 'use of traditional generic structures as a means of demythologisation. A film like *Chinatown*

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<sup>25</sup> Bob Millington, '*Boys from the Blackstuff* (Alan Bleasdale)', in George Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 124.

<sup>26</sup> Antony Easthope, 'Notes on Genre', *Screen Education*, n32/33 (autumn/winter 1979/80), 44.

<sup>27</sup> John Cawelti, '*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films', in Mast and Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism*, 507.



deliberately invokes the basic characteristics of a traditional genre in order to bring its audience to see that genre as the embodiment of an inadequate and destructive myth.’<sup>28</sup> Nor is *Chinatown* an isolated example of this procedure. Cawelti finds a number of successful films of the 1970s whose ‘puzzling combination of humorous burlesque and high seriousness seems to be a mode of expression characteristic of our period, not only in film, but in other literary forms’.<sup>29</sup> The point is that genres in development may simultaneously participate in and offer a critique of familiar conventions.

The argument is perhaps more clearly demonstrated with regard to films like *Blue Velvet* (USA, 1986, directed by David Lynch) and *The Last Seduction* (USA, 1993, directed by John Dahl), which partly depend for their effect on the ways in which they reformulate the conventions of *film noir*. *Blue Velvet*, for instance, operates a more drastic polarity than is usual between the ‘normative’ and the ‘transgressive’ worlds of the narrative. Indeed the former – in this case a suburbia of artificial pleasantness – is so clearly satirised that the ‘normal’ can no longer be seen as a trustworthy haven. The return from the dangers presented in the film by a seedy underworld is not as cathartic and reassuring as is the case in the crime thrillers made between the 1920s and 1940s. *The Last Seduction* is a homage of sorts to Billy Wilder’s celebrated film *Double Indemnity*, featuring the same criminal project (an insurance scam) and making a number of explicit references to the earlier movie, not least through one of the character’s use of the assumed name, Neff. (In *Double Indemnity* Walter Neff is the insurance salesman who orchestrates the murder and the false claim.) But *The Last Seduction* is also a critique of the gender roles typical of the *film noir*, through its portrayal of a *femme fatale* who manifestly uses men as instruments of sexual pleasure and arranges criminal activity to her own advantage, and who crucially remains unpunished at the end of the film. Genre productions can use precisely their genre identities to construct new fields of meaning which operate as a critique of previous meanings in the same – or a closely related – genre.

One can argue in a similar vein that British TV thrillers offer a critique of the dominating ideological structures of preceding genre films and television series and

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<sup>28</sup> Cawelti, ‘*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation’, 515.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

serials in associated genres, as I shall discuss in Chapter 11. This is especially so <sup>with regard to</sup> in their focus on the role of the state, commercial institutions and public organisations as sources of anxiety, to the extent that one must recast the relationship between the protagonist and his/her society that structures earlier thrillers. Equally of relevance is the frequency with which narrative closure in these programmes is ambiguous, sometimes denying the 'solution' which in the past has been a staple feature of the thriller narrative. Indeed it is in part this aspect of the programmes – disallowing the viewer the luxury of a reassuring closure – which marks the TV thriller as a genre in development, revealing a productive new relationship between text and viewer. There is undoubtedly a narrative convention at work even here (the convention of the partially-open closure): but where it appears that genre expectations are exceeded we can observe that a text can be both recognisably a genre-product, and distinctly individual.

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I have asserted that there is aesthetic development within a genre, which necessitates an historical understanding of the ways in which genre products alter through time. It is possible to talk of 'history' in a narrower sense, as it applies to events in the public sphere at the time that genre programmes are made. Brian G. Rose finds it

difficult to accept the view that the TV genre production process has ever been decisively shaped by the immediate political or social environment ... When TV genres do change, it is more often the result of network programming practices and production techniques than a sudden thematic reaction to new cultural concerns.<sup>30</sup>

Rose is right to point to the influence of industrial and institutional factors on the development of genre patterns but is otherwise regrettably anti-historicist. The contention of the current study is that political thriller serials were precisely a response to their immediate social and political environment, and that such a focus accounts in

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<sup>30</sup> Brian G. Rose, 'Introduction', in Rose (ed), *TV Genres – A Handbook and Reference Guide* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1985), 7-8.

large part for the development of this particular genre in the first place. No less significantly, their new thematic content gives rise to new and appropriate aesthetic strategies.<sup>31</sup> In this case we might suggest not only that ‘the immediate political or social environment’ has a bearing on genre production, but that crucially it can impel genre development along certain lines. Thus, as Fredric Jameson observes, ‘the notion of a genre ... allows the coordination of immanent formal analysis of the individual text with the twin diachronic perspective of the history of forms and the evolution of social life.’<sup>32</sup>

These are arguments which must be carried out in detail in subsequent chapters. My point here is that in addressing the historicity of the TV thriller genre in the following pages, I am invoking two different conceptions of history. One concerns the connection of a genre product with the social and cultural context at its time of production. The other, on a broader canvas, concerns the history – the development through time – of a genre in its own right. The two are in no sense mutually exclusive, and together they recommend the observation that there is no such thing as a pure, ‘ideal’ generic essence which transcends its cultural context. In fact if we recognise the historicity of genre we immediately recognise the importance of context. As Jane Feuer observes, summarising Thomas Schatz’s semiotic account of genre, ‘ultimately genre criticism is cultural criticism’.<sup>33</sup>

Regardless of how scrupulously specific one is, there are clearly degrees of specificity in the boundaries a genre describes. It is thus possible to speak of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ genre identities. Towards the end of his chapter on genre in *Potboilers*, Jerry Palmer attempts to resolve ‘the question of different ways of analysing genre’ and suggests that identifying a ‘hierarchy of discourses’ might be the most profitable critical endeavour:

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<sup>31</sup> This is especially so as regards *Edge of Darkness* and *A Very British Coup*. See my discussion of these programmes in Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>32</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 105.

<sup>33</sup> Jane Feuer, ‘Genre Study and Television’, in Allen (ed), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, 143. Feuer’s essay accordingly includes a materialist account of the (intertextual) development of US sitcoms from the late-1960s to the mid-1980s (151-6).

where it is possible to show that a given group of texts in fact does have a dominating procedure in common, then we are in the presence of a genre; where no dominating procedure is involved, then the mere fact of some common elements should not be taken to indicate genre – or at least it should be recognised that the word genre is being used in two different senses, where one sense is much stronger than the other ... Where genre is used in the strong sense, it is probably the case that many texts will not belong to the genre at all; where it is used in the weaker sense of a horizon of expectations [on the part of the audience], it is likely that all texts will be traversed by some level of genre-based expectations, but the dosage will vary greatly.<sup>34</sup>

Of course some texts might depend on a kind of symphonic organisation, where discourses which appear to be less widely present are in fact no less important to the overall effect. With this reservation in mind, Palmer is surely justified in suggesting that groups of texts can be classified as genre products in stronger and weaker senses according to the degree of specificity invoked in one's interpretation of their 'dominating procedures'. The musical, for instance, can encompass works as varied as *Carousel*, *Oh What a Lovely War!* and *Cats*, and is clearly a genre in a rather loose sense of the term. The dominating procedure here is the use of songs within a dramatic presentation. But if we apply a narrower definition and talk of 1940s Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals including *Carousel*, *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*, we are in the presence of a group of shows which form a genre in a much stronger sense, bounded by a more rigorous set of conventions. The dominating procedures here are more clearly delineated, and involve particular narrative structures, musical idioms and performance conventions.

How does this relate to the subject of the current study, British thriller serials of the 1980s and '90s? I want to suggest that the dominating<sup>nt</sup> procedures of a group of programmes made in this period contribute to the formation of a recognisable genre; but that it would be a mistake to categorise these programmes as a discrete and enclosed 'strong' genre. They certainly demand a degree of flexibility in classification. Their shared elements suggest that a grouping together is inevitable but, as we shall see, their differences are as decisive as their similarities. My aim in the following chapters is not

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<sup>34</sup> Palmer, *Potboilers*, 126-7.

to shoehorn any particular text into a rigidly defined pre-existing category, but to explore the ways in which the formulation of genre elements and divergences from genre expectations produce significant effects. In any case, my concern throughout this study will be less with the cataloguing of programmes and more with the ways in which their generic constitution contributes to their network of meanings.

In conclusion, then, the current study assumes the following:

- i) a genre-text is formed of certain fundamental elements which constitute an assemblage of meaning-effects;
- ii) these meanings may vary according to the wider relationship between text, viewer and context;
- iii) a genre is not static and 'closed' but develops through time;
- iv) texts within a genre can be addressed according to the co-ordination between cultural determinants and immanent aesthetic characteristics.

All the above suggests that genre is not a monolithic concept, a key which automatically unlocks a guaranteed set of effects. The particular assemblage of a programme – its *mise en scène*, the nature of its camerawork, the inflections of its narrative, its construction of character and so on – will mean that genre elements bear a different charge in different programmes. One must additionally place a genre product within the flow of that particular genre's history, and recognise its possible relationship with divergent genres. Moreover the context in which a programme is being watched is of no little importance. Genre identifications are useful, however. They act as a kind of cultural shorthand and they are a handy means of dealing with what can be – in television, at any rate – a seemingly diverse array of texts.

In the following chapter I shall explore fundamental elements of the thriller, addressing a 'theoretical' genre (to use Todorov's term) structured according to important recurring principles. In subsequent chapters I shall examine the ways in which particular serials of the 1980s and early-'90s draw upon and modulate these elements, and together form an 'historical' genre. Convergences of theme and aesthetic organisation in these programmes point us towards revealing structures of feeling at their time of transmission.

## 4 The thriller genre: a theoretical account

The continuity announcement which preceded the first repeated transmission in 1985 of *Edge of Darkness* introduced 'a political thriller which has received much critical acclaim'. When *Prime Suspect* won the Royal Television Society's award for best single drama of 1991, the citation commended 'an exceptionally well-made police crime thriller'. The first episode of *Blood Rights* on BBC2 in 1990 was, the continuity announcer stated, 'the adaptation by Mike Phillips of his bestselling thriller', while Ruth Rendell's *A Fatal Inversion* in 1992 was trailed as an 'adult thriller'.

To this handful of examples one could add many more, from programme listings, continuity announcements, broadcast media reports and press reviews, where the word 'thriller' is used to connote the kind of programme in question. It is an immediately evocative term, a promise to the viewer of action, intrigue and excitement, and one would clearly expect the programmes mentioned above to be 'thrillerish' in these respects. Routine etymological inquiries reveal that the first example of its usage given in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is in a review in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1889, when it was applied to a 'worthless play', with connotations of sensationalism that survive to this day. (Interestingly *The OED* makes a cross-reference with the term 'shocker'.) Since then it has taken on positive as well as pejorative connotations, yet as a generic term it is loose and vague. It has been variously applied to spy stories, action adventures, detective stories and political dramas. Indeed it has been associated with a number of overlapping genres, to the extent that 'the thriller' forms part of what Julian Symons describes as an extensively hybrid category, 'sensational literature'.<sup>1</sup>

The term has indeed frequently been applied to novels and short stories. It can

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder* (Hong Kong: Pan Macmillan, 1992), 15.

describe espionage adventures from writers as different as John Buchan, Ian Fleming and John le Carré; and detective stories as varied as those of Arthur Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammett and Sara Paretsky. It does not just refer to literary works, however. In his book on suspense cinema, *The Thriller*, Brian Davis includes films as diverse as Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946), Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and Spielberg's *Duel* (1972).<sup>2</sup> Their plots involve, respectively, the efforts of a private eye – Raymond Chandler's creation Philip Marlowe – to establish the circumstances behind the blackmailing of a wealthy client; an assassination attempt whose success would result in a communist placeman becoming President of the United States; and the attempt of an unseen lorry driver to pursue – apparently to the death – an innocent motorist. Whatever might unite these films, their subject matters and settings are markedly diverse. Even in the case of individual directors noted for their work within a thriller mode – Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock and even Jean Luc Godard, for instance – one can observe a remarkable range of tone and treatment across individual films.

The precise meaning of the term is further clouded when we consider programmes described as thrillers which have been transmitted on British television over the past decade, including *The Professionals* (1977-80, 1982-91 – an action-adventure series), *The Beiderbecke Affair* (1985 – a musical-romance), *Mother Love* (1989 – which might also be described as a melodrama), and *GBH* (1991 – a political-psychological-comedy). No wonder the word 'thriller' is frequently coupled with an adjective, so that we talk for instance of espionage thrillers, police thrillers, action thrillers, psychological thrillers and assassination thrillers – a whole procession of sub-genres. Faced with such an array of texts, how can we say with any confidence just what is a thriller?

Writing in this area has tended to fall into two categories of criticism, the mythic and the culturally materialist. For W.H. Auden, 'The interest in the thriller is the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil, between Us and Them ... The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt.'<sup>3</sup> Auden's book was published in 1948, after the Second World War but before the appearance of the more cynical spy

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<sup>2</sup> See Brian Davis, *The Thriller* (London and New York: Studio Vista/EP Dutton and Co, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> W.H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', in Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 147.

literature of the cold war years – most notably the work of John le Carré and Eric Ambler. ‘We’ were not to triumph quite so unequivocally in post-war thriller stories. But Auden’s point is that there is a mythic and indeed moral matrix to the action of a thriller. A similar argument is central to Ralph Harper’s study, focusing on existential and psychological aspects of thrillers. Harper suggests that ‘the primary world [of the thriller] is the soul’s perpetual struggle between good and evil’.<sup>4</sup>

This view is developed in more sophisticated terms by Jerry Palmer, although Palmer’s analyses also take a historical perspective.<sup>5</sup> Critical works following this more materialist path, as one would expect, reach different conclusions as to the political nature of various thriller narratives. Tony Davies, for instance, argues that

the pleasures of reading, in thrillers, seem inescapably predicated on an endorsement of patriarchal norms and oppressive masculine codes ... the unravellings and exposures of the classic thriller are accomplished entirely within the terms and along the grain of the dominant popular codes – sexist, imperialist, racist – of masculinity and Englishness.<sup>6</sup>

This may be the case with writers such as John Buchan, Saxe Rohmer and Edgar Wallace, but when we come to latter-day television thrillers the argument does not carry, as I shall maintain in the chapters that follow, especially with regard to programmes like *Edge of Darkness*, *A Very British Coup* and *Prime Suspect*.

The relationship between thrillers and their culture has also been discussed in writings about American hard-boiled fiction. Ken Worpole, for instance, emphasises the role played by American literary thrillers of the 1920s and ’30s in confirming for the public an image of civic corruption which embraced big business, politicians and the police.<sup>7</sup> Dennis Porter’s valuable and readable book *The Pursuit of Crime*, in part a

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<sup>4</sup> Ralph Harper, *The World of the Thriller* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1969), 17.

<sup>5</sup> See Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978); and Palmer, ‘Thrillers’, in Christopher Pawling (ed), *Popular Fiction and Social Change* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Tony Davies, ‘The divided gaze: Reflections on the political thriller’, in Derek Longhurst (ed), *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989), 132, 133.

<sup>7</sup> Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives* (London: Verso, 1983), 45-6.



historicist account of the development of detective fiction, touches upon similar issues.<sup>8</sup> The connection between culture and politics is also addressed in Cawelti and Rosenberg's analysis of spy stories.<sup>9</sup>

For the moment, however, I mean to explore whether texts as diverse as those mentioned above share common elements or processes which permit the formulation of the thriller as a genre in 'theoretical' terms, and leave until the final chapters a fuller discussion of the cultural resonances of British television thrillers. Most writing on the nature of thrillers has focused on literary texts, but that is not to say that such work will have little bearing on a study of television drama. Analysis of intrinsically literary aspects of thrillers – a stylistic congruence between the writing of Hammett and Hemingway, for instance – will not be relevant. But theories appertaining to narrative structure, story content, myth and ideology certainly will.

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As a useful point of departure, let us consider differences between two genres related in some ways, the classical detective story and the thriller, in order subsequently to isolate elements particular to the latter. The category of the thriller can, for the moment, include the range of texts mentioned above, but the classical detective story can be defined a little more precisely: it is exemplified by stories which centre upon the solution of a crime in a primarily ratiocinative manner, by a detective who may or may not be a professional but whose central function in the story is to elucidate a mystery. Notable examples of the form are the three detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe; the short stories and novels of Arthur Conan Doyle, featuring the character Sherlock Holmes; and the novels of the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction (the 1920s and '30s) by the likes of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham.

Tzvetan Todorov has undertaken a comparison of this kind in his essay 'The Typology of Detective Fiction'. The thriller, for Todorov's purposes, is exemplified by

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981). See especially 197-8.

<sup>9</sup> John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg, *The Spy Story* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

the hardboiled school of detective fiction, featuring novels and short stories by Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Mickey Spillane, but the points he makes apply as well to the other kinds of thriller mentioned above. As Todorov explains, classical detective stories have a double narrative structure: the body of the text constitutes a narrational account of the detective's work, moving towards a solution of (usually) a criminal act; but in the process the detective pieces together the hidden narrative of events which led to the crime which s/he is endeavouring to solve. The effects of this crime – the convulsing woman in the locked bedroom, say, in Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, or the wrongly-accused suspect in the dock in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* – are usually given towards the beginning of the detective story, and constitute the material circumstance which necessitates the detective's involvement. But they are the result of an earlier set of actions involving the actual villain or murderer. The narrative of the detective's investigation thus entails an uncovering of the narrative of the crime, and both narratives are usually concluded when the solution is revealed.

Todorov's analysis of this structure is informed by the Russian Formalists' distinction between *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot – or ordering/telling of that story).<sup>10</sup> These two categories involve different treatments of time and chronology, a narrational phenomenon which is pronounced in detective narratives. In these, the second story (that of the detective) can reveal events and actions <sup>with</sup> in varying degrees of clarity, and in a different order, than is the case with their 'actual' status in the first story (that of the criminal). Thus, according to Todorov:

The first [story], that of the crime, is in fact the story of an absence ... [the second story] serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime ... We are concerned then in the whodunit with two stories of which one is absent but real, the other present but insignificant.<sup>11</sup>

Todorov then suggests that there is a shift in the nature of and relationship between the

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<sup>10</sup> See pp. 328-9 for a discussion of these terms.

<sup>11</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, translated by Richard Howard, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', in Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 46.

two elements as the detective fiction genre develops (notably in the United States) in the 1940s, as evidenced in French *série noire* publications. (Richard Howard loosely translates the French compound *série noire* as 'the thriller'.) He suggests that the difference between the 'classical' whodunit and 1940s detective fiction is found in an enhancement of the thriller-effect in the latter, which is manifested in an altered narrative structure:

this kind of detective fiction fuses the two stories or, in other words, suppresses the first and vitalises the second. We are no longer told about a crime anterior to the moment of the narrative; the narrative coincides with the action. No thriller is presented in the form of memoirs.<sup>12</sup>

This is not entirely true. Spillane and the *Black Mask* writers Chandler and Hammett used a first-person reflective form, a device replicated in *films noirs* through the use of the voiceover. But we can agree with Todorov that this is not presented as 'literature' or 'reflection' in the sense that the detective has calmly sat at a desk to write up notes or to present a case history. In the 1940s *noir* thrillers, despite the fact that the detective is giving a first-person account after the event, and despite the literary panache of a stylist like Chandler, there is an attempt to *lessen* the distance between event and retelling and emphasise the experience of events as they happened.

Consider the following passage from Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, in which Marlowe finally shoots the brutal Canino. The latter has fired a number of shots towards the driver's seat of a stationary car, wrongly assuming that Marlowe is there:

He had fired six times, but he might have reloaded inside the house. I hoped he had. I didn't want him with an empty gun. But it might be an automatic.

I said: 'Finished?'

He whirled at me. Perhaps it would have been nice to allow him another shot or two, just like a gentleman of the old school. But his gun was still up and I couldn't wait any longer. Not long enough to be a gentleman of the old school. I shot him four times, the Colt straining against my ribs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', 47.

<sup>13</sup> Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin Books, 1948), 194.

There are two co-existent modes. The first is coolly rationalising ('he might have reloaded inside the house'; 'it might be an automatic') and, in recalling an alternative form of behaviour in combat ('it would have been nice to allow him another shot or two, just like a gentleman of the old school'), sardonically reflective. But this points up the contrast with the other mode, that describing quick thought and action. This mode is figured in the short, surprising sentences ('I said: "Finished?"/He whirled at me'); the nervous excess implied by the detail of *four* shots; and the emphasis on immediate physical sensation in the description of 'the Colt straining against my ribs'. Thriller action and narrative are fully coincidental.

This is often the case even when the device of voiceover is used in film. In *Farewell My Lovely* (directed by Edward Dmytryk, USA, 1944), for instance, Marlowe (played by Dick Powell) is held by the police in what initially seems a torture/hostage scenario. The film opens with a shot of a glaring light. Marlowe has bandages over his eyes and is tied to his chair. The light is being shone in his face. He agrees to tell his story to the police. This telling becomes the voiceover which links events as the film cuts to actions in the past, but it is also grounded in a 'present' of its own (the interrogation room) which is consistent with, rather than detached from, the hardboiled world which the rest of the film evokes.

A similar effect can be seen in *Double Indemnity* (directed by Billy Wilder, USA, 1944) which, although not a detective story, is still concerned with the explication of criminal activity. The film's protagonist, Walter Neff (played by Fred MacMurray), pays a night-time visit to his office to make a recording for his colleague, which itself becomes the voiceover to the action – the events of the past – which the film details. It transpires that Neff is wounded. His voiceover is anything but the quiet reflection of a writer in a study, but *itself* contributes to the heated-up here-and-now quality of the thriller.

By way of apparent contrast, consider Conan Doyle's Dr Watson, who has an explicitly 'authorial' function. The Sherlock Holmes stories make it clear that Watson writes up the cases: Holmes is the main actor, Watson is the chronicler. Indeed *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is narrated not only through Watson's desk-bound

chronicle, but also through a diary he kept whilst at Baskerville Hall and copies of letters that he addressed to Holmes in Baker Street. But interestingly the Holmes stories involve their protagonists in a fair amount of dangerous activity, chasing villains and dodging hansom cabs, and at these moments the narrative again coincides with the action. The narrative mode in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* when Holmes, Watson and the Scotland Yard detective Lestrade eventually see the hound emphasises the experience of the protagonists in the thick of the action:

“Hist!” cried Holmes, and I heard the sharp click of a cocking pistol. “Look out! It’s coming!”

There was a thin, crisp, continuous patter from somewhere in the heart of that crawling bank. The cloud was within fifty yards of where we lay, and we glared at it, all three, uncertain what horror was about to break from the heart of it. I was at Holmes’s elbow, and I glanced for an instant at his face. It was pale and exultant, his eyes shining brightly in the moonlight. But suddenly they started forward in rigid, fixed stare, and his lips parted in amazement. At the same instant Lestrade gave a yell of terror and threw himself face downwards on the ground. I sprang to my feet, my inert hand grasping my pistol, my mind paralysed by the dreadful shape which had sprung out upon us from the shadows of the fog. A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish, be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog.<sup>14</sup>

This short passage evokes the attempts of the protagonists to listen and to see through the fog and darkness; it reveals Watson’s observance of Holmes and Holmes’s ‘exultancy’ and sudden ‘amazement’; it details Watson’s paralysis through fear; and through a welter of adjectives (‘dreadful’, ‘enormous’, ‘smouldering’, ‘flickering’, ‘savage’) it emphasises the immediately frightening nature of the dog’s appearance. In all respects, then, it privileges the time of the action, not of its retelling.

It is because narrative and action are at times coincidental in this story – as in others by Conan Doyle – that the paperback edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* from

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<sup>14</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London: John Murray, 1968), 164.

which the above passage is quoted can, on its front cover, describe its contents as 'The World-famous Mystery Thriller'. As Holmes admits to his (apparent) nemesis Professor Moriarty, 'Danger is part of my trade'.<sup>15</sup> Holmes and Watson leap into dangerous action and are thus protagonists of thrillers, and it is this aspect which differentiates the Holmes stories from those detailing the more consistently sedate methods of the central characters of Golden Age detective fiction.<sup>16</sup>

In some respects the Holmes stories straddle the detective and thriller forms, but if Todorov enforces too rigidly the difference between the two, his central point remains valid. In the ratiocinative detective story, the murder has already been committed. Of course the murderer may strike again, but the detective is for the most part engaged in a process akin to reading: gaining understanding from the facts presented to him/her. The thriller protagonist by contrast is *actively* engaged, experiencing events as they happen, as is amply evidenced, for instance, by Richard Hannay in the four adventures written by John Buchan (first published in one volume in 1930), Hans Beckert in Fritz Lang's film *M* (Germany, 1931), Alec Leamas in le Carré's *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* (first published in 1963), Ronald Craven in the BBC serial *Edge of Darkness* (first transmitted in 1985), and Dr Richard Kimball in the Hollywood film *The Fugitive* (directed by Andrew Davis, USA, 1993): a sample of characters drawn from a wide range of thrillers in different media and from different periods.

As Colin Watson points out, 'in the thriller, the scene is where the action is, not where a witness is answering questions about action that has taken place already'.<sup>17</sup> The thriller depends crucially upon a match between event and experience. This experience obviously takes place, for the protagonist, in the present. Furthermore it involves some kind of disruption of the certainties of everyday life and often poses a direct threat to personal safety. In *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, for instance, Richard Hannay is confided in by a man living in the same apartment block, who then stays at Hannay's

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<sup>15</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Final Problem', in Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin Books, 1950), 242.

<sup>16</sup> For a brief discussion of sensational aspects of the Holmes stories see Reginald Hill, 'Holmes: the Hamlet of crime fiction', in H.R.F. Keating (ed), *Crime Writers* (London: BBC, 1978), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: crime stories and their audience* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971), 42.

flat for four days before he is killed. Thus Hannay must abandon his uneventful life in the City and go on the run both from the police, who suspect him of the murder, and from the real murderers. In *Edge of Darkness* Ronald Craven is a detective involved in what appears to be a reasonably routine investigation of allegations of vote-rigging in a union ballot. He is returning home with his daughter, when the latter is shot by a mysterious gunman. Initially it seems as if Craven was the intended victim. His subsequent investigations involve him in increasingly dangerous activity. He escapes from armed security guards in a nuclear reprocessing plant, but has become fatally irradiated. And in *The Fugitive* Dr Richard Kimball, a successful vascular surgeon, returns home to find that his wife has been murdered. He is himself convicted of the act and sentenced to death, and spends much of the film engaged in the double quest of escaping from the police (capture would mean his execution) and ascertaining the identity of the murderer.

Each of these protagonists changes from being an 'insider' – someone comfortably ensconced in respectable circumstances – to being an 'outsider' – someone on the run, deemed to be an enemy of the state. There is a psychological dimension to 'outsiderness'. Both Craven and Kimball, for example, suffer extreme mental distress, caused in part by the literally incredible nature of their experiences. They find it difficult to comprehend that the authorities in whom they had previously trusted turn into their persecutors. In *M* the outsider-fugitive is a child murderer, somebody who deserves to be caught. The film grows more politically complex, however, when the viewer is encouraged to adopt Beckert's subject-position as he becomes the victim of the crowd who pursue him and arraign him at an underworld trial. There is an ideological dimension to the thriller's treatment of the outsider. Why is s/he forced 'outside'? By whom is s/he pursued? These questions are resolved differently in different thrillers, and I shall discuss their application to *Edge of Darkness* in Chapter 6. They have their effect nonetheless in an insistence that the protagonist's experience is vivid and immediate.

The movement in each of the thrillers mentioned above is additionally from a world which is known, quantifiable and apparently 'safe', to one which is suddenly unknown, unquantifiable and manifestly dangerous. Indeed a frequent device in

thrillers is to play up the supposed normalcy at the very beginning of the narrative in order for its disruption to ~~be the more~~ <sup>make more impact!</sup> impactful. Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein*, for instance, has pronounced thriller characteristics, not least due to a narrative trajectory which follows Victor Frankenstein from a state of utopian innocence to the gradual destruction of his extended family, encompassing a lengthy pursuit (in which he is the pursuer, an interesting aspect of the novel's divided empathic focus: the reader is encouraged to share the monster's trauma as much as that of the scientist) and his final extinction. The first sections of Frankenstein's account emphasise the harmony of his domestic circumstances. 'No human being could have possessed a happier childhood than myself,' he asserts. '... When I mingled with other families, I distinctly discerned how peculiarly fortunate my lot was'.<sup>18</sup> This idyllic childhood makes the subsequent murder of William and execution of Elizabeth more disturbingly transgressive. As it is, Frankenstein is traumatised at his success in building a living creature. When he finally returns to his home to discover the extent of its violation, he is shockingly confirmed in a sequence of events which implacably erode the (false) normalcy originally taken for granted.

In *The Thirty-Nine Steps* John Buchan marks the contrast between the 'ordinary' and the thriller worlds by elaborating on Hannay's initial torpor, induced by 'three months in the Old Country' after the more exotic experiences afforded by Bulawayo. 'The weather made me liverish, the talk of the ordinary Englishman made me sick, I couldn't get enough exercise, and the amusements of London seemed as flat as soda-water that has been standing in the sun', Hannay complains.<sup>19</sup> The contrast between the two states, the everyday and the extraordinary, is again marked, but this time in terms which invite the reader to anticipate the glamour of the thriller experience as well as its danger.

David Lynch exaggerates this aspect in his film *Blue Velvet* (USA, 1986), whose thriller narrative is framed by a highly parodic representation of suburban middle-America, evoked by luridly red roses nodding against a white picket fence and a

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1974), 36.

<sup>19</sup> John Buchan, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, in Buchan, *The Four Adventures of Richard Hannay* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950), 3.



palpably artificial robin twittering against a blue sky. In these texts – and we could add many others – the paradigm normal/disrupted is explicitly laid out. Even where this suggests that the ‘normal’ is an illusory or a tainted state, as in the texts mentioned above, the effect is nonetheless to accord a heightened significance to the protagonist’s experience in the realm of the abnormal, the shocking, the disrupted.

In every case, the experience of the protagonist in a thriller is traumatic to a greater or lesser degree. To underscore its immediacy, and to distinguish it from representations of other kinds of present-tense experience (where, for instance, the emphasis might fall on displays of anger, or the enjoyment of sensual pleasure, or the entry into a dream-state) we can define it as ‘traumatic present experience’. Throughout the rest of this chapter I shall shorten this phrase to the less unwieldy ‘present-experience’.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly the stakes are high for the thriller protagonist, an aspect central to the experience which the thriller presents. Of course many different kinds of literary and artistic production – works as diverse as Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Kenneth Graeme’s *Wind in the Willows*, for instance – emphasise the present-experience of their characters, in these cases through the devices of Renaissance comedy, stream-of-consciousness narration and orthodox third-person narration. In the thriller the protagonist’s experience is *heightened* because of a pervasive awareness of risk and danger. We can thus expect that the reader/viewer will

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<sup>20</sup> My analysis has thus far depended upon a formulaic account of differences between detective and thriller fictions. Of course there are historicist readings of these differences. David Glover, for instance, suggests a class aspect, where ‘academic’ detective stories represent a ‘status-conscious reaction’ on the part of the middle class against earlier ‘swashbuckling fiction’. Todorov’s case is that there is a development *within* the detective genre from an emphasis on ratiocination to an emphasis on action, whereas Glover’s more politicised account finds a reversed line of development – from action to ratiocination – earlier in the genre’s history. Looking a little further back, Dennis Porter suggests that the detective story had its roots in ‘a late romantic preoccupation with the night side of the soul and with the cultivation of the powers of the mind beyond what is normally thought possible’. In any case cultural materialist accounts do not necessarily mitigate against more abstract formalist definitions of the difference between detective stories and thrillers. See David Glover, ‘The stuff that dreams are made of: Masculinity, femininity and the thriller’, in Longhurst (ed), *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure*, 72; and Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 25.

find the story pleasurable to the degree that s/he recognises the extent of risk and danger, and is in sympathy with the plight of the protagonist. This brings us to the two 'absolutely indispensable' elements in the thriller, according to Jerry Palmer, whose book *Thrillers* is the most comprehensively theorised account to date of literary thrillers.

Taking the stories of Mickey Spillane and Ian Fleming as paradigmatic, Palmer arrives at a 'minimal definition' of the thriller: 'There are only two elements which are absolutely indispensable: the hero, who is intrinsically competitive; and the conspiracy, which is intrinsically mysterious'.<sup>21</sup> For Palmer the hero (in this case Spillane's Mike Hammer and Fleming's James Bond) is uniquely competent, able to act by virtue of special skills and character. But that is as nothing unless the reader takes a special interest in the hero's success. This interest is in part encouraged given the nature of the 'conspiracy' that the hero faces:

The fundamental characteristics of the conspiracy are mystery and disruption. A conspiracy that presents no serious threat to the order of the normal is inadequate: routine watchfulness and bureaucratic procedures would take care of it. It is only the truly monstrous that can serve as the subject of a thriller. ... Mystery is equally integral. Devoid of mystery, one is in the presence not of conspiracy but of opposition, or obstacles; the world presented by the story would lose its characteristic opacity, and the nature of the threat would be radically different.<sup>22</sup>

Palmer's analysis begs a number of questions. It is debatable, for instance, whether the relationship between the reader and the protagonist is always as empathic as Palmer implies; and the notion of the definably criminal conspiracy does not adequately explain thrillers in which conspiracy is presented in morally ambiguous terms. John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* is a case in point. The central character Alec Leamas is, to be sure, misled by his British employers and arguably betrayed. But (also arguably) this has been for the 'greater good' of preserving the anonymity of a double agent highly-placed in the East German intelligence service. The reader is encouraged to

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<sup>21</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 82.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

share Leamas's bitterness, but in gradually recognising the extent to which he has allowed himself to be duped, a degree of detachment prevails. Thus an estimation of the extent to which the reader has an empathic interest in Leamas's plight would involve a more extensive analysis of the ideological operations of the text and the ways in which it modulates the interests of the individual against those of the state, and those of a 'totalitarian' system with those of the 'free' world. This is not the place for such an analysis, but the complexity of this text (evident not only in the novel but in Martin Ritt's film version) complicates the straightforwardly 'moral' identification with the protagonist that Palmer proposes.<sup>23</sup>

Palmer's more recent essay 'Thrillers' is, to all intents and purposes, a short restatement of the central arguments of the earlier book, but his formulation of the structure of the thriller into 'three dogmatic propositions' allows us to pursue the implications of present-experience in the thriller a little further:

- (1) Thriller suspense consists of experiencing everything from the point of view of the hero.
- (2) The hero is distinguished from the other characters by his [*sic*] professionalism and his success.
- (3) The hero undertakes to solve a heinous, mysterious crime which is a major threat to the social order.<sup>24</sup>

These propositions are perhaps a little too dogmatic. One can quibble with the supposed definiteness of the hero's actions, for instance, in texts where the protagonist does not set out intentionally to 'save' society from wickedness in the manner of the 'professional' heroes, James Bond and Mike Hammer, on whom Palmer concentrates. Certainly Richard Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, Richard Kimball in *The Fugitive* and Jeffrey Beaumont in *Blue Velvet* all find themselves suddenly immersed in the thriller world without any initial (crime-solving) intention on their part. In the case of Kimball and Beaumont (one also thinks of the young protagonists in the early political thriller *The Riddle of the Sands*) professionalism is hardly a defining quality of the thriller hero. Nor is his/her success. At least for the likes of Craven in *Edge of*

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<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Palmer, *Thrillers*, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Jerry Palmer, 'Thrillers', in Pawling (ed), *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, 90.

*Darkness* or Leamas in *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* success is achieved, if at all, only at huge personal cost – the loss of their lives.

There is still a persuasive aspect to Palmer's propositions, however. They indicate a tripartite formula (the sympathetic interest of the reader; the role of the protagonist; the nature of the mystery) where no one element is divorceable from the whole. Moreover, through his first proposition Palmer underlines the experiential nature of the *reader's* involvement.

The reader/viewer identifies with the hero. In so doing, when the hero feels fear or encounters danger, the reader/viewer vicariously shares the adventure. Of course the reader/viewer's experience is not that of a person *actually* driving a car at 120 miles per hour, or *actually* hiding in a doorway in a dark alleyway: it is the imaginative participation of somebody who is in fact sitting safely in a chair. Nonetheless the experiential aspect of this participation is important. The most effective thrillers, in marketing parlance, are heart-stopping; they make you chew your finger-nails or cover your eyes with your hands. Thriller novels induce you to read faster at points of climax, your eyes glued to the page. Similar moments in the cinema bring you to the edge of your seat. These are vernacular ways of stressing the strong physical response which thrillers elicit from their readers and viewers. Indeed this is part of their guarantee of reading or viewing pleasure, where the thriller's heightening of present-experience applies as much to the reader/viewer as to the protagonist. It is not coincidental that one definition of the word 'thrill' given in *The Oxford English Dictionary* describes "a subtle nervous tremor caused by intense emotion or excitement (as pleasure, fear etc.), producing a slight shudder or tingling through the body; a penetrating influx of feeling or emotion".<sup>25</sup> Thrillers are sensual.

There are broadly two reasons why this should be so. Firstly, the reader/viewer recognises that something of great value is at stake for the protagonists, and thus to an extent *shares* the adventure with them in a conventionally empathic manner. Secondly, in order for this participation to be *felt* most acutely, the thriller operates in particular the aesthetic of suspense: the ordering of textual information in such a way that the

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<sup>25</sup> J.A. Simpson, E.S.C. Weiner (eds), *The Oxford English Dictionary, Volume XVII* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 1011.

reader/viewer has an especial concern – perhaps fearful, perhaps compellingly desirous, but nonetheless intense – to discover what will happen next.

Todorov identifies two different forms of interest on the part of the reader of detective and thriller stories:

The first can be called *curiosity*; it proceeds from effect to cause: starting from a certain effect (a corpse and certain clues) we must find its cause (the culprit and his motive). The second form is *suspense*, and here the movement is from cause to effect ... This type of interest was inconceivable in the whodunit, for its chief characters (the detective and his friend the narrator) were, by definition, immunized: nothing could happen to them. The situation is reversed in the thriller: everything is possible, and the detective risks his health, if not his life.<sup>26</sup>

It follows that suspense cannot properly operate without an initial connection of the reader/viewer's interest with the protagonist's (value-laden) experience. Therefore when considering a suspense sequence we must take into account both the aesthetic mode (the technical manner in which suspense is engineered) and its relationship to the narrative (the information it is 'suspending'). The first relates to dramatic form, the second to narrative content. In effective suspense sequences the two elements often work in combination: the outcome of the sequence is significant in terms of the larger propositions of the narrative. Suspense is thus not solely a question of 'good' literary or cinematic aesthetics, (finding a telling phrase, or selecting the appropriate camera angles and cutting from shot to shot at just the right moment), but has a fundamental relationship to textual content and narrative structure.

Suspense can attain a variety of inflections, ranging from the very general (to do with the broad propositions of the narrative) to the very specific (to do with moments of tension at particular points). By way of illustration, consider Alfred Hitchcock's film *North By Northwest* (USA, 1959), in which the advertising executive Roger Thornhill (played by Cary Grant) is targeted by a malevolent espionage organisation under the mistaken belief that he is a secret agent working for the US security forces. Thus Thornhill might lose his life and the espionage organisation might have its treachery

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<sup>26</sup> Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', 47 [Todorov's emphases].

facilitated: although the film wittingly operates in a semi-comic register, the ramifications for both the central protagonist and for the state are not inconsiderable.

In general terms, suspense in *North by Northwest* is connected with the mystery which Palmer identifies as a central part of thriller narratives, the 'characteristic opacity' which permeates the story. We can elaborate on this by giving voice to the set of questions which hang over the events depicted. Why has Thornhill, an innocent if somewhat complacent man, become the target of a sinister organisation? What do these mysterious people want with him? These questions are gradually and partially answered until towards the end of the film they are replaced by other general suspense questions: will Thornhill defeat the spy ring and save his own life and that of the agent Eve Kendall (played by Eva Marie Saint), with whom he has struck up a relationship?

Within these questions, sharper 'local' suspense questions are posed, as with the celebrated sequence in which Thornhill, alone next to a road running through flat farming country, is suddenly machine-gunned by an aeroplane that had appeared to be crop-dusting. Suspense in this scene is first rather vague (*Why is no-one at the rendezvous? Has Thornhill been set up?*) and is to do with the unusual situation in which the protagonist finds himself. A man appears (*Is this the meeting? Does he represent a threat?*) who, it transpires, is about to catch a bus. He comments that the actions of the crop-dusting plane are unusual (*Does the plane therefore represent a threat?*). Suspense is partially resolved when the plane opens fire on Thornhill (he has fallen into a trap after all), but the most crucial and pressing question now remains: *Will he escape with his life?* The sequence finds its climax in an absolutely simple life-or-death situation.

Robin Wood has described how Hitchcockian suspense is more than merely a gratuitous effect. As he notes, this particular sequence in *North by Northwest* 'marks a crucial stage in the evolution of the character and his relationships, and, through that, of the themes of the whole film'.<sup>27</sup> Suspense here operates across general and specific registers, and the reader/viewer is confronted by a set of questions which demand resolution. A curious effect is set in motion: suspense is pleasurable because it suspends a final outcome, but it intrinsically promises that this outcome will be

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<sup>27</sup> Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 68.

revealed. As John Cawelti observes, 'Suspense is essentially the writer's ability to evoke in us a temporary sense of fear and uncertainty about the fate of a character we care about. It is a special kind of uncertainty that is always pointed toward a possible resolution'.<sup>28</sup> This is where, for Cawelti, the formula of a story comes into play, for the audience *expects* the appropriate formulaic resolution through familiarity with other formula works.

This latter assertion is questionable. Suspense, even in formulaic stories, depends on the *possibility* of defeat rather than on a certain and comfortable knowledge of impending delivery from disaster. It is thus *of its particular moment*, and that is its paradox. While suspense demands resolution, it is not in itself something the reader/viewer can defer or lightly pass over in order to reach that resolution. It is an essential part of the present-experience effect of the thriller. As Dennis Porter notes, 'Suspense involves, of course, the experience of suspension; it occurs whenever a perceived sequence is begun but remains unfinished'.<sup>29</sup>

Porter recognises that suspense can also operate in some detective stories, in tandem with a process of rational enquiry.<sup>30</sup> It seems fair to argue further that there is a structural similarity between thriller suspense and detective-story investigation. The question asked by a suspense sequence is in some ways analagous to the question asked by a detective novel: in both cases pleasure depends upon the narrative evoking in the reader/viewer a desire to know the outcome; and that outcome is played out in the field of the text's content. To state the obvious: the resolution of suspense (as with the detective's resolving of the case) is simultaneously the delivery of meaning.

Suspense is therefore an important part of the text's drive towards a meaningful conclusion. This is paradoxical, because suspense depends for its effect on withholding information: it operates like a dam, whose function is not necessarily to stop the water for good, but to make it flow more powerfully once it has been released.

This can be further explained by reference to the hermeneutic code described by Roland Barthes in *S/Z*, Barthes' structuralist analysis of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine*.

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<sup>28</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

According to Barthes, the hermeneutic code is one of 'five major codes under which all the textual signifiers can be grouped'.<sup>31</sup> Its function 'is to articulate in various ways a question, its response, and the variety of chance events which can either formulate the question or delay its answer; or even constitute an enigma and lead to its solution'.<sup>32</sup> This entails a 'logico-temporal order'. In the thriller, for example, the protagonist can only escape (or not) *after* s/he has initially been threatened. We are not in the realm of interchangeable episodes (texts like Buchner's *Woyzeck*, perhaps, where the running-order of certain scenes is indeterminate) or of Brechtian works in which events are explained before they happen. Thriller narratives depend upon a strict sequential ordering. Indeed a 'classical' narrative must of necessity pose an enigma before revealing its solution. The solution is nonetheless at the heart of the hermeneutic code, even where, in Barthes' terms, the text provides 'snares', 'equivocations' and 'jammings' which delay the resolution of the enigma. As Barthes says, 'a pointing finger always accompanies the classic text: the truth is thereby long desired and avoided, kept in a kind of pregnancy for its full term ... the hermeneutic terms structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution'.<sup>33</sup>

Thrillers boast an exaggerated hermeneutic code. Suspense inflames the audience's desire for resolution, and thus for knowledge of the truth, the authoritative answer to the questions *How? Who? What?* and *Why?* typically posed by thriller narratives. By way of example, let us consider a well-known suspense sequence from Hitchcock's *Notorious* (USA, 1946).<sup>34</sup> In the film the young Alicia Huberman (played by Ingrid Bergman) agrees to work for the American secret service after the death of her father, a prominent Nazi sympathiser. Alicia renews a former friendship with the wealthy Alexander Sebastian (played by Claude Rains), a friend of her father now living in Rio de Janeiro, where he is at the centre of a subversive ring of expatriate German businessmen. Sebastian proposes marriage, to which Alicia agrees in order to infiltrate

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<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, translated by Richard Miller, *S/Z* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 75.

<sup>34</sup> For an account of Hitchcock's organisation of cinematic elements in the creation of suspense, and for a cogent analysis of suspense in *Notorious*, see Lez Cooke, 'Hitchcock and the Mechanics of Cinematic Suspense', in Clive Bloom (ed), *Twentieth-Century Suspense* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1990), 189-202.



the ring more efficiently. She is, meanwhile, having an affair with her American contact, agent T.R. Devlin (played by Cary Grant), and the film dwells in part upon the extent to which each doubts the other's love – a thematic concern with fidelity and treachery in affairs of the heart which is mapped against the narrative of espionage and betrayal.

A number of suspense questions run through the film, from the more general (*How 'stable' is Alicia? Will she and Devlin defeat the Nazi spy-ring? Will they remain lovers?*) to the more specific (*What is the nature of Sebastian's 'business' with his Nazi colleagues? What is the secret of the wine bottle? Will Alicia and Devlin be discovered in the cellar?* and so on). These are packed more densely at certain points. Sebastian throws a party to which Devlin is invited. Alicia and Devlin suspect that Sebastian's covert activity might be explained by an exploration of his wine cellar, for the reaction of one of his colleagues at dinner one evening on seeing a particular bottle of wine appeared highly suspicious. Alicia has purloined the key. She stands guard as Devlin enters the cellar.

Two immediate questions are at issue: the first, the most general, is *What is the secret of the cellar?* Given that Devlin has gained access, we can expect an answer. The second is more immediately suspenseful: *Will Devlin and Alicia be discovered?* Sebastian has already been established as a suspicious and jealous husband. Shots of the dwindling stock of bottles in the champagne crate, along with the footman's careful monitoring of the situation, create the expectation that at any moment a trip to the cellar to replenish the stocks will be necessary. Thus the sequence promises that the mystery surrounding Sebastian's activities will (at least partially) be unravelled; and it offers the pleasurable nerve-wracking experience of suspense (Devlin and Alicia are in danger of being discovered – *what happens next?*). The first element is ontological and cognitive, and works towards the establishment of the 'truth' of the situation. The second is intrinsically of-the-moment and unites the endangered present-experience of the characters and the viewing experience of the viewer. Both depend on satisfying the demand of the hermeneutic code: what are the resolutions to the enigmas presented by the text?

The sequence is additionally sophisticated in that the hermeneutic functions of

suspense often overlap. Devlin inadvertently knocks a wine bottle from the shelf and it breaks, revealing that it is filled not with wine but with a dark, sand-like substance. The accident complicates Devlin's business in the cellar: he is in a hurry, but must spend valuable time clearing up the incriminating mess he has made. Suspense is heightened through the simple device of introducing another obstacle to the speedy completion of the task. But Devlin's clumsiness has also aided his quest: surely the bizarre discovery – sand rather than wine – is the key to Sebastian's covert activities? The narrative will later reveal the identity of the substance (uranium ore) and the plans of Sebastian's circle to develop an atomic bomb. The single element (the broken bottle) has an extended suspenseful and hermeneutic function.

Suspense predicates a resolution (even if this resolution is only partial) and in that sense is a guarantor of knowledge. It revolves around a question (say, *Will she escape?*) and delivers an answer (*Yes*). We have seen that suspense is experiential even for the reader/viewer; but because it posits a question it can also encourage mental activity, to do with reasoning and speculation, as the incident with the wine bottle in *Notorious* demonstrates. Let us consider one more suspense sequence by way of elaboration, from the film *Nikita*, directed by Luc Besson (France, 1990).

Nikita (played by Anne Parillaud) is an ex-junkie who has murdered a policeman. She is sentenced to death, but agrees to train as a government agent in exchange for her life. She is aggressively dysfunctional, but gradually acquires more self-control in the clinically high-tech institution in which she is both imprisoned and trained. Apparently as a gesture of goodwill, her supervisor, Bob (played by Tcheky Karyo), takes her to an expensive restaurant for her twenty-third birthday – her first trip out of the institution since her initial imprisonment. Bob hands her a present. Nikita is obviously moved – she clasps the gift as the waiter brings a bottle of champagne. When she opens it she discovers a loaded gun. Bob tells Nikita that this is her first assignment: she must assassinate a VIP sitting behind her. She has three minutes. Her chaperone leaves.

Music begins and there is a close-up of Nikita's face, a shot, supported by the soundtrack, which invites speculation as to her emotional state. Is she feeling despair at Bob's treachery, apparently promising a relaxing evening only to organise a murder? Is she bitter at the cold efficiency of her 'employers'? Is she fearful about doing the job?

Will she carry it out? Is she in fact relishing the opportunity to put her training into practice? Or is she as coolly unemotional as her supervisor, nothing more than a killing machine?

At this point in the film all these readings are possible, although the look on Nikita's face would suggest that the first two questions are uppermost. The shot encourages speculation about Nikita's interior state, but it is simultaneously suspenseful in narrational terms, quite literally in that it delays (suspends) what is to follow. The viewer knows that Nikita must quickly make a decision and that action – probably violent – will follow.

Michael Eaton has argued that there is a ritualistic aspect to thrillers, where 'the structure of the thriller narrative exactly corresponds to that of a rite of passage'.<sup>35</sup> This is certainly true of this particular sequence. Nikita's life is possibly at stake. If she fails in the mission she may herself be shot by the VIP's bodyguard. If she succeeds, she will have proved to her captor-employers that she is both capable and reliable, and will thereby have redefined her relationship with them. She will also be confirmed to the viewer as a murderer. There is a play between the notion of Nikita as a cold-blooded killer and as a feeling human being, and the film in part explores this modulation of the professional and the emotional. In this sequence the experience of suspense, the desire to know the outcome, and rational speculation on the implications are necessarily intertwined. 'In the thriller, what is usually at stake is knowledge,' Michael Eaton observes. 'The tale involves a movement from ignorance to intelligence'.<sup>36</sup> We might add that this is usually the case both for the protagonist and the reader/viewer.

I have already suggested that thrillers exaggerate the elements of the hermeneutic code, and in this respect a kinship with detective fiction is immediately apparent. Having already identified structural differences between thrillers and detective stories, then, it is now useful to explore important similarities. Dennis Porter observes that 'A detective novel is the most readable of texts ... because it prefigures at the outset the form of its denouement by virtue of the highly visible question mark hung over its

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Eaton, 'Thrilling Rituals', *Sight and Sound*, v1, n4 (August 1991), 5. Eaton, incidentally, wrote the script for the drama documentary *Shoot to Kill*, discussed on p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

opening'.<sup>37</sup> This is where the detective comes in: whatever else might distinguish the sleuth of Golden Age detective fiction (an unusual appearance or lifestyle, for instance) he or she possesses exceptional ratiocinative abilities. Within the world of the narrative, only the detective is able to solve the initial mystery, dealing with the evidence in a manner which is beyond other characters in the story and, quite possibly, the reader too. The detective, through a combination of peculiar intelligence and particular methods, establishes a proper ontology for the events of the case – a coherent assessment of their place and relationship. The narrative process leads towards an authoritative, ordering, 'truthful' account of events within the world of the story. For both detective and reader, the process is one of cognition, resulting in a final state of comprehension. The discourse of classical detective stories privileges 'accurate' comprehension.<sup>38</sup>

This phenomenon is termed 'epistemophilia', a 'drive' which involves what Stephen Neale describes as 'the desire to know, to "find out"'.<sup>39</sup> As Neale observes with regard to detective and thriller films:

The process of the narrative is a process of investigation, both on the part of the fictional detective or of the character who performs an analogous role, and on the part of the spectator. Like the detective, the spectator is constantly looking for clues and signs in a process of piecing together the reasons for the process of the crime, attempting to solve the enigma which structures the story. ... Both the detective genre and the thriller inscribe the spectating subject as caught up in a particular version of

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<sup>37</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 87; see also 235.

<sup>38</sup> It hardly needs stating that there are significant ideological consequences here, with regard to the world-view sustained in this final act of comprehension. For the common argument that detective fiction betrays a largely conservative cultural impulse, see Colin Watson, *Snobbery With Violence*; and Watson, 'Mayhem Parva and Wicked Belgravia', in Keating (ed), *Crime Writers*, 50. John Cawelti asserts the importance of cultural context, relating the classical detective formula to broader patterns of economic change, a shift in the ethos of individuality and an emerging interest in psychological states, where the detective story marks a swerve from tensions present in society (Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, 101-5). Similar preoccupations concern Ernest Mandel in his Marxist account of crime literature (Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A social history of the crime story* [London: Pluto Press, 1984]). For solid analyses of sociological and ideological issues in detective fiction, see also Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980); and Derek Longhurst, 'Sherlock Holmes: Adventures of an English gentleman 1887-1894', in Longhurst (ed), *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure*. I shall discuss the ways in which the narratives of British thriller serials are ideological in Chapter 11 of the present study.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 42.

epistemophilia, always engaging it to be 'satisfied', to be given the answer to the riddle.<sup>40</sup>

Even 'detection' texts which appear to disobey the conventions of the classical detective story still share this epistemophilic drive, though it might be couched in slightly different terms. One option, for instance, would be to emphasise not the progress towards the solution, but the psychological state of either detective, chronicler, victim, murderer or any of the other characters. Paul Auster's stories which form *The New York Trilogy* pursue exactly this course, concentrating on psychological and existential aspects of the detective's experience. In *Ghosts*, for instance, the detective Blue is shadowing Black, without knowing for what purpose:

Blue keeps looking for some pattern to emerge, for some clue to drop into his path that will lead him to Black's secret. But Blue is too honest a man to delude himself, and he knows that no rhyme or reason can be read into anything that's happened so far. For once, he is not discouraged by this. In fact, as he probes more deeply into himself, he realizes that on the whole he feels rather invigorated by it. There is something nice about being in the dark, he discovers, something thrilling about not knowing what is going to happen next. It keeps you alert, he thinks, and there's no harm in that, is there? Wide awake and on your toes, taking it all in, ready for anything.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly the three stories do not conclude with fully-resolving explanations of the circumstances they depict. The evocation of a psychological reality diminishes the importance of a straightforwardly conventional hermeneutic process. In a postmodern text like *The New York Trilogy*, at least, an epistemophilic preoccupation with 'factual' circumstances is not the dominating issue, whereas of course it is in classical detective stories. But the hermeneutic code still operates, admittedly in slightly less conventional ways. The denouement of the third story, *The Locked Room*, reveals that the whole trilogy can be read against supposedly biographical and psychological facts appertaining to the author of all three stories, (himself, of course, a character), the protagonist (/detective) of the final story. The establishment of epistemophilic

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<sup>40</sup> Neale, *Genre*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Auster, *Ghosts*, in Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988), 152.

conclusions, albeit in mischievously self-reflexive terms, is still central.

The same can be said of Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, another text celebrated for its dispersal of the conventional elements of detective fiction (*avant la lettre*, as it was published in 1868). The novel is told through multiple narratives from a number of characters in the story, a tapestry first-person device which allows for the creation of different subjectivities and mitigates against the pursuit of an authoritative reading of events until the very end of the novel, when the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of a valuable jewel are finally clarified. Thus *The Moonstone* ultimately asserts the importance of right-understanding, but along the way it has denied the processes of authority, vested in a single individual, which later literary detective fictions were to observe. Of course *The Moonstone* itself boasts a 'professional' detective in Sergeant Cuff, who is singular in appearance and technique, and who fashions an eminently plausible theory to explain the theft of the diamond. He is mistaken, and his analysis of events (which would later form the denouement of the classical detective story) is here presented as one opinion among many, merely the interjection of another participating player.

The discourse, even so, again establishes a proper ontology for the events of the story. In this respect, the detective story is analagous to the suspense sequence: the reader/viewer is suspended in a state of not knowing the outcome, and needing to know. We are returned to Dennis Porter's point about 'the centrality of suspense in novel reading generally':

Reading fiction of all kinds is an activity which generates tension that can be relieved only through the experience of an end. All story telling involves the raising of questions, the implied promise of an answer, and, in traditional narrative at least, the provision of that answer in time.<sup>42</sup>

That is not to deny that different modes of story-telling involve crucial differences of technique. Dorothy L. Sayers polarised detective fiction into two camps:

the purely Sensational and the purely Intellectual. In the former, thrill is piled on thrill and

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<sup>42</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 51.

mystification on mystification ... In the other ... the detective ... follows up quietly from clue to clue till the problem is solved, the reader accompanying the great man in his search and being allowed to try his own teeth on the material provided.<sup>43</sup>

Sayers' complaint that 'the uncritical are still catered for by the "thriller", in which nothing is explained',<sup>44</sup> reveals clearly enough where her own preferences lay, but it would be wrong to suggest that thrillers are only to do with titillating sensation rather than with reason and deduction. As we have seen, a suspense sequence, even though thrillingly experiential, can still invite a process of rational speculation on the part of the reader/viewer. Even in tough action thrillers like the James Bond stories, as Jerry Palmer notes, 'deductive reasoning and action are always complementary'.<sup>45</sup> Colin Watson's identification of Fleming's espionage fiction as 'the thriller of unreason'<sup>46</sup> is understandable but not fully accurate. The hero is not solely a man of action, without recourse to strategic rationalisation.

Regardless of the size of the hero's IQ, there is a more important aspect to address. Thrillers can invite rational speculation about issues which are usually resolved in some way towards the end of the narrative, through the epistemophilic drive and the reader/viewer's arrival at accurate comprehension. For the reader/viewer, then, comprehension is preceded by a *need* to know either how the circumstances fit together in the case of the detective story, or what will happen next in the case of the suspenseful thriller. One's enjoyment is enhanced to the degree that one desires to discover the outcome. Comprehension is therefore predicated on the importance of the outcome which, in the case of the thriller, is the resolution of the chase, or the escape, or the quest, or the task. In the most effective thrillers there is something inexorable about this. The events of the story have both a narrational logic (they happen in a particular sequence in order first to present the disruption around which the story centres, and then to reveal its cause and possible resolution) and an internal logic (the

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<sup>43</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Omnibus of Crime', in Robin W. Winks (ed), *Detective Fiction* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1980), 62.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>45</sup> Palmer, *Thrillers*, 103.

<sup>46</sup> Watson, *Snobbery With Violence*, 116.

world of the story is plausible in its own terms). The thriller demands that the reader/viewer submit to this axis of logics.

For Porter, fear and suspense offer a pleasure analagous to that of a roller coaster ride: 'A reader, like a rider, submits himself willingly to the prepared experiences of a closed-circuit system that promises to return him to the safety of his point of origin after having exposed him to a series of breathtaking dips and curves'.<sup>47</sup> This emphasises the importance of the experiential nature of suspense, while the promise of return indicates the momentum towards denouement of the thriller narrative. As I shall discuss later, however, the viewer of TV thrillers is not necessarily deposited safely at the point of origin. Thriller narratives do not always work in the circular roller-coaster model that Porter describes. They can instead be linear, and the viewer can find that when the story ends the world of the narrative is markedly different than first seemed to be the case.

The roller-coaster analogy is useful, however, because it evokes the reader/viewer's submission to the operation of the thriller narrative, strapped in, as it were, for the duration. But 'submission' is not quite the right word. It implies a loss of reasoning faculties, a craven tolerance of textual excesses. As we have already seen, it is perfectly possible for the reader/viewer of a thriller to retain the capacity to reason beyond the circumstances of the immediate action; to retain, in other words, a degree of critical distance. But we have also seen that thrillers demand a quasi-active participation from the reader/viewer. What we succumb to, then, in the presence of the thriller, is a state of sublimation in the face of mystery and suspense which involves the willing acceptance of the strategies of the thriller: its heightening of present-experience and its impetus towards a denouement. This state of sublimation is not simply enjoyed for its own sake as an auto-erotic narrative experience. It is crucially bound up with the network of meanings which emerge from the text. These meanings vary from thriller to thriller, and only a more historically- and culturally-specific analysis can adequately engage with them, from one thriller to another.

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<sup>47</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 108.



I have referred to a range of thriller texts – novels, short stories, films and television dramas – from different periods and in different styles, in order to elaborate abstract theoretical qualities particular to these texts: a set of conditions, or effects, which apply to them all regardless of their historical context. It is now possible to summarise the points that have emerged.

Thriller narratives tell stories in which there is much at stake for the characters involved, possibly including loss of integrity, loss of property, loss of family and loss of life. The characters in a thriller are often under threat or in danger: their experiences are thus immediate and heightened. The reader/viewer is to some extent encouraged to sympathise with the protagonist of a thriller: s/he thus participates vicariously (due to the thriller's narrational and aesthetic strategies) in the character's heightened experience. The reader/viewer's engagement with the text is further heightened through the operation of suspense, which results in an intensified desire to discover the outcome of the sequence and/or story. Thus the thriller has an exaggerated hermeneutic code. There is much at stake for the character, and the reader/viewer is aware of the enormity of the story-situation. Thrillers move inexorably towards an outcome which will, in the terms of the story, have great significance. This may be political as well as personal, of global as well as national consequence. The outcome is meaningful in terms of re-presenting the world in which the thriller takes place. As a result of the epistemophilic drive, the reader/viewer gains accurate comprehension of that world by the end of the story. The set of meanings which emerge or are endorsed at the story's close, of course, have ideological implications.

It is here that we can build a bridge between theoretical and historical genre analysis, in seeing how the defining elements of thrillers are expressed in particular texts. Such an undertaking surely necessitates close attention to cultural and historical issues. In any event, I suggest that the conclusions reached in this chapter, outlining what is signified by the term 'thriller', do not in themselves allow a comprehensive analysis of thriller texts. They instead offer a framework within which one can assess the operation and effect of particular thriller narratives. The task of the following chapters will be to indicate how the defining elements of thrillers, as discussed above, find particular expression in British television thrillers in the Thatcher era.

## **5 British thriller serials of the Thatcher era: the evolution of an historical genre**

The 'historical' genre of British thriller serials in the Thatcher era is formed of a range of texts which display divergences as well as similarities. In order to locate these programmes within the framework of an evolving genre it is most appropriate to provide a chronological survey. For the sake of clarity I shall address a number of texts one by one, but shared characteristics with regard to narrative, characterisation and theme will become increasingly apparent.

Various differences (often relatively slight) in the aesthetic organisation of these programmes persuade me that thriller serials of the 1980s and early-'90s are most closely cohered by thematic similarities. Fundamental activities of the thriller narrative, including its patterns of suspense and deliverance, its epistemophilic drive and its emphasis of the protagonist's trauma, are structured around strongly delineated themes. These provide the most straightforward means of addressing affinities between this particular group of texts, although that is not to deny the importance of other principles of generic convergence. Indeed I believe that a dominant narrative structure in thrillers of the period is significant enough to warrant the attention of a later chapter. I shall pay much closer attention to aesthetic considerations in subsequent chapters on selected individual programmes.

In dealing with lesser-known 1980s and '90s thriller serials in this chapter, I shall focus on what I see as three central thematic axes. Firstly there is the projection of the secret state, a hidden establishment whose power spills beyond ordinary jurisdiction. Secondly there is a fascination with what one might call 'culture shifts'. These include

the emergence of disturbing social constraints; points of tension between the 'old' and the 'new' England; and reversals of individual allegiance. Thirdly there is the exploration of a moral frame of reference, which has a bearing on the relationship between ethical and political considerations. Each of these thematic axes operates through a focus on the individual protagonist, often isolated and alienated, and often engaged in a quest for knowledge or a flight from powerful adversaries. It is obvious even from the outset that these themes cannot easily be separated. The following pages, then, trace the evolution of a set of programmes whose discourses overlap to a striking and significant extent.

### ***Bird of Prey* (1982)**

The first significant 'paranoia' thriller of the 1980s is *Bird of Prey* (BBC, 1982), a four-part serial written by Ron Hutchinson, who also developed the story for *Final Run* (a subsequent thriller serial), and produced by Michael Wearing, who also produced *Edge of Darkness*, transmitted three years later. The storyline depicts a congruence of sorts between the hidden establishment and an explicitly criminal organisation. The central character, Henry Jay (played by Richard Griffiths), is a middle-ranking civil servant, a Principal Scientific Officer for the Department of Commercial Development (a nod to the economic expansionism of the period). His report on computer fraud is reclassified by his superiors so that its circulation is restricted. He subsequently notices that references to an Italian bank have been removed, and later discovers that a Euro MP and businessman, Hugo Jardine, is involved in a massive financial fraud centring on the projected Channel Tunnel development. The British Government, knowing of Jardine's plans, nonetheless allow his extortionate activities in order to avoid the risk of terrorist activity.

*Bird of Prey* is not among the most effective thrillers of the period. Some of the characterisation is too superficial (the sarcastic Detective Inspector Richardson; the brassy journalist Rochelle Halliday; the doltish penpusher Tomkins); much of the

narration is enacted in rather obvious and clumsy ways; and some of the dialogue is too obviously contrived. 'The whole system's riddled with fraud,' says Jay at one point, for example. 'It's inevitable, I suppose. Where you have artificial price barriers and a non-accountable bureaucracy there *will* be fraud.' [Episode 2] Even Richard Griffiths, who gives an admirably understated performance as Jay, has difficulty in rendering lines like these convincingly. Later thrillers would refine more impressively relationships between mystery, explication and contemporary reference.

*Bird of Prey* is significant, however, in shaping what was to become a dominant dramatic theme: the interlinking of individual paranoia with the covert operations of the political establishment. In this case the Establishment is complicit with the interests of a mysterious international criminal network known as The Power. The programme suggests that a certain degenerate *casualness* on the part of the Government's agencies naturalises such complicity. The following exchanges demonstrate how this is articulated. The first comes during an interview Jay has arranged with Hendersley, his Head of Department, and Chambers, the Security Advisor. They question his allegations. 'Ah yes, the conspiracy theory,' says Chambers. Jay replies:

But that's the point. It's not a conspiracy. It's not a big machine working day and night under anyone's control in particular. It's lots of little people like you and me, removing a file here, returning a favour to another department there, it's everywhere. Well, more on the Continent than over here, but the closer we get to them politically, socially, the more the system will be operated here. [Episode 1]

This nascent Euro-scepticism runs throughout the text. Europe remains a slightly untrustworthy place across the sea, home to sophisticated interconnections between business, politics and organised crime. The point, however, is that Britain is increasingly open to such connections. Another exchange which enlarges on this theme comes in Episode 2, when Jay meets Bridgnorth (played by Nigel Davenport), a British Intelligence officer:

There's a grey area in this sort of business, Henry. Terrorism shades into organised crime, into police undercover operations, into how the state security *apparatus* responds to the chaos, which mobile

internationally-minded crooks and politicians have been creating since the early sixties, especially in Europe. ... Even those who did the killing may be unaware what favour they are repaying to whom.  
[Episode 2]

The cynical tone of this utterance is familiar from thrillers reaching at least as far back as those of le Carré and Ambler, although the narrative as a whole, through its references to the capacities of electronic technology and the flowering of European commercial activity, suggests the *intensification* of institutionalised corruption. The motor of such activity, however, is finally located overseas – not, as with subsequent thriller serials, in the heart of the British state. The British security services in *Bird of Prey* are indeed complicit in an international network of organised crime, but the governing responsibility is displaced to Rome, where shady underground mafiosi regulate European fraud. Indeed by the end of the programme Jay has learned the appropriate lessons. He does a deal with the Italians, recognising them as the real power brokers, thus preserving his own life and securing the extinction of Bridgnorth.

By the end of the drama, then, Jay has singlehandedly outmanoeuvred British Intelligence and a conglomerate of international criminals. His transformation from passive civil servant to resourceful adventurer is presented initially as a question of pride in a job well done: his report is doctored and then suppressed, which inflames his desire to explore its consequences. In some respects he falls into the tradition of the ratiocinative detective, a remarkable lone individual using his intellectual prowess to piece together evidence, to guess the next move of his adversaries and to extricate himself from danger. As performed by Richard Griffiths, Jay is not an athletic thriller hero. He evades discovery not by escaping in a high-speed chase but by renting a shabby flat. He avoids being blown up by a car bomb because he makes a last-minute decision to phone his wife. The characterisation of a downbeat, sardonic protagonist undergoes some development, however. By the end of the programme he has acquired a gun and disguised himself as a chauffeur in order to kidnap and hold as hostage the corrupt Jardine.

The most significant textual strategy is to set Jay's low-key resourcefulness against the more overheated life-threatening activities of the security forces. In a sense he beats

them at their own game by being more covert, more cunning and ultimately more ruthless. It is not simply a question of style, then, but one of degree. Later thrillers like *Edge of Darkness* and *Defence of the Realm* accord greater sophistication to the security services, with a concomitant reduction in the hero's all-conquering capabilities. *Bird of Prey* is not wholly optimistic, however. Jay's ruthlessness is expressed as his final option, reluctantly taken in order to preserve his life. His solution of the crime and the conspiracy does not entail a renewed equilibrium but the bleak consolation of one man's fragile deliverance from danger. (He has programmed the Government's computer system to print out incriminating evidence unless he is alive to key in a counter-instruction every few months.) Corruption has not exactly been purged, and the protagonist is not completely delivered from his trauma.

Nevertheless, Jay's ingenuity has saved the day. Such capable self-preservation is replicated in the 1984 sequel, *Bird of Prey 2* (BBC), in which Jay once again escapes from *The Power*, but it lay beyond the parameters of plausibility for later thriller serials, whose protagonists were unable to escape quite so neatly. In *Bird of Prey*, furthermore, the intelligence officer Bridgnorth is a lone cipher for covert security activity, rather than one among a myriad number of industrialists, politicians, civil servants and security operatives. Serials like *Edge of Darkness* and *A Very British Coup* give a much fuller account of the nexus of political and economic interests which sustain the relationships between government and international business operations in the 1980s. To that extent *Bird of Prey* can be seen as a transitional text, formulating themes which subsequent programmes would dramatise more extensively.

### ***In the Secret State* (1985)**

The conspiracy thriller genre coalesced at the mid-point of the 1980s. There is an emblematic exchange in the 1985 serial *The Detective* between the central character, Ken Crocker, and an MI5 operative, Major Naughton. Crocker has just arrived at a friend's house to try to visit his wife, from whom he is estranged. Naughton, known to him, looms out of the shadows. 'Is this a matter of state security?' asks Crocker

tersely. 'What isn't?' replies the Major. The meeting, casual but not exactly chance, exemplifies an insistent preoccupation of 1980s thrillers with the ever-present scrutiny of individuals by the state, and with a circumscribing net of secret – and not-so-secret – surveillance.

The prevalence of this theme was obvious by the middle of the decade. In an article in *The Listener*, Bill Grantham observed that:

It is always difficult to suggest, even in the silhouette of fiction, the definitive aspect of a particular time or period. But if our present era in Britain has two characterising obsessions, they are perhaps the mushrooming of information technology and a scepticism about the benevolence of the state and its secrets.

If this is the age of the portable computer and telephone, it is also a time when a new form of "treachery" – the heartfelt betrayals of Sarah Tisdall, Clive Ponting and Cathy Massiter, to name but the leading whistleblowers – has disrupted the calm conviction of our political institutions that they act in all our interests.<sup>1</sup>

Better, perhaps, to attribute the sense of concern to the public rather than its political masters, but Grantham notes an emerging anxiety at the covert operations of agencies of the state. The preoccupation, as well as the genre of programmes addressing it, crystallised in 1985 with the appearance in particular of four dramas: the serials *Edge of Darkness* and *The Detective*, the television film *In the Secret State* and the cinema film *Defence of the Realm*. *Edge of Darkness* is the most remarkable of these and I shall discuss it in detail in the next chapter. Two of the other dramas are not serials, but their themes and styles are so pertinent to the formation of the genre that they deserve mention here.

*In the Secret State* (BBC, 1985), adapted by Brian Phelan from the novel by Robert McCrum, employs the narrational device whereby a 'professional', an insider, discovers facts about his own organisation that he would not ordinarily have credited. The organisation in this case is the Directorate, a branch of Whitehall which has responsibility for collating data appropriate to national security. Towards the beginning

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Grantham, 'Enemy within', *The Listener*, 7 March 1985, 28.

of the programme there is a retirement party for the central character, Frank Strange (played by Frank Finlay), who, in the approving words of his Deputy Controller, has built up the Directorate 'from an obscure arm of the service to ... *the* essential repository for information in this country.' Strange is, you might say, a highly sophisticated policeman.

He leaves the service just as an enquiry into the death of one of the department's computer experts, Richard Lister, is set in motion. The viewer already suspects malodorous possibilities given that, according to the official explanation, Lister 'jumped' from a fifth-story window. Strange, now independent of the Directorate, is alerted by various snatches of evidence to investigate the case more fully. He discovers that Lister was about to publish information proving the involvement of two senior officers in the Directorate in an arms ring and an accompanying tax scam, whereby millions of pounds had been fiddled from the Inland Revenue.

Such a bare summary of the solution to the mystery gives little indication of the levels of suspense and sense of danger which the programme develops. Strange is himself under surveillance during most of the narrative. He is photographed and followed by operatives whom the camera often shows only fleetingly or at a distance, and his telephone is tapped. A contact is assassinated as he is about to deliver incriminating evidence at a secret rendezvous, and Strange himself is murdered, the victim of a car bomb, towards the end of the programme.

These narrative developments are consistent with the thriller mode, but Strange's quest establishes a number of explicitly contemporary resonances. The premise of the programme is the centrality of the computer system as an information store and a surveillance tool. Strange created the Directorate; he is subsequently spied on by it. There is a *Frankenstein*-like sense that the creation takes on an unaccountable life of its own. If such a system of data collection violates individual freedom, how piquant that its victims should include the man who constructed the system in the first place. It transpires that the machinery does not actually possess a mind unto itself, as it might in science fiction dramas, but is in fact still subject to the ministrations of individuals. But this raises another worry. Corruption within the security system operates in unpredictable and almost uncontrollable ways. More disturbingly, it takes place within



a body – the civil service – ostensibly devoted to the public good. It is unclear for most of the programme how far the corruption spreads. Does it include the government minister whom several of the characters mention? Eventually not, but the *plausibility* of widespread corruption is played on by the text and gives added urgency to the patterns of mystery and anxiety which it generates.

These developments are situated within a society straining with latent and actual conflict. In one sequence Strange's ex-colleague Quitman visits his girlfriend. On the way to her flat in an urban part of London he is passed by three youths chanting 'Chelsea'. He stops off at the local corner shop, to be greeted by the Asian shop owner, wearing a neck brace, obviously the victim of a recent assault. The camera suddenly pulls focus to reveal the flare of a floodlight as the sound of a crowd at a football match rises: sound and image are aggressively harsh. There is a close-up of the transparent blinker on a police horse, a reminder of an increasingly familiar form of social control.

Quitman arrives at his girlfriend's flat to find another friend there, wearing a tie and red braces, the outfit of a bullish yuppie. 'If you've got any spare fivers invest in us now,' he tells Quitman. 'Cable Midwest is in business ... it's perfect territory. 35 percent unemployment, 65 per cent high-rise blocks, high density and with nothing to do but watch cable, all day, every day.'

Both this character (the exploitative young entrepreneur) and the Asian shopkeeper (the victim of racist violence) are not seen again, but they are placed in the drama as referents for wider social patterns. The drama frequently emphasises broader cultural considerations, an effect partly achieved through Christopher Morahan's direction (Morahan had previously directed the successful costume serial *The Jewel in the Crown*). The following scene provides an example. Strange has arranged a night-time rendezvous at what appears to be an industrial site. A large bonfire burns, attended by a group who might be pickets. There is a hand-painted banner which reads in capitals 'THIS FAR AND NO FURTHER'. There is, one presumes, an industrial dispute underway, although the programme features this information as a casual part of the *mise en scène* rather than in any more developed sense. The bluish lighting, appropriate for night-shooting, emphasises the bleakness of the scene. A car suddenly speeds into

the frame and knocks down Strange's contact. As the car roars off the camera dwells on a wide-shot image: a murdered man in a wasteland evocative of social disintegration.

### ***Defence of the Realm* (1985)**

*In the Secret State* deals centrally with corruption embedded in an organisation ostensibly established to serve the public. This theme is treated even more explicitly in *Defence of the Realm* (Enigma Films/Rank Film Productions/National Film Finance Corporation, 1985), written by Martin Stellman and directed by David Drury. (The film was, incidentally, one of the last productions to receive finance from the National Film Finance Corporation before it was privatised.) The protagonist, Nick Mullen (played by Gabriel Byrne), is a reporter on a tabloid newspaper who discovers that the Government has concealed an incident which nearly triggered a nuclear catastrophe. The film was enthusiastically received, and David Robinson's comments in *The Times* articulate one aspect of its effectiveness:

What makes it so sinister is the discovery of menace in cosily familiar characters and circumstances. The Special Branch men are polite and undramatic; at the centre of MI5's labyrinth we find only courteous, suited, gentlemanly civil servants; ... Orders to kill are uttered in cultivated English voices. It is a gripping, disturbing and documentary thriller.<sup>2</sup>

In a review in *The Observer*, Philip French locates *Defence of the Realm* within a tradition of paranoia thrillers reaching back to the 1940s, observing that at different periods these movies proposed the existence of either right-wing or left-wing conspiracies.<sup>3</sup> The conspiracy central to *Defence of the Realm* is clearly right-wing in nature – this is true of thrillers throughout the 1980s – and has its source in the presence of US nuclear bases in Britain. The film's concern with the partly unaccountable nature of the American presence is shared by *Edge of Darkness* and *A*

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<sup>2</sup> David Robinson, 'Gripping thriller of menacing contemporaneity', *The Times*, 3 January 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Philip French, 'All the Queen's Men', *The Observer*, 5 January 1986, 39.

*Very British Coup*. The military base is presented by these dramas as a kind of enemy within, all the more disturbing due to the benevolent relations between the US and British administrations. As with *Edge of Darkness*, however, the real enemy within is the state-within-the-state, a silky organisation which is increasingly autonomous and unaccountable.

*Defence of the Realm* overlays these political concerns with a more orthodox dramatic exploration of moral considerations through its treatment of the character Nick Mullen. The film is in part an exploration of ethics within Fleet Street, the erstwhile home of the newspaper industry. Mullen is initially precipitate in his quest for a good story, not questioning the source of tip-offs he receives. He follows the case of an opposition MP seen leaving the flat of a prostitute, who is then visited a little later by a KGB agent, with the obvious implication that this might be a matter of state security. The ensuing publicity leads to the resignation of the MP. Mullen discovers during the course of the drama that he has been an instrument, through his newspaper reports, for a complicated network of special interests which embrace the powerful proprietor of his newspaper and reach as far as the Government. He becomes more tenaciously committed to his investigations but concomitantly isolated from the institution he serves. Unlike some fictional detectives and investigators, he does not start the drama as a particularly scrupulous character already defined within the moral universe of the narrative. Instead, he becomes more ethically-aware during the course of his investigations. There is a political aspect to this, given that he uncovers evidence which compromises the government of the day, although the character himself is not so much politicised as 'moralised'.

The relationship between the two terms is, however, rather complex in drama of the period. The narrative process is often either a confirmation of the protagonist's existing moral codes, or a growing politicisation of the character which is cast in moral terms. It is important that the viewer retains what, in a literary context, Jerry Palmer has described as the reader's 'moral sympathy' with the protagonist.<sup>4</sup> Palmer suggests that

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<sup>4</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 82.

'the thriller hero is always, intrinsically, isolated'.<sup>5</sup> It is true that in a number of television thriller serials the protagonist is either an outsider of some sort from the outset, or is separated from his/her community at points throughout the drama. (This will become especially clear with regard to each central protagonist in the programmes analysed in the following chapters.) There are important consequences to this nexus of relationships between the isolation of the protagonist, his/her moral sensibility, and the viewer's sympathy.

### ***The Detective* (1985)**

This is particularly evident in *The Detective* (BBC, 1985), dramatised by Ted Whitehead from the novel by Paul Ferris, and directed by Don Leaver. The serial focuses on apparently disturbing developments in the relationship between the state and the police force. To Ruth Baumgarten, writing in *The Listener*, the programme seemed uncannily prescient:

With Thames's *Dempsey and Makepeace* looking like an attempt to turn crime fiction's clock back to the early 1970s, and the second series of *Widows* seeming to retreat from its exploration of the harder side of femininity into more conventional "action" devices, *The Detective* looks doubly interesting: as an investigation into traditional masculine identity and – considering that the serial was conceived some 18 months ago – as an almost prophetic prediction of the direction in which policing and surveillance were to develop.<sup>6</sup>

The detective of the title, Commander Ken Crocker (played by Tom Bell), is a police officer working in Special Intelligence. During the surveillance of a Trades Union official – by 1985 the programme could assume that this was a routine procedure – Crocker discovers that the Home Secretary Sir Henry Blankenall (played by Terence Harvey) is availing himself of the services offered by a brothel staffed by teenagers

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<sup>5</sup> Palmer, *Thrillers*, 29.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Baumgarten, 'Straight and Narrow', *The Listener*, 2 May 1985, 29.

under the age of consent. Crocker embarks on a quest, depicted as the obvious course for a scrupulous law-enforcer, to bring Blankenall to justice. This proves difficult and the narrative includes a number of instances where Crocker's allegations are ignored or rebutted.

In Episode 2, for instance, Crocker is invited to his Commissioner's house to be told that he has mistakenly identified the punter as the Home Secretary, but that in any case he is being sent on a Senior Officer's course, which normally means promotion. He is, he suspects, being bought off. Notwithstanding this, he drives to Blankenall's country mansion ostensibly to pass on some information he has acquired concerning a high-profile industrial dispute [Episode 3]. Plausibility is perhaps stretched in this sequence, although the conjunction of narrative and character development override the possible inauthenticity. During the course of his visit, Crocker verifies for himself that Blankenall has an incriminating birthmark that establishes his identity as the adolescent prostitute's client. When he subsequently reasserts his accusations against the Home Secretary, the Commissioner flatly disagrees and suspends Crocker from duty on condition that he seeks medical treatment for his apparently obsessive behaviour [Episode 4].

Crocker's isolation is not merely a passive question of difference from others. He is himself the subject of close surveillance and suffers justifiable paranoia. His pursuit of justice leads, indirectly, to his wife's decision to leave him. By Episode 5 it seems that he has forfeited his job, not to mention his hoped-for promotion. This entails a radical questioning of those in authority, a theme of the programme which is expressed all the more powerfully given the characterisation of its protagonist as, initially at least, a respectful functionary of the police establishment.

The narrative depicts a pattern of gradual revelation of details on Crocker's part and corresponding blandishments or denial on the part of his superiors. The pattern continues even after Blankenall commits suicide and the validity of Crocker's allegations has been recognised. Crocker is now assured of promotion. This could form the programme's resolution, but the narrative takes a far more pessimistic turn.

'We're being bought off,' Crocker says to a colleague. '... What's needed is an impartial enquiry ... a political enquiry, this is a political issue.' The implications are

clear. *The Detective* has as its narrative mainspring a cover-up on the part of the Establishment of a senior politician's libidinal transgressions. There is a further sting to the programme, however. It transpires that one of the members of Crocker's Special Intelligence team is in fact working for MI5. The original operation to compromise a Trade Union official was established to secure the Home Secretary's downfall. A possible reason for this is given in Episode 2. It appears that the Prime Minister wants to 'take a hard line' with regard to the industrial dispute whose progress forms a subplot of the programme. The minister most likely to be given Blankenall's job is known to hold similarly hard-line views. The implication is that a covert operation on the part of the security services would have the result of consolidating the influence of the Right. The hermeneutic process of the narrative is not merely to uncover layers of corruption within the secret state but to reveal that these have an inextricably right-wing determination.

The ascendancy of right-wing views in this period is emphasised through the presentation of Crocker's brother-in-law David Marchwint (played by Michael Cochrane), one of the more peripheral characters in the programme. During the Thatcher years the secondary industries of marketing, press and public relations, image consultancy and corporate promotion underwent phenomenal expansion. *The Detective* acknowledges this development in that Marchwint is the Public Relations Director of a light industrial firm, Maskins Circuits Ltd. He is depicted as a boorish, gung-ho capitalist, a vigorous exponent of management-oriented business practices. In Episode 2, for instance, he rails at the tardiness of the Government in changing employment legislation, and he implies to Crocker that he would like to evict, illegally if necessary, the workers engaged in a sit-in at Maskins' factory. It is clear by Episode 3 that the company is contemplating the use of a private security firm to this end. Private security, incidentally, was another sector which flourished during the Thatcher era. It is presented in *The Detective* as an unsavoury and unscrupulous new industry.

There is a confrontational aspect to the discussions between Crocker and Marchwint. Crocker is in some senses an 'old-style' policeman, scrupulously operating within the law. Marchwint is a new-style free-marketeer, seeking ways of avoiding legislative constraints on aggressive business practices. He is involved in the

organisation of violent confrontation at the plant, but it appears that this has the Government's covert sanction. An official from MI5 gives him a list detailing which of the strikers are members of the Militant Tendency. And the news is subsequently announced that, firstly the Government has banned a scheduled Trades Union demonstration in Trafalgar Square; and secondly that Maskins has won its action for trespass against the occupying strikers. The domination of the Right seems inexorable.

The drama does not polarise its characters along uniquely political lines, however. One element of Crocker's apartness is his sense of morality. A colleague describes him as 'incorruptible' [Episode 2]. 'Is he political?' a colleague asks later in the same episode, regarding his pursuit of the Home Secretary. 'I've never heard him use the word,' comes the reply. 'No, I think it's a moral thing with Ken.' One is reminded of Raymond Chandler's recommendation that the hero of detective fiction 'must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honour, by instinct, by inevitability'.<sup>7</sup> That said, Crocker is not presented in unequivocally heroic terms. His racism, for instance, is questioned through his antipathy at his daughter's relationship with her Polish boyfriend.

There is nonetheless a distinction drawn in *The Detective* between politics and morality, where the political is to do with calculated strategic decisions concerning power, while the moral refers to a more fixed and fundamental set of values. 'I'm not after a scandal. I just want justice,' Crocker says [Episode 2], and this is presented as a basic motivation for his actions during the drama. It is important to this division between *realpolitik* and ethics that Crocker is shown *not* to have a political agenda. His values, indeed, have a puritanical aspect. He castigates a colleague, for instance, for having an affair with a married man. [Episode 4]

Crocker's friend and colleague Penfield (played by Mark Eden), by contrast, articulates an apparently common-sense pessimism, a kind of resignation in the face of entrenched and institutionalised corruption. One such exchange between the pair takes place on the embankment of the Thames facing the Houses of Parliament. A two-shot of the characters features St Stephen's Church at the Palace of Westminster, seen

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder', in *Pearls Are a Nuisance*, in *The Chandler Collection*, Volume 3 (London: Pan Books, 1984), 191.

between them across the river. The backdrop is, literally, the political world, but it is presented not as their 'natural' environment but as an unknowable domain across the water. 'If our leaders in their wisdom have decided to play this quiet, isn't it your duty to do the same?' Penfield asks Crocker [Episode 3]. The question of duty becomes paramount: does one owe allegiance to official institutions or to one's own sense of justice? In Crocker's case the distinction is painful to contemplate, but 'duty' takes precedence as a code of behaviour which does not permit of compromise. Indeed this is neatly caught in the Commissioner's comment: 'I've always respected your integrity, Crocker. It's your strength. And your weakness.' [Episode 4] As the narrative develops it becomes clear that the security forces have played on this 'weakness' to their own advantage. The twist to expectation, however, and thus a powerful aspect in character development, is the rigour and dedication with which Crocker pursues his investigations. 'He did exactly what was expected of him,' says one character. 'Only they never expected him to go political.' [Episode 5]

Finally, then, the programme suggests that the two terms cannot after all be separated. Crocker acts within a moral rather than political frame of reference, but there are inevitable political consequences, as the character finally recognises ('this is a political issue') when he seeks an independent enquiry into a cover-up on the part of the Government. The moral and the political are interlinked, although the rhetoric of the politicians and members of the security forces would keep them separate. In staying true to an underlying set of moral values, characters who operate (even if tangentially) within the political sphere face inevitable isolation. The examination of this appalling split between ethics and politics is central to *In the Secret State*, *Defence of the Realm* and *Edge of Darkness*, transmitted or released in the same year as *The Detective*. Each drama features a protagonist who becomes increasingly isolated from the institutions to which he initially belongs, and whose apartness has consequences which are explicitly both moral and political. By the end of 1985, then, a significant pattern for thriller fictions of the period had been established.



## ***The Price* (1985)**

A number of documentaries and drama documentaries of the period addressed the relationship between the British security forces and organisations in Ireland. The most controversial of these was *Death on the Rock* (1988), while 1990 saw the transmission of three related drama documentaries: *Who Bombed Birmingham?*, *Shoot To Kill* and *Dear Sarah*, which dramatised the letters of Giuseppe Conlon to his wife, Conlon being an Irishman jailed for twelve years as one of the 'Maguire Seven'.<sup>8</sup> Events in Northern Ireland were also a context for thriller serials of the period. Two of the programmes I shall consider in this respect – *The Price* (1985) and *Final Run* (1988) – focus not on the political situation but on the psychological effects of terrorism or criminal activity on its perpetrators and victims. *Children of the North* (1991) is more ostensibly political and I shall consider it in due course.

Most of the action of *The Price* (Astramead/Radio Telefis Eireann for Channel Four, 1985), written by Peter Ransley and directed by Peter Smith, takes place in Ireland, but that does not diminish the programme's focus on issues to do with the emerging corporate culture in England. The central character, Geoffrey Carr (played by Peter Barkworth), is an English computer executive who runs his own company. As a gesture of affection towards his young wife Frances (played by Harriet Walter) he buys a mansion in Southern Ireland near her former home in Country Wicklow. Shortly afterwards Frances and Clare (her daughter from a previous marriage) are kidnapped by a pair of maverick IRA operatives whose plan is to extort money in order to buy arms for the Republican army.

A central dilemma is established which proposes two immediate questions: will Carr raise sufficient money to pay the ransom, and in any case does his concern for his company override his concern for his wife? The conundrum is to do with loyalty and affection rather more than financial capability.

One of the important narrative lines of *The Price* concerns the extent to which Carr struggles to retain his controlling influence as a business leader, balancing financial

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<sup>8</sup> *Death on the Rock* is briefly discussed on pp. 21-22; *Who Bombed Birmingham?* on pp. 17-18; and *Shoot to Kill* on p. 17.

operations against the safety of his wife and step-daughter. In Episode 3 he attempts to retain control over his company by agreeing a deal with a friend, a member of another successful financial outfit. The latter will announce the intended purchase of Carr's personal holding, thus signalling that the company's value remains buoyant, only to allow the deal to fall through a little later. When the press realise that a full takeover is implausible the share price of Carr's company falls further. His friend then offers actually to buy the controlling influence at a much reduced price. Carr appears to have no option. In raising capital to pay the ransom fee, he must sell his company off cheaply. 'I built myself up!' he exclaims at one point, a reminder of his function in the programme as a self-made entrepreneur. His friend's smooth commercial acumen indicates that the business world operates according to laws of financial value rather than codes of personal loyalty and support.

In a further twist Carr sells his shares instead to a neighbouring landowner in Ireland, with a buy-back option open for six months. A mishandled exchange of the ransom money results in the death of one of Carr's colleagues, after which Carr proposes that he use his computers to process police information, in order to establish where the kidnappers are hiding out. His role in the drama changes from being a victim to becoming a detective figure in his own right (a pattern evident in later thrillers including *The Real Eddy English* and *Die Kinder*). This is consistent with the presentation of the character as a man of intellect and aloof detachment, but it further complicates the viewer's relationship to him: on the one hand he is presented as a dynamic and 'intellectual' businessman, on the other as a shallow materialist, only comfortable when seated at a computer.

The parallel narrative of Frances's imprisonment is similarly problematic. By Episode 5 she has sex with the male kidnapper, Frank Crossen. 'I'm trying to save our lives and if I have to sleep with that scum I will,' she remonstrates with her daughter, but the programme invites speculation that Frances is in some way excited by her new circumstances. The kidnappers are eventually shot by the police on their way to a promised flight out of Ireland from Cork Airport. In the programme's closing sequence, Carr discovers that his wife is pregnant. He wants her to abort the foetus: 'You see, I'll never be able to get it out of my head, you see,' he says. 'That it's not

mine. You see.' 'That's absurd,' Frances responds. 'It's all in your imagination, darling. That's as nonsensical as me imagining that there was a price. That you wouldn't sell your company for me.' [Episode 6] The programme's theme – and it is a contemporary one – is thus rather palpably signposted: commercial activity becomes a consuming passion at the expense of more 'natural' affections. *The Price* connects with thrillers like *Edge of Darkness* and *The Detective* in recognising that the emerging commercial culture of the 1980s had significant consequences in redefining 'ordinary' social relationships. Subsequent thriller serials, including *The Real Eddy English*, *Thin Air* and *Chain*, would focus more directly on this theme.

*The Price* was cited in a distressing real occurrence. During its transmission Bernadette Speers, wife of the businessman Patrick Speers, was kidnapped by hooded gunmen from their home in Armagh. A ransom of £100,000 was demanded. Mrs Speers escaped, however, after being held for 36 hours. Her family subsequently claimed that the incident was inspired by *The Price* and called for the remaining episodes of the programme to be cancelled. Channel Four did not accede, arguing instead that the programme could not in itself be held accountable for the kidnapping.<sup>9</sup>

The affair indicates that for all its overt thriller inflections, *The Price* has some basis in plausibility as regards terrorist activity in Ireland. It would be wrong, however, to see this as the drama's predominant concern. Ireland is depicted as a place of anarchic violence. A number of the characters, including the kidnappers, are caricatural. Even the central characters are not particularly likeable, which poses problems in a drama whose narrative appears to offer clear-cut moral distinctions, and the viewer's prospective subject-identifications are not handled with great felicity. A curious parallelism is evident in the intransigence shown by both the capitalist Carr and the terrorist Crossen. Carr's faults are revealed but the narrative still invites the viewer's sympathy for his situation, and admiration of his resourcefulness. Frances too is shown to be greedy and selfish, although she finally becomes the central figure in a revenge drama, administering the exquisite punishment of separation on her husband.

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<sup>9</sup> See Diana Hutchinson, June Southwark, 'The Price of terror', *Daily Mail*, 30 January 1985, 6; and John Hicks, "I blame TV for kidnap", *Daily Mirror*, 30 January 1985, 1. For an appreciation of the programme, see Godfrey Hodgson, 'Giving thanks for a mercy of some magnitude', *Financial Times*, 20 February 1985, 15.

The characters are circumscribed by material desires rather than liberated through transcending commitment to a cause or to each other. It is difficult to observe a clearly-worked political perspective here, however. *The Price* draws on the thriller idiom for its presentation of psychological trauma, but its patterns of threat are rather crudely presented. It is a text inscribed with some of the cultural tensions of its period but proves unable to dramatise these with especial depth or complexity.

### ***Dead Head* (1986)**

The prevailing mode of the aforementioned programmes combines the functional elements of thriller narratives with a realistic depiction of the world of the drama. Two serials of the period, however, operate according to more overtly stylised idioms whilst retaining as their central theme the grip of the hidden establishment. These are *Dead Head* (BBC, 1986), written by Howard Brenton, and *Never Come Back* (BBC, 1990), adapted from John Mair's conspiracy thriller of the same name.

The protagonist of *Dead Head*, Eddie Cass (played by Dennis Lawson), is a petty criminal from South London who is framed by the Special Branch for the brutal murder, sexual defilement and subsequent beheading of a 20-year-old woman. *Dead Head* draws – in its dialogue, costumes, music, lighting and filming style – on *film noir* conventions. It is nonetheless constructed not as a nostalgic homage but as a direct comment on contemporary realities, an important aspect of the drama's identity. As Sheila Johnston suggested in *The Listener*, *Dead Head* should be seen 'less as a political thriller than as a satiric, caricatured portrait of the state of a nation locked in darkest Thatcherism'.<sup>10</sup> This was the writer Howard Brenton's first serial for television. It features a number of metaphorical settings of a kind also present in Brenton's plays of the 1980s and '90s,<sup>11</sup> along with characters who operate in the folds between different social classes. Eddie's wife Dana (played by Lindsay Duncan),

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<sup>10</sup> Sheila Johnston, 'Britain on the run', *The Listener*, 9 January 1986, 32.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Howard Brenton, *Greenland* (London: Methuen, 1988) and *Berlin Bertie* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1992).

for instance, is a working class woman who has become mysteriously associated with a powerful member of the Establishment. His rastafarian friend Caractacus is revealed as a 'paid-up policeman'. 'There's an organisation, man,' Caractacus admits. 'They're everywhere.' [Episode 3] As this perhaps demonstrates, Brenton's dialogue as well as his narration is schematic rather than naturalistic.

The following exchange between Eddie and the MI5 operative Hugo Silver (played by Simon Callow) over dinner in a country house, indicates some of the programme's themes:

SILVER: The man who performed that atrocity: we were ordered to protect him, not to ask who he was. To find some snivelling little shit down in the lower depths and pin it on him, set him up. We found you.

EDDIE: The Government [*pause*]. But I always vote Tory.

SILVER: Yes, well, what is happening to you is just one more hard luck story ... Every country has its wild men who'll do anything, anything at all, to preserve the status quo. I'm one of England's. It is my vow: Anything for England. [Episode 2]

This is potentially misleading, given that much of the programme suggests that the status quo is changing quite drastically. Nonetheless the secure and reassuring England to which Silver refers is not that of ordinary members of the public but of the select band who hold political power behind the scenes. The programme's use of visual and verbal conventions, drawing on images evocative of English country-house drama, *film noir* and Orwellian futurism, give it a stylish sheen but complicate these anxieties about the hidden establishment. The combination of overt pastiche in the filming and rhetorical insistence in the writing makes the admonitory tone of *Dead Head* seem glib rather than disturbing. The project was initiated by the director Rob Walker, who approached Brenton with the original idea. A similar charge that the direction over-indulges clichés of the screen thriller can be levelled at *Die Kinder* (BBC, 1990), another serial directed by Walker, discussed later in this chapter. In one particularly ludicrous sequence in *Dead Head*, Hugo Silver is gunned down by two frogmen who emerge from a peaceful stream in the countryside as the local hunt rides by.

Despite such overwrought scripting and direction, the programme's relevance lies partly in its depiction of a radically divided nation. Eddie travels from the magnificent town houses of London's Regent's Park to South London council accommodation; from country pubs and houses in Shropshire to downbeat cellars in Birmingham (described by Cass as 'rat city', as a rat scuttles obligingly across the floor); and from well-guarded detached houses in Holland Park to derelict wasteland in Glasgow, 'the great rotting city of the North'. Ranging across the nation, the drama suggests that Britain is riven by polarities between wealth and poverty, the secure and the disintegrating, the powerful and the dispossessed. By 1986 the theme of a 'two-nation' Britain has become dominant.

Eddie eventually colludes with the wishes of the Establishment and is seen in a final address to the camera from a sun lounger under a technicolour sky, complicit in the silencing of any scandal attaching to whichever VIP committed the vicious murder. The lack of clarity in this latter regard, incidentally, constitutes a disappointing swerve from orthodox thriller narration. Eddie is an ardent Royalist and the programme invites speculation that the sex crime is perpetrated by a member of the Royal Family, for whom he is quite willing to assume the blame. Having established such a premise, reminiscent of the case of Jack the Ripper (presumed in some accounts to be the Duke of York), the drama is – perhaps for obvious reasons relating to libel and to public sensibilities – unable to make this explicit. When Eddie learns of the murderer's identity it is by way of a whisper from another character that the viewer, tantalisingly, does not hear: a lapse in the epistemophilic structure of deferral and deliverance of knowledge intrinsic to the thriller.<sup>12</sup>

This betokens a larger failure to integrate overt social comment with a satisfying thriller narrative. Hugh Hebert suggests that Brenton

is fascinated by the thriller model without really understanding it, or being able to reproduce or parody

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<sup>12</sup> This absence of tangible information did not prevent the *Daily Express* from attempting to create a scandal out of the drama, as the headline to its story bears witness: see 'Killer royal stars in BBC shocker', *Daily Express*, 9 January 1986, 5. The programme was subject to another misplaced attempt at scandal when it was claimed that it included a scene in which Cass is raped by a woman. He is indeed tied to a bed, but the scene is exotic rather than violent. See 'TV Orgy Shocker,' *Daily Mirror*, 9 January 1986, 1.

its effects in a satisfying way. So Cass doesn't show signs yet of either the wit or the low cunning needed to make him a worthy adversary for the forces stacked against him.<sup>13</sup>

This raises a revealing point. *Dead Head* belongs to a stable of thrillers where the central character's paranoia, and thus the main motor of events in the narrative, derives from the smooth but brutal operation of the hidden establishment. In *Dead Head*, however, paranoia is experienced by a character who is *already*, as a small-time crook, to a large extent an outsider. The viewer is encouraged to adopt Eddie's subject-position, but the character has little investment in mechanisms of political power and social control. The programme is thus less able to explore the kernel of corruption upon which much of the central threat is predicated, but can only caricature it as a case of the little man against the forces of the state. This is a key difference between *Dead Head* and other 'paranoia' dramas like *Defence of the Realm*, *Edge of Darkness* and *A Very British Coup*, whose protagonists have a plausible relationship, as journalists, policemen or politicians, to real centres of power. Even programmes like *Natural Lies* and *The Price* feature protagonists (an advertising executive and a millionaire businessman respectively) who are able to operate within channels of power and influence. I have already noted a preoccupation in 1980s thrillers with the state as a network of commercial and political interests: these can best be probed through their consequences to a central character who to some extent operates within the discourses of this particular world. *Dead Head* illustrates – by way of its comparative failure in this respect – one of the important narrational elements of the most effective thrillers of the period.

### ***Brond* (1987)**

The sense of a hidden establishment covertly policing the nation is also developed in *Brond* (Jam Jar Films/Channel Four, 1987), a thriller adapted from his own novel by Frederic Lindsay, a member of the Scottish National Party. The nation in this instance

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<sup>13</sup> Hugh Hebert, 'Head Start', *The Guardian*, 16 January 1986, 10.

is Scotland, which gives a nationalist tone to the programme's presentation of its English secret agent. Lindsay claimed in a newspaper interview to have written *Brond* in response to *Scotch on the Rocks*, the novel co-authored by the Tory MP Douglas Hurd which, according to the Scottish writer, displayed an 'Anglocentric and Unionist interpretation of Scottish political development where nationalists were depicted as violent thugs or duped individuals'.<sup>14</sup> The eponymous English anti-hero of Lindsay's work, played by Stratford Johns, is both decadent and mysterious. The drama opens with him tipping a young boy over a bridge. By the closing episode he is enjoying a spanking in a brothel. Although it is never made completely clear, the inference throughout is that he is working for the British Intelligence services. The characterisation – an Englishman who is casually aloof, violent and self-pleasuring – contributes to the programme's sceptical thematic treatment of English intervention in Scottish affairs. *Brond*'s function as a reference for English imperialism is demonstrated by a speech in the final episode, in which comments he makes about another character take on a wider reference:

He's a patriot. He's been going to the wars for a very long time. He's the man who built the British Empire. ... He fought against Napoleon, and in the Crimea. [Brond is now looking out of the window as a Scots pipe band marches past.] In the last war he fought in the desert. And in 1916 he fought on the dry plains of the Somme, and drowned in its mud when winter came. Kenya, Korea – he's been there. He's still in Ireland. And only last week he came back from a little group of islands in the South Atlantic. And every time he came home, he found things were worse than when he'd gone away. He never had learned to fight for himself. [Episode 3]

*Brond*'s actions earlier in the drama do not accord with such a keen awareness of the class struggle. Unfortunately *Brond* does not fully resolve the enigmas it proposes with regard to its central character's apparent amorality and his relationship with the police, the armed struggle in Ireland and the Nationalist movement in Scotland. Its setting (including the back streets and tenements of Glasgow) and shooting style

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Rob Brown, 'Shining a light on dark side of politics', *The Scotsman*, 22 September 1986, 11.



(including unusual shot formats and the thrillerish use of orange light) advance the familiar theme that the city harbours danger and depravity, as the film's protagonist, the student Robert (played by John Hannah), discovers. Importantly, however, the mystery at the heart of the narrative is not intrinsic to the city itself, ingrained like the corruption in, say, Hammett's 'Poisonville',<sup>15</sup> but is provided by the interloper Brond, an Englishman abroad. His suave political agitating has its basis in covert English neo-imperialism. *Brond* is a rather uneven thriller, but it is characteristic of the period in dealing with questions of national identity (a concern it shares with later thrillers like *The Real Eddy English* and *Blood Rights*) and in its pronounced scepticism with regard to the English Establishment.

### ***Final Run* (1988)**

*Final Run* (BBC, 1988) is a narrowly-focused psychological thriller, but its transmission was nonetheless postponed twice by the BBC, firstly in the wake of the explosion at Enniskillen on Remembrance Day which killed a number of civilians and injured many others, and secondly so as not to play against *Crossfire*, another thriller with an Irish setting. These delays account for the July screening of the programme, an unusual time to release a new drama serial. The story was devised by Ron Hutchinson, who had previously written the *Bird of Prey* dramas. When Hutchinson left to work in America the programme was scripted by Carol Bunyan.

Questions of identity are central to the narrative. At the beginning of the serial the protagonist, Danny McDonnell (played by Bryan Murray), is a prisoner in a jail in Northern Ireland. His crime was the extortion of monies through computer fraud to finance IRA activities. McDonnell turns informer in order to secure his release and is thus provided with a new identity by the British security service, and he and his family are relocated to a modest house in the Midlands. Much of the drama is concerned with the effects of an alien identity, and indeed an alien culture, on McDonnell and his wife

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<sup>15</sup> 'Poisonville', a witting mispronunciation of 'Personville', is the setting for Hammett's *Red Harvest*. See Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*, in Hammett, *The Four Great Novels* (London: Picador, 1982).

and young son. In the final episode the viewer learns that McDonnell has been keeping a secret account in yet another (false) name. He betrays not only the IRA but his British contacts and his family as well. McDonnell is mysterious to an extent which militates against any significant subject-identification with him. This makes the thriller elements of the drama only partially effective, and it does not open up the fissures between political affiliation and personal betrayal which the serial promises to examine. It initially appears that *Final Run* will be concerned with the relationship between Irish politics and the British security forces, but this context operates as a backdrop for the more psychologically-oriented focus on McDonnell, his wife, his son and the policeman, Jeff Courtney (played by Paul Jesson), assigned to guard him. In switching from one to the other the plot does not allow full treatment of their various crises of responsibility.

McDonnell himself is definable by negatives: he has no fixed identity and no passionate allegiance: everything is part of a pretence played out in front of whomsoever he needs to delude. These characteristics would be pertinent if they appeared in the drama as indications of deep psychological tendencies or the contingency of political pressures, as they are, for instance, with regard to the double agents in le Carré's novels. The ambivalences of *Final Run* are not quite as telling. In common with other dramas of the period, nonetheless, the programme suggests that cultural and individual identity are sites of struggle and that their limit zones are broken only at great personal expense.

### ***Thin Air* (1988)**

Contemporary property development and crime are connected in *Thin Air* (BBC, 1988), a thriller co-written by Peter Busby and Sarah Dunant, directed by Caroline Bird, and produced by Caroline Oulton, who subsequently produced *Blood Rights*. The central character Rachel (played by Kate Hardie) is a young radio journalist for Urban Air, a commercial station located by the Thames in the Docklands Enterprise Zone. (Dunant had herself already worked for BBC and commercial radio, and went on

to become a presenter on BBC2's *The Late Show*. She is also a writer of private-eye novels.<sup>16</sup>) Rachel's friend, the station's leading reporter, is murdered while working on a story about corrupt Docklands developers. The programme links two predominant features of 1980s commercial activity – property development and the growth of the independent media – in that *Urban Air*'s proprietor Hellier (played by Nicky Henson) is a property entrepreneur. The central mystery of the narrative is explained by the revelation that an international drugs baron is among the foreign businessmen at the heart of the regenerated Docklands.

*Thin Air* is avowedly contemporary in its references to ongoing commercial activity, and to the lifestyle and language of the young journalists and presenters who staff the radio station. Its shooting style and fast editing pace reinforces a sense of youthful energy. The programme is also notable for its presentation of a young, ambitious and resourceful female protagonist, similar in some respects to Hannah Wolfe, the private investigator in Dunant's literary thrillers. That said, it does not blithely celebrate the contemporary. Instead the narrative expresses manifold concern with regard to a commercial climate which encourage speculators and entrepreneurs rather than a sense of social responsibility. Rachel eventually exposes the drugs and property racket by broadcasting her report on the station's channel, an act of individual insubordination. Such a triumphal and utopian denouement, however, belies the drama's anxiety at the unregulated nature of new forms of commercial expansion, and their vulnerability to sophisticated institutionalised corruption.

*Thin Air* marks an extension of the concerns of thriller-oriented serials. In this programme – as will subsequently be the case with *The Real Eddy English*, *Chain* and *Natural Lies* – the mystery and threat central to the narrative derives not from the state but from the operations of the corporate sector. In programmes like *Edge of Darkness*, *The Detective* and *In the Secret State* commercial activity connects nefariously to the interests of those inside the political establishment. In *Thin Air* and certain subsequent thriller serials there is no indication of the presence of government agencies within the drama, but the narrative still directly addresses a realignment of the civic structures of British society. In all these cases the thrillers pit their individual protagonists against

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Sarah Dunant, *Fatlands* (London: Penguin, 1993).

belligerent and coercive organisations who appear to be 'legitimately' sanctioned within the public sphere. The dynamic of the drama, as with thrillers earlier in the decade, still derives from the tension between personal experience and the new imperatives of the British public realm. It is made explicit in thrillers like *Thin Air* that this realm embraces a form of commercial activity (enabled, one must note, according to policies developed by succeeding Thatcher administrations) which appears to take on a newly threatening aspect.

### ***The Fear* (1988)**

A crime-thriller serial written by Paul Hines and directed by Stuart Orme, *The Fear* (Euston Films, 1988) deals more ambivalently than the dramas mentioned thus far with the thrusting, entrepreneurial culture of the 1980s. The production company Euston Films, a subsidiary of Thames Television, also made the low-life, London-based dramas *Minder*, *Widows* and *Out*, which to some extent celebrate the communities in which they are set. *The Fear* is set in Islington, a newly fashionable part of London whose Victorian and Edwardian property was renovated and gentrified during the 1980s, while a rash of new cafes, bars and designer shops appeared on and around the high street. The drama follows not the new influx of home-owners, but a group of local youths in their early twenties, characterised as working class, fashion-conscious, acquisitive and amoral. The plot details the gradual consolidation of a criminal network organised by Carl Galton (played by Iain Glen), whose territorial ambitions are played out in the East End, the traditional seat of London's gangland. In the first episode Galton pits himself against Bobby Chalker, the ageing boss of a chain of East End clubs, whose chronic wheeze and caricatural displays of aggression signal his function as a representative of a decaying and outdated order. Indeed Chalker collapses and dies at the end of the first episode: both he and the empire he heads are simply too decrepit to survive any longer.

Galton, by contrast, is a young man who drives a Porsche, wears smart, fashionable clothes and operates with clinical ruthlessness. In these respects he is not a

new prototype for the gangland villain but belongs to a long heritage of screen representations of the chieftains of organised crime, from 1920s US gangster films to the British film *The Krays* (GB, 1990), which dramatised supposedly real-life events concerning the Kray Twins. Certainly the latter shares with *The Fear* a fascination with the co-ordinates of youth, male narcissism, businesslike organisation and the strict intra-communal values exhibited by the gangster protagonists. Whilst *The Krays* is set in the semi-distant past of the late-1950s and early-'60s, however, *The Fear* maps these established tropes against a vividly contemporary London, where the behaviour of Galton and his gang appears as an expression of an emerging set of cultural values rather than as deviant and isolable criminality. This much was suggested in press responses to the programme. Janet Street-Porter, for instance, remarked that

*The Fear* is a bulletin from the Eighties, successfully reflecting the reality of many young people in Thatcher's Britain – they want consumer goodies, designer labels and flashy cars and they don't care how they are obtained. They have learned Thatcher's message of self-survival only too well.<sup>17</sup>

Given its strikingly contemporary resonance, *The Fear* can as readily be seen as one of 'Thatcher's thrillers' as the earlier conspiracy dramas, albeit that its themes are clearly different. It becomes an issue, of course, whether such a 'bulletin from the Eighties' endorses the emerging culture of materialistic gratification. Key exchanges between Galton and the representatives of the East End manor show the younger man in a favourable light: he is quicker to respond to events, more intelligent, decisive and determined. The costuming, lighting and shot formats emphasise the clothes the young gangsters wear and their relaxed and confident movements. There is a sense of approbation at the level of visual representation, although not, finally, at the level of narrative closure. Ted Willis, the originator of the early police series *Dixon of Dock Green*, expressed his concern

with a very subtle sociological change reflected in *The Fear*. When I was involved in *Dixon of Dock Green* TV crime programmes were very simple. The good guys were the police. They were the heroes.

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<sup>17</sup> Janet Street-Porter, 'Fear holds the key to our selfish Eighties', *Today*, 20 February 1988, 17.

The criminals were the bad guys. In *Z Cars* it was the same. So too *The Professionals*. But the hero in *The Fear* is the villain.<sup>18</sup>

*The Fear* is not a police or detective drama, however, but a gangster serial, and shares with a number of other films and programmes of its type an interest in the complicated moral codes of the gangster and the ways in which these intersect or depart from those of contemporary society. Nor is Willis entirely correct in ascribing the traits of the mythic hero to Galton. In terms of the narrative, the fact that the character is eventually shot by his wife delivers a conventional closing message that crime does not pay. *The Fear* is itself a product of the fascination with style and its rhetoric of economic self-sufficiency which characterised the 1980s. In this respect Galton is an entirely contemporary character. However slick and formulaic the programme is in other respects, it does project an essential ambivalence at the heart of the imperative of self-betterment. There is a concentration on the beguiling surfaces of modern materialism (Galton's car, the clothes he and his gang wear, the magazines they read, including *The Face* and *Blitz*) and a narrational reflex which casts these new-age entrepreneurs as doomed gangsters for all that. *The Fear* is quite different in terms of its thematic organisation to most of the dramas examined in this chapter, but it thus demonstrates the flexibility of the thriller idiom in this period. In this instance thriller strategies are used to heighten a decidedly contemporary narrative – one dealing with a newly vigorous combination of consumerism and criminality.

### ***The Real Eddy English* (1989)**

A number of thriller serials raise questions of cultural affiliation, and two produced in the period – *The Real Eddy English* and *Blood Rights* (1990) – feature black protagonists. National identity is a central issue in *The Real Eddy English* (North South Partnership for Channel Four, 1989), written by Frank Cottrell Boyce and directed by

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<sup>18</sup> Ted Willis, 'When TV turns rats into heroes', *Daily Mail*, 1 March 1988, 6. For a discussion of the restrained depiction of violence in *The Fear*, see Christopher Dunkley, 'Ambitions beyond cops-and-robbers', *Financial Times*, 16 March 1988, 11.

David Attwood. The drama juxtaposes older and newer versions of Englishness and effects a partial ~~of~~ reconciliation of these in its eponymous central character. Eddy (played by Stephen Persaud) is black, initially works as a projectionist at an old cinema called the Empire, and wears a suit as well as a trilby given to him by his white uncle, also named Eddy English (played by Frank Windsor). Old Eddy drives a Zephyr, a classic car of the 1960s, and describes himself as 'the last projectionist-manager in the country' [Episode 1]. If the 1980s are marked by radical changes to the civic structures of British society, Old Eddy represents a previous era when immigration began to alter the face of urban and inner city demographics. It transpires that he operated as a money-lender to the black community at a time when the British banks were unwilling to countenance such activity. He is an ambivalent character, an businessman with an eye to the main chance yet ostensibly a friend to a marginalised community.

These themes are played out in an Oxford markedly different to that presented in the series *Inspector Morse*, which began transmission in 1987. The opening shot of *The Real Eddy English* is a slow pan over the cityscape, set against a yellow sky. This might be a nostalgic sepia colouring, but it also suggests a somewhat more dystopian tone than is the case with the panoramic shots which capture Morse's city. The Oxford of *Inspector Morse* is a tranquil setting for crimes of passion and deviance. The Oxford of *The Real Eddy English* is by contrast a city of housing estates and new corporate development where social tensions are endemic.

One of the programme's narrative lines features the proposed construction of a theme park by the contemporary-sounding company, Holly Communications. 'I wanna make this a town worth living in,' Mrs Holly, the company's managing director, tells Eddy. Her working class vowels mark her as a boundary-crossing modern businesswoman, drawing on new commercial acumen rather than old money. 'One of the things I wanna do is build a theme park, here in Oxford,' she continues. 'The Albion Pleasure Park. The whole history of England. Hundreds of jobs. Loads of fun.'

That Oxford should be seen as a microcosm for the country is insisted upon in the metaphorical naming of characters, places and projects ('Eddy English' and 'the Albion Theme Park', for instance, while Holly Communications' publicity information claims that the company is a powerhouse in the city at the 'heart of England'). Cottrell Boyce,

the writer, had previously worked on the soap opera *Brookside*, which has at times foregrounded tensions to do with class, gender and race. Stresses in the conception of national identity are overtly signalled in *The Real Eddy English*. It transpires that the images of Oxford featured in the programme's opening sequence, accompanied by the hymn 'Jerusalem' (a signifier for desired national renewal) and the sound of a whirring projector, are from a marketing film made by Holly Communications in which Oxford is presented as a city of 'new ideas ... using the past to build the future'. This rhetoric is criticised within the programme. A later marketing film shows images of green lawns in front of a country house, as 'Jerusalem' again plays. Mrs Holly gives a voiceover which ends with the words, 'now we're going to build the Albion Pleasure Park in England's green and pleasant land.' As she says this a bulldozer roars across the screen, inviting the viewer to speculate that the land is in fact about to be torn up for the sake of commercial profit.

Questions of heritage are treated no less overtly through the presentation of Eddy's experiences. The vexed racial issues at the centre of the programme are raised through his antagonism towards his mother's white husband and his admiration for his white uncle. He subsequently discovers that Old Eddy was a racist bigot, and that the cinema which the latter had promised to bequeath him was in fact sold to Mrs Holly, an act of racial affiliation and personal betrayal. It is paradoxical, then, although entirely expected, when the viewer discovers that Old Eddy is in fact Eddy's father.

The serial's treatment of racial identity is complicated rather than complex. There is an attempt to address the impact of civic developments on racial groups outside the white mainstream, although Eddy's dysfunctional relationship with his family tends to dissipate any sense that he is other than an alienated individual rather than a representative of a particular community. Indeed his main ally during the programme is the improbably-named Mad Bastard (played by Sue Devaney), a gravedigger ('Well, I'm not a real gravedigger,' she admits; 'I'm on a scheme' [Episode 1]), whose shaven head, leather jacket and dwelling (a hut next to a railway line) mark her decisively as a member of an English underclass.

This indicates the prevailing trope of *The Real Eddy English*: its protagonists are isolated from their own culture. By the end of the programme Eddy is in prison on a



rigged charge of arson and extortion, a victim of Holly Communications' ruthless expansionist project. He is shown digging in the prison's vegetable patch as the programme's credit music, 'I'll leave my heart in an English garden', plays. The irony could hardly be more pronounced nor the theme more palpably underlined. England's garden is, for the outcast and the victimised, joyless and unyielding.

*The Real Eddy English* is built upon obvious juxtapositions and contrivances, and its narration is marred by jerky development and a clumsy blend of over-emphasis and opacity. Nonetheless it develops an established theme in 1980s thriller serials: that the individual expression of both cultural difference and cultural belonging is subject to the merciless impositions of commercial and civic development. The latter provides the threat which accounts for the programme's thriller elements. *The Real Eddy English* shares with a number of thrillers of the period a defining unease with the operations of the commercial sector, further consolidating a dystopian view of the British public sphere. It develops such disquiet within a narrative which suggests that British society is characterised not by harmony and inclusiveness but by division and exclusion.

### ***Blood Rights* (1990)**

A black protagonist also features in *Blood Rights* (BBC, 1990), a serial adapted by Mike Phillips from his novel of the same name.<sup>19</sup> The central character, Sammy Dean (played by Brian Bovell), is a journalist turned detective. He is hired by the wife of Grenville Barker, a Tory MP, to find their apparently-kidnapped daughter, Virginia. The latter is in fact party to a ransom scheme orchestrated by her half-brother Roy, product of the MP's illicit affair with a black woman.

*Blood Rights* is an orthodox private-eye thriller in that it imbricates Sammy himself into the environment of the drama's low-life characters. The single room in his studio flat is both his bedroom and his office. He is the archetypal private investigator, a resourceful loner of modest circumstances but pronounced tenacity. He keeps working

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<sup>19</sup> For an account of differences between the novel and the television serial, see James Saynor, 'Crosstown Traffic', *The Listener*, 8 November 1990, 38.

on the case even when he is asked to stop, due to an interest in the half-caste Roy. He has a mixed-race son himself, and the programme's over-sentimentalised sub-plot details the difficult balance he negotiates between paternal care, as he is estranged from his partner, and professional responsibility.

*Blood Rights* is partly set in Grenville Barker's government offices and his well-appointed home, but this social world is a secondary focus. The pre-eminent settings are the grainy and unglamorous areas of London in Camden and around the Westway and Royal Oak. Lesley Manning's direction refuses to romanticise these locations, despite shots of railings and stairwells, council accommodation and back streets which display a visual grammar usual to the thriller. Phillips himself acknowledged the influence of US crime fiction on his work, and the London of *Blood Rights*, marked by clear social and geographical divisions, has antecedents in the Los Angeles of Raymond Chandler or the Harlem of Chester Himes. As Phillips noted, the American crime fiction genre 'is born in the cities and it's born as a way of describing fragmented social conditions. It's a way of describing the conflict that happens when different social groups collide.'<sup>20</sup>

These conflicts are not decisively resolved in *Blood Rights*. Virginia is returned to her parents and Roy too decides to live with his father, who by now acknowledges his offspring. Their reconciliation is not presented in entirely optimistic terms, however. Grenville Barker's wife has previously shot the programme's villain, the drug dealer Winston, at a country cottage. Played by Maggie Steed she is depicted as a malevolent, calculating woman, a Lady Macbeth-like spouse who complements her ambitious and cynical husband. Roy is hardly entering the bosom of the ideal family. The denouement to *Blood Rights* features Sammy playing with his son, who then leaves with his mother: the implication is that 'aloneness' is something common to the main characters in the programme. It is the serial's *uneasiness* with regard to British society which connects it to other thrillers of the period. The characters in *Blood Rights* are situated in a culture in transition: one which is able to countenance mixed race liaisons, but where these are not experienced as entirely positive and fulfilled.

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Kathy Watson, 'The bloodying of rural England', *The Voice*, 24 July 1990. See Mike Phillips, 'City in the Blood', *The Listener*, 25 October 1990, 7-8, for the writer's account of his experience of certain parts of London.

## ***Die Kinder* (1990)**

*Die Kinder* (BBC, 1990) was written by Paula Milne (who also wrote the single drama *Frankie and Johnnie*), directed by Rob Walker (who also directed *Dead Head* and episodes of the *Blind Justice* series) and produced by Michael Wearing: a production team clearly attracted to the thriller form. The programme's protagonist, Sidonie Reiger (played by Miranda Richardson), goes to collect her children from their school, only to discover that they have been abducted. She quickly learns that they have been taken by her German ex-husband, Stefan (played by Hans Kremer), a former revolutionary in the 1960s. The programme maps Sidonie's emotional trauma against the ideological turbulence of contemporary Europe. She goes to Germany in order to search for *die kinder*, a quest which brings her into renewed contact with Stefan's former political associates, the 'children' of a Europe devastated in the middle of the century.

In exploring a changing Europe, the programme alludes to the activities during the 1970s of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group. In this respect it connects with *Centrepoint* (Rosso Productions for Channel Four, 1990), written by Nigel Williams and directed by Piers Haggard, which examines a now-dated 1960s rhetoric of protest. *Centrepoint* uses flashbacks (to 1979 and 1968) to provide points of contrast with the emphatically contemporary setting of London's Docklands at the end of the 1980s. The title sequence of *Die Kinder* also constitutes a flashback: it shows in jerky stop-action scenes the explosion of a bomb in a shopping centre, arranged by Stefan's group. The grainy black-and-white images, which cut to the flaming title, 'Die Kinder', present this form of urban terrorism as a clinching point of reference, a level of callous violence betokening the ideological certainties of revolutionary groups in the late-1960s and 1970s.

Stefan's seizure of his children is paradoxically in keeping with this discourse of anti-social aggression. Ostensibly, then, the programme's central polarity is between Sidonie, the mother, and Stefan, the father-abductor. But this conceals the major organising principle around questions of belief and commitment. Stefan is characterised as a man of dour and forthright seriousness. Sidonie herself decides to mortgage her house in order to secure the services of an unorthodox American private investigator,

Lomax (played by Frederic Forrest). She, too, is decisive, albeit that the focus of her commitment is her children rather than a political cause. Sidonie searches for Stefan among his ex-associates. One of these is now a leading figure in the German Green Party. Another works at a small, subversive printing press. Another is still in hiding from the police.

The passionate dedication of these characters is contrasted with the cooler style of the programme's 'professionals'. These include Lomax, the mercenary detective, and the members of the security forces in Britain and Germany who, it transpires, are monitoring the activities of the erstwhile revolutionaries. They also keep close watch on Sidonie and Lomax, so their presence remains pervasive throughout.

A distinction is made, then, between the resourceful security services, dispassionate and professional, and the cluster of characters whose affiliations are expressed in terms of deep individual feeling. The contrast is between a sophisticated state bureaucracy and affective individual expression. Patterns of secrecy and anonymity are central to the programme's thematic organisation: the security services operate in covert ways; the terrorists must, of necessity, conceal their activity from them. That said, *Die Kinder* is only secondarily concerned with the arena of international political agitation and indeed with state surveillance. Sidonie herself is characterised by her unquestionable devotion to her children and her bravery and determination in securing their return. The defining opposition, then, is one between personal commitment and detached professionalism.

*Die Kinder* marks a shift from the thrillers of the 1980s in that the unaccountable operations of the security services are depicted as the routine mechanics of international policing and appear as a 'natural' backdrop to the drama, rather than being revealed as the central source of the programme's network of threat. It is thus able to draw upon themes established in earlier thrillers and treat them as 'given'. While the programme appears to be a 'political' drama in featuring revolutionary activity and state supervision among its subject matter, its representation of the security services as an insidious apparatus is no longer new. By 1990 the dynamics of the genre have altered. There is not a process of gradual *revelation* of the blithe power of the state, but the use of this context as an arena for the exploration of other themes. The central focus of the serial thus moves to more explicitly emotional and psychological ground, using the thriller

idiom as the vehicle for a drama presenting a mother's quest to retrieve her children. This also suggests that having become established as one of the most robust genres of the period, the thriller was now open to appropriation for the exploration of specifically female structures of feeling, as would become especially clear with regard to *Prime Suspect*, transmitted the following year.

### ***Never Come Back* (1990)**

Earlier in this chapter I criticised *Dead Head* as a thriller whose <sup>parodying</sup> parodying elements are not fully controlled. A more sophisticated pastiche of B-movie conventions is achieved in *Never Come Back* (BBC, 1990), adapted from John Mair's novel by David Pirie and directed by Ben Bolt, who later worked together on the contemporary thriller *Natural Lies*. *Never Come Back* was originally published in 1941, and what for Mair was a near-contemporary setting – London during the period of the phony war in 1939 – becomes under Pirie and Bolt a costume drama which draws heavily on literary and cinematic conventions appropriate to action thrillers of the 1930s and '40s. The protagonist, Desmond Thane (played by Nathaniel Parker), is a magazine journalist, bored with a job which involves writing pulpy romance fictions. He meets the mysterious Anna Raven at a boxing match, a near-underworld setting for an encounter which leads him precipitously into a sequence of events over which he has little control and which he does not comprehend. He inadvertently kills Anna after having sex with her. Her suspiciously bland diary, which Desmond takes and hides, proves to contain a coded list of influential members of the Establishment who would be sympathetic to the return of the Duke of Windsor at the head of a Nazi regime. This information is not revealed until the denouement. In the interim Desmond is pursued, drugged and imprisoned by the Nazi-supporting gang, who seek to retrieve the diary. There are a number of chases and escapes reminiscent of John Buchan's Richard Hannay stories. The narrative is dramatised with <sup>knows</sup> a witting control of the mechanics of suspense, which emphasise questions concerning agency and identity: who is pursuing Desmond, and why?

In one sequence, for instance, Desmond is taken, blindfolded and hands bound, to meet the gang's most prestigious members at a mansion in the countryside. He is led along a dowdy passageway inside the building (they are in the servants' quarters) and up some narrow stairs, then is eventually propelled into a strikingly different environment, a luxuriously furnished large room. The setting, with Thane emerging from a kind of backstage gloom into the gang's slightly decadent centre, is characteristic of the drama's stylisation of images of power, which is associated throughout with an accompanying seediness, with darkness and shadows, and with Thane's experience of powerlessness. A deep-focus long-shot shows a group of people gathered at the end of the room, a theatrical arrangement of establishmentarians, anonymous in the shadows, even though there are lights on the table in front of them. When the group's leading member speaks, the image cuts to a close-up of his mouth (with his bow tie and wing-collar just visible), further denying the viewer access to his full identity. Thane is still blindfolded, so this is of course not a point of view shot, although its function is to further unite the perspective – and indeed the anxiety – of the viewer with that of Thane himself. The entire sequence ends when Desmond is taken elsewhere by car, escorted up some metal stairs and stood against a wall. A gun is pointed into his mouth. There is a close-up on the petrified victim, awaiting an inevitable violent death. Instead, nothing happens, and after a while Desmond loosens the blindfold to discover that he is alone on the balcony outside his flat. There has been no sound of footsteps retreating.

The sequence reiterates the arbitrary, threatening power of the gang, but also indicates the strategy of the production team, eschewing realism in favour of a heightening of suspense. The grammar of shots (including strategic close-ups of guns, a gloved hand, the car's grille), the *mise en scène* (enhanced by night-shooting and by rain) and the use of chiaroscuro lighting to conceal as much as to reveal, are familiar from 1930s and '40s crime movies. Their presence here, however, has a double function. Through an overt dependence on recognised cinematic and narrational conventions, the drama points self-referentially to its status as a parodic piece of fiction. These stylised devices also work 'innocently', however, as the motors of suspense. The effect is a rich concentration of signifying elements. The viewer's pleasure derives

both from recognising a stylish pastiche, but also in succumbing to the hermeneutic questions posed within the narrative. These revolve around pressing issues to do with the suave manipulation of events by corrupt members of the Establishment. *Never Come Back* professes its modernity in its clever employment of stock thriller devices; but also in its theme. Desmond's paranoia is treated as real and disturbing. He becomes a fugitive due to the agency of a privileged few. The hidden establishment (in this case a clique within the ruling class) is depicted as unequivocally ruthless and efficient. When set alongside the conspiracy thrillers of the 1980s the programme's resonances seem obliquely contemporary.

### ***Chain* (1990)**

Written by Desmond Lowden and directed by Don Leaver, *Chain* (BBC, 1990) is another thriller serial dealing with the apparently unregulated excesses of modern commerce. It features an odd-couple alliance between a young and fashionable Serious Fraud Officer (played by Peter Capaldi) and a Senior Crown Prosecutor (played by Robert Pugh), a middle-aged, suburban family man. The pair investigate an extensive financial and commercial fraud which has its roots both in England and on the Continent. The programme is set in an unnamed city on the South Coast. Its depiction of a Docklands-like waterside development contributes to its sense of contemporaneity, as does its focus on international fraud, given the preparations of companies and trading organisations for the opening of European trade frontiers in 1992.

*Chain* dovetails its anxiety at the enlarged scope for international crime with more specifically national concerns. The first episode features an industrial dispute at a local factory, and includes highly realistic scenes of violence. The imagery of a divided society is emphasised. The Prosecutor's wife laments both the escalation of commercial property development and the fact that the wealthy home-owners in the suburb in which she lives do little to help out their less well-to-do neighbours in a dilapidated council estate. 'Dallas has left the TV screen,' she says to her husband, noting the rash of BMWs in the neighbourhood. In terms of characterisation and plotting, *Chain* is an

unremarkable thriller. Its apprehensions, however – to do with social division in Britain and fraudulent activity in the expanding arena of international commerce – connect some of the dominant motifs of other thrillers of the period. <sup>^</sup>

### ***Children of the North* (1991)**

Adapted by John Hale from the novels by M.S. Power and directed by David Drury, *Children of the North* (BBC, 1991) addresses the separate communities embodied by the IRA, the RUC and the British Army. ‘Extraordinary, isn’t it?’ says a British official towards the serial’s conclusion. “This whole business orchestrated by fewer than 300 people.’ [Episode 4] The programme suggests that the dynamics of power in Northern Ireland are negotiated by a few key players but involve a more extended community of Irish men and women and British soldiers and security operatives.

Members of the British Government or legislature do not form part of the programme’s central interest, although some scenes feature government representatives. Instead Whitehall remains as a nebulous influence on the action, which is located almost entirely in and around Belfast. Much of the drama is developed through exchanges between characters whose affiliations are continually under scrutiny; palpably so by other characters in the story, and thematically in that the narrative highlights degrees of commitment and compromise. Many scenes are conducted in neutral spaces: parks, country lanes and rooms in unprepossessing safe houses. Others take place in territory which is clearly demarcated: the bars and clubs of the Catholic community; the homes of various characters; the station offices of the RUC and the less public offices of the British security forces in Whitehall. There is, then, a play between the clear delineation of areas, whether of territory or local political influence, and the consolidation or erosion of the boundaries which they suggest.

This sense of slippage is figured not least in the character Arthur Apple (played by Michael Gough), a redundant British diplomat recruited as a money-launderer by the IRA. Apple expresses his new imbrication in Irish politics through resonant voiceovers quoting Irish poetry. The language of national identity, however, is most acutely



scrutinised in the secret meetings between the IRA chief Reilly (played by John Kavanagh) and the RUC Intelligence officer Axton (played by Tony Doyle). The narrative proposes that the pair are defined by their similarities as Irishmen impinged on by the British as much as by their differences as law enforcer and lawbreaker, or as Protestant and Catholic. 'You and Reilly are poles apart,' a Colonel from MI6 observes to Axton. 'Reilly and I live here. [Pause] With respect,' Axton replies. 'You are the outsiders.' [Episode 3] Certainly the two Irishmen operate in similar manners, capable of both delicate nuance and the organisation of decisive violence. The viewer is invited to recognise a similarity between them in their final encounter, in Axton's car, when the RUC man gives Reilly a book belonging to a maverick IRA operative. Axton himself will subsequently arrange and be present at her assassination, presumably tipped off by Reilly. The pair sit in the front seats of the car in a nondescript side alley. A muted trumpet plays the programme's theme music, inviting reflection on this last act of collaboration between strange colleagues working together across an historically insuperable divide. [Episode 4]

Terrorist activity is not represented as the sole domain of the IRA, or even the RUC. The British Army too, within the drama, arranges deaths (including those of its own men when this is deemed necessary). *Children of the North* is fictional, but through naturalistic scriptwriting, with a preponderance of vernacular dialogue, careful handling of *mise en scène* and well-judged casting, it develops a highly realistic effect. This is enhanced by speculation in the year before the programme's transmission that the British Army had previously operated a shoot-to-kill policy in the Province (the drama documentary *Shoot to Kill* had been transmitted in 1990); and that the British Government engaged in secret talks with Sinn Fein while publicly disavowing any contact with the political wing of the IRA.

The further implication of the drama, moreover, is that the British Army would also organise the deaths of its own men if this was deemed necessary. This is the case, for instance, in the final episode when an Army assassin shoots a Colonel who has been kidnapped by the IRA, just as he is returned to the British; and in the same sequence the viewer discovers that a Captain has also been killed by a member of the British security forces. The programme's politically sensitive nature is borne out in the fact that it went

through a complete vetting procedure within the BBC, viewed by Colin Morris, the Controller of BBC Northern Ireland, Alan Yentob, Controller of BBC2 and Will Wyatt, Managing Director of BBC Television. Wyatt even sent the BBC governors review copies, a highly unusual procedure but one doubtless deemed necessary after the incidents over *Carrickmore* and *Real Lives: At the Edge of the Union*, factual programmes about events in Northern Ireland which ignited major controversies about the role of broadcasters with regard to the Province.<sup>21</sup> The planned transmission of the programme in February 1991 was postponed so that, as a drama focusing on British military and security operations, it would not be screened during the Gulf War. Predictable objections were made on its eventual transmission, as front -page headlines in *Today* ('Shoot-to-kill BBC Film Fury') and the *Sun* ('Beeb Drama Lets IRA Spout Propaganda') indicate.<sup>22</sup>

*Children of the North* is decidedly not pro-British, although it would be wrong to claim it as pro-Republican. If anything it develops along more liberal lines as a humanist narrative ultimately concerned with questions of moral responsibility, guilt and 'natural' justice – a matrix of concerns it shares with most thriller serials of the period. Michael Wearing's comment that 'This is the sort of drama which the BBC ought to be showing and ought to be proud of showing',<sup>23</sup> indicates a bullish defence of its engagement with sensitive issues, but the programme is studiously balanced, not developing a clear political agenda beyond its subtext that political violence breeds only further violence. To that extent it has, if anything, a pacifistic slant, although its development of sympathy for the IRA godfather Reilly indicates a refusal to present such distaste at the politics of the gun in over-simplistic terms.

The moral ambit of *Children of the North* is in part developed through a focus on crises of conscience experienced by certain of its characters. One of these is the assassin Barton (played by Derrick O'Connor), who is working for the British Army. One scene shows him in church, kneeling at a row of devotional candles. He is crying, and a silent flashback details the devastating explosion at a family house which he had

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<sup>21</sup> The controversies which ensued with regard to these projects is discussed on pp. 18-20.

<sup>22</sup> See Richard Brooks, 'Biting the rubber bullet', *The Observer*, 27 October 1991, 71.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Richard Brooks, 'Biting the rubber bullet'.

previously arranged. Barton is subsequently captured by the IRA and, blindfolded, meets Reilly. Their discussion takes an eschatological turn as Barton reveals that he is scared of meeting, at his death, the innocent people he has killed. He later obeys his British superiors and assassinates a Colonel in the British Army. He then throws himself from the parapet behind which he has been hiding, shooting himself in the mouth as he falls. This spectacularly decisive suicide has been prepared for by a number of scenes suggesting the character's growing revulsion at his actions, and invites the viewer to assess the moral dilemmas which his job entails.

This is a fairly orthodox turn, given that Barton is a trained hitman, but it is indicative of the programme's comparative depth that the assassin is not a shadowy functionary but a character accorded some psychological development. The ambivalent moral nature of political operations in the Province is further explored through another character's experience of the nearly-intolerable demands of duty. The British Army dispatches Major Nairn (played by John McGlynn) to Belfast in order that he might infiltrate the IRA. Nairn appears to some of the Republicans to be 'winnable', even though they recognise that he is potentially playing a double game. He is an independently-minded Scot who has no apparent respect for his English colleagues. His 'loyalty' is tested when he is instructed by the IRA to shoot one of his own men, a corporal who has been abducted and sits bound before him, begging for his life. Nairn shoots, and once he has left his new acquaintances, breaks down crying. The scene is presented as a moment of (harrowing) trauma for the character, caught in an impasse between ethically proper behaviour and the ruthless imperatives of his job. By the end of the programme, however, when Nairn crisply salutes a British civil servant, his basic affiliation is in no doubt.

Let us consider one other example, this time that of the IRA godfather, Reilly. In the final episode Reilly gives a private interview to a journalist with whom he is friendly, the implication being that this is some final reckoning. 'Maybe it's like going to confession,' he admits. 'I have to do it. For my soul's sake.' [Episode 4] When the interview is completed he refuses the journalist's offer that the tape be scrapped. 'It has to be done,' he says. 'We have to have political power.' [Episode 4] Although the interview itself is not shown within the narration, it seems that Reilly has endorsed the

idea of negotiation with the British, in contradiction to the views of powerful IRA colleagues. He is arrested and killed by IRA operatives almost as soon as the interview is completed, the victim of a shift of power within the organisation. His final gesture, however, is presented in terms which are as moral as they are political, as a decision to speak rather than remain silent. Ironically what is not finally allowable by the emerging IRA chieftains in the drama – the suggestion of IRA co-operation in a peace process – was to happen in actuality only a few years later, when the IRA participated in a ceasefire in August 1994.

As with *Die Kinder* the year before, *Children of the North* presents the operations of state agencies as an informing context for more dominant themes. Where the narratives of programmes like *The Detective*, *Edge of Darkness* and *A Very British Coup* seek to uncover the true nature of the Establishment, *Children of the North* is able to take the discourses of power established in the 1980s for granted and focus centrally on more abstract questions of moral responsibility.

### ***Natural Lies* (1992)**

Economic expansionism forms an anxiety-inducing context to many thriller narratives of the 1980s and early '90s. In *Natural Lies* (Lawson Productions/London Film Productions/BBC Television, 1992), written by David Pirie and directed by Ben Bolt, sharp business practices on the part of the food industry are a component of the narrative's central threat. The protagonist Andrew Fell (played by Bob Peck) is an advertising executive working on the promotion of a brand named 'Burger Choice', when an ex-lover dies. She has been conducting research on BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, known as 'mad cow disease'), and Fell eventually discovers that the food company has concealed a connection between the disease and her death.

*Natural Lies* is a paranoia thriller which takes a pessimistic view of the official statements of both the Government and the food industry about the safety of British meat products. When BSE came to public attention in 1990 it was quickly claimed that the situation was comprehensively monitored and firmly under control, and that there

was no threat to humans from British meat products. A celebrated photograph of the Agriculture Minister, John Gummer, shows him feeding his four-year-old daughter a burger in a public display of confidence in British beef. Two years later, shortly before transmission of *Natural Lies*, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food complained to the BBC that the programme's scientific advisors took 'a very different view' of the threat posed to humans by BSE than the Government's own experts.<sup>24</sup> The drama's implications are that BSE is indeed fatal to humans and that its contaminating effect is not properly controlled by an industry more concerned with profit margins than with public health. Put in such bald terms this does appear a fairly outlandish proposition. Whatever else the food industry might be guilty of in terms of the mistreatment of animals and the use of chemicals in food preparation, it is not in its best interest to have to explain away the death of anybody who happened to eat a contaminated piece of beef. The important factor, however, is not whether the programme's implications are entirely justified, but that they are able to sustain a serious contemporary drama in the first place. The narrative of *Natural Lies* suggests that far from operating as a natural, organic process, the food chain is subject to ethical malpractice and commercial greed, both of which are treated in the programme as markedly contemporary phenomena. The serial's context of unscrupulous commercial profiteering and its depiction of the vicious and secretive operations of a powerful industry connect with themes and strategies developed in the thriller serials previously examined in this chapter. In common with many of these programmes *Natural Lies* is notably sceptical with regard to contemporary developments in the corporate sphere.

The programmes mentioned above form the outlines of a genre. It is now possible to draw some interim conclusions in order to inform the discussion in subsequent chapters of the most significant thriller serials of the period. The following comments, then, are suggestive rather than final, and where I mention programmes that are yet to be

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<sup>24</sup> See Richard Brooks, 'BBC play altered in row over "mad cow" disease', *The Observer*, 24 May 1992, 4. The BBC subsequently claimed that the alterations made to the programme were not in response to pressure from the Ministry.

examined in detail, it is in order to build connections which will bear fuller analysis later in this study.

What shared elements and dominating procedures connect these programmes generically? On the most obvious level, they are all narrative-based, telling stories which come to a conclusion, even though in places the conclusion is not 'final' and definitive; and they all feature characters who are developed to varying degrees in some psychological depth. They are broadly realist, then, depending upon the assumption that the events and characters they present are grounded in plausibility.<sup>25</sup> According to their inflection as thrillers, however, their narratives propose that the protagonists are subject to a threat of some kind. This threat, or mystery, is usually located in the actual, contemporary world of the viewer.

Nearly all the programmes considered in this study are contemporary in their settings. The exceptions – *Never Come Back* and, in parts, *The Singing Detective*, for example – connect with the genre on account of certain aspects of stylistic and thematic organisation. Most of the serials are set in contemporary Britain or Ireland, and their geographical and cultural specificity is often stressed. As I shall discuss later, while *A Very British Coup* could only take place in London, the seat of government, the northern background of its protagonist Harry Perkins, a steelworker from Sheffield who becomes Prime Minister, is central to the programme's juxtaposition of north and south, and of working class and ruling class experience. Likewise *Edge of Darkness* makes much of the protagonist's northern roots: Ronald Craven is a detective in the West Yorkshire police force and his working methods are significantly different to those of London's Metropolitan Police or the London-based civil servants reporting to the Government.

To take less celebrated examples: it is important to both narrative and character development that the events of *Chain* take place in a city on the south coast of England undergoing commercial redevelopment. The particularities of lifestyle for a black journalist living in central London are important to *Blood Rights*; those of a provincial lower-middle-class environment (the suburbs of Oxford) are defining for the black protagonist of *The Real Eddie English*. On the other hand some thriller serials are partly

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<sup>25</sup> For a fuller discussion regarding the plausibility in thriller serials of the period, see pp. 362-4.

set outside the British Isles. In *Die Kinder*, for instance, Sidonie Reiger seeks her kidnapped children in Germany just after reunification. Many of the events depicted in *Traffik* take place in Germany and Pakistan. In both instances, however, the enlarged geographical scope allows the development of themes which relate to changing circumstances of life in Britain.

Setting is relevant and not merely incidental: but this is a claim that would be made for many forms of drama. In a number of thriller serials, however, there is a quite drastic polarisation of setting, ranging, for instance, from government offices to very ordinary urban streets in *Edge of Darkness*, *Blood Rights* and *A Very British Coup*; from a cabinet minister's house and a German businessman's mansion, to the inner city flats and public toilets that are the haunts of heroin addicts in *Traffik*; and from the country retreat of the Home Secretary in *The Detective* to the modest bedroom of the under-aged prostitute with whom he has had sex.

Contemporaneity, then, does not provide a 'neutral' context, the happenstance of a present-day setting. There is instead the sharper sense of a wide sweep across contemporary society, a representation of differing 'local' cultures and therefore of differing circumstances applying to the people implicated in those cultures. In many cases there is a clear dramatic juxtaposition of north with south, rich with poor, powerful with impoverished, comfortable with traumatised. The Britain of these dramas is one of marked cultural polarities.

There is a similar polarisation in terms of characters' experiences. This is the case in two senses. Firstly, the protagonist often experiences a range of states, involving fear, anxiety and occasionally terror. In order for this to be most effective, the protagonist is usually first shown in a state of relative comfort, a temporary – even illusory – period of relative tranquility before s/he is propelled into the thriller world. More interesting, however, are the thrillers' patterns of revelation. The threat which the protagonists experience is generally derived from the growing autonomy of the state or the increasing vigour and independence of the commercial sector or, in some cases, a powerful combination of the two. The second form of polarisation of experiences therefore contrasts the anguish and trauma of the protagonists with the cool, empowered mode of various government agents and entrepreneurs.

The thriller functions of these serials are not 'mechanical' in that they simply replicate strategies of mystery and suspense for their own sake. They are intrinsically connected to the content of the programmes, which is itself often political in its implications. The dramas address momentous public issues under debate at their respective times of transmission. *Shoot to Kill* and *Children of the North* explore the relationship between the British security forces and terrorist organisations in Northern Ireland and mainland Britain. *Die Kinder* explores possible connections between revolutionary activity of the 1960s and latter-day European instability. *Chain*, *Thin Air*, *The Real Eddy English* and *Natural Lies* all feature conflicts between powerful business organisations (in some cases multinational corporations) and individuals and local institutions, against a backdrop of 1980s economic expansionism. They address the possible effects of unfettered commercial activities on individuals and local communities. *Prime Suspect* foregrounds malpractice in the police force, as does the series *Between the Lines*, while the series *Blind Justice* examines breakdowns in the legal system. *Traffik* examines global connections between government policy, western business practices and drug addiction. *Edge of Darkness* and *A Very British Coup* explore ramifications of military and industrial nuclear capacity, as does the film *Defence of the Realm*.

These are only a few examples and their subject matter connects them with a large number of programmes, not all of them thrillers, made during this period. Obviously there are overlapping areas of interest, but one theme emerges as perhaps the most important. Nearly all the programmes referred to above explore the growth of the British hidden establishment, with explicit reference to the covert and unlawful operations of government bodies, or of individuals working directly to the Government. This is consolidated throughout the 1980s as one of the major themes of drama of the period: an overwhelming concern with the corrupt and complacent secret state.

The centrality of this theme can hardly be overstated. Without it there would be no *Edge of Darkness*, *A Very British Coup*, *The Detective*, *GBH*, *Bird of Prey*, *Die Kinder*, *Never Come Back* and *Dead Head*, a list which includes some of the most distinguished drama of the period. The *Prime Suspect* dramas along with serials like



*Brond*, *Children of the North*, *The Real Eddy English* and *Thin Air* would be less interesting without their evocation of the hidden power of the Establishment. The theme is not only borne out in serials but in British films including *Defence of the Realm*, *The Whistleblower* and *Hidden Agenda*, and single dramas including *1996*, *In the Secret State* and *Frankie and Johnny*.

Implicit in the depiction of a hidden establishment is the idea that it polices the nation (and indeed the nation's policemen) in increasingly sophisticated ways. Electronic technology underwent rapid development during the 1980s, and this is figured in thriller serials through a fascination with the mechanics of surveillance, with regard to modern bugging devices like fibre optic lenses, high-powered microphones and telephoto camera lenses. Let us look again at *The Detective* by way of example. Crocker is an honest copper who, in pursuing what he sees as the course of justice, becomes himself the target of surveillance. He discovers that his phone is tapped, his mail examined and that he is being followed. The motif of surveillance is figured in certain shots and edits: the use of a long shot of a colleague's house as if from a spy camera in a top-storey bedroom across the street; or a rapid movement from long-shot to mid-shot, showing a rendezvous on Wimbledon Common, which is formed of three jump-cuts, each tighter in focus, creating a photographing effect. The shooting style replicates the activity it is representing.

Thriller serials also explore the implications of new methods of information-processing. The computer becomes a familiar prop in drama of the period, an adjunct to both commercial and policing activity (as in, say, *The Price*, *A Very British Coup* and *In the Secret State*), and the receptacle of valuable information which can be accessed and manipulated (as in *Bird of Prey*, *Edge of Darkness* and *Final Run*). Many thriller serials express unease at the potential application of such technology. In some cases this is so even where the protagonist is a computer expert, thus able, notionally, to hold sway over the machine rather than become its victim. In the 1982 serial *Bird of Prey*, for instance (proclaimed by the BBC as 'A thriller for the electronic age'<sup>26</sup>), the central character, Henry Jay, is a computer expert whose credentials are underscored by his job as Principal Scientific Officer for the Department of Commercial Development. His

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<sup>26</sup> BBC press release, collated on BFI *Bird of Prey* microfiche.

first action on leaving his job is to purchase a computer and modem which enables him to make further investigations into a mysterious case. The linkage of new technology with nefarious criminal activity is made explicit when a pair of detectives are killed in his flat while he is away. When he returns to discover their bodies, the lighting – a greenish tint motivated by the computer's luminous green screen – evokes an atmosphere of unnatural strangeness.

Computers are especially ubiquitous in *A Very British Coup*, on the desks of stock market traders, newspaper journalists and MI5 spooks, and they are obviously implied in the computer-generated graphs which depict the response of the markets to the election of a Labour Government. The Prime Minister, Harry Perkins, asks his press secretary to check a set of computer-derived documents to see whether information has been removed. The expert response is that they have indeed been tampered with. In *Final Run* the central character, Danny McDonnell, is a banker and a computer expert. McDonnell has funded the IRA through the illegal computer-enabled transfer of monies, a skill which accounts for his renewed criminal activity in the course of the programme. Financial embezzlement and electronic expertise are again linked.

Computer technology is the source of a more recondite interest in the thriller serial *The One Game* (Central, 1988), written by John Brownjohn and directed by Mike Vardy, whose central characters are Nick Thorne (played by Stephen Dillon), the millionaire owner of a games company, and Magnus (played by Patrick Malahide), a former business partner he has jettisoned. Through his ingenuity with computers Magnus arranges various tests and 'games' in which Thorne must participate, since he discovers that his ex-wife has been kidnapped and that £2.1 million has disappeared from his company's account. Central's press information described the programme's pivotal *duel* as a 'reality game' but the inference to the burgeoning world of virtual reality is not entirely appropriate. The dynamic of the narrative concerns actual competition, depicted as a neo-medieval duel between a cynical entrepreneur and his mystical new-age antagonist, where computer technology is presented as an apparatus open to insidious subversion.

In all these programmes information technology is seen as a partially closed field, accessible only to specialists. This is disturbing on two counts. On the one hand it

allows refined methods of surveillance through the gathering and manipulation of often highly personal information. On the other it leaves the system vulnerable to corrupt infiltration, providing a new field of operation for criminals and fraudsters.

Surveillance is part of the information-gathering activity of the Establishment. Information is a disputed currency during the period, as is evidenced in the increased attention which thriller serials pay to the electronic media, which itself underwent rapid development in the 1980s. There are, to put it simply, a striking number of scenes featuring radio and television news programmes. The recourse to news bulletins itself becomes a convention (much like the use of rapidly turning calendar leaves to signal the passing of time in less recent films), and has three functions. The first is narrational. Scenes in which characters watch or listen to the news retail events in the world of the drama, providing information which is otherwise not shown. At times this is a means of showing the characters themselves learning information relevant to their own quest, as when, in *Edge of Darkness*, Craven hears on the radio of the takeover of a British company by an American organisation.

Their second function is thematic, where the information presented in news or current affairs programmes gives shape to issues developed throughout the drama. News programmes are a part of a nation's public discourse, but the actions and opinions which they report can challenge mainstream currents of opinion. This is the case in *The Detective*, for instance, when the newscaster reports that the General Secretary of the Association of Energy Workers:

alleged that the Government was determined to turn Britain into a police state, and it was time for the Labour movement to unite in resisting the challenge. He said that the industrial confrontation of the past few months had not been sought by the unions. Workers had been deliberately provoked by the intransigent attitude of managements, urged on by the most reactionary government this century.  
[Episode 3]

As the newscaster reads this report, the picture on the screen behind him shows images of police in riot gear and shields, on horseback, in confrontation with a group of demonstrators. As the report ends, the image freezes on a shot of a policeman,

truncheon raised, about to beat one of the striking workers. The footage clearly comes from one of the actual encounters between police and striking workers of the early-1980s, and in any case readily evokes memories of disputes such as the one at Orgreave, which occasioned widespread accusations of police aggression. As Ruth Baumgarten notes, 'Images like these provide the fictional policemen's debates about the neutrality of the police force with a power far exceeding crime fiction's usual mechanisms of audience involvement.'<sup>27</sup> Indeed as one of the policemen himself says at the beginning of *The Detective*, it seems that the police are being used as a 'political force' rather than a 'police force'. [Episode 1] The rhetoric of the union leader, moreover, is reminiscent of that of Arthur Scargill, General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, whose bitter conflict with the Government provides another historical reference point for the *The Detective*'s fictionalised industrial dispute.

This points to the third function of news bulletins in TV thriller serials: they contribute to the programme's realist-effect. This is marked in *Edge of Darkness*, where Craven watches 'actual' news bulletins read by the well-known newscaster Kenneth Kendall, as well as an interview between Robin Day and Margaret Thatcher. In *Traffik* the programme's fictional politician, Jack Lithgow, is interviewed on a current affairs programme by the actual broadcaster Peter Snow, and much of the action of the first part of the programme takes place in a television studio reporting the general election which sees the return of a Labour government. Even completely fictionalised bulletins trade on this kind of realism. To take *The Detective* as an example again: Crocker watches news reports on television, naturally enough, to stay in touch with current events. This constitutes an 'ordinary' part of his evening routine. Meanwhile the programme that he watches itself partakes of the assumed objectivity of news coverage and the national importance of the events reported. Thus the news flashes – urgent items pertaining to industrial action at an electronics plant – instantly validate the importance and plausibility of these events, in which the character himself is tangentially involved.

If this seems daring, one should remember that there was no drama in the period which focused *directly* on racial or industrial dispute, or which centrally featured the

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<sup>27</sup> Ruth Baumgarten, 'Straight and Narrow', *The Listener*, 2 May 1985, 29.

experiences of a radicalised working class community, as in the tradition of *The Big Flame* (BBC, 1969) and *Days of Hope* (BBC, 1975). Indeed Trevor Griffiths' experience in 1971 sounded an ominous early warning note. Griffiths' play *Such Impossibilities*, commissioned for the BBC series *The Edwardians*, was rejected on the grounds that it exceeded budgetary constraints. Griffiths suspects on the contrary a failure of political will on the part of the BBC, given that the play was about Tom Mann and his successful leadership of the Liverpool dock strike in 1911. The episode does suggest the BBC's sensitivity to 'oppositional' drama long before the Thatcher Government took office.<sup>28</sup> It is a defining characteristic of 1980s thriller serials, on the other hand, that their exploration of political resonance is rooted not in the experiences of working class characters but those of their largely professional, middle-class protagonists.

As with any form of thriller, the positioning of the protagonist is of prime importance. A distinctive set of characters is presented in thriller serials of the period. There are the entrepreneurs and corporate representatives, characters who are materialistic, cynical and self-seeking. Mrs Holly in *The Real Eddy English*, David Marchwint in *The Detective*, Grogan and Bennett in *Edge of Darkness* and Hellier in *Thin Air* are all examples. There are the members of the governing institutions: the MPs, civil servants and security operatives who oil the machinery of the state. Consider Sir Percy Browne in *A Very British Coup*, Grenville Barker in *Blood Rights*, Major Naughton in *The Detective*, Bridgnorth in *Bird of Prey* and Crombie in *Die Kinder*, all of whom operate in secretive and unscrupulous ways. The characters in both groups are not characterised in great psychological depth and the viewer is not invited to take up their subject-positions. They are instead 'villainous' to varying degrees, implicated in the dramas' networks of anxiety and threat. That said, there are no lone, master criminals as in a number of crime and thriller fictions of previous years. Criminality is more amorphous and ill-defined in British thriller serials and is often connected to the operations of the nation's executive.

The main focus in these programmes, of course, is on the protagonists. Where the

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<sup>28</sup> See Edward Braun, 'Introduction', in Trevor Griffiths, *Collected Plays for Television* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 2-4.

entrepreneurs and government representatives have a more or less functional presence, their personalities and motivations remaining unchanged throughout the drama, the protagonists frequently undergo the most emphatic changes of circumstance and allegiance. They often embark on a quest which has a clearly emotional dimension. Sidonie in *Die Kinder*, for instance, searches for her children; Lithgow in *Traffik* searches for his daughter; Carr in *The Price* searches for his wife and step-daughter. The quest often necessitates the penetration of secretive organisations or institutions, as in *Edge of Darkness*, *The Real Eddy English* and *Thin Air*. The protagonist often becomes an outcast, with his/her job and domestic happiness at stake; or, worse, a fugitive, with his/her life in danger. The quest thus involves the establishment of information or circumstances which will restore the protagonist's credibility or facilitate an escape from his/her persecutors. Whether the protagonist is in danger of losing her job, as in *Prime Suspect*, her children as in *Die Kinder*, or her life, as in *Thin Air*, the recurring trope in 1980s and early-'90s thriller serials is one of traumatised isolation, whereby the protagonists are severed from people, places and circumstances which previously structured their lives.

Isolation is more than merely an apartness from one's colleagues. It involves a sense of being under scrutiny and suspicion, and perhaps a sense of victimisation. It also underscores differences between the 'political' understandings of the protagonists and their opponents. This often entails a shift on the part of the protagonist from one affiliation to another, to the point where their initial allegiance to class or community breaks down, as is the case in *Bird of Prey*, *The Detective* and *Edge of Darkness*. Even in dramas where the protagonist does not notably change his/her allegiance, the narrative process necessitates a changed understanding of the world in which s/he operates. This is so in *The Real Eddy English*, *Never Come Back*, *Die Kinder* and *GBH*, for instance. The society which these dramas depict is shown, through the experiences of the protagonists, to be more threatening and corrupt than initially seemed the case at the beginning of the narrative. A recurring tendency in British thriller serials is thus to transform, during the course of the narrative, the terms of social and political discourse. This transformation is experienced 'for real' by the protagonists, whereby it becomes clear that there is no clear distinction to be made between a 'political' and a

'moral' construction of social life.

The programmes surveyed in this chapter share, to varying degrees, a number of dominating <sup>strategies</sup> procedures. Their contemporaneity is important, for there is a sense that they are forged in the tensions of their age and catch the country at a moment of vivid transition. Their patterns of mystery and threat often centre on the activities of the secret state, or of agencies invested with civic or commercial power. Their protagonists often become increasingly isolated during the course of the drama, with inevitable psychological consequences. This depiction of private trauma, however, is matched by an insistence on the public and political nature of their narratives. A clear moral inflection is evident in more than a few of these dramas.

The dominance of the motif of the secret state should not lead to the conclusion that 'Thatcher's thrillers' describes only the paranoia and conspiracy serials. By no means all the serials discussed in this chapter share this theme. A number of overlapping *tendencies* can be observed, however. One of the most important of these is the evocation of 'culture shifts'. *The Detective*, *The Real Eddy English* and *The Fear*, for instance – serials which at first sight do not appear to be closely related – all suggest a strong sense of an emergent social development. There is a *newness* to the representation and an implication that older assumptions and practices are no longer valid within contemporary society. Each of the programmes examined in this chapter reveals points of tension between the 'old' and 'new' England. They dramatise a nation at a point of troubling cultural transition. This partly accounts for the predominance of the thriller mode during Mrs Thatcher's era. As I shall discuss in the final chapter, the thriller is an especially appropriate form for the narrativisation of conflict and change.

Not all the programmes studied in these pages are 'thrillerish' to the same degree, which is why I prefer to see thriller serials as a 'flexible' genre.<sup>29</sup> The important point, however, is that there is a strikingly frequent recourse to thriller strategies in dramas which might also be structured according to other generic models. Thus *The Fear* is in part a gangster drama, *Final Run* a psychological drama and *Blood Rights* a private eye drama. Many of their effects also derive from the patterns and strategies of the thriller. I have paid less attention in this chapter to filmic and narrational thriller devices in order

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<sup>29</sup> See p. 95.

to concentrate more fully on thematic connections and developments. In the chapters which follow I shall relate these two fields – aesthetics and content – more closely. Many of the general tendencies observed above are configured in especially effective ways in the more significant dramas of the period.



## 6 The defining 1980s political thriller: *Edge of Darkness* (1985)<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it, the phenomenal success of *Edge of Darkness* might have been difficult to predict. A prolonged focus on a personal tragedy, a sinuously complex storyline and a persistent atmosphere of gloom and foreboding might not have seemed the most obvious tools with which to rivet the viewer's attention. But *Edge of Darkness* was a landmark. Transmitted halfway through the 1980s and halfway through the premiership of Margaret Thatcher, it captured the spirit of its age but exceeded the conventions of drama of its time.

*Edge of Darkness* was generally described as a thriller, but this hardly begins to explain the programme's nature. It is generically mixed, and its effect lies partly in its volatility, flickering between the realistic and the improbable. It challenges expectations attaching to the thriller form, often transcending the limits of the genre. Its tone is variously serious, wry and comic, sometimes all at once. In part it is elegiac, an atmosphere supported by the plaintive music of Michael Kamen and Eric Clapton. Elsewhere it contains action sequences that reminded some critics of James Bond films. Its locations, variously shabby and salubrious, include the streets of Shepherd's Bush, committee rooms in the House of Commons, the interior of a disused mine and the Scottish countryside.<sup>2</sup> It has an unorthodox tenderness, gently exploring the depth of

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an altered version of my essay, '*Edge of Darkness* (Troy Kennedy Martin)', in George Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 103-118. It is reproduced here with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

<sup>2</sup> The programme's writer, Troy Kennedy Martin, notes that the Scottish settings were intended as a homage to John Buchan, the writer of the Richard Hannay adventures. See Troy Kennedy Martin, *Edge of Darkness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 156n.

its protagonist's grief. At the same time it is insistently unsentimental. Central to its effect is the way it connects the experiences of its protagonist with developments in the political sphere. It is precise in its attention to small contemporary details but it addresses nothing less than the destruction of the planet. In such an intensely modern drama, it is perhaps unsurprising to find a further shift at the end of the serial. The programme's conclusion represents a valiant effort to throw a shaft of optimism over a resoundingly pessimistic narrative.

'*Edge of Darkness* is a masterpiece', wrote Sean Day-Lewis in the *Daily Telegraph*. 'It is one of those very rare television creations so rich in form and content that the spectator wishes there was some way of prolonging it indefinitely.'<sup>3</sup> The critics were largely in agreement. Response to the programme in the press centred on two areas: the grand scale of its political themes, addressing nuclear technology and government secrecy; and the emotional depth of Bob Peck's performance as the central character Ronald Craven. Indeed, in Craven *Edge of Darkness* had one of the iconic figures of 1980s television drama: alienated, haunted, and driven by a search for truth in a disturbing world. 'What begins as a small provincial tragedy ends up encompassing issues of global and cosmic significance,' said the programme's author, Troy Kennedy Martin,<sup>4</sup> and viewers responded to such epic aspirations.

In December 1985, ten days after the last of six episodes was transmitted on BBC2, *Edge of Darkness* was repeated on BBC1 in three parts on consecutive nights: an unprecedented achievement for a drama serial.<sup>5</sup> This latter showing gained an audience of roughly eight million viewers for each night: double the average for the showing on BBC2. Even accounting for the fact that some viewers may have watched the programme twice, the aggregate of viewers was impressive for a serial which had an avowedly political theme and a social issues content.

With £400,000 of American money from Lionheart Television International, a significant part of the £2 million the programme cost, *Edge of Darkness* demonstrated

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<sup>3</sup> Sean Day Lewis, 'Mystery too good to solve', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 1985, 17.

<sup>4</sup> 'BBC thriller about power struggles in the nuclear industry', *Television Today*, 24 October 1985, 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Edge of Darkness* was transmitted in six weekly episodes on BBC2 between 4 November and 9 December 1985. It was repeated in three episodes on consecutive nights on BBC1, 19-21 December 1985.

that transatlantic co-production need not lead to bland and conformist drama. The impact the programme made within the British television industry was signalled when it received six BAFTA awards for 1985,<sup>6</sup> and it subsequently sold to nineteen countries abroad. Its success rejuvenated the reputation of Kennedy Martin, who was invited to give the MacTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival the following year.

Not that Kennedy Martin had slipped entirely from view. His work in establishing the newly realistic police series *Z Cars* in 1962 marked him as one of the pioneers of television drama in the 1960s. He later moved further towards the mainstream, writing the films *The Italian Job* (1969) and *Kelly's Heroes* (1970) and episodes of the television series *The Sweeney* (1975-78), which mixed tough action with amusing and sardonic dialogue. His style is not easily sketched, however. 'There is a mystical dimension to Troy's imagination. His instincts are visual and non-naturalistic,'<sup>7</sup> observed Michael Wearing, the producer of *Edge of Darkness*, and although the programme belongs to a realist tradition, Kennedy Martin's renowned antipathy to naturalism helps account for its additional poetic qualities.<sup>8</sup> In the following pages I shall address this powerful combination of elements and explore the effects it generates in one of the most remarkable political dramas ever transmitted on British television.

In common with most drama on television *Edge of Darkness* is emphatically narrative-based. Its central character, Ronald Craven (played by Bob Peck), is a detective in the West Yorkshire police force. Craven collects his daughter, Emma (played by Joanne Whalley), from a political meeting she is chairing at the college where she studies. On returning to their house in the country, Emma is shot by a gunman.

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<sup>6</sup> These were presented for Best Drama Series, Best Actor (Bob Peck), Best Music (Eric Clapton with Michael Kamen), Best Photography (Andrew Dunn), Best Editor (Andrew Fisher and others), and Best Sound (Dickie Bird and others).

<sup>7</sup> John Lytle, 'Out on the edge', *City Limits*, 1 November 1985, 17.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Troy Kennedy Martin, 'Nats Go Home', *Encore*, v11, n2 (March-April 1964), 21-33; and Kennedy Martin, 'Up the Junction and After', *Contrast*, v4, n5/6 (spring 1966). For a brief discussion of Michael Wearing's importance with regard to drama of the period, see p. 67.

This is the plot-spring for an intensive focus on Craven's grief and his subsequent overriding desire to 'solve' the murder. It provides a vivid immediate mystery: who shot Emma? Craven's colleagues in the West Yorkshire Police quickly conclude that the gunman must have been after Craven himself, perhaps as a revenge killing for his earlier police work in Northern Ireland. The whodunit aspect of the shooting is not initially paramount, however. Instead the narrative details Craven's lonely grieving for his daughter (the viewer learns in a flashback that his wife died some ten years earlier), to a remarkably empathic extent. Craven is indisputably the central focus here, but it is characteristic of the programme to find counterpoints to his isolation. This is partly achieved by an immediate sense of personality even in characters who only appear in a single scene. Craven has to retrieve Emma's belongings from her Teacher Training College, for instance. The caretaker who opens her locker for him complains about the complaints he gets: "I open too late, the courts are not swept, the showers are cold ...". There is a distinct trace of comic observation.

The grieving Craven undertakes his own inquiry into Emma's murder, travelling to London. He is partly aided in his endeavours by Pendleton and Harcourt (played, respectively, by Charles Kay and Ian McNeice), an enigmatic pair of civil servants working to the Cabinet Office; and Darius Jedburgh (played by Joe Don Baker), an unconventional CIA operative and expert on nuclear technology. His investigations, it seems, are of considerable interest to both Whitehall and Washington. The characterisations are distinctive, as is the dialogue. Pendleton, for instance, is studiously urbane and is described to Craven as a man who 'drives a green Mercedes, and parks in other people's places'. Jedburgh, a larger than life Texan, drives a white Rolls Royce and wears a stetson, with the explanation, 'Now that Reagan's in the White House we get to keep a higher profile'.

If characters are idiosyncratic, so are settings and situations. In Episode 2, for instance, Craven enters a telephone box on Battersea Bridge. The camera views him through the window, on which is scrawled 'DEATH OR BONGO'. The telephone is broken, much to Craven's annoyance. Again there is a muted comic tone. It is a small and unimportant moment, but it contributes to the accumulating difficulties Craven is facing.

Up to this stage the programme appears to be a detective drama with a developed focus on its protagonist: Craven is a shrewd and experienced member of the CID and the first half of the serial situates him in the context of routine police work. The programme's opening scene (after the credit sequence) shows him in a meeting with a trade union official discussing an investigation into vote-rigging. Even here, however, Craven's 'apartness' is stressed. He agrees to let the enquiry lie fallow during the political-conference season, but only after a long silence and much prompting from his Assistant Chief Constable (played by John Woodvine). He is, it seems, a scrupulous but ultimately pragmatic policeman. He relents in this scene, which provides a point of departure for the drama: in later scenes he will prove more decisively inflexible. There is little apparent change of mode after Emma's murder, in that he is still engaged in the detective's business of searching for clues. As Craven moves further into the narrative, however, the programme's identity shifts. The sardonic tone remains. 'We've no intention of putting you in the picture,' Harcourt tells Craven. 'That's what we're paid for.' But Craven makes headway and enters more explicitly political territory. He discovers that Emma had led an expedition into Northmoor, an underground facility for the storage of low-grade nuclear waste, in her capacity as a member of the ecological movement GAIA.

By this stage, as with many effective thrillers, the initial mystery has been replaced by one which is even more unsettling. Craven discovers the identity of the gunman – as suspected, a former adversary in Ireland – but now believes that Emma's murder was intended. Was she killed as a result of the break-in? And why? What is the mystery of Northmoor? The close attentions of the functionaries of the Government make it clear to the viewer that the solution has a hidden political dimension. Craven comes to suspect, as Emma had, that the plant is actually being used for the reprocessing of plutonium. Meanwhile an American company – a contender for contracts to develop President Reagan's Star Wars programme – is engaged in a takeover bid for the company which owns Northmoor.

Craven and Jedburgh break into Northmoor and discover that it does indeed contain a 'hot cell' for the reprocessing of plutonium. Despite the attentions of security staff, culminating in a gun battle, they manage to escape, now badly irradiated. Jedburgh

takes the plutonium with him and subsequently produces it at a NATO weapons conference, at which the delegates flee the hall. Jedburgh escapes and arms the plutonium so that it is capable of causing a nuclear explosion: the maverick has become a threat to life, and the programme brings the potential military application of nuclear material to the forefront.

Craven, now dying of radiation poisoning, tracks Jedburgh down to a Scottish guest house, where the latter is shot during a raid by security forces, including CIA operatives, despatched by the Government. The programme ends with Craven, alone on a hillside, watching security personnel recovering the stolen plutonium from a loch. The viewer has meanwhile discovered that members of the British government had authorised the reprocessing as part of an experimental military programme, hiding the fact not just from Britain's American allies but even from fellow members of the Government.

There are two shoot-outs, then, which contribute to the partial identity of *Edge of Darkness* as an action drama, with its polarised forces of good and evil, gun-fights and narrow escapes. Certainly the assailants in these encounters are shadowily defined and impersonalised, very much in line with the expendable villains of conventional action dramas, and the slick directorial style of these scenes undoubtedly owes much to director Martin Campbell's work on a number of other action series, including *Shoestring* (1979-80), *The Professionals* (1977-80, 82-91) and *Bergerac* (1981-91). There are other simplifying tendencies. Bennett and Grogan, for instance, the British and American nuclear entrepreneurs, are pictured amid the trappings of wealth and power, and spend much of the programme exchanging veiled and secretive looks in accordance with their function as unequivocally the villains of the piece.

These strategies accord with the thriller and action inflections of *Edge of Darkness*, but they also testify to the programme's weighted political agenda. It is about nuclear technology and its devastating military implications; it touches on the uneasy 'special relationship' which developed between the Thatcher and Reagan administrations; and it makes connections between government secrecy and the international activities of the military-industrial private sector. As already noted, a number of dramas of the period displayed similar anxieties. Writing in *Sight and Sound* in 1988 Julian Petley noted that

'the last few years have seen a remarkable number of works which, in their various ways, have reflected doubts about the central institutions of the British state'.<sup>9</sup> *Edge of Darkness* is the key text in this respect, consolidating in 1985 a disturbing set of themes to do with abuses of government responsibility. The serial dramatises an apparent trend towards government secrecy and the centralisation of power in the 1980s. Ewing and Gearty argue that the threat to civil liberties offered by succeeding Thatcher administrations could hardly be overstated, and had indeed reached a 'state of crisis'.<sup>10</sup> *Edge of Darkness*, with its paranoiac tone and reference to the secretive operations of the state, addresses this context.

'What the serial does suggest,' said producer Michael Wearing, 'is that the nuclear state is a state-within-a-state, and has grown up without public debate or democratic control.'<sup>11</sup> As the serial progresses, the nuclear theme becomes more predominant, and this too relates to widespread social concern. Mrs Thatcher's first Conservative Government made a wholehearted commitment to the 'deterrent' defence argument, purchasing the costly American Trident system and agreeing that American Cruise missiles could be housed in England. Meanwhile East-West detente seemed to be breaking down and peace movements grew all over Europe. At its healthiest in 1984 the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament had a membership of 110,000. Connections between defence and the nuclear industry were given a new twist on 23 March 1983, when President Reagan gave his 'Star Wars' speech outlining his Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). It was possible, Reagan argued, to develop a system of high-intensity lasers powered by nuclear energy and operated from space. This caused consternation, not least among America's allies in the West. By any reckoning SDI would upset the delicate system of checks and balances upon which defence policies had been founded and open up the unquantifiable horror of militarising space.

Nuclear proliferation became a dominant issue during the 1980s. Again, a number of television dramas bore out the extent of public concern, addressing the implications of nuclear technology. Kennedy Martin himself adapted Angus Wilson's nuclear war

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<sup>9</sup> Julian Petley, 'A Very British Coup', *Sight and Sound*, v57, n2 (spring 1988), 95.

<sup>10</sup> K.D. Ewing and C.A. Gearty, *Freedom Under Thatcher: Civil Liberties in Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 255.

<sup>11</sup> 'Now the battered Beeh fears a nuclear reaction', *Daily Mail*, 2 November 1985, 17.

novel, *The Old Men at the Zoo*, for transmission in 1982. As noted in Chapter 5, *Defence of the Realm* (1985) dwelt upon on the presence in Britain of American military bases and the threat of a nuclear accident. Mick Jackson's *Threads* (1984) graphically dramatised the predicted effect of a nuclear explosion over Sheffield; and the same director's *A Very British Coup* (1988) included a triumphalist sequence in which a nuclear warhead is dismantled, a symbolic event staged at the behest of the socialist Prime Minister who is the programme's central character.<sup>12</sup>

*Edge of Darkness* belongs, then, to a swathe of dramas and documentaries which reflected anxiety at the operations of both the Government and the nuclear industry, and its success doubtless owed much to this timely expression of current concerns. The programme attained a unique intensity, however, by showing how events in the public sphere impinged on the experiences of an individual. Its thematic references are relevant precisely insofar as they bear on Craven's traumatised experience. The programme's most characteristic genre identity, of course, is as a political thriller, a form ideally suited to place existential anguish within a contemporary political setting. That said, the treatment of Craven's suffering is very <sup>subtle</sup> (nuanced). In places, for instance, his experiences are presented in an extremely tender and reflective manner, which ~~accords~~ <sup>accord</sup> the abrasive political themes of *Edge of Darkness* an intensely emotional context. This can partly be addressed by considering an important passage early in the serial. Midway through Episode 1, after Craven's police colleagues have left his house, he goes upstairs to Emma's bedroom. He is still wearing his mac, wet from the rain, and carrying a shotgun. Kamen and Clapton's evocative theme music is playing as this sequence begins.

Craven moves around the room and the camera slowly pans over its details: a poster which has 'PEACE' written in capital letters above an image of poppies; a hanging rainbow mobile; a shelf cluttered with childish ephemera. The implication is that this is the first time Craven has really stopped to notice his daughter's effects. There is a record player, and Craven sets it going. The record on the turntable is Willie Nelson's plangent country ballad, 'The Time of the Preacher'.

Craven continues his exploration. He walks to a wardrobe, sorts through a couple

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of this sequence, see pp. 217-8.



of dresses, lifts one out towards him and smells it. He moves to a chest of drawers, and cursorily tidies the underwear in the open top drawer, which he then pushes closed. He pulls open the second drawer to reveal a pink and white box-file which has 'GAIA' written on it. Inside the box there is a map, a book with part of the title showing ('Mineral Identities') and another object which the viewer later learns is a geiger counter.

Craven then sits on the bed, and puts his head in his hand. He opens the drawer of a bedside cabinet, which is below the level of the shot and thus out of view. Craven takes out a wallet and a passport. He then looks towards the drawer and gives an expression of surprise. He takes out a vibrator. He kisses it, and in putting it back into the drawer is surprised to notice another object. He lifts out a revolver, which he stares at perplexedly. The camera stays tight on Craven with the gun in front of him as he lies back on the bed. There is a teddy bear by his right shoulder. He pulls it up, looks at it and then at the gun as he lays the teddy on his left shoulder.

The last shot of the sequence is from overhead and shows Craven lying on the bed, staring upwards as he rests the gun on his groin with the teddy still held on his left shoulder. The song finishes with the lines, 'Now the lesson is over / And the killin''s begun'.

It is a remarkable sequence, lasting for nine minutes and unfolding very slowly. While a scene of this pace and duration is highly unusual for television drama, it nonetheless has a conventional aspect. During its course Craven's character and motivation are established, strands of the narrative are revealed, and a particular emotional context is created which subsequently informs the whole programme. The scene has a number of functions, then, the first of which connects with its intensely private aspect. The sense is of a man invading his daughter's privacy, but doing so in order to understand her the better. Craven pushes Emma's underwear down in its drawer, smells her dress and even kisses her vibrator. He is touching aspects of her life which would normally remain private. There is a sense of violation, but this is offset by the greater violation of her murder, which has brought him into the room in the first place in some kind of act of remembrance. There is an incestuous undercurrent. But Emma's ghost appears to Craven at various points throughout the programme, a device

which depends on the viewer accepting the strength of the father-daughter relationship. The evocation of Craven's grief at Emma's death, and the demonstration of his sense of intimacy, justifies the departure from the prosaic confines of realistic plausibility. This applies to the programme as a whole.

A second function concerns Craven's discovery of items which relate directly to elements of the narrative. He takes the GAIA file with him to London, and discovers the extent of Emma's involvement in the ecological pressure group. The geiger counter is later used to motivate a section of the narrative, when Craven accidentally discovers that a lock of Emma's hair is highly radioactive. The revolver is more immediately interesting. It contradicts the other articles – toys, sea-shells and ornaments – which weave a sense of innocence and vulnerability into the scene and illustrate that this has been her bedroom since childhood. The revolver transgresses the image of a secure and domestic world and implies one which is dangerous, mysterious and ill-defined. There are aspects of Emma's life, then, which it will be essential for the programme, through Craven, to reveal.

The thriller conventionally projects a set of enigmas: these relate here to a third function of the sequence, the displacement of Craven's values which occurs throughout the serial, and their replacement by an alternative set of values. Craven enters the room with a shotgun, and ends the sequence with the smaller and more private weapon, and while this is a coincidental effect of the scene, it does echo the more emphatic development of Craven's pacifism through the programme. In the scene between Craven and Jedburgh in the Scottish guest house, Craven stops Jedburgh taking up his revolver at the arrival of the security forces, in order to continue their conversation about the ecological future of the planet. Jedburgh participates in the programme's final shoot-out but Craven stays in his seat, by now confirmed in a position of radical pacifism which rejects the use of force altogether ('I don't see the point of moving from this spot'). The posters in Emma's bedroom indicate her pacifist beliefs. By the end of the programme, Craven has come round to his daughter's point of view. He is, of course, a male protagonist. One impetus of the narrative is to displace a dour and aggressive form of masculinity with an altered, perhaps more spiritual, sensibility.

The sequence consists of alternating long pans and tight close-ups: a camera

rhetoric which expresses in visual terms the dynamic between objective representation and subjective experience. This is an aesthetic mode evident throughout the programme, and its effect is contained in the overhead shot which closes the sequence. The image itself is complex. Craven is caught between conflicting worlds: a world of domestic comfort and security (the teddy bear nestling against his cheek) and a world of masculine threat and violence (the gun held against his groin).

There is a further point. This particular composition – a high shot observing Craven in a moment of speculation or stress – is used at other significant moments in the programme. In Episode 3, for instance, Craven has been talking to the ghost of Emma in London's Hyde Park. He looks round to discover that she is no longer there. Craven is framed in a big close-up. He cries 'Emma'. There is a cut to an extremely high overhead shot which shows him wheeling round, surrounded by scattered vacant deckchairs: a moment of sudden despair viewed with graphic precision. The detail of the collapsed deckchairs itself reinforces the emotion of the moment, situating Craven within an environment which is both material and suddenly metaphysical.

A similar effect is achieved earlier in the drama, after the body of the murdered Emma has been carried away by the police. Craven stands watching, in pouring rain. As the critic Ruth Baumgarten remarked:

the camera slowly cranes upwards, gently pulling out from the frantic events and the fast sequence of tight close-ups. Like a narrator, simultaneously world-weary and pitying, it sets a mythic scene, laying out events in the human world with Olympian aloofness.<sup>13</sup>

It is a telling technique, both subjective and detached. Looking down from a height, the viewer has a perspective of sublime objectivity, while the subject of the shot is framed in a moment of affective crisis. One is reminded of George Steiner's observation that one of the defining qualities of tragedy is that it places 'private anguish on a public stage'.<sup>14</sup> In any event, Craven's quest has a profoundly emotional basis.

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth Baumgarten, *The Listener*, 31 October 1985, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in John Drakakis, 'Introduction', in Drakakis (ed), *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London and New York: Longman, 1992), 2.

In the course of *Edge of Darkness* Craven goes to the limits of his physical and psychological endurance, and this 'absoluteness' is a source of the pleasure the programme offers the viewer. Craven suffers shock, grief and fear. He finds himself in life-threatening circumstances. His experiences are, as it were, written on his body, in that the programme traces a process from physical and mental health to critical bodily and psychological suffering. This has implications even where the programme seems especially concerned with action. The viewer is encouraged to adopt Craven's subject-position, share his trauma, and subsequently understand precisely *why* his suffering has come about, with political implications which I shall discuss later. The point, however, is that the threshold of the character's disaster is simultaneously the threshold of the viewer's pleasure.

This is demonstrated in a most effective suspense sequence in Episode 4 when Craven gains access, one evening, to a large office which houses MI5 computer terminals. The sequence classically combines the thriller's vivid depiction of danger with its customary hermeneutic drive, the need to know what happens next. There are added epistemophilic dimensions here, in that Craven is seeking information on a computer. What will the machine reveal? He is with two accomplices. They have ten minutes to break in to the system and access details of how to gain entry to Northmoor. Craven and his companions work their way through sets of information on screen. He reads about his daughter's involvement in the earlier break-in at Northmoor. These discoveries are interrupted by cutaway scenes to the debonair Pendleton and Harcourt in their office, monitoring on their own VDU the data called up by the infiltrators. A glitch in Craven's pursuit of information – a Barthesian 'snare' – occurs when he types in a code word, 'Oxford Street', and the computer fails to recognise it. By this time the police have arrived and are rushing through the building. Craven changes his command to 'Oxford Circus' and the machine suddenly begins to print out the information he is after. His colleagues have by this time sprinted off, and Craven rushes out of the room just as the police enter. He finally evades them (in the Barbican centre – an in-joke, playing on the building's notoriously unhelpful design) in a subsequent chase.

The pleasure for the viewer is empathic, sharing Craven's danger; and epistemophilic, wanting to find out what secrets the computer contains. The programme

continually builds patterns of fascination. There is a sense of being where one has never been before, or of seeing new and wondrous sights. The images of the decomposing bodies of the victims of the earlier break-in at Northmoor have this function, for instance; as does the hot cell itself, a threatening, high-tech construction in the depths of the earth, its alarms flashing and sounding. This has been a journey to forbidden limit zones.

Once Craven leaves the hot cell he is involved in a longer and more momentous chase. He runs through the empty underground corridors of the facility pursued by a phalanx of security personnel, some of them in vehicles. The situation – the resourceful individual against the deadly operatives of the system – is familiar from the action thriller but is given a slightly different aspect here. Craven’s frantic gasps for breath and close-ups of his sweating face emphasise his sheer desperation in flight. The sequence ends with him in a locked room into which gas is being pumped. Gasping and choking, he eventually finds a telephone which connects to Downing Street (an audacious plot twist, this). His cry ‘*Get me Pendleton!*’ is the final bid of a man on the cusp of panic, at the limit of endurance.

At points in the drama, then, Craven is a fugitive, running pell-mell in a lung-bursting bid to escape. Elsewhere his trauma has a more deeply psychological basis. The programme’s opening sequence of scenes, detailing the shooting of Emma and the onset of Craven’s grief, has its own minor denouement in a shot which shows Craven sitting in his car at a motorway lay-by. The directions in Kennedy Martin’s script note:

He can be seen bent over the steering wheel. He is crying. It is the first time he has cried since he was a little boy, but we can’t hear him actually sobbing.<sup>15</sup>

The next shot is from inside the car:

The tears come in long, sobbing gasps, as if his throat were rusty and dry. ... Craven stays in the lay-by for a long time. No one stops to ask him whether or not he is in trouble.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kennedy Martin, *Edge of Darkness*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

The image is of a grieving man, but it signals Craven's increasing isolation, which is partly presented as a spiral into an interior mental world. At the beginning of Episode 4 he is a patient at a psychiatric hospital, suffering, as the chief medical officer says, from shock, depression and grief. At one stage while in hospital he wakes up at night and screams, 'Emma!' In terms of his psychological suffering, this is his nadir. In terms of his physical suffering, there is a sudden and irreversible plunge later in the drama once he has been irradiated. At the end of the programme he is dying. He has *experienced* the events of the narrative to the depths of his physical and psychological capacity.

The cement which binds the divergent elements of *Edge of Darkness* is a form of scrupulous naturalism which, as Lez Cooke suggests, gives the serial 'a credibility lacking in other political thrillers and makes it hard to dismiss as "merely entertainment", a harmless piece of fiction'.<sup>17</sup>

Hence Craven watches the news on television, on which the newscaster Kenneth Kendall is reading a report on the growth of the Green movement. He watches a report on alleged police violence, which includes footage of fighting between the police and pickets (*Edge of Darkness* was shot during the Miner's Strike of 1984). He catches part of an edition of the current affairs programme *Panorama*, on which Margaret Thatcher, interviewed by Robin Day, declares that the nuclear deterrent has been effective in prolonging world peace. These pieces of actual programmes are woven as a 'natural' cultural backdrop to the story, but carefully chosen to express central themes which the programme develops, and the use of personalities playing themselves (Michael Meacher MP, and the broadcaster Sue Cook) also reinforces the intended authenticity and contemporaneity of the programme.

Despite this, the supposed plausibility of the programme hardly stands up to scrutiny. Why does Craven need to break into the MI5 computer when Pendleton or Harcourt could presumably have obtained the information for him? How does Craven

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<sup>17</sup> Lez Cooke, 'Edge of Darkness', *Movie*, n33 (winter 1989), 45.

escape from Northmoor? Why is Jedburgh, irradiated and in possession of plutonium, allowed to attend a weapons technology conference? In an important respect these are secondary concerns, however, as Michael Wearing recognised. 'In an investigative journalism sense,' he said, 'it's not meant to be a plausible plot.'<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere he suggests that *Edge of Darkness* 'stops being a normal detective story, a who-dun-it, early on because by about the end of Episode 2 everyone knows who-dun-it and it becomes instead a kind of what-can-be-dun-about-it'.<sup>19</sup>

It is here that *Edge of Darkness* departs most significantly from conventional genres to enter a more individualised mode. The programme identifies the nuclear threat, the anti-humanist effects of international business, and government secrecy as areas of concern. If individual parts of the story are improbable, it is suggested that they are part of a very plausible *context* for life in Britain in 1985.<sup>20</sup> The forces ranged against the freedom and safety of the individual seem extensive and all-powerful. In order to effect a narrative resolution which is not entirely pessimistic there is a movement from the gritty realities of the political sphere to a more poetic sensibility. In *Edge of Darkness* fact is countered with the mythic and the mystical.

Emma's ghost is the most obvious element of the mystical dimension. She appears at intervals throughout the narrative to comfort, coax and chide her father. She is presented as 'real' to him, and her presence or absence is beyond his control. He cannot call her up whenever he desires, nor make her stay. Craven sees not only the 'contemporary' Emma, an adult woman. A number of flashbacks show that he remembers Emma as a young girl; but this is not presented simply as a trick of Craven's memory. In Episode 4, for instance, Craven is surprised to hear the sound of the young Emma in the kitchen singing 'All I want is ratatouille' to the tune of the children's song 'Here we go round the mulberry bush'. This reminds him of the meal he was preparing on the eve of Emma's death and compels him to look in a recipe book. Between its pages he finds a list of tube stations, which he subsequently discovers is a code which represents the route which Emma and her companions took

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<sup>18</sup> John Lyttle, 'Out on the edge', 17.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Kerr, 'A world close to the edge', *The Guardian*, 4 November 1985, 11.

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion of the issue of plausibility in television thriller serials, see pp. 362-4.

into the Northmoor mines.

The coincidence is contrived in order to bind the supernatural element as an intrinsic part of the plot. If Craven is to make any progress he *has* to be helped by the supernatural – a force beyond the jurisdiction of the ‘real’ political world. The existence of this mysterious other world is seemingly corroborated when Craven discovers that a stream has sprung up in his garden at the place where Emma was shot.

The mystical element connects to the mythic. In his ‘Introduction’ to the text of *Edge of Darkness* Kennedy Martin writes of his desire

to make [Craven] the reincarnation of the original ‘green man’, whose destiny was to confront and destroy in the name of the planet the free-market forces of modern entrepreneurial capitalism, as represented by the chairman of the Fusion Corporation of Kansas, Mr Jerry Grogan.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly Craven’s trajectory through the programme takes him from the urban world of police detective work to an exterior world where he is radically removed from his previous life and much closer to nature. The serial ends with him alone and abandoned on a hillside overlooking a Scottish loch.

Craven’s ‘green man’ lineage is never developed enough in the programme to be comprehensible to the viewer, operating rather as a concept informing the writer’s work. It does have a subsidiary role in the development of an ecological theme in *Edge of Darkness*, however, which is partly expressed through the programme’s unorthodox use of tree imagery. In Episode 3, Craven is wandering in Hyde Park, close to a nervous breakdown, when Emma again appears to him. ‘This is no time to break down,’ she tells her father. ‘You’ve got to be strong – like a tree – don’t break ...’<sup>22</sup> Later in the same episode, when Craven rereads letters his daughter had sent him, there are trees drawn on all the envelopes. Kennedy Martin intended to end the serial by having Craven, alone on the Scottish hillside, turning into a tree. The idea was eventually rejected by the production team.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kennedy Martin, *Edge of Darkness*, x.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>23</sup> See Kennedy Martin, *Edge of Darkness*, x-xi.



Kennedy Martin did manage, however, to replace this crude transubstantiation with something more subtle. In one of her supernatural visits Emma tells her father that in a past ice-age black flowers had grown through the ice to draw the sun's rays into the earth. In the guest house with Jedburgh, Craven retells the story. The programme ends with the image of black flowers growing on the hillside where Craven had, in the previous shot, been standing – a gesture of ecological hope in the face of the hero's abandonment and death.

It is an important final image: the 'solution' to the threat offered by nuclear technology is not found in any individual action but in the regenerative properties of the planet itself. This, the clinching mythic theme of *Edge of Darkness*, derives from the writings of the NASA scientist J.D. Lovelock. Kennedy Martin acknowledged a debt to Lovelock's book *GAIA – A New Look at Life on Earth*, the basic premise of which, as developed in the programme, is that life-forms on earth exist to regulate optimum conditions for life on the planet; that man has the capacity, through nuclear technology, to fracture this equilibrium; but that within a larger time-span the planet will operate as an integrated organism to defend itself from threats to its existence.

The final endorsement of the GAIA theory is not without its ideological aspect. *Edge of Darkness* juxtaposes individual sensibility, as represented by Craven, with a broad raft of inhibiting agents – the British police, the civil service, the nuclear industry – whose final authority derives, within the programme, from central government.

According to Lez Cooke:

*Edge of Darkness* was produced in a far more reactionary climate than the earlier generation of BBC "social issue" dramas. The terms of debate under Mrs Thatcher are not so much about how socialism can be achieved but about how a total hegemony of right-wing ideology can be averted ... In the context of a reactionary conjuncture, the act of confirming half-formed beliefs and suspicions which viewers might hold can be considered progressive, especially if it serves to make those viewers question the ideology of "the dark forces that rule our planet".<sup>24</sup>

This argument suggests that *Edge of Darkness* is a 'progressive' television drama in the

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<sup>24</sup> Cooke, 'Edge of Darkness', 45.

sense outlined by Millington and Nelson, whereby the programme is a 'means of exposing and exploring contradictions in society in such a way as to produce a sense of contradiction in the audience that may in turn promote the will to create social change'.<sup>25</sup> But what new perception suggests itself to the viewer of *Edge of Darkness*? Craven's adoption of Emma's eco-political beliefs is important, for it is the alternative ideology which *Edge of Darkness* proposes. As Craven is driving to seek out Jedburgh in the programme's denouement, the car radio announces that Fusion Corporation is rumoured to be a strong contender for substantial contracts for the Star Wars programme. The image on screen is of Craven, dying of radiation sickness, sweating and coughing, signifying by implication the human cost of the pursuit of nuclear technology: a grim piece of irony. By the end of the programme he believes that the planet will win any 'battle' between itself and mankind: he is, as he tells Jedburgh, 'on the side of the planet'.<sup>26</sup>

Craven's rejection of the Establishment seems final. When he is captured, the security chief Nallers shines a torch directly on him (again the big close-up, viewing Craven from above, fixes him with disturbing intensity), and a gun is held to his face. 'Do it, do it,' he cries. 'No, no, old son. You're on our side,' comes the reply. '*I am not on your side!*' Craven screams, emphasising every word.<sup>27</sup>

Paradoxically Craven is still *partly* on 'their' side. He telephones Pendleton to notify the latter of the location of the hidden plutonium, and is present – at a distance – at its recovery. He is once again an agent for the re-establishment of social order, the role in which he was presented at the start of the programme. This is an ambivalent position, and one which the narrative never quite resolves. The final image – the black flowers, with the slightest suggestion of a subsequent ice-age – is both a vindication of Craven's radical isolationism and a means of withdrawing from any final confrontation between the programme's contradictory social forces. *Edge of Darkness* eventually 'manages' contradiction by deferring it. The equilibrium it achieves at its resolution is an uneasy one founded on a gesture of huge mythic faith, represented by the black

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<sup>25</sup> Bob Millington and Robin Nelson, *'Boys from the Blackstuff': The Making of TV Drama* (London: Comedia, 1986), 174.

<sup>26</sup> Kennedy Martin, *Edge of Darkness*, 175.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

flowers, in which the metaphorical forces of darkness remain firmly within this world.

The signal achievement here is that the operations of big business and international politics are seen to impinge so directly on the life of an individual. There is something existential in Craven's plight, not least in his primal scream of 'Emma' which closes the programme; but there is also something utterly contemporary about his devastation. He is driven to death because he moved too close to the insidious power structures which shape modern Britain. The status quo seems unshakeable. 'One of the problems is that, to a certain extent, everyone who's writing about Thatcher's Britain ... is unbelievably depressed about it', suggested Kennedy Martin,<sup>28</sup> and this pessimism takes an expansive turn in *Edge of Darkness*. It is hardly surprising that the only solution should be located in a utopian future, but it does mean that a drama rooted throughout in a political and social context ends by slipping into a mystical yonder.

Even so, the viewer is left with a profound sense of loss and violation. It is not only that a man has died, but that a system remains intact. If the impact of *Edge of Darkness* was in part down to its potent mix of genres and styles, its colourings of passion and emotion were also most significant. *Edge of Darkness* can be placed alongside other paranoia dramas of the 1980s but it is surely pre-eminent. It remains, by any estimation, a powerfully emblematic response to its time.

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<sup>28</sup> Stewart Lane, 'A depressing nuclear chiller', *Morning Star*, 4 November 1985, 4.

## 7 Developments in television form: *A Very British Coup* (1988)

*A Very British Coup*, transmitted in three hour-long episodes on Channel Four in 1988, shares with *Edge of Darkness* a concern with currents of political power in Britain. It was adapted by Alan Plater from the novel by Chris Mullin, a Labour MP, and directed by Mick Jackson, for whom the earlier programme was an influence. 'The closest thing to what I'm trying to do is *Edge of Darkness*, which has epic overtones as well as being scrupulously naturalistic,' Jackson said. 'What I'm after is a kind of poetic naturalism.'<sup>1</sup> *A Very British Coup* develops a fascinating balance between realism and symbolism, both of which are partly mediated through highly stylised filming techniques. Its technical qualities were recognised in that it won BAFTA awards for Best Series/Serial, Best Actor (Ray McAnally), Best Film Sound and Best Film Editing, and received further nominations for original music, make-up, cameraman and design. Produced by Skreba Films in association with Parallax Pictures, it was an independent production for Channel Four and indicates the channel's willingness to commission innovative and political drama in serial form. Indeed the project was rejected by the BBC, a fact which Chris Mullin, at least, found unsurprising. 'In the current climate the BBC would not be permitted to show a series like this,' he said, alluding to the programme's overtly political content.<sup>2</sup>

*A Very British Coup* is based on a premise. What if, in the near-future, a Labour Prime Minister were to set about implementing a range of radical socialist manifesto commitments? These include the central policy initiative of decommissioning nuclear

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Petley, 'A very British production', *Broadcast*, 27 November 1987, 15.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Jane Thynne, "TV series on "MI5 political corruption"", *Daily Telegraph*, 9 May 1988, 4.

weapons and securing the closure of American military bases in Britain – another example of the concern with nuclear expansionism in drama of the period, noted in the preceding chapter. The programme suggests that the Establishment would methodically destabilise a Government and a Prime Minister so audaciously left-wing in character. Thus the nation's new democratically-elected leader, Harry Perkins (played by Ray McAnally), a former steel worker and trade union leader from Sheffield, is pitted against a range of powerful institutions including the media, the military and MI5. One of the drama's narrational strategies is to homogenise these as a powerful anti-democratic bloc, insidiously fostering its own influence and ideologies. According to Sally Hibbin, one of the producers of *A Very British Coup*, such a representation tapped into a changing conception of Britain's structures of political power:

Until Thatcherism, there wasn't in most people's minds this thing called "the state" which was separate from the country as a whole. It was something that was just a part of the country, like the health service. What Thatcher has done, and nowhere more clearly than in the Ponting and Tisdall cases, is to turn the state into something which is identifiable as an organism, something more obviously *there*.<sup>3</sup>

The programme is different from *Edge of Darkness*, then, in that power is held to reside not with the Government but with a broadly right-wing network of interests which forms the Establishment, working quietly behind the scenes, out of the public eye and not subject to public scrutiny. Its evocation of the power of the hidden establishment places it alongside a number of dramas already mentioned in these pages, including *Bird of Prey*, *Defence of the Realm*, *The Detective*, *In the Secret State* and *1996*. In a useful and incisive essay on *A Very British Coup*, Jeremy Ridgman finds that it

perhaps epitomises this genre of conspiracy screen thrillers and ... certainly marks the furthest extent of its penetration into the implications of the state within the state. ... *A Very British Coup* confronts what in popular terms might be regarded as the most fundamental of political questions; who runs the

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Julian Petley, 'A Very British Coup', *Sight and Sound*, v57, n2 (spring 1988), 97. The first part of Petley's article addresses the emerging cycle of conspiracy drama in Britain in the 1980s.

country?<sup>4</sup>

Such subject matter suggests from the outset that *A Very British Coup* is keenly political. The ideological nature of the programme itself, of course, depends not only on the events which form the narrative, but on the manner in which those events are narrated. How is the story told? An orthodox account of authorship might see the drama as essentially belonging to Chris Mullin – he did write the novel, after all. But its effectiveness is in large part down to the collaboration between Alan Plater and Mick Jackson, scriptwriter and director.<sup>5</sup> Jackson had worked as an editor for the BBC arts programme *Omnibus* between 1968 and 1970, then as, variously, assistant producer, producer and director on programmes made by the BBC's Science Features Department, notably the major series *The Ascent of Man* (1973), *The Age of Uncertainty* (1977) and *Connections* (1978). He went on to direct two acclaimed and award-winning drama documentaries: *Threads* (BBC, 1984), a chilling account of the predicted effects of a nuclear explosion in Sheffield, and *Life Story*, (BBC, 1987), a dramatised account (transmitted in the science-oriented *Horizon* series) of the work of the geneticists Watson and Crick, who discovered the structure of DNA. The drama operated much like a thriller, developing a pace to the narrative and building a desire in the viewer to discover the outcome to the central quest, the explanation of the 'mystery' of DNA. This career path is not entirely conventional for a drama director. Jackson's work as an editor, and his involvement with programmes whose brief was to explain complex facts and developments in an accessible way, reap rewards in his direction of *A Very British Coup*. He subsequently went to Hollywood to make films including *Bodyguard* (USA, 1992) and *Clean Slate* (USA, 1994).

Alan Plater was already well-known as one of television drama's most eminent adaptors through his work on *The Barchester Chronicles* (BBC, 1982) and *Fortunes of War* (BBC, 1987). He had also written a number of single dramas of his own, and the

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Ridgman, 'Conspiracy and Consensus: Television Drama and the Case of *A Very British Coup*', in Graham Holderness (ed), *The Politics of Theatre and Drama* (Houndsmill and London: Macmillan, 1992), 201.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of differences between Mullin's novel and Plater's script, see Ridgman, 'Conspiracy and Consensus', 202-4.

series *The Beiderbecke Affair* (Yorkshire TV, 1985), *The Beiderbecke Tapes* (1987) and *The Beiderbecke Connection* (1988). These latter dramas blended comic, poignant and thrillerish elements. *Fortunes of War* revealed Plater as a writer skilled in nuances of dialogue and plot-development. Between them Jackson and Plater forged an original tone and style for *A Very British Coup*: a fast-paced drama with thriller overtones, humorous, ironic, and not without considerable emotional effect. In respect of its formal and thematic complexities it is one of the most sophisticated dramas of the period. It is certainly one of the most overtly stylised, in ways which entail a decisive break with some of the conventional strategies of mainstream television drama. In its recommendation of a left-wing ideology it is one of the most explicitly political dramas of the period. In order to examine these issues I propose to concentrate, in the following pages, on a close textual analysis of a number of sequences. In the very fabric of its aesthetic construction, *A Very British Coup* endorses certain anti-Thatcherite perspectives within the narrative.

The distinctively belligerent tone of *A Very British Coup* is developed through a number of registers. It is coloured, firstly, by Perkins' ready and combative wit. 'Well, I'm a third-generation socialist,' he says during a telephone conversation with the US President. 'I believe you're not.' The programme's formal arrangement often underscores such moments of shrewd irony. In this case the *mise en scène* has Perkins overlooked by a portrait of Winston Churchill. The chipper socialist quips with the mighty Americans under the painted gaze of a renowned Tory leader. This is a matter of tone. The drama's feistiness is promoted on a more extensively formal level through the sheer speed of its editing rhythms and the often abrasive nature of its edits.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes cuts between different shots are vivid and surprising, moving the viewer with a jolt from one scene to the next. The programme's opening credit sequence, for instance, is formed of images of petrol bombs smashing, intercut with flames burning

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<sup>6</sup> There is regrettably little substantial writing on film and video editing. For a collection of interviews with film editors, see Gabriella Oldham, *First Cut: Conversations with Film Editors* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992).

in front of a big-close-up of the 'Big Ben' clock face, which viewers would recognise (partly from its place in the title sequence to ITN's *News at Ten*) as a signifier for the Houses of Parliament. The image is accompanied by music from Mozart's Mass in C Minor. The inferences are of social unrest and thus a threat to the seat of government. The image cuts to a close-up of a toilet bowl. Somebody is urinating in it, and whistling reedily. This edit has a double function. It qualifies the first sequence, undercutting the theme of conflated grandeur; but it also in some sense underpins it, juxtaposing the cataclysmic (the petrol bombs) with the personal (the urinating). It will be a persistent mode throughout *A Very British Coup* to qualify the epic by reference to the individual. The opening shot is surprising, focusing on a bodily function usually absent from TV screens. The viewer is perhaps 'shocked' into attending to what follows.

Mullin's novel was published in 1982, its story set in 1989. In the television serial the setting is extended to the early 1990s, but if the drama presents a Britain of the near-future, it is a future which has its roots in the 'present' of the programme's transmission in 1988. *A Very British Coup* offers itself as a document of what *might plausibly* happen were a socialist Prime Minister to attain office in the 1990s, and in this respect it benefits from a sense of connectedness with already-familiar events. The producers originally intended to make *A Very British Coup* as a film, but as Mick Jackson observes:

We realised that our story would be much better for the change to television. A movie has to have international appeal, so you can't assume a great deal about the audience's basic level of political awareness. You can't have glancing references to Joe Gormley or work-to-rules, you can't play on the niceties of British politics, so you tend to lapse into crude simplifications.<sup>7</sup>

The programme's invocations of plausibility are strengthened by careful and often unobtrusive reference to actual events in the public realm. *A Very British Coup* was filmed at a time when Soviet and Chinese banks were shown to be underwriters of the Channel Tunnel scheme, which made more credible the moment in the programme when the incoming Labour Government accepts a loan from a Moscow bank. Some of

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Petley, 'A Very British Coup', 96.



its inferences link to allegations made in *Spycatcher*, Peter Wright's account of a plot within MI5 to discredit Harold Wilson's Labour Government. When the programme was released Chris Mullin cited various allegations which, he argued, gave the drama added pertinency: that an MI5 spy had infiltrated the council of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; that BBC staff were vetted by MI5; that the CIA interfered with attempts to remove American bases from Britain; that MI5 had colluded with a British newspaper proprietor to smear Labour MPs; and that the US had brought pressure to bear against the anti-nuclear stance of New Zealand's government.<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not these allegations could be substantiated is in a sense beside the point. Their currency at the time of transmission gave them the status of a coherent body of speculation, expressing unease at the lack of accountability of agencies of the state. In *A Very British Coup* the tenor of such speculations is central to the narrative. In the course of the programme the CIA uses techniques of electronic surveillance to spy on the Labour Government; members of MI5 collude with a national newspaper to suggest, untruthfully, that the Prime Minister has a suspect health record; there is an MI5-engineered plot to smear the Prime Minister with allegations that he has received incriminating payments to his (fictitious) private bank account; and in a moment of high drama a senior member of the BBC who is on friendly terms with the head of MI5 attempts to fade out a Prime Ministerial broadcast.

A rather different aspect of the programme's plausibility is its sense of giving the spectator a privileged view of normally hidden worlds. There are scenes set in Number Ten Downing Street, in Cabinet offices and the offices of powerful members of the ruling class, and in a television studio, where the production elements of a current affairs programme – the cameras and sound booms, the make-up people, the viewing gallery with a range of production personnel – are all foregrounded. These are not presented as *neutral* settings for the drama. The programme *interprets* them for the viewer. This is nowhere more clear than in the sequence in which Perkins enters his new residence in Downing Street for the first time as Prime Minister. His new private secretary Tweed (played by Oliver Ford Davis) introduces him to his staff, and a sound

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<sup>8</sup> See Jane Thynne, "TV series on "MI5 political corruption"", and Hugo Young, 'Something shocking on the box', *The Guardian*, 21 June 1988, 18.

effect gives a reverberating heartbeat-like noise as Perkins sees the massed group of people now in his close employ. There are so many that they continue up the elegant stairway. As Perkins mounts the stairs, the programme's theme music, Mozart's triumphant Great Mass in C Minor, plays. It is worth looking in closer detail at this sequence, as it bears witness to a number of filming and editing strategies which are important to the programme as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

#### Shot 1

A tracking shot follows Perkins as he shakes hands with members of his staff. He looks up and registers surprise. The music begins.

#### Cut            Shot 2

A low-angle vertical shot pans a little to look up the tiered stairway. People are leaning over the bannisters applauding.

#### Cross-fade    Shots 3-6

The camera moves along the line of people applauding. These four shots, connected by dissolves, focus alternately on their hands and faces.

#### Cross-fade    Shot 7

A low-angle shot pans across a chandelier.

#### Cross-fade    Shot 8

A low-angle shot through the stair-rails follows Perkins as he climbs the stairs, looking at portraits on the wall.

#### Cut            Shot 9

The camera moves to reveal – perhaps through a doorway – a portrait of Winston Churchill. A feather duster is cleaning one side of the picture frame.

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<sup>9</sup> My analysis here and elsewhere in this chapter owes a debt to a presentation on *A Very British Coup* given by George Brandt some years ago in the Drama Department at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

**Cut            Shot 10**

A close-up, through the stair-rails, of a briefcase as someone goes downstairs. The camera thus tracks or cranes leftwards in the opposite direction to Perkins' movement.

**Cut            Shot 11**

A hand-held camera observes photo-portraits on the wall of Harold Macmillan and Edward Heath. This is Perkins' point of view, and the camera is now moving rightwards and upwards again.

**Cut            Shot 12**

A close-up of Perkins from slightly above. He looks up ahead of him.

**Cut            Shot 13**

A slight jump-cut. A low-angle shot just to the side of Perkins shows him shaking hands with a bishop.

**Cross-fade    Shot 14**

A high shot of Perkins as he ascends the stairs, a couple of flights below. There are now no more staff to meet. The camera tilts up to catch a character carrying a briefcase, a flight above Harry, on his way down. The camera keeps tilting to reveal, at 90 degrees, a painting of galleons in what might be a former naval battle, and tracks back just as a member of the domestic staff walks past carrying a small crate of milk. This is the upper level.

**Cut            Shot 15**

The music diminishes in volume. Tweed, just in front of the camera, opens a set of double doors. He announces, 'The Cabinet Room'. The camera enters, and shows (from Perkins' point of view) a long, grand table taking up the room's central space.

**Cut            Shot 16**

A close-up of Perkins as he pensively enters. He walks around the left of the table. The music rises in volume. The camera maintains focus on Perkins but tracks around to the right, so that Perkins and the camera between them embrace the table. The camera 'notices' the trappings of the room – the red leather chairs, the candlesticks and the ornaments on the mantelpiece. Perkins reaches the end of the room.

Cut            Shot 17

A close-up on Perkins. He looks up to the wall on his right.

Cut            Shot 18

Eyeline match from Perkins' point of view. A close-up of a portrait of a bewigged grandee, looking down complacently. A voice – Tweed's – says, 'It's quite impressive'.

Cut            Shot 19

A deep-focus shot, the length of the room, shows Perkins in the foreground in the right of frame, then the table, the chandelier above it, and Tweed still standing at the door at the other end. The music finishes. Perkins says, 'Yes. It is,' in a very subdued voice.

Cut            Shot 20

A close-up of Perkins from a slightly low angle. He is looking down to the table. He says, 'You can almost touch the history. And there's the odd whiff of betrayal. We must do something about that.' He looks across to Tweed.

Cut            Shot 21

Eyeline match. A close-up of Tweed, holding the Prime Minister's gaze. There is no change in his straight-faced expression, but the shot is held *just* long enough to register a frisson of conflict.

A cut to a member of staff ascending the stairs ends the sequence.

What might have been a fleeting introduction to Perkins' new residence instead becomes a spectacular narrational event in *filmic* rather than literary terms. The shot construction, camera choreography, editing rhythms and use of music help structure the sequence's meaning-effects. The editing pace is much quicker in the first part as Perkins ascends the stairs, and slows once he is in the Cabinet Room: he has finally arrived at the centre of executive power, to which a 'proper' reverence is accorded.

Initially the choice of shots offers a multiple perspective on Perkins' ascent. Some (4, 6, 11, 15 and 18) are filmed from Perkins' point of view. Others feature him as the subject of the shot. Others (7, 9 and 14) 'fill in' details of his new home. These do not simply report the environment, however. Shot 7 conveys a giddy sense of its grandeur, while the feature of the duster in shot 9 is wonderfully insouciant. Some shots (2, 8, 13 and 14) are exaggeratedly high or low: perspective continually shifts. Transitions from shot to shot are various. A series of cross-fades towards the beginning of the sequence elides the various representations with Perkins' point of view. The subsequent cuts emphasise small jolts of new information for both Perkins and the viewer: the jump-cut from Perkins looking up to his shaking hands with the bishop is a case in point. Shot 10, entirely unnecessary in narrative terms, maintains the dynamic of progress by introducing, fleetingly, movement in the opposite direction. The camera itself is moving in every single shot before Perkins enters the Cabinet Room. The sequence is alive with the pure dynamic of movement.

The pleasure for the viewer lies partly in participating in the realism of the programme – accepting that it gives privileged access to a world which is usually hidden – and simultaneously in submitting to its overtly dramatising mode. Thus Shot 11, filmed with a hand-held camera from Perkins' point of view, helps construct the realism of the event, drawing on the documentary convention whereby the lightweight camera is most fitting to film events as they happen. Shots 2 and 14 remind one that this is nonetheless a highly crafted, *theatrical* piece of filmmaking. Indeed its theatricality is contained in the sequence's highly structured process of revelation. Shot 2 explains Perkins' surprised expression: a sudden vista of the rising stairwell, thronged by applauding members of staff. He ascends. Shot 15 is the most theatrical of all, a conventional revelation where the opening of doors is like the parting of the stage

curtains. This is the Cabinet Room. Having entered the Prime Ministerial residence and climbed the stairs Perkins is now, one presumes, in the very kernel of government. He has arrived. The music underscores this implication by dimming in volume as Perkins enters the room, a little reverentially. As he savours its grandeur the music suddenly rises in volume, a ceremonial gesture marking the importance of the setting.

The sequence is obliquely scopophilic. The term, used in film criticism and derived from psychoanalysis, describes a compulsive desire to look, with connotations of sexual voyeurism. Films like Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (USA, 1954) and Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (GB, 1960) make the process of scopophilia a subject of the film itself. Perkins' entry into Number Ten Downing Street and subsequently into the Cabinet Room is designed for scopophilic effect, not least in that it virtually erotises the zone of power. Perkins is fascinated with what he sees. The viewer both witnesses and – through an empathic participation in Perkins' point of view – shares his fascination. Here, perhaps for the first time, we are being introduced to the thrilling centre of political power in Britain. How telling, then, that Perkins' only words at this point should connect 'history' and 'betrayal'. Power brings responsibility, but it also reeks of danger. The viewer will discover that the Cabinet Room is in fact only the *apparent* centre of control. Real power lies elsewhere in an ominously dispersed network of influences. For the moment, however, the sequence ends by re-establishing Perkins' central moral authority. He has been caught up in the giddy ascent, then subdued at the sight of the Cabinet Room. Shot 20, a fixed, low-angle shot, reasserts his predominance as he states his intention to 'do something' about treachery. Tweed's impassive gaze indicates that this is a theme to which the narrative will return.

The sequence draws upon conventional techniques (in its use of eyeline match, for instance) and conventional relationships between the camera and the viewer (in its organisation of point of view), but in general *A Very British Coup* is notable for its *difference* to the established rhythms and techniques of mainstream television drama. Its filming style is more intense, with an extensive use of close-ups and big-close-ups, frequent camera movement and often a welter of movement within individual shots. Its editing rhythms are sharper and demand that the viewer remains alert to rapid shifts between images, which must therefore be connected or juxtaposed. Some sequences

have a greater structural similarity to the techniques of advertisements or rock videos than those of serial television drama, in their rapid intercutting and exaggeration of perspective. The programme's aesthetic construction has an intrinsic energy. Its various elements are mediated, however, to produce certain clear meaning-effects which will bear further discussion in the following pages. The form thus shapes the narrative in a more overt manner than is the case with most other realist dramas of the period.

A further sense of the programme's interpretative tendencies lies in its partial deconstruction of media processes. As with programmes like *Threads*, *Edge of Darkness*, *Thin Air*, *The Real Eddy English* and *Traffik*, *A Very British Coup* advances its narrative in places through the depiction of news and current affairs reportage. News bulletins on the radio, interviews on television, newspaper headlines and reports are all ways of relaying information to the viewer about events which form the backdrop to the programme. These are usually relevant to the programme's theme, as with the reports of increasing diplomatic tension in the war between Iran and Iraq in *Threads*, which explains the political scenario which leads to a nuclear war; or bear more directly on the development of character, as when Craven, in *Edge of Darkness*, increasingly finds himself disagreeing with the Government's line on nuclear power, as reported over the radio. *A Very British Coup*, however, additionally indicates some of the ways in which these headlines and news reports are constructed in the first place. There are scenes in the editorial office of a tabloid newspaper, whose proprietor and editorial team slant news stories in ways which will be most damaging to the Government. Thus key industrial conflicts in which Perkins' administration is involved – disputes with the nurses and the power workers – are shown to be interpreted for the public by the press. This again connects with actuality. During the 1987 general election the Labour Party's campaign was flagrantly misrepresented by sections of the right-wing press, most notably Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* and Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mail*.

A number of scenes are set in a television studio, where the programme shows some of the behind-the-camera decisions which construct current affairs coverage. There is less of a sense that Perkins is the victim of these processes, however. The one openly censorious moment occurs when a BBC executive attempts to cut short Perkins' address to the nation toward the end of the programme. The production personnel,

perhaps surprised at the unprecedented command issued to them, fail to respond before Perkins' bodyguard calmly insists that the broadcast should continue.

The scenes featuring the media demonstrate a central dramatic strategy of *A Very British Coup*. Broadly speaking, the programme simplifies its featured sectors of public life into representative blocks. Thus the news journalists, gathered for the weekly press conferences which Perkins institutes, are presented as an amorphous pack eager for sensational utterances. The BBC television studio where interviews are conducted with Perkins and Sir George Fison, the proprietor of a tabloid newspaper, and from which Perkins delivers his address to the nation, is always the same one. The production staff, including the editor and vision mixer, are in all cases the same. On the one hand this is straightforward dramatic shorthand: it would be pedantic (and more expensive) to show separate programmes with different personnel. On a deeper level it accords with a strategy whereby the programme homogenises the world of the media into a group of more or less cynical professionals whose reaction to Perkins' unorthodox style of leadership ranges from casual surprise to barely concealed hostility. This helps further the dramatic premise of the programme: that the Government is the victim of a subtly concerted network of opponents. Most of the characters in *A Very British Coup* are either 'for' Perkins or 'against' him. Having signalled its willingness to demythologise the workings of government and the media, then, the programme creates instead a different set of mythologies based around its presentation of conflicts.

There is a sheerly formal aspect to this. Let us consider, for instance, Mick Jackson's use of close-ups in ways which are unconventional in mainstream television drama. Close-ups, of course, allow a more detailed view of any one object or person, but they can also be used to distort and make strange. About six minutes into the programme, for instance, there is a sequence showing Perkins' acceptance speech once the election result in his own constituency has been announced. The shot-construction and editing structure themselves refer beyond the substance of the speech and convey the thematic core of the programme.

Perkins is speaking on the platform, with a bank of television screens behind him which together show one large close-up of his face. He says:



If it is simple-minded and foolish to feel revulsion at the fact that millions of men, women and children are forced to live in hell so that a tiny bunch of fat cats can eat the cream, then yes, I plead guilty, I hold up my hands and I confess, 'I am a simple-minded fool'.

The image cuts to:

Shot 1

A big-close-up of Perkins' face, viewed from a low angle to his left. The black-and-white image is that shown on the screens behind him, giving in fact a strong bluish tint. A threatening low chord begins and continues for the rest of the sequence. Perkins says, 'And I would like to thank the other millions of simple-minded fools ...'

Cut            Shot 2

A wide-angle shot of three men in suits at the end of a large table, watching the broadcast. They are largely in shadow and lit by the blue glare of the television. The viewer later discovers that these are the President of the United States and two of his staff. Perkins' voiceover continues throughout this sequence: '... who indicated by their votes that they feel the same way.'

Cut            Shot 3

A big-close-up, square-on, of the US President. 'They have given notice, ...'

Cut            Shot 4

A close-up from a slightly low angle to his right of Fiennes, an MI5 operative. He too is blue-lit and watching the television. '...we have given notice, to the outgoing Government and to that whole ...'

Cut            Shot 5

A close-up, exactly the same lighting and format as the previous shot, of Sir Percy Browne, the chief of staff of MI5. '... non-elected army that hold power in this country

...' Browne half-winces. Perkins' audience cheers.

Cut            Shot 6

A close-up of Perkins, as shot 1 but this time 'naturally' in colour, unmediated by the screen within the screen. '... now it's *your* turn to go to hell.' The audience cheers. Perkins gives a nod of affirmation.

Cut            Shot 7

A close-up of a military epaulette. The camera pans to look along three faces in a line. The lens's short focal length means that only the middle face is in focus. The blue-lit men are silently watching the television. The officer nearest the camera draws on a cigarette. The audience is still cheering.

The connecting discourse between these shots is one of threat. Perkins provides a threat to the Establishment by virtue of his radical socialist manifesto. The American administration and MI5, on the contrary, will threaten Perkins by attempting to undermine his Government. The composition of the shots draws them together in a structural similarity through the close-up and the blue light which, although it has a plausible determination (it is a reflection from the television screen), contributes a disturbingly unnatural tone. Perkins, however, is separated from the other characters. He is speaking; the others are watching silently. The first shot of the American trio is then superseded by shots which take only one of that trio and place him in conjunction with characters representing MI5 and the military. This condensation presents the political forces which are ranged against Perkins in a single, undifferentiated mode of representation. *A Very British Coup* thus begins to develop its thriller orientation of mystery and threat. Perkins' rhetoric is enjoyably apocalyptic but it is qualified by the measured gaze of the powerful observers. The viewer does not yet know who these characters are; merely that they are coolly, threateningly watching. On the other hand the viewer knows more than Perkins: the next Prime Minister speaks boldly, but even now he is being supervised.

*A Very British Coup* works in terms of antitheses which usually represent Perkins

(socialism) versus the media/the army/MIS/revisionists within Perkins' own party (anti-socialism). The filming style throughout emphasises these narrational oppositions. The sequence, incidentally, also demonstrates the programme's aesthetic felicity. The edits are neatly arranged, as the cut to Sir Percy on 'non-elected army' indicates. The dialogue is economical. The *mise en scène* is organised for full symbolic effect – in this case, in the shots of the threatening observers, situating the subject in surrounding darkness. The deliberate use of close-up strengthens the dynamic of conflict. A conventionalised mode of representation in current affairs interviews and news broadcasts is the mid-shot, where the precise framing of the face and upper body of the interviewer and interviewee confers authority and signifies that the centred personality is able to speak 'directly' to the viewer.<sup>10</sup> In *A Very British Coup* this filming technique is superseded by the programme's own more stylised use of close-ups. Where Perkins is represented on a screen in the sequence referred to above, the image constitutes a significantly bigger close-up than would be usual for the televising of such speeches and events. This is presented within the programme as unproblematic: those who are watching simply watch, as it were, 'as usual'. The image, then, has a double function. On the one hand it simply takes its place within the film narrative as a realist detail: Perkins, as a politician, is naturally on television. On the other hand the image is strange, bigger than usual. The size of the close-up and the angle of the shot give an intensity of concentration on the face. It is being scrutinised and in the process made strange.

This technique recurs throughout the programme. Characters are interviewed within current affairs programmes, and the images which are then seen on television by other characters in the drama are in more intensive close-up than is normal. This is the case, for instance, with Sir George Fison, the proprietor of a tabloid newspaper, and with Laurence Wainwright, the soft-left minister within Perkins' Government. The image appears real, but also unusual and disturbing, a double-function which helps develop an ongoing sense of agitation. By its very size, moreover, it is, quite simply, made significant.

The programme's formal arrangement is continually emphatic. *Mise en scène* in *A*

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<sup>10</sup> See John Ellis, *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 131, 134, 143.

*Very British Coup* consistently foregrounds significant details, whether these are facial expressions, props or graphic information on a computer screen. Fison, the newspaper proprietor, is seen dictating editorial copy over a radio phone from an airbed on a swimming pool, and into a dictaphone whilst in a jacuzzi. The trappings of wealth and luxuriousness appear as 'natural' indications of his cynical and morally unscrupulous character. Sir Percy Browne has a prominently displayed Buddha figure on his desk, connoting an exotic and aesthetic sensibility. He is characteristically pictured smoking a cigarette, in a manner which suggests casual elegance and sedentary reflection. This also allows Ernie Vincze, the director of photography, to shoot through the wreaths of cigarette smoke, giving the image a conventionally threatening cast. A different set of signifiers apply to Perkins: the council flat in Sheffield; the reference to the fact that he only has two extra suits; the Sheffield Wednesday holdall, from which he takes an electric razor to shave before meeting the King; and the shaving mug left to him by his grandfather. The programme's iconography distinguishes between opposing worlds with concomitantly different ideologies.

The narrative dwells on conflicts between the two. *A Very British Coup* is, to an extent, dialectical in its constant oscillation between competing positions. It is not even-handed, however, for it continually arbitrates on them during the course of the narrative. The programme, in other words, does not only describe Perkins' hypothetical activities; it clearly endorses them as well. This is evidenced in a sequence just over seven minutes into the programme which additionally demonstrates the sophisticated way in which music is used for thematic purposes.

Confirmed as the winner of the general election, Perkins leaves Sheffield for London. He is shown in long-shot walking over a connecting bridge at Sheffield's British Rail station, flanked by supporters, photographers, and a walking jazz band who are playing a rowdy version of the socialist anthem 'The Red Flag'. The image cuts to a shot from the railway platform at the foot of the stairs, which shows a seated brass band, also playing 'The Red Flag'. The soundtrack takes over this latter rendition. It is more ordered, and in a higher key. As Perkins approaches, the jazz band's music fades in again (this time in the same key as the brass band!), and the two renditions merge in a cacophonous celebration along with cheers from the crowd. Perkins

passes the band on his progress to the train, and the soundtrack cross-fades 'The Red Flag' with music from Mozart's Mass in C Minor, the theme music for the programme as a whole. The movement is thus from the rousing anthem, with its specifically socialist context, to the more generalised classical music. This acts as a thematic link to Perkins' journey to London, (Mozart's Mass has already been connected with the 'Big Ben' clock face, itself a signifier for the capital). The soundtrack uses qualitatively different kinds of music in a linear fashion to signify Perkins' advance from spirited but disorganised socialism, to a more orderly but no less celebratory form of socialism, to a supremely resonant and ceremonial journey to the capital.

The mixed iconography pictured in this sequence includes an array of Union Jack pennants and a banner which features a man in an ordinary cap and jacket clenching his fist in a victory salute. The pennants would usually signify Empire, Jubilee and Royal Wedding; the banner the quasi-mythic victory of the working class. There is an undercurrent of ironic triumphalism in the yoking together of the two, in a sequence which also fuses 'The Red Flag' and Mozart, and the North (Sheffield) and the South (London). Perkins' victory, it seems, promises a newly united Britain.

The first establishing shot of the brass band also contains a telephone kiosk at the right of the shot, mid-frame, at the foot of the stairs. The image cuts to a shot through the kiosk's glass pane which features, left of frame, a man having a telephone conversation. He cranes his head to watch as Perkins comes down the stairs. This single shot is characteristic of the programme's constant implication of the private and the public, wrapping events of public significance within the context of an individual perspective. That perspective is dropped in here as an incidental detail amid Perkins' splendidly anticipatory departure for the capital: a socialist leader advances.

Perkins himself is represented in a manner which emphasises both the public figure and the private man. On the one hand he is shown as a politician at the mercy, to some extent, of the larger social forces represented by Browne (MI5), Alford (the BBC), Fison (the press) and other members of the Establishment. On the other hand he is portrayed in highly individualised terms. The viewer is given a privileged view of uniquely private moments – as when Perkins is shown urinating (twice in the programme) or musing on a letter from an ex-lover. In *A Very British Coup* there is a

firm textual endorsement of the protagonist's centrality and thereby the policies he and his party espouse.

This is borne out in another striking tendency. At key moments the narrative is slowed down to allow the insertion of a set-piece: an 'event' both in terms of the story, encapsulating a moment of pivotal significance to the drama, and in terms of the methods of representation. Such set-pieces are a characteristic of director Mick Jackson's work. Perkins' ascent to the Cabinet Room, as already discussed, is one of these. The most clearly signalled set-piece in *A Very British Coup*, however, is the sequence midway through Episode 2 – at the heart of the serial – which deals with the disarming of a nuclear missile. The event initially grows out of the drama. The British Government is negotiating with the American administration for the removal of American bases from British soil (an eye-opening premise, given the close 'special relationship' which existed between the British and American Governments in actuality in this period). The Americans are proving obdurate. What is needed, suggests one of Perkins' advisors, is a media event to capture the imagination of the public: the dismantling of a nuclear warhead.

This gives the programme's production team an opportunity to demonstrate their own virtuosity. They stage the event, which is itself, within the drama, the staging of an event. The sequence has a doubly reinforced status as representation. It begins with a close-up of the 'Big Ben' clock face as the minute-hand edges towards the hour. This has a narrational function – the event is eagerly awaited and it would presumably begin on the hour – but the image refers back to the programme's opening sequence, which also featured the clock face. Here, as there, the music which continues throughout is from Mozart's Mass in C Minor. Thus the sound and image which introduces Perkins' media event is the same as that which introduces *A Very British Coup* as a whole, again blurring any distinction between the drama's discourse and that of its central character. The programme also blurs the boundaries between its own dramatising tendencies and the manner of reportage of the 'event' on television within the drama. It subscribes to this momentous act of demilitarisation in a conflated act of celebration.

Part of the sequence reproduces what is supposed to be the 'actual' television coverage, although it shows this within a framework which makes clear that it is,

precisely, reportage. Thus images of the dismantling taking place also include the (fictional) camera teams filming the event. The image is further dazzled by the bright television lighting which they use. These shots are worked into a mode of representation familiar from television's customary methods of 'special events' coverage. There are passages in slow-motion; the camera wheels around the technicians dismantling the warhead, consciously observing; Mozart plays; a voiceover, provided by Perkins, gives a commentary. This soundtrack, however, plays over images which cut from the event itself to shots of the viewing public watching at home, or watching televisions in a shop window, in attitudes of close attention. The sequence climaxes with the release of a flock of doves. As the incandescently white birds fly upwards into a black sky, the image cuts to a shot of Fiennes, in characteristic big-close-up, lit by the familiar bluish light, who winces and exclaims, "Jesus!" The programme situates the doves firmly within the oppositional discourse of its central character and celebrates this moment of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

The sequence is marked by a mischievous trope. There is a shot of the BBC's vision mixer, who has hitherto been seen knitting at her work, indifferent to the supposed importance of the events her station is transmitting. During the dismantling sequence she is shown watching with an expression of surprised concentration. The only other time the programme represents her thus is when Perkins departs from the pre-prepared text of his televised resignation speech. The viewer is invited to share her rapt attention. Patricia Mellencamp notes that moments of spectacle in a musical are separated from the linear flow of the story.<sup>11</sup> They are moments of intense gratification and pleasure for the viewer. This sequence has exactly the same function, and its effect is precisely to endorse the politics articulated by the socialist Perkins.

The set-piece occurs in other dramas which Jackson has directed, and as this is such an unusual dramatic device in terms of the conventions of mainstream television narration, it is worth digressing briefly to consider a couple of additional examples. In *Threads* (BBC, 1984), for instance, the pivotal moment in the narrative is the explosion of a nuclear bomb in Sheffield. This again provides a moment of arrested narration. Footage of a developing mushroom cloud is accompanied by absolute silence. The

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<sup>11</sup> See Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: BFI, 1980), 30.

programme has previously punctuated sequences with a black screen, a symbolic gesture – bleak, funereal and intrusive – which emphasises its segmentation into units of information and consolidates the emerging tone of despair. After the shot of the mushroom cloud, however, the image cuts to a completely white screen. This sudden enveloping whiteness must surely signify the flash of the explosion. As the only time a white screen is used in the programme it indicates the utter uniqueness of the event itself. Given our knowledge of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War, the suggestion that a nuclear explosion is cataclysmic is stating the obvious. Nonetheless such assumptions still need to be dramatised, and the solution in *Threads* fixes the mushroom cloud as the most awful punctuating moment of the drama, an event from which there can be no return.

In *Life Story* (BBC, 1987), by absolute contrast, the key set-piece occurs when the geneticists Crick and Watson unveil their model of the structure of DNA. This sequence is shown in slow motion as the two central characters reveal their discovery to admiring colleagues. Music plays and the camera circles the model, making it the pivotal focus of a tracking shot just as, thematically, it is the still point around which the whole programme revolves. *Life Story* depicts the discovery of the double-helix structure as a race – with thriller overtones – between competing groups of scientists. The model is reified, in another moment of narrative arrest, as an icon invested with significance. In all three dramas each set-piece sequence has a highly symbolic function, referring to issues developed within the programme which have an emphatically cultural bearing. This mode of representation fixes one particular sensibility from which all else unravels. In *Threads* this is a lamentation, detailing the horrifying capabilities of nuclear weapons – the effects of which, the programme suggests, last for generations. In *Life Story* it is proud and euphoric, celebrating a pioneering achievement of science. In *A Very British Coup* the sensibility is that of the Prime Minister himself, determinedly liberatory as the doves soar into the sky.

The success of *A Very British Coup* in projecting such a charismatic protagonist is evidenced in admiring responses on the Left. The programme was transmitted during the Labour Party's leadership election campaign, which begged obvious comparisons between the actual contenders and the fictional Perkins. Ken Livingstone suggested that



'socialists across Britain have tuned in to Harry Perkins, seen the strength and confidence of his character, and quietly whispered to themselves "if only I could vote for Harry in the leadership contest"'.'<sup>12</sup> *A New Statesman* editorial, meanwhile, drew ironic comfort from the example of Ronald Reagan in the United States in noting the obvious drawback that Perkins 'does not exist. But Ray McAnally does. ... It is not too late he should enter the Labour leadership contest at once.'<sup>13</sup>

For all Perkins' inspirational qualities, *A Very British Coup* is actually riven with alternating sensibilities, swinging between optimism and pessimism, between celebration and admonition. It is a text permeated throughout with a sense of event and also with a sense of impending crisis. This is finally confirmed by an ending which does not provide a complete closure. Perkins and Sir Percy Browne (played by Alan MacNaughton) have a decisive showdown in the Cabinet Room. Perkins has received details about alleged payments into his private account which would indicate that he has been 'bought' by the Soviet Union. Browne admits that the allegations are rigged but that they will nonetheless be made public unless Perkins resigns. The Establishment has played its hand. The exchange between the two men has the deep resonance of an endless struggle between the classes. As Perkins subsequently says to his press secretary:

Sir Percy Browne inherited a country house, fifty thousand acres of property in London and a noble profile. I inherited a shaving mug from my grandfather. What we do with our inheritance. That, you might say, is the question.

Perkins appears to accede to Browne's demands and arranges a special Prime Ministerial broadcast at which he is to announce his resignation on the grounds of ill-health. In fact he stages a coup of his own, abandoning his prepared text, explaining the circumstances of the smear, promising a full public enquiry and calling a general election at which he will stand. In Mullin's novel, Perkins resigns in the face of the threats made against him. The television adaptation is less pessimistic about its

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<sup>12</sup> Ken Livingstone, 'A Very Popular Coup', *Evening Standard*, 5 July 1988, 18.

<sup>13</sup> 'Dream ticket', *New Statesman*, 10 June 1988, 5.

protagonist, but not about the eventual outcome. It ends, as it began, on election day. Perkins shaves at the start of the day, as at the beginning of the programme. The final voiceover, however, is not Perkins' but a radio newsreader's. The bulletin is ambiguous and hints that Perkins is unlikely to achieve victory:

This is the BBC World Service ... In London, the political upheaval of the last three weeks following the recent adjournment of Parliament appears to be drawing to a close. A statement on behalf of the authorities at Buckingham Palace will be issued later this morning, which is expected to clarify the constitutional situation.

The voiceover is then drowned out by the noise of a helicopter and voices on a walkie talkie. The final shot is of a polling station in the bleak early-morning light, whilst there is a figure silhouetted from behind in the corner of the shot, holding a gun. The military were first represented, at the start of the programme, when the result of the count in Perkins' constituency was announced. The image showed a figure wearing a military uniform, as revealed by the epaulette on his shoulder, viewing the announcement on television. It is as if the army has come from the inside, watching secretly, to the outside, patrolling in the open. Has this, in fact, been the coup? But the closure is deliberately vague, a denouement which forbids resolution.<sup>14</sup>

This is the necessarily complex, partly-open ending to a cautionary, ideologically-inscribed fantasy. *A Very British Coup* sets out not just to tell a story of putative future events, but to recommend a certain political programme. It projects a Manichaean conflict between 'good' (Perkins/socialism) and 'evil' (the establishment/anti-socialism). It is a conflict which the 'good' Perkins will surely never finally win, but such anxieties are soothed in the very fact that the drama champions him nonetheless.

In a discussion of controversial dramas of the 1980s, George Brandt wonders why *A*

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<sup>14</sup> For an examination of the ending of *A Very British Coup* in relation to similar narrative closures in thrillers of the period, see pp. 332-3.

*Very British Coup* failed to ignite responses similar to those levelled at, say, *The Monocled Mutineer*, transmitted a couple of years earlier.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the answer lies in Jeremy Ridgman's observation that 'A *Very British Coup* is not a polemical work but a visionary, cautionary and celebratory one'.<sup>16</sup> It does not tell of events which happened in the past, as with *The Monocled Mutineer*. Nor does it claim to dramatise contemporary events in the manner of other controversial programmes like *Tumbledown* and *Who Bombed Birmingham?*. Its evocation of abuses of power is partly diluted by its 'fantasised' futurist narrative and, not least, by its virtually utopian presentation of Harry Perkins. It is, then, a question of the programme's relationship to the 'real'.

In an influential paper, Raymond Williams posits three characteristic 'terms' observable in the development of realism since the Eighteenth Century: a conscious movement towards social extension; a movement towards situating actions in the present; and an emphasis on secular action. In his discussion of the Loach-Garnett-Allen play *The Big Flame* (BBC, 1969), however, he recommends an additional defining term, given that the drama extends its meanings towards a particular audience in the interests of a reasonably well-defined political position. The fourth term, then, is 'the consciously interpretative in relation to a particular political viewpoint'.<sup>17</sup> This means that a dramatic and political hypothesis is established ('what would happen if...?'), and treated in terms which are clearly politically defined. Camerawork, dialogue, editing structures and various other technical criteria are distinctly motivated by their relationship to the programme's hypothesis, and can be seen specifically to advance this hypothesis rather than simply being 'present' in all their casual innocence.

*A Very British Coup* is a realist drama in this sense. Its formal devices, as I have suggested, are extremely theatrical and project an overtly dramatised set of conflicts. The drama does not claim to be 'actual', merely *possible*. That said, its carefully structured contemporaneity depends upon a number of realist strategies designed to enhance the 'consciously interpretative' aspect of the programme. It is a rich

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<sup>15</sup> George Brandt, 'Introduction', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Ridgman, 'Conspiracy and Consensus', 213.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond Williams, 'A Lecture on Realism', *Screen*, v18, n1 (spring 1977), 68.

combination: a futurist drama which foregrounds a number of stylised elements but which simultaneously reflects on the discourse of power in Britain at the time of the programme's transmission.

*A Very British Coup* draws overtly on the strategies of the thriller. Its narrative presents a protagonist continually under threat, the source of which is located in a network of interests at the heart of the Establishment. Perkins is confirmed as an 'outsider', and in the process the programme's formal devices create thriller-patterns of suspense and conflict. The serial further connects with the dramas examined in previous pages on account of its structure of feeling, a shared characteristic which I shall discuss more fully in the final chapter. *A Very British Coup* made no accusations regarding actual abuses of power: hence it was not explicitly controversial. In forwarding its premise, however, it gave shape to contemporary anxieties about the nature of the modern British state. To that extent the programme was 'political' simply by virtue of its presence in the evening's viewing schedule. As Mick Jackson observed:

There is a vague anxiety, a feeling deep down that things are spiralling out of control, that the rules of the game have changed. It is an inarticulate, unexpressed feeling, but it is definitely there. Films like *A Very British Coup*, *Defence of the Realm* and *Edge of Darkness* help to legitimate such feelings. They help people to realise that they are not alone in their worries, that they are not crazy or paranoid, and that there really is a hidden, unanswerable face of authority beneath the acceptable public mask.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Petley, 'A Very British Coup', 97.

## **8 Epic narration in the thriller: *Traffik* (1989) and *GBH* (1991)**

The serial format presents the opportunity to develop a narrative in greater detail than can be encompassed by the single drama or film. The programmes discussed in the preceding chapters accordingly offer a considerable focus on the experiences of the protagonist. The serial allows yet further complexities, however. Rather than being limited to a dominant storyline featuring a central character, it is possible to develop different narratives without sacrificing detail or depth. This is the case with the two serials I shall examine independently in this chapter, both of which are notable for their extended narrative structures. *Traffik* features three geographically-defined 'spaces' of narration (England, Pakistan and Germany), although within these the drama splinters again into discrete but overlapping storylines. *GBH* is more straightforward: it presents the experiences of two central characters who come into contact at points during the drama but who are otherwise treated separately.

Both dramas depend upon thriller elements, although they indicate ways in which, by the end of the 1980s, thriller devices were integrated with diverse dramatic idioms. Both draw upon many of the themes appropriate to the thriller identified in Chapters 4 and 5. With regard to *Traffik*, I shall explore the development of a social critique through a striking blend of epic, thriller and melodrama modes. With regard to *GBH*, I shall examine the presentation of combined public and psychological disorder. Both serials, however, share the following: an elaborate narrative structure, a sophisticated modulation of genres, and a willingness to explore major social and political issues. They are among the most ambitious television dramas of the period.

Both programmes were broadcast by Channel Four. With a major commitment to single drama in the form of feature film production, Channel Four financed the production of far fewer series and serials than did the BBC or the major ITV network companies during the 1980s. Its drama policy, under David Rose and then David Aukin,<sup>1</sup> was accordingly to commit the channel only to large-scale projects intended to make a substantial public and critical impact. This was the case, for instance, with *The Manageress* (1989-90; a drama about a woman who becomes the manager of a football team), *The Camomile Lawn* (1992; an adaptation of the novel by Mary Wesley) and *Lipstick on Your Collar* (1993; the serial written by Dennis Potter). *Traffik* and *GBH*, both expensive and prestigious serial dramas, are also the result of this strategy and I shall examine them in turn.

### ***Traffik*: melodrama and meaning**

*Traffik* was produced by Brian Eastman, whose track record as the producer of popular series and serials like *Blott on the Landscape* (1985), *Porterhouse Blue* (1987), *Agatha Christie's Poirot* (1989-93), *Jeeves and Wooster* (1990-93) and *Anna Lee* (1993-4) indicates a preoccupation with escapist entertainment rather than with the venting of public issues. Simon Moore, the writer, had previously written *Inside Out* (1985), a serial about an employment agency run by ex-convicts, and would later write and direct *Under Suspicion* (1992), a latter-day private-eye *film noir*. The director of *Traffik* was Alastair Reid, who had directed early episodes of *Inspector Morse* in 1987, and who would later direct another major serial broadcast on Channel Four, *Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City* (1993). The programme was produced for Channel Four by Picture Partnership Productions.

Transmitted in five weekly episodes,<sup>2</sup> *Traffik* cost £3.2 million, making it the most expensive drama financed solely by Channel Four up to that point. The same would

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<sup>1</sup> David Aukin took over as Head of Drama from David Rose in October 1990.

<sup>2</sup> *Traffik* began transmission on Channel Four on 22 June 1989. Episodes were one hour in duration, apart from the feature-length opening episode which ran for two hours.

subsequently be true of *GBH*, transmitted two years later, which cost £6.5 million. Channel Four entered into filming agreements with officials from Benazir Bhutto's new administration in Pakistan. These involved the use of locations and local knowledge and properties (some heroin was acquired, for instance, for some of the scenes) in return for transmission rights rather than for any injection of co-production money - an unusual form of collaboration. The programme won the BAFTA Award for Best Series/Serial for 1989.

*Traffik* is epic in structure. The narrative is not organised around a central protagonist but around a unifying focus on the heroin trade, addressing opium farming, heroin manufacture, smuggling, addiction and appropriate government initiatives. It depicts a commodity-process, then, involving cultivation, manufacture, distribution and use. The programme is set in three different countries in two continents (Europe and Asia), a straightforward division of place, clearly signalled throughout, which qualifies the programme's focus (the heroin trade is international) and suggests an epic disparateness (it has many 'centres'). The fact that *Traffik* featured 200 speaking parts indicates the breadth of its various storylines. The experiences of the main characters overlap at various points, obviously so in that sometimes a character from one narrative line comes into contact with a character from another narrative line; and more indirectly in that a character's actions might impinge on another character in another part of the world altogether. Actions are therefore interrelated; but by the same token it is their disconnectedness which makes the heroin trade so insidious.

The drama is thus both centred and decentred. As no single setting predominates, a tapestry style is developed, piecing different segments of narrative into a coherent whole. This cohesion is, on the surface, thematic (addressing corruption and the downfall of individuals in the wake of the heroin trade); but it also allows the programme to suggest that the divergent interests of national politics and underground business operations are complicit in perpetuating cycles of exploitation, dependency and misery. The context is global, not parochial.

According to an account in *The Guardian*, the production team aimed to achieve in *Traffik* 'the scope of an American mini-series and the international eye of a feature

film'.<sup>3</sup> If this signals an awareness of internationally marketable drama formats, writer Simon Moore also claimed an intention to invert established narrative expectations:

A conventional drama series about the drug trade would end up with a huge bust in which everyone is arrested and the chain is broken. So we thought, why not start the series with the bust, and then spend the rest of the series showing how the route is gradually put back together. So each episode covers about a month, and shows three apparently separate stories which gradually come together until you see that they are in fact one story.<sup>4</sup>

The response to *Traffik* in the national press in general praised the programme's complexity and a number of critics commented on the realism of its characterisation and dialogue. According to Chris Dunkley, for instance, 'Far from being a hero, the British cabinet minister who discovers his daughter's heroin addiction is accused by his wife of not understanding his own child's life or anxieties. There is a moral ambivalence here which accurately reflects real life.'<sup>5</sup> Kevin Jackson noted in *The Independent* that many international mini-series, featuring heavily stereotyped 'native' characters, 'can be considered one of the more dismal products of Western cultural imperialism. ... where [*Traffik*] breaks from form ... is in giving equal time and equal importance to each of its three leading characters from those countries [Britain, Germany and Pakistan], and – more unusual still – in allowing each character to speak, wherever appropriate, in their own language.'<sup>6</sup>

*Traffik* features dialogue in four languages (English, German, Urdu and Pushtu) with non-English speech accompanied by subtitles. These indicate the programme's intended seriousness (subtitles are often associated with art-house films, which avoid dubbing in order to preserve cultural specificity) and its realist effect (if characters in Pakistan speak Urdu, this is rendered accordingly). Actually, however, the programme uses devices which conveniently allow English to be widely spoken: Karl Rosshalde,

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Gristwood, 'A sharp shock of reality', *The Guardian*, 22 June 1989, 25.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Kevin Jackson, 'Speaking in many tongues', *The Independent*, 8 June 1989, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Dunkley, '*Traffik*' (review excerpted by BFI Library Services), *Financial Times*, 28 June 1989, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Jackson, 'Speaking in many tongues'.



the German drug baron, is married to an English woman, so many of the scenes set in Germany are rendered in English; and English is the common tongue spoken by characters from different parts of Pakistan.

A level of contrivance in this and other respects – hence a *lack* of ambiguity – was commented upon by some newspaper critics. Adam Sweeting suggested that ‘while subtitles might have been intended to evoke authenticity and sophistication, they also spelt out the thinness of the dialogue’, and described *Traffik* as ‘an airport paperback with pretensions’.<sup>7</sup> Mark Lawson echoed these comments, finding *Traffik* a ‘beach-blockbuster historical’ and complaining that ‘Moore’s dialogue has an airport-stand feel throughout’.<sup>8</sup>

These differing reactions indicate the tensions in a formally ambitious serial. I shall argue in this chapter that *Traffik* is dramatically effective precisely because it depends upon a melodramatic idiom, but that this does involve a slippage into stereotyped images and ideas. Certainly, as Edward Said has impressively demonstrated in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, Western culture, through often unrecognised means, routinely interprets and (mis)represents the East according to its own interests and imagination.<sup>9</sup> We might borrow a wry phrase from Said in noting that, as we shall see, the Pakistan of *Traffik* ‘has less to do with the Orient than it does with “our” world’.<sup>10</sup> One must therefore arbitrate between, on the one hand, the ensuing trans-cultural simplifications and, on the other, the oppositional tendencies of the text (with polarising effects which are similar to those of *A Very British Coup*) in scrutinising the relationship between civic and private responsibility. For *Traffik* is underpinned by a serious critique of the social and political implications of the heroin trade. The effectiveness of this critique is, at every stage, complicated by overt dramatisation: if the serial is compelling it is because of the devices of melodramatic social realism rather than in spite of them.

Of course *Traffik* also operates according to thriller conventions, and a short

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Sweeting, ‘High flying on an airport paperback’, *The Guardian*, 23 June 1989, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Lawson, ‘Caught in a jam’, *The Independent*, 4 July 1989, 14.

<sup>9</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 12.

account of these is necessary before expanding on the programme's unusual combination of thriller, melodrama and epic forms. The thriller mode is clearly established from the very beginning. The opening sequence intercuts helicopter shots of the countryside of north Pakistan with tight shots of four characters in a small room inside a ship. Two of the men are about to buy a consignment of heroin from the other pair. The soundtrack includes a series of effects created through the music, evoking a screech-like noise, the sound of a voice saying 'aah', the boom of a slamming door, a cymbal shimmer and an echo, which help build a sense of danger. Diegetic sound is manipulated alongside these non-diegetic elements: the striking of a match and the scrunching up of a piece of paper are amplified, for instance. A blue key-light illuminates the scene, a dim and intermittent shaft of light intrudes from outside, and the use of chiaroscuro is pronounced. Dialogue is terse; shot formats typical of the thriller are used, including low-angle shots and big close-ups; and the rhythm of the scene suddenly accelerates as a shoot-out takes place. The viewer learns that two of the men are detectives attempting to expose a pair of drug traffickers.

Nothing in the above description would suggest that *Traffik* is anything other than a drama displaying a studied awareness of genre conventions, and the serial additionally features protagonists in its different narrative lines who are on a quest of some kind and are circumscribed by danger. That said, the strong cross-threads of social and domestic drama are at least as important as the action and thriller sequences. The thriller mode recurs throughout, however, colouring the drama's social basis with suspense and dramatic moment. It operates through a number of registers. There are surprising plot-twists (as, for instance, when a drug baron callously shoots in the head the son of a recalcitrant heroin manufacturer; or when a key witness is poisoned shortly before testifying); escapes and attempted escapes (as when the smuggler flees the detectives in Episodes 1 and 4); and the revelation of new information in sequences of discovery (as when the German police swoop on a restaurant and discover heroin hidden above a panel in the kitchen ceiling). Suspense also works alongside narrative development, as the following sequence demonstrates. Domenquez, the lawyer for a corrupt businessman about to stand trial, wakes to a strange noise. On going into his kitchen to investigate, he discovers that his coffee machine is on. This lurid disturbance has been

arranged by a detective who reveals that he has evidence of the lawyer's previous fraudulent activity and thereby conscripts him as his spy. A twist in the narrative depends on a contrivance – the lawyer has a criminal record and has changed his identity – but it characteristically combines melodramatic plot-development with the mechanics of thriller suspense.

The thriller form is an obvious recourse in a programme dealing with drug trafficking, which instantly betokens a dangerous and nefarious world. Its patterns of suspense and resolution and of physical and psychological distress relate to a larger strategy: to explore the process by which characters negotiate their apparently inimical fates. Here the thriller idiom meshes with the programme's controlling humanist agenda. The main protagonists undergo a metaphorical journey through the drama: each is on a quest for either knowledge, physical sensation or material reward, and their values are shaped and changed according to their experiences. The thriller-melodrama invites the viewer to see these events within a moral, indeed ideological, framework, as I shall discuss below.

I use the word 'melodrama' advisedly. Over the last thirty years critics have rescued it from being merely a term of disparagement, signifying drama which is excessively sensational and lacking in emotional or psychological complexity. It has been reclaimed, for instance, to indicate ways in which certain films and television series – especially (and separately) US domestic melodrama in the cinema of the 1950s and '60s, and US soap operas of the the 1970s and '80s – heighten aspects of narrative and thereby increase the pleasures experienced by the viewer. As a result the relevant films and television programmes offer potentially disruptive readings beyond the obvious surfaces of their narratives.<sup>11</sup> Most of the critical attention in this area has been directed to the notion of 'excess' which, as Jane Feuer summarises, is seen 'not merely as aesthetic but as *ideological*, opening up a textual space which may be read against the

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<sup>11</sup> For an absorbing collection of essays on melodrama in different media, see Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (eds), *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen* (London: BFI, 1994). For some useful and influential essays on American domestic melodramas in the 1950s and '60s, see Christine Gledhill (ed), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987).

seemingly hegemonic surface'.<sup>12</sup>

This work is valuable, not least in recuperating genres deemed in some quarters to be trivial or merely escapist, but it is important not to lose sight of earlier formulations of melodramatic effect. The term 'melodrama', deriving from the Greek word 'melos' (music), was originally coined in the Eighteenth Century to denote music-drama.<sup>13</sup> It was subsequently applied to tragicomic, sentimental and didactic entertainments which used theatrical elements – notably live music – to underscore for an audience the emotional resonances of strongly-delineated characters and narratives. It is clear from this rather neutral definition that there is a melodramatising aspect to most of the drama we see on cinema and television screens today, in which the organisation of emotion through characterisation, story structure, shooting style and use of music is paramount.

Something of this sense underscores the validation of melodrama provided by critics in the 1960s for whom, as Eric Bentley suggested, 'Melodrama is not a special and marginal kind of drama, let alone an eccentric or decadent one; it is drama in its elemental form; it is the quintessence of drama.'<sup>14</sup> This somewhat excitable claim at least identifies the *effectiveness* of melodrama, a crucial point when assessing its aesthetic and ideological characteristics. 'Classic' Victorian melodramas like J.B. Buckstone's *Luke the Labourer* (1826), Douglas Jerrold's *Black-Eyed Susan* (1829) and the anonymously-written *Maria Marten* (1828) present narrowly-delineated characters who have 'heroic' or 'villainous' tendencies, operating within a plot which has a clear moral dimension. As Michael Booth notes:

Most definitions of melodrama have laid stress upon the concentration on plot at the expense of characterisation, the reliance on physical sensation, the character stereotypes, the rewarding of virtue, and punishment of vice. These are truly characteristic, but what is really more important is the pattern

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<sup>12</sup> Jane Feuer, 'Melodrama, serial form and television today', *Screen*, v25, n1 (Jan-Feb 1984), 8 [Feuer's emphasis]. Feuer examines the American soaps *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, showing that their narratives in fact allow for extremely *diverse* readings (as opposed to readings which are uniformly against the grain), making the texts remarkably open to ideological interpretation. For a brief indication of critical writing about 'excess', see John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1988), 90-93 and 192-4.

<sup>13</sup> James L. Smith, *Melodrama* (London: Methuen, 1973), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965), 216.

into which they all fit, a pattern giving what appears on the surface to be a wildly chaotic and exceedingly trivial drama a logical moral and philosophical coherence.<sup>15</sup>

Booth's observations are echoed by Robert Heilman, for whom 'melodrama is the realm of social action, public action, action within the world ... Melodrama is concerned with making right prevail in the world and between persons, or with observing that it does not prevail'.<sup>16</sup> These latter studies concentrate on formal aspects of melodrama, but in talking of its contemporary manifestations it seems important to retain a sense of a defining *moral* conception, where techniques of dramatisation ensure that the text is constantly structured along interconnected moral and emotional planes. This is a theme of perhaps the most influential recent account of melodrama, Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Brooks argues that the melodramatic mode has as its 'centre of interest ... the "moral occult", the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality.'<sup>17</sup> The action of the drama or the novel, then, takes place within an ethical matrix which may or may not be clearly recognised. For Brooks, the 'moral occult' is not found, simplistically, in the rewarding of virtue and punishment of villainy, nor even in the provision of morally reassuring conclusions. Instead it is part of the ontology of the dramatic (or literary) world:

Melodrama is ... typically, not only a moralistic drama but the drama of morality: it strives to find, to articulate, to demonstrate, to "prove" the existence of a moral universe ... The play's outcome turns less on the triumph of virtue than on making the world *morally legible*, spelling out its ethical forces and imperatives in large and bold characters.<sup>18</sup>

This well describes the dramatic strategies at work in *Traffik*. Far from being

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), 13-14.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Bechtold Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of experience* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1968), 97. See also Frank Rahill, *The World of Melodrama* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967), xiv.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 42 [my emphasis].

disappointingly crude, the programme engages with contemporary society (and indeed with the realist conventions of television drama) through a modulation of melodramatic techniques. This is true on the most basic level in that its soundtrack, including music by Shostakovich arranged by Fiachra Trench and original music by Tim Souster, is an important source of melodramatic effect. The techniques of melodrama serve to make the programme 'morally legible' and invite the viewer to recognise the events of the narrative as in some respects representative of ethical fissures running through contemporary society.

*Traffik* features central protagonists in each geographically-separated storyline. In Britain, the main characters are Jack Lithgow (played by Bill Paterson), a junior Home Office minister in charge of foreign aid allocation, and his daughter Caroline (played by Julia Ormond), a student and heroin addict. In Pakistan they are Fazal (played by Jamal Shah), a poppy farmer, and the drug baron Tariq Butt (played by Talat Hussain). In Germany they are Helen Rosshalde (played by Lindsay Duncan), wife of a wealthy German businessman on trial for smuggling heroin into the country; and the two detectives working towards his conviction (played by Tilo Prückner and Fritz Müller-Scherz). The drama's orientation around conflicts to do with class, culture, social justice and moral responsibility is apparent even in this brief outline of characters.

In order to explore further the relationship between dramatic idiom and ideological effect in *Traffik*, let us examine the treatment of one of its protagonists, Jack Lithgow, a junior Home Office minister in charge of the allocation of foreign aid. *Traffik* is explicit in its relaying of information about the heroin trade, and these details are often delivered in the context of Lithgow's fact-finding missions to Pakistan. The programme is in this respect similar to American series like *Cagney and Lacey* and *LA Law* where the presentation of extensively researched information contributes to the drama's sense of contemporaneity. In *Traffik* the viewer learns, with the minister, that opium is easy to grow as it needs very little water. Pakistan's opium farmers are encouraged by their government to switch to alternative crops – maize, wheat, sugar cane and tobacco, for instance – but receive too little subsidy to make this an attractive change of practice. For every five acres of poppies, the farmers need to grow 20 acres of sugar cane to earn the same revenue: there is an economic imperative which explains the continued production

of opium at source level. The farmers are thus presented not as malevolent dope-pushers but as working people at the thinnest end of international capitalism's wedge.

Opium can readily be transformed into a morphine base from which it is relatively easy to manufacture heroin. The programme distinguishes between the use of opium among farmers in Pakistan (for whom it is a 'controllable' narcotic), and the use of heroin in the West. This is made especially clear in Episode 5<sup>19</sup> when Lithgow visits the Khyber Pass in the company of a Pathan villager, outside the remit of the official tours which have previously introduced him to the country. The pair rest on a mountainside, and the Pathan offers Lithgow a share of his opium cigarette. At his refusal the Pathan explains that should any of the locals become addicted, two weeks in a form of solitary confinement cures them. Heroin, on the other hand, is different, a commodity manufactured chemically to satisfy Western demand.

Lithgow eventually relents: 'Well, I've thrown everything else I believed in out of the window,' he says as he takes the proffered reefer. 'There are no windows here,' comes the reply. The *mise en scène* – two characters alone on the mountainside at sunset – supports the implicit assertion that opium is part of the 'natural' order of life in Pakistan, quite distinct from the disordering influence of the West. The heroin industry is depicted as vast and nefarious, involving corruption and intimidation at all points from manufacture to distribution. But this is in order to emphasise the non-accountable nature of the system of supply, rather than to suggest that Pakistan is in the grip of drug addiction. Certainly the programme shows almost no images of drug dependency in that country, while it focuses on the seedy settings and depraved behaviour associated with addiction in London.

Lithgow's initial engagement with the drug trafficking industry is circumscribed by *realpolitik*. In a presentation to government colleagues at the beginning of Episode 2, for instance, he notes that heroin from Pakistan accounts for around 80 per cent of the drug's market in the UK, then outlines a set of <sup>priorities</sup> ~~prerogatives~~ for the allocation of aid to Pakistan:

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<sup>19</sup> Episode numbers refer to the repeated transmission of *Traffik*, constituted of six hour-long episodes beginning on 4 January 1990.

I'm not talking about charity. I'm talking about a cost-effective way of tackling the heroin problem at source. Now we simply cannot afford to have a widespread belief that somehow or other government policy is contributing to drug addiction and that is why the expansion of the crop replacement scheme is so very, very useful to us. Now we're not talking about vast sums of money here. We're talking about ... 6 million a year. By investing that money it proves that we care about the undeveloped nations and, more importantly, it identifies the problem for what it is: an overseas problem.

The image cuts to a shot of students at Cambridge running, drunk and doped, through the streets, spraying champagne, on their way to a party. Lithgow's daughter is among them, and the 'problem' is clearly much closer to home. By a plotted coincidence (one of the melodramatising aspects of the programme) she is a heroin addict, and the impingement of domestic and personal problems directly influence his position as a spokesman for the international legislature.

Lithgow's close involvement with an addict provides one of the key dramatic conflicts of the programme. He initially assumes that sufferers bear individual moral responsibility for their actions, but eventually sees drug addiction as the result of integrated social and personal circumstances. His deepening contact with aspects of the heroin trade is both through his daughter and through his ongoing involvement with intergovernmental political initiatives. In Episode 5, for instance, he returns to Pakistan to sign an International Aid Agreement. Coincidental (suspiciously so) with his arrival, the Pakistani police stage a successful drugs bust. Lithgow learns, however, that the impounded heroin has in fact been returned to its 'owner'. The accord which the politician is about to sign is merely cosmetic.

At the signing ceremony Lithgow is poised, pen over document, when he announces, as the programme's theme music wells up: 'I can't sign this. I'm sorry, I do not believe that this agreement will be effective in stopping the trafficking of heroin.' His individual crisis of conscience has international consequence. As so often in thrillers of this period, the language in which the protagonist's doubts are expressed has a disturbed, existential quality. 'Everyone expects me to know what to do,' Lithgow says in a voiceover after inspecting the lorryload of fraudulent powder. 'But you only take decisions if you don't question them ... I feel like I'm falling.'



The circumstances of his job increasingly overlap with his domestic experiences, forming a clear disjunction between the political and the personal. He has ordered a government funded television campaign advertising the dangers of taking heroin, for instance. He rejects a pilot advertisement on the grounds that the agency should not use actors but 'real' people for greater authenticity. He sees the subsequent advert at a pre-arranged screening, in which relatives of drug abusers give direct testimonies to camera. Now enmeshed in his daughter's case, Lithgow is unable to watch the whole showreel. The advert itself is effective and plausible, and again underscores the programme's realist effect. As with other dramas of the period, *Traffik* features media-created images as a natural part of its *mise en scène*, while the screen within the screen emphasises that these images are themselves 'fabricated' rather than straightforwardly representational.<sup>20</sup>

Lithgow's quest to break his daughter's heroin-habit brings him into contact with medical professionals, where the views that he espouses as a government minister are further challenged. He discovers that there are no places available for his daughter in a specialist rehabilitation clinic. The doctor informs him that she can refer her to a private clinic charging a deposit of £1000 and a daily fee of £170. 'You're a government minister, aren't you?' she asks. '... Do something, so that people who can't afford £170 a day have the same chance to save their children.' Given that *Traffik* was first transmitted in 1989 there is an unavoidable resonance with the controversial expansion of private health provision in the latter years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership.

The collision of public event and private trauma become more explicit. In Episode 4 Lithgow participates in a discussion on BBC2's *Newsnight*, chaired by Peter Snow (an actual *Newsnight* broadcaster, a piece of *verité* casting similar to the use of Sue Cook and Michael Meacher in *Edge of Darkness*). Lithgow agrees that resourcing for customs checkpoints should be increased. 'Minister, let me just get this straight,' says Snow. 'When you first took the job did you not say that you thought that present resources were adequate for tackling the problem?' 'Yes, that is the current attitude of government,' replies Lithgow. 'It is no longer my attitude.' He takes off his glasses, a phatic gesture of weariness which brings the section to an end.

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<sup>20</sup> The representation of media images in thriller serials of the period is discussed on pp. 174-5.

This exchange signals the shift in Lithgow's thinking and prepares the viewer for his subsequent hostility to government policy. This is treated ironically towards the end of the programme. Lithgow hears from Pakistan that a large quantity of heroin is being smuggled into Britain on one flight from Karachi to Heathrow. Now without official remit, he instructs the customs officials to swoop; but they are working to rule and not carrying out body searches. In the words of the union leader, 'Due to the Government's refusal to replace lost manning levels we're operating a strictly limited customs inspection'. Lithgow can only stand and watch impotently as the passengers, heroin secreted inside their bodies, come through. His commitment to the struggle against trafficking has now become personal rather than professional, and the distinction between the public and personal spheres is now as marked as it will be in the programme. Having displaced its protagonist from the position of power in which he was initially established, the drama now emphasises his inability to affect events alongside a wider context of government complacency. This trope – impotence in the face of government – is familiar in a number of thrillers of the period.<sup>21</sup>

Now removed from his job and departed from the Government, Lithgow has become disenfranchised and powerless, an individual no longer within the system but against it. This is figured most directly at the end of the programme. Lithgow gives the closing speech at an 'Action Against Drugs' conference, of which he is the Chair. A controlled zoom pulls out from a close-up to a long-shot of Lithgow at the platform before a large audience in the conference hall. His comments are presented as a direct public address, incorporating the viewer as well as the conference delegates. The theme music plays, underscoring the significance of the speech, as Lithgow says:

We're not fighting a battle against criminals making money out of other people's miseries. We are fighting a battle against one of *the* major crises of the last part of the twentieth century, in my opinion *the* major crisis. The law enforcement agencies will do as much as they can to ~~destroy~~ the supply of hard drugs, and we must give them more resources, but in the end that is not the answer. We cannot police the world ... We cannot ultimately stop the supply of heroin or cocaine or any other drug, we can only limit the demand for it. And in the long term that will mean making a decent life for people, and

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<sup>21</sup> For a fuller discussion of this with regard to constructions of individualism, see pp. 356-9.

producing a decent society that people want to live in and not to escape from. And that, my friends, will not be easy.

The transition is clear. Lithgow remains a figure operating in the public sphere, but his personal experience has altered his ideology. No longer a spokesman for government policy, he articulates a different vision based on an understanding of the relationship between social determinants and individual actions. He has, we might say, become a member of the opposition.

At the start of the programme Lithgow is defined in two senses: firstly, as a government junior minister, talked of as a future Prime Minister; secondly, as a father. More particularly, *Traffik* offers a critique of his patriarchal assertiveness, depicting a gradual softening of the character until he becomes less autocratic and more supportive of his daughter Caroline. The drama connects his professional method (brusque and businesslike) and his paternal authoritarianism, building a character with an initially inflexible set of values concerning respectability and appropriate behaviour. This is made clear in his first meeting with Caroline. He goes to collect her from the scene of a party where a student was found dead. She is sitting on the steps to the house where the party took place. Lithgow lifts her roughly to her feet and says, 'I'm not very proud of you. ... You're not some illiterate 16-year-old on a housing estate somewhere. You're supposed to be intelligent.'

Lithgow's snobbery, his antagonistic relationship with his daughter and his distance from her lifestyle are clearly delineated through dramatic juxtaposition. This does indeed give *Traffik* the cadences of the 'beach blockbuster', to use Mark Lawson's dismissive description, but the muscularity of the technique – in fact the melodramatic organisation of conflict – means that the programme's themes are strongly and centrally organised.

Lithgow is told that Caroline's problems might be attributable to circumstances other than ~~self~~-weakness. 'Your daughter has a number of personal problems which are surfacing in her desire to take drugs,' a doctor observes. Lithgow dismisses this as soft-headedness, but as the narrative develops his own unyielding attitudes are eroded. An existential crisis ensues, figured in the drama through subjective voiceover, a dream

sequence and an expressionistic sequence detailing his search for his now-missing daughter. The transition to a more psychological mode begins as Lithgow visits Pakistan again, supposedly to sign the Aid Agreement. 'I loathe this place,' he says in a voiceover, presented as an internal monologue. 'I don't understand it. I see the endless contradictions and compromises and I lose my way ... My wife cried throughout our last conversation. My name is Jack Lithgow and my daughter is a heroin addict.' [Episode 5]

Episode 6 opens with shots of an airplane flying into a sunset (Lithgow is returning to London) and cuts into a dream sequence. Lithgow is at a graveside for a funeral and is rubbing the inside of his arm. 'No, she's not really dead,' he says. The dream-sequence is clumsily integrated – it is the first time a device of this nature has been used in the programme – but it fleshes out a state of psychological disturbance in a character initially depicted as focused and controlled. Having refused to sign the Aid Agreement Lithgow loses his ministerial post, at which point the character enters his nadir in the drama.

He returns home to a message on the answering machine from his wife, saying that she has left him. He then searches for his runaway daughter on the Embankment. A soundtrack of overlaid voices – all Lithgow's, with lines like 'I'm trying to find my daughter ...', along with the sound of phones ringing and music emphasise the acuity of his psychological crisis. This is further reinforced through a night-image, in a strong blue light, showing Lithgow in the rain staring at a vendor's display for the *Evening Standard* bearing the headline: 'Minister sacked after signing fiasco'. There is a cut to Lithgow sitting alone in a church pew, wet and crying. The lone politician in a drizzly and desolate London is reminiscent of a similar scene in *A Very British Coup*, in which the Prime Minister Harry Perkins wanders along deserted streets and walkways during a comparable personal dilemma. In *Traffik* the sequence suggests a bravura confidence on the part of its makers, extending the treatment of a complex protagonist and modulating the crises and clashes of melodrama with a subjectively-ordered interiorised drama.

In accordance with its thriller-melodrama mode, *Traffik* has its share of emblematic settings and discoveries. Lithgow finds the cheap rented accommodation where Caroline

is staying. He climbs flights of bare stairs, in a red light. The programme's theme music plays. He discovers a man shaking his daughter, saying, 'Wake up, look, I paid you, wake up ...'. [Episode 6] Caroline has obviously turned to prostitution to finance her habit. She is lying on the bed with her jeans halfway down her legs, half-conscious. Lithgow and the viewer share the discovery of the extent of Caroline's fall, a structural precursor to the emotional reconciliation between father and daughter. Back at his home, Lithgow's personal transformation is clinched in a scene between the pair: Caroline, in tears, says, 'I don't know how to cope'. Lithgow embraces her and says, 'Oh God, I love you. I love you unconditionally. You don't have to stop taking heroin. You don't have to stop or do anything ... I'll love you whatever.' [Episode 6]

The programme endorses this new tolerance in a scene in which Caroline gives an account of her addiction at a rehabilitation meeting in a small church hall, to a group of other addicts. 'I haven't taken any smack for four days, so, you know, I'm having a go.' The camera pulls focus to reveal Lithgow standing at the back of the hall against the doorway. He is there with his daughter, and the text has thus brought its central character from a position of morally-articulated contemptuousness to one of humbled supportiveness.

The family is disrupted, then partially reconciled: a pattern which emerges in the other dominant narrative lines in *Traffik*. Indeed it is so central that it can be considered one of the main concerns of the drama. The family is in some ways a microcosm of social functioning, displaying hierarchies of responsibility or instances of the abuse of responsibility. Thus the family can seem an echo of its society (the relationships within it harmonious, divided or antagonistic, for example); or it can stand in opposition to the larger 'family' – the *civis* – as a more adequate version of social interaction. Both models are present in *Traffik*: families are sundered during the narrative (the result of extraneous social pressures), then partially reunited at its close (healing themselves in the absence of the supportive ministrations of society). Familial concerns operate within a social and political continuum but must paradoxically seek a space outside that continuum. Some of these tendencies will become clearer in the following discussion. Let us consider the programme's presentation of Fazal, its major protagonist in Pakistan.

Fazal becomes increasingly ambitious throughout the drama, but it is important that he is not characterised as motivated purely by self-interest. Characterisation is again organised around moral and thematic concerns, as is evidenced by the melodramatic conclusion to the first episode. A long sequence details the destruction of the opium crop by the army, working to government orders. After an initial stand-off between the villagers and the army, the soldiers don gas masks and fire tear gas and bullets. Fazal is shot through the hand, and close-ups of his injured palm and his horrified expression play subliminally upon an allusion to Christ-like sacrifice. As Fazal rolls on the ground, a soldier hits his chin with the butt of his rifle. Fire spreads across the field and a tractor runs over the crop. There is a cut to Lithgow returning by plane from Pakistan. Earlier in the episode – in a characteristic conjunction of separate narratives – Fazal had handed Lithgow a note to read. He opens it on the plane to reveal a badly typed message: 'THE AID IS NOT ENOUGH AND NOT SPREAD FAIR'. Lithgow crumples it and prepares for sleep. The image cuts to a shot of Fazal lying on the ground, then to a close-up of an opium bulb collapsing in flames.

The programme's sombre theme music has been playing for much of this sequence and substantially reinforces an elegiac atmosphere counterpointing the images of violation. The viewer's subject-identification is at this point with Fazal rather than with the Westerner Lithgow, who is presented as being harsh and out of touch. The process of heroin manufacture is depicted as a complex interrelationship of Western demand and Asian production, the latter structured by deep cultural patterns and traditions. Political pressure for a reduction in the amount of opium grown has inevitable consequences for the farmers whose livelihoods depend on its cultivation. Fazal is presented as a victim in a melodrama of irrevocable social pressures. His stigmatised suffering is consistent with a narrative whose juxtapositions are between rich and poor, and East and West.

Fazal becomes a somewhat callow social climber because he can see no other option. Unable to farm opium, unable to survive economically by growing an alternative crop, he leaves his family to seek work in Karachi. A slow-motion sequence shows him walking through the streets of the city, emphasising his sense of disconnectedness from this new environment. The scene pre-emptively shows

Lithgow alone in London later in the drama. 'The lonely city' is an effective motif. Scenes at the docks and the market make it clear that there is no work to be had. Fazal's voiceover recounts part of a letter to his wife (the image shows her reading): 'It's Allah's will that we suffer injustice so that we might more truly understand the nature of his eternal blessing.' [Episode 2] Fazal eventually finds employment with Tariq Butt, a wealthy businessman (he owns a transportation company) and an unscrupulous heroin dealer. Thus the drama establishes another polarised relationship: Fazal is poor, far from home, dependent and obedient; Tariq Butt is rich, established in a mansion which is also a power base, independent and unaccountable. The dangers to Fazal are vigorously dramatised in Episode 2 on his arrival at Tariq Butt's residence. He notices that the businessman keeps birds in cages. There is a sudden screech-like chord as Fazal sees the previous driver, guilty of purloining some heroin for his own purposes, who is hanging by his hands, his face horribly mutilated. The camera pulls focus quickly from Kamal and crash-zooms in on Fazal. The image cuts to a shot of a hooded bird of prey, and the hand of someone feeding it. This, of course, is Tariq Butt. The filming technique accentuates and exoticises his cruelty.

The programme casts Fazal's new status in explicitly pessimistic terms. He drives Tariq Butt's Mercedes and wears a smart uniform. He moves his family into the previous chauffeur's quarters and unveils a new sewing machine for his wife. Such rapid upward mobility, however, is hardly celebrated. Melancholic music plays over these images, undercutting the *mise en scène* of the family acquiring greater comfort and security, and continues underneath a short sequence in which Fazal and his sons run towards the sea. A sense of foreboding surrounds even their leisure activities, and is played upon in a short exchange between Fazal and his wife: 'Money gets you respect,' he says. 'We're still in service,' she replies. 'There's always a price to pay.' Fazal disagrees. 'You can never have enough,' he says.[Episode 3]

A process is mapped out: Fazal is a victim of international political forces which restrain him from working in the industry he knows. Because he is unable to find work he undergoes a shift of values whereby, in seeking employment, he becomes more willing to countenance 'immoral' activity for material reward. The complicated relationships between social status, earning capacity and self-respect are insisted upon.

'I've no respect for you any more,' Fazal is told by a friend. 'You're working for gangsters.' 'No-one cared about me when they destroyed my fields,' Fazal replies. [Episode 3]

His journey from opium farmer to gangster's henchman has another function: it allows the programme to elide certain themes with its depiction of heroin production in Pakistan. Fazal learns how to make heroin from opium, for instance, in a small hillside dwelling. During this sequence there is a flashback to Fazal in his days as a farmer, first sowing seeds then walking through a field of fully-grown poppies. It is accompanied by a ruminative voiceover. 'When the harvest was ready, a man would come and buy my opium,' he says. 'Now that man is me. Everything changes, and everything stays the same.' [Episode 4] Opium production is depicted as an organic cycle, while Fazal's position in a larger life cycle is implied. There is a sense of Eastern *dharma*, a cosmic patterning within which the individuals fits. This meditative strain is hardly developed in *Traffik* and here forms one of the programme's strategies for indicating the exotic 'otherness' of Pakistan, a place where natural relationships between individuals and their culture are more deeply embedded than is the case in England. The 'Pakistan' of *Traffik* does not need to conform to accuracy in strictly documentary terms. Rather it is presented as an alternative culture to that of the West, by implication offering a critique of contemporary Western materialism represented by the decadent Rosshaldes, the inflexibly pragmatic Lithgow and his stimulus-seeking daughter. To that extent the programme accords with Edward Said's remarks about the representation of the East from a Western perspective, where the Orient is 'not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe'.<sup>22</sup>

Ironically, then, it is Fazal's 'Westernness', his quest for material comfort and career promotion, which accounts for his demise. A sense of inexorable foreboding accompanies a number of sequences detailing his experiences, partly evoked through the prevalence of sombre music and the use of long shots at points to enforce a more detached mode of narration. This textual evocation of unease finds its fulfilment in Episodes 5 and 6. Fazal is caught in a police raid of a drug-carrying ship in the docks at

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 63.



Karachi. He is sentenced to five years imprisonment and flogged. In order to secure Tariq Butt's benevolent intervention, Fazal's wife agrees to be a human 'carrier' of heroin to England, swallowing a number of bags of heroin powder. In another overtly melodramatic trope she becomes unwell as two of the bags break inside her stomach and dies shortly after arriving in England. Fazal is released from prison, only to discover that his wife has secured his freedom with her life.

These scenes are intercut with those detailing the culmination of Lithgow's search for his daughter. It is clear that heroin is the agent which separates families, but the drug is a signifier for larger structures of social and economic dependency, where families are sundered through a combination of dysfunctional personal relationships and intolerable social and political pressures.

It is consistent with the moral and sentimental mode of melodrama that, as Lithgow and his daughter reach a state of understanding, Fazal takes revenge on Tariq Butt, appropriately injecting him with an instant overdose of heroin while embracing him at a religious ceremony. Thus the trafficker's death is arranged according to the precepts of melodramatic justice: he staggers grotesquely, a syringe sticking out of his neck, in a fatal enforced binge of the drug he has trafficked. Lithgow's family is broken (his wife leaves him) but is then partially stabilised (he is reunited with his daughter). Fazal's family is irrevocably fractured (his wife dies), but the closing gesture of the melodrama is to effect another scene of reconciliation. In a wordless sequence, accompanied by the sonorous theme music and filmed in long shot to accord a sense of epic observation, Fazal meets his two sons as they disembark from a bus. They have returned from London to rural Pakistan. Thus *Traffik* closes with an image of a broken but restored family. The narrative has a markedly cautionary function. It ostensibly warns against the dangers of involvement with the heroin trade, but its real concern lies beyond the surface of its subject matter. It cautions against the rigid lack of compassion which Lithgow initially exhibits, and against the abandonment of principle and concomitant pursuit of gain which mark Fazal's journey. In both respects it reveals a humanist agenda whereby the value of interrelationships within society are celebrated above those of individualistic self-sufficiency. This agenda is expressed through a subtextual assertion of the centrality of the family unit, making *Traffik* a conservative programme

recommending an orthodox form of social organisation. It also marks its dissonance with the culture of Britain in the 1980s, however, where society was increasingly defined as an arena for individual or corporate activity rather than a site of familial interdependence.

It is not coincidental, then, that Helen Rosshalde in Germany, *Traffik's femme fatale*, is surrounded by the trappings of wealth. She lives in a white mansion with a full complement of domestic staff, drives a black Porsche and has her own indoor swimming pool. She is often pictured at a large desk (presumably that of her husband, imprisoned awaiting trial) as she schools herself in her husband's criminal activities. Caught in a spiral of debt, she makes contact with Tariq Butt and proposes a renewal of business. The filming mode – there are a number of close-ups of her in a cool blue light, a conventional signification of threat – depicts her as ruthless and decisive. Indeed she hires a contract killer to assassinate the key witness in the trial of her husband. By the end of the programme she is a model of hardened professionalism. Now a trafficker in her own right, she tells her newly-released husband that she is not in the mood to make love and talks of finding a new heroin supplier. A closing shot depicts her looking out of the window into the garden. A still composition, lit by a bluish light, it juxtaposes the cool, intellectual organisation of heroin smuggling with its destructiveness, as the image cuts to the muted final greeting between Fazal and his sons.

Helen's conversation with her husband has been taped by the police (a conclusion to the detective's quest) so that the denouement of *Traffik*, while resisting the full-blooded deliverance from villainy offered by its melodramatic forebears, still offers a sentimentalised closure. The immoral Rosshaldes will finally be incriminated, even if such perfect justice is merely projected in the narrative's imagined future. Narrative closure in *Traffik* is in fact partial. It involves a return to family and to 'home', and a promise that the villains will eventually pay for their criminality. This is how *Traffik* completes the ambit of moral behaviour it has foregrounded throughout. The effect of its interlinking narratives – underpinned by the epic form and pointed up by thriller and melodrama modes – is to refute Margaret Thatcher's notorious observation that there is no such thing as society. The programme suggests that individuals are subject to

interrelated social, political and cultural determinants, and that far from being parochial and microcosmic, these have international dimensions.

### ***GBH*: public and personal trauma**

Of the programmes centrally examined in this study, *GBH* is the one which blends dramatic conventions most ostentatiously. A sprawling drama following the experiences of two central characters, it is realistic, melodramatic in the manner described earlier in this chapter, farce-like and comic. Its significance lies partly in this interleaving of modes, exemplifying a tendency in much drama of the period to blur formal and generic boundaries. More telling, however, are the connections it makes between the 'state of the nation' and the state of individual psychology at the beginning of the 1990s. Indeed *GBH* develops a familiar thriller theme: that illicit political activity induces paranoia in both its perpetrators and their victims. The thriller mode is appropriate to a drama which proffers a relationship between uncontrollable forces operating in the public sphere and the psychological trauma of individuals.

*GBH* was the most expensive drama serial commissioned up to that point by Channel Four. Produced by GBH Films, it cost £6.5 million and was comprised of seven episodes, each running for 90 minutes, constituting over ten hours of drama.<sup>23</sup> This immediately signals the uniqueness of the project. Most drama serials run for four or six weeks and are usually transmitted in episodes lasting between fifty minutes and an hour. The two-hour running time has also been employed, as with *Inspector Morse* and the *Prime Suspect* dramas, but in these instances the story-duration is respectively two and four hours. Sometimes pilot programmes or opening episodes of a drama series are longer than an hour to allow a more complex presentation of detail and character to an enlarged 'first night' audience, but *GBH* made more extensive long-term demands on its viewers.

*GBH* was writer Alan Bleasdale's fourth major television serial, after *Boys From*

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<sup>23</sup> *GBH* was transmitted on Channel Four in seven weekly episodes from 6 June 1991.

*the Blackstuff* (1982), *Scully* (1984) and *The Monocled Mutineer* (1986); dramas which also resist neat categorisation. Unlike soap operas, sitcoms and most series, which are usually format-oriented, the serial privileges the creative input of the writer. It is still an 'authorial' form of television and Bleasdale's texts, which punctuate Mrs Thatcher's era, established him as one of the most significant playwrights of the period. Before examining the textual strategies of *GBH* it is worth giving a more general account of Bleasdale's work. His previous dramas display recurring tendencies which surface again in the later serial. On the other hand – and this is especially true with regard to *Boys From the Blackstuff* – they established certain assumptions about the writer's political views which *GBH* appeared to contradict. A Bleasdale text was deemed to have certain innate qualities, then. Indeed the writer's 'star' status by the end of the 1980s is important to the commissioning and production processes of *GBH*, a serial which thus draws in various ways on the dramas which precede it.

*Boys From the Blackstuff*, Bleasdale's most celebrated work to date, is a series of five single plays set in Liverpool at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> The plays follow a group of characters first featured in Bleasdale's film play *The Black Stuff* (1980), a gang of tarmac layers who are sacked after they are caught 'doing a foreigner' (illicitly taking on extra work). In 'Jobs for the Boys', the opening play of *Boys From the Blackstuff*, they are together again, working on a building site under a manager whose shoddy ethics and working practices indirectly lead to the death of one of their number. Subsequent episodes focus on individual members of the group, although each drama develops connected themes to do with the effects of unemployment on constructions of masculine identity.<sup>25</sup>

Millington and Nelson locate *Boys From the Blackstuff* within a tradition of

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<sup>24</sup> There is quite extensive academic writing about *Boys From the Blackstuff*. See especially Bob Millington and Robin Nelson, *'Boys From the Blackstuff': the Making of TV Drama* (London: Comedia, 1986); Richard Paterson (ed), *'Boys From the Blackstuff': BFI Dossier 20* (London: British Film Institute, 1984); and Bob Millington, *'Boys From the Blackstuff (Alan Bleasdale)'*, in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 119-139. The former additionally provides an excellent account of the process of production of a television drama series.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the representation of masculinity in *Boys From the Blackstuff* see Richard Paterson, 'Restyling masculinity: the impact of *Boys From the Blackstuff*', in James Curran, Anthony Smith and Pauline Wingate (eds), *Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Methuen, 1987)

'unorthodox and socially engaged drama series' including Jim Allen's *Days of Hope* (1975), Trevor Griffiths' *Bill Brand* (1976), Dennis Potter's *Pennies from Heaven* (1978) and G.F. Newman's *Law and Order* (1978).<sup>26</sup> The formal unorthodies of these are of rather different character (Potter's serial is the most radical in its departure from realist techniques) but the authors reasonably group them together as programmes which are in varying degrees anti-establishment. Millington expands on this aspect of *Boys From the Blackstuff* by situating it alongside another group of texts: 'Northern documentary film dramas' including the BBC dramas *The Big Flame* (1969), *The Rank and File* (1971), *The Spongers* (1978) and *United Kingdom* (1981)<sup>27</sup>. These observations place *Boys From the Blackstuff* in a tradition of (mostly realist) drama which critically interacts with its contemporary society. It is the case, however, that the programme is differentiated by a very particular and individual tone which makes this a clearly 'authored' work and which mitigates against the effect of documentary-like veracity achieved by some its elements.

The unorthodoxy of *Boys From the Blackstuff* lies partly in its format. As Millington notes, the programme 'sits as something of a hybrid between the industrial categories of the single play and the series, as is clear even in the way it was promoted as a "series of five new plays" in the *Radio Times*'.<sup>28</sup> It is especially unusual, however, for its meld of pathos and dark comedy, and its shafts of surprising detail and situation. Scenes like the one in which Yosser and the drunk argue with the policemen as to which of them smashed a shop window (each wants to be arrested in order to spend a night in a bed, albeit in a cell), or the one in which Chrissie finds food for his family by shooting the livestock in his yard in a slaughterous binge, project the 'real' in strikingly idiosyncratic ways. The single exception to the realist basis of the drama is Yosser's dream at the start of 'Yosser's Story', in which the character wades calmly into a boating pond with his children then becomes increasingly desperate as he discovers that they have disappeared, perhaps drowned. Even here, the eventual revelation that this is a dream suggests that this is not surrealism proper (emphatically

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<sup>26</sup> Millington and Nelson, '*Boys From the Blackstuff*', 18.

<sup>27</sup> Millington, '*Boys From the Blackstuff* (Alan Bleasdale)', in Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

privileging the fantastical or the imagined over the 'actual') but an unexpected filling-out of affective detail. The writing, as elsewhere, is notable for its extensiveness in connecting the social, the psychological and the emotional. In this play, Yosser's progressive mental disintegration is presented as a direct result of unemployment and expressed as an embittered bafflement at his failure to find work, uncontrolled macho self-assertion and a fierce protectiveness towards his children.

*Boys From the Blackstuff* entered the public consciousness as an 'oppositional' drama, providing a voice for an emerging underclass – the unemployed – and lamenting the effect that enforced unemployment had on both individual lives and on broader communities. Its very 'transparency' in this respect contributed to the misreadings generated by the more sinuous *GBH* nine years later, as I shall discuss below. That said, there is a greater breadth of experience presented in *Boys From the Blackstuff* than is indicated in some of the earlier reviews of the programme. The drama's secondary characters are peripheral but not unimportant, and even where the petty tyrants of the Department of Employment are depicted in a satirical light, they are often given motivations of their own which help to situate their actions within a broader context. Consider Miss Sutcliffe in 'Shop Thy Neighbour', head of a DoE investigation squad, who is (comically) attracted to Loggo and (more traumatically) experiencing difficulties with her perhaps-senile mother. Other cameos include the semi-organised group of docker-thieves in 'Moonlighter' who reduce Dixie to tears as he, a dock security guard, is forced to stand idly by as they 'work' by plundering a ship's cargo. It is through these additional characters that the social world of *Boys From the Blackstuff* is made more complex. There is an extended presentation of social interaction which does not limit the drama to one sole perspective or even the articulation of a single (sub)class, but which lodges a number of alternating voices, each plausibly detailed, to form a genuinely expanded sense of cultural moment. This is what is meant by writing which somehow catches the resonances of its age. The expansion both of technique (utilising comic, pathetic and bathetic modes of realism) and of social detail offers the viewer a full and well-defined presentation of a community affected by cultural currents specific to the period in which the drama is set.

*Boys From the Blackstuff* made a significant public impact but *The Monocled*

*Mutineer*, transmitted in four episodes on BBC1 in 1986, generated even more attention. Adapted by Bleasdale from the book by John Fairley and William Allison, its central character is Percy Toplis (played by Paul McGann), a former blacksmith from Mansfield who passed himself off as an army officer during and after the First World War, and who was shot by armed police in 1920. The controversy – as was the case with other television dramas with a factual basis, such as *The War Game* (produced in 1966), *Death of a Princess* (1980), *Tumbledown* (1988) and *Shoot to Kill* (1990) – lay in the extent to which Bleasdale and the production team had ‘distorted’ the facts of Toplis’s life. The drama was all the more incendiary in that it retells events leading up to and including the mutiny in 1917 by Allied troops at Etaples, a training camp in France for soldiers on their way to the front. Fairley, Allison and subsequent researchers could find no mention of the affair in Army records, suggesting at the very least official embarrassment at a particularly unsavoury episode. Both the original book and Bleasdale’s television drama can therefore be seen as drawing on a vernacular ‘people’s history’. Bleasdale depicts the mutiny as a near-inevitable consequence of the brutal treatment of the soldiers by their officers. Criticisms of the programme from Tory MPs and in the right wing press accused it of distorting historical verities, attacking the British Army from an irresponsibly left-wing perspective, and displaying gratuitous detail in the depiction of a rape scene.<sup>29</sup>

The issue came to a head the day before transmission of the third episode when the *Daily Mail* published a two-page spread headlined ‘Tissue of Lies on the BBC’. The piece was accompanied by an editorial fulminating against ‘the dishonesty of the BBC in advertising their Monocled Mutineer series as a true story’ and asserting that the *Mail*’s report ‘shows exactly to what depths of irresponsibility the Corporation has sunk. ... Many people believe that the BBC is engaged in a long-term operation to rewrite history because of its hatred of our Imperial past.’<sup>30</sup> The same day the *Daily Telegraph* published a front-page story headed ‘Mutiny TV series “riddled with error”’, following up the news that the serial’s historical adviser, the historian Julian

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<sup>29</sup> For a good account of the controversy and some of the issues involved, see Julian Petley, ‘Over the Top’, *Sight and Sound*, v56, n3 (summer 1987), 126-31.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Big Lie’, *Daily Mail*, 13 September 1986, 6.

Putkowski, disclaimed any responsibility for apparent factual errors and misrepresentations in the programme. Putkowski subsequently reported the *Daily Mail* to the Press Council for 'unethical conduct' in attributing the phrase 'tissue of lies' to him, a quote which was to be widely published. The Council rejected the complaint on the grounds that there was not sufficient difference between the quotation and what Putkowski had actually said – a finding laden with irony, given that the *Daily Mail's* initial indignation had been over the programme's lack of scrupulous accuracy.<sup>31</sup>

The dispute trod familiar ground in arguing over the relationship between verity and ideology,<sup>32</sup> although it was noted that it came at a time when the Government was due to appoint a new chairman to the BBC's Board of Governors. It was known that Margaret Thatcher and Norman Tebbit, the Chairman of the Conservative Party, both preferred the tough Lord King, chairman of British Airways, while the Home Secretary Douglas Hurd was in favour of a more emollient candidate.<sup>33</sup> The controversy comfortably played into the hands of those who felt that the BBC was being run in a shoddy and politically motivated manner.

The vehemence with which these views were expressed, however, should not obscure a couple of important elements in Bleasdale's serial. *The Monocled Mutineer* follows Toplis through a series of misadventures until his death in 1920. As the title implies, the programme is centrally concerned with slippages between and transgressions of the English class system during and just after the War. It is not solely concerned with this historical period, however, as Bleasdale himself made clear:

I also thought that if I got it right I could say something about the bleak times we live in now, that cannon fodder is always cannon fodder, however much you are told that things have changed, be it in the Falklands or on the dole queue. ... I tried to make it clear that the mutiny, like the Brixton and

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<sup>31</sup> See Julian Putkowski, 'Mutineer misfires' (letter), *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, 3 October 1986, 26; and 'Mutineer complaint rejected', *Sunday Times*, 8 February 1987, 9.

<sup>32</sup> For articles sympathetic to the programme, see, for example, Hugh Hebert, 'Over the top with Percy Toplis', *The Guardian*, 15 September 1986, 11; and Christopher Dunkley, 'Blind faith and blinkered views', *Financial Times*, 17 September 1986, 23. Both writers, however, criticise the BBC for initially publicising the programme as a 'true-life' account.

<sup>33</sup> See Petley, 'Over the Top'; and 'Darkly, through a monocle' (editorial), *The Guardian*, 16 September 1986, 10.



Toxteth riots, wasn't politically motivated although it also happened because of politics, because of the condition of the people, which is brought about by political factors.<sup>34</sup>

The serial was conceived, then, not as a coolly objective view of history (were such a thing possible) but as a work whose resonances were modern. This is not to say that it had a clear political agenda. Indeed the anti-hero Toplis is markedly sceptical of the socialism expressed by one of his army colleagues, and the viewer is not encouraged to find him overly cynical in these scenes. Even so, these currents of debates between characters, and more particularly the focus on the defining nature of social status, make this a politically complex work. Jim O'Brien, the director, had also directed parts of *The Jewel in the Crown*, another costume drama similarly cautious about the British class structure. *The Monocled Mutineer* is itself impressively detailed in its visual presentation of historical detail, not least in the scenes set in the trenches, but does have a contemporary tone in presenting a disaffected protagonist who plays the system for what he can get out of it. Toplis is a mercurial character, defined by his multifariousness (hero and cheat, and able to operate across a wide social span) rather than by the rigid demarcations of class and culture which apply to the 'Boys' in the earlier series. The tendency in both dramas, however, is the same: to present British culture at a defining moment of change, showing the effects of shifts in social organisation across a number of emotional and ideological registers. This form of social engagement in Bleasdale's work finds its most expansive expression in *GBH*.

Bleasdale began writing *GBH* as a novel in 1986, sending an eventual draft of over 800 pages to, among others, the producer Verity Lambert. The novel had as its theme the 'Great British Holiday' which provides one interpretation of the title's capital letters. Lambert brought the text to the attention of Peter Ansorge, commissioning editor for drama at Channel Four, who, with chief executive Michael Grade's backing, asked Bleasdale to turn it into a television script. Bleasdale submitted a draft version which represented around 14 hours of drama. Under duress he cut this to around ten hours,<sup>35</sup> although he acknowledged the extent to which Channel Four honoured his

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Petley, 'Over the Top', 128, 130.

<sup>35</sup> See Peter Lewis, 'Amiable bear still pulling no punches', *Sunday Times*, 2 June 1991, Section 5, 3.

initial expansiveness. 'I don't think there's another station or chief executive who would have taken on this story in 1988 and told me not to restrain myself or my verbal aggression in any way,' he later said.<sup>36</sup> Bleasdale in any case had good cause to feel warmly towards Michael Grade for the latter, as controller of BBC1, had supported him in the face of accusations of political bias made against *The Monocled Mutineer*.

Verity Lambert, by now the head of her own production company Cinema Verity, was the executive producer, and Bleasdale is credited as a producer of the programme along with David Jones. In its final form *GBH* is arguably still too long and in need of more incisive script-editing. It seems certain that Bleasdale's position as producer as well as writer enhanced his role in the production process, which might account for an indulgence towards the screenplay. In any case, one can understand the desire of Channel Four's executives to give him a great deal of leeway in deciding the final shape of the programme despite any reservations they might privately have entertained. Bleasdale came to them as a 'star' writer and the very scale of *GBH* promised to seal Channel Four's emerging reputation as a broadcaster of substantial contemporary serial drama.

In the event *GBH* gained additional publicity for a perceived contiguity between one of its central characters (Michael Murray, played by Robert Lindsay) and Derek Hatton, the former deputy leader of Liverpool Council, who came to public attention as a supporter of the Militant tendency in the Labour Party during the period that the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, waged a bitter public campaign against Militant supporters. The connection was more than incidental. Michael Murray is presented as the leader of a northern metropolitan council pursuing a Trotskyite agenda. More provocatively, he enjoys power for its own ends and indulges in various forms of corruption with a view to increase his own wealth, political influence and sexual pleasure. When *GBH* was transmitted, Hatton was due to appear in court accused of conspiracy to defraud ratepayers. The issue was sensitive enough for the Merseyside police, after the transmission of the first episode, to request viewing copies of the programme to determine whether – as Hatton claimed – it might prejudice his trial. Channel Four

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<sup>36</sup> Peter Lewis, 'Amiable bear still pulling no punches'.

refused.<sup>37</sup>

Hatton himself suggested that 'GBH' evidently stood for 'Goodbye Hatton'.<sup>38</sup> Bleasdale continually denied any intended reference. 'If I was that interested in writing about Derek Hatton I would have accepted his offer of a wild and considerable amount of money to ghost-write his biography three or four years ago,' he said. 'I have no interest in Derek.'<sup>39</sup> This smacks of a Catullan attempt to wound through apparent indifference. As I shall argue below, the programme constitutes a rebuke to the form of coercive populist politics practised by Hatton during his period of influence in local government.

As well as keeping copies of *GBH* from the police, Channel Four operated a strict press embargo. Unusually, even critics previewing and reviewing the programme were denied foreknowledge of its developments, with the obvious result that what the journalists did not know could not be conveyed to the nation in advance. This simple tactic enhanced the sense of event surrounding *GBH*. The programme was later attended by controversy of a different nature. It did not win the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Award for best television drama series for 1991 (the award went to *Prime Suspect*) but after the announcement, four of the seven jurors declared that they had voted for Bleasdale's work. The matter was never satisfactorily resolved.<sup>40</sup>

To turn to the drama itself. *GBH* is mostly set in a northern city. References to Liverpool are obvious in the resonances with the period of Militant dominance in that city, and in the Scouse accents of some characters, although many of the scenes were filmed in Manchester. Michael Murray (played by Robert Lindsay), the left wing leader of the local council, palpably luxuriates in his own power. He is often shown in his chauffeur-driven car, followed by a retinue of bodyguards and flunkys. He organises a day of protest against government policy, in part to demonstrate his control over the city. Only one member of the public sector spends the day at work: Jim Nelson (played

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<sup>37</sup> See 'Channel 4 refuses to let police view tapes', *The Independent*, 13 June 1991, 6.

<sup>38</sup> See Richard Last, 'Seconds out for a clean contest', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 1991, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Jasper Rees, 'Britain's medical is not a pretty sight', *The Observer*, 2 June 1991, 68.

<sup>40</sup> See p. 29.

by Michael Palin), the headmaster of a school for children with special educational needs. Ironically Nelson, as a member of the Labour Party, only works because there is no picket line at the school. The press gleefully champion Nelson as a dissenter and Murray's staged political gesture is thus blemished. An opposition is established between the two central characters which dwells upon the relationship between public action and personal conviction, and the tenets of a 'genuine' socialism. This relates to other oppositions developed within the programme, between city and countryside; *realpolitik* and humanism; and the shifting allegiances demanded by class and political commitment.

This is problematic, however. *GBH* initially appears to address questions of local government in the aftermath of the Conservative Party's assault on local and metropolitan councils. The Tories' 1983 manifesto committed the next Conservative Government to the abolition of the Greater London Council – led by the eloquently left-wing Ken Livingstone – and the metropolitan councils. These were duly abolished in 1986 after a high-profile struggle. The Government additionally loosened its ties with local authorities: by 1987 the contribution of central government to local authority funds had been cut from 63 to 49 per cent.<sup>41</sup> The Government paradoxically maintained a direct influence over local government, however, by insisting that local authority spending remained within proscribed limits and enforcing these by 'rate-capping' certain authorities. This shift in relationship between central and local government was compounded by the fact that certain local districts featured very low Tory support. As Vernon Bogdanor notes:

It is, in particular, in Scotland and the great conurbations of the North of England that this relationship has been put under strain to such an extent that there is now, in some parts of Britain, a real question mark over the moral legitimacy of the actions of central government.<sup>42</sup>

It initially appears that, through the characterisation of Murray, *GBH* addresses the

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<sup>41</sup> Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 132.

<sup>42</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, 'The Constitution', in Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The Thatcher Effect: A Decade of Change* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 137.

'excesses' of a left-wing council defined according to the popular and stereotypical idea of Liverpool and perhaps the GLC in the mid-1980s. In fact the drama goes on to question the 'moral legitimacy' of central government – not quite in the terms that Bogdanor notes with regard to local political representation, but in that some of the events in the drama are explained by a right-wing plot, coordinated by the security services to stir up civic unrest in a bid to justify ensuing repressive action. This only gradually becomes clear as the drama develops. The early episodes, then, appear to confirm a right-wing version of 'loony left' behaviour. Ultimately, however, the drama confirms a left-wing version of covert destabilisation on the part of the Government. The shift in perspective is not handled with great elegance, but it is crucial to 'read' *GBH* in respect of its final identity as a conspiracy thriller. I shall address this aspect of the programme in greater detail below, after exploring its treatment of its two protagonists.

Murray and Nelson are both men of the left, although they express this political persuasion in very different ways. To an extent they embody two particular options for socialist affiliation: confrontation with the Establishment, based on a notion of authoritarian manipulation of the instruments of power; or utopian humanism based on a notion of individual worth and collective social responsibility. The pair rarely meet during the course of the programme, although each is impinged on by the actions of the other during most of the narrative. A small number of face-to-face confrontations dramatise the divergent formulations of socialism which they embody. In the first of these, Murray confronts Nelson at his school during the day of protest. 'Let me remind you that you're supposed to be on our side. You're supposed to be a socialist,' he says. Nelson laughs almost uncontrollably at this, then suddenly breaks off to say, 'Don't ever use that word to me. Don't ever, ever claim that what you're doing, Murray, has anything at all to do with socialism.' 'I'll get you,' Murray responds. 'Oh yes, I'll get you. I know where you live.' [Episode 1]

The scene establishes Murray's intimidatory manner, Nelson's resistance and the unpredictability of both men, and indicates that variations on the term 'socialist' will form a *leitmotif* throughout. In a subsequent scene in Episode 1 a group of Murray's followers, dressed uniformly in bomber jackets and jeans, hang on the windows of

Nelson's classroom, climb onto the roof and holler aggressively at the children. The bully-boy tactics are redolent of organised fascist rallies and Murray is presented as the mouthpiece of a strikingly anti-social political vision. Scenes like this are 'staged' by Murray and his sidekicks as coercive displays of power. Equally to the point, they are theatricalised by the production team of *GBH* as spectacular demonstrations of Murray's brand of political agitation, the effect of which is to endorse the heroic isolation of Nelson. This is further demonstrated in another confrontation between the two protagonists. Nelson is alone in his classroom opening his end-of-term presents from the children. Murray enters with a group of henchmen, who pelt Nelson with coins amid cries of 'You fucking Judas', a reference to his supposed breach of party discipline during the day of protest. Murray then talks to Nelson about an impending special meeting of Nelson's local Labour Party, to debate a motion that the latter's membership be rescinded. 'Play your cards right and we can play a draw, me and you,' says Murray. 'No-one need lose, I mean, after all, it's only a game, for Christ's sake.'

Nelson: 'A game?'

Murray: 'Yeah, of course it is ... Look, we should be on the same side. Here's a chance to forget the past and come back and play the game on our side.' [Episode 3]

Nelson punches Murray. The explicit juxtaposition is between the conniving professional politician whose values are shifting and compromised, and the non-doctrinaire Labour man who defends his principles with a Corinthian vigour. This personal and political conflict is resolved in a final direct confrontation in the closing episode. This takes place at the Labour Club during the special meeting, where both protagonists give speeches to a public audience. Nelson's can be seen as the programme's central statement of political philosophy:

Here we all are, living under the most reactionary democratically-elected government we've ever known, in a Labour-controlled city where all animals are equal but some councillors are more equal than others, where too often lions are led by donkey jackets, living proof that the further left you go the more right-wing you become.

At this point Nelson is framed in a two-shot with Murray, the latter looking at the floor.

On 'right-wing', to emphasise Nelson's argument, the image cuts to a close-up of Murray. Nelson continues:

We have to behave with dignity, with honour, and above all without corruption ... socialism is the redistribution not only of wealth, but of care and concern and equality and decency and belief in humankind ... In the short time that we all have, we would want to be remembered for the good that we have done. Wouldn't we? Of course we would.

Murray's speech following this, by contrast, is neither controlled nor articulate. A group of journalists burst into the meeting telling him of riots in the city centre and of the warrant issued for his arrest. Murray is no longer coherent. 'I believed in all the promises I made, and all that,' he says. 'But there was someone with a scarf. She came back ... I'm guilty of nearly everything. But all I ever did was hold a scarf.'

This latter remark – a cryptic allusion to his role in the near-death of a childhood friend – indicates one of the strategies developed in the programme, presenting Murray's 'warped' political vision as in part the result of a deep psychological disturbance. Indeed Nelson's speech makes it clear that *GBH* does not propound a clear agenda along party political lines. If anything it contrasts doctrinal assertiveness with instinctual relativism, treating the latter with marked sympathy. This division between rhetoric and reserve is signalled from the opening sequence of the programme, in which Murray's former headmaster reads an excerpt from T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the words 'That was not what I meant at all' sounding a note which resonates throughout the entire programme. Shortly after this, Murray evicts the headmaster from his own school.

Throughout *GBH* Murray's strident bombast is cast against Nelson's quiet conviction, the latter endorsed by the resolution of the narrative. Through this treatment of its protagonists, *GBH* marks a disavowal of the civic political process, recommending instead the felt experience of a humanist commitment by individuals, to individuals. It shares this tendency with a number of dramas of the period, and I shall return below to this aspect of the programme.

The confrontation between Murray and Nelson, then, is finally won by the latter,

who publicly affirms a set of generalised core values as opposed to a pragmatic political philosophy. Nelson's speech is a reflex against *realpolitik* and has an accordingly idealist dimension. As Hugh Hebert suggests:

With Nelson's easy liberal speech Bleasdale uses his authorial power to drown out the implication of Murray's claims about what he has done for his citizens, and the implication of much of what Bleasdale has written about before: that for the disenfranchised, moderation and toeing the line buy no justice. The argument goes by default, and in a work of this span that's a pity and a weakness.<sup>43</sup>

The default is made in order to foreground a utopian strain of thought and action. In this respect *GBH* is much less bitter and abrasive than *Boys From the Blackstuff*, written ten years earlier, but presents (more coherently than is the case in the earlier series) an assertion of idealist values which is rounded out by Nelson's victory at the Labour Club. Murray himself, defeated on all counts, by implication accepts this shift of power.

'He's me, you know, Teddy,' he says to his minder as he leaves the hall, nodding in Nelson's direction. 'Who is?' Teddy asks. 'Jim Nelson. He's me,' Murray says, thereby suggesting a form of reconciliation between the two characters. Murray's brand of socialism, the programme implies, was doomed by its anti-democratic coerciveness. People like Nelson, by contrast, keep the flag flying through a straightforward espousal of decency and respect. Thus *GBH* re-imagines socialism as a set of humanist generalities rather than as a programmatic praxis. Political value is relocated from the realm of the *civis* to the realm of individual attitude and behaviour. It might appear from an initial summary that *GBH* is predominantly social and political in character, even if it expresses disquiet at organised politics. In fact the programme swerves from a rigorous focus on the political process and concentrates instead on the drama of feelings and emotions. As I shall argue later, however, this does not mean that *GBH* is bleached of any kind of political radicalism. By means of another swerve its narrative suggests that the political process is in any case shackled because of the covert activities, with an expressly right-wing motivation, of the security services.

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<sup>43</sup> Hugh Hebert, 'When good men hope', *The Guardian*, 19 July 1991, 36.



The programme develops personal themes through the experiences of its central protagonists. It provides an extensive focus on male psychological disturbance through challenges to their sense of self-worth and through their fear of losing control of events, of institutions, and of physical behaviour. It marks a development in terms of Bleasdale's presentation of the life of the mind, a memorable aspect of the characterisations in *Boys From the Blackstuff*. As Christopher Dunkley suggests:

The important purpose of *GBH* is to use television serial drama as a means to explore that landscape of the mind which has long been the subject of the novel but which has so rarely been approached on television. The master of the form is Dennis Potter whose *Singing Detective* is the best thing ever attempted in this area, but *GBH* ... runs it a close second.<sup>44</sup>

Both protagonists are subject to a range of obsessions, neuroses and uncontrollable bodily malfunctions. Nelson sleepwalks, waking to discover himself variously in his wardrobe, his outhouse, at the reception desk of a holiday camp and on the moor near his house. He is a hypochondriac, and has a fear of bridges to the extent that he plans a route to his holiday destination which avoids them altogether. His phobia is rendered in an appropriately expressionistic manner when he turns a corner in his car and catches sight of an iron-girdered bridge. This cues a number of swooping shots of the bridge from skewed angles, accompanied by disturbing music on the soundtrack. [Episode 5] Nelson sees a psychotherapist who recommends a technique of stress management which involves him holding his left wrist with his right hand and saying the words 'Calm, calm, calm,' a mantra-like utterance which he repeats at various points throughout the programme. This has a comic aspect (at times Nelson's reaction baffles the people he is with, or is bizarrely out of proportion to events) but it additionally emphasises that for much of the programme the character is engaged in a personal struggle to conquer private fears and phobias.

Murray is obsessed with events in his childhood which he still finds disturbing to remember, and the exposure of which, he is sure, would result in his removal from office. These are depicted gradually through a series of flashbacks, the full 'history'

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Dunkley, 'Local government drama', *Financial Times*, 24 June 1992, 17.

only revealed in the final episode. It transpires that Murray, a working class boy, formed a friendship with a girl in his class named Eileen Critchley, the daughter of a high court judge. The flashbacks present her as a *fille fatale* obsessed with the execution by hanging of Ruth Ellis. She asks Murray to strangle her, a request which is presented as a form of bullying on her part, cajoling the hapless boy to participate. He does, and as she chokes he releases his hold just as his headmaster comes across the scene, assuming an attempted murder by an 8-year-old. To make matters worse, Murray takes the blame for an incident at school in which Eileen kills a cage full of hamsters by pouring acid on them.

These events are presented not through objective third-person narration but through a more subjective mode in order to explain psychological characteristics of the grown man. Thus they are cut as flashbacks into sequences from the present, in which some chance encounter or observation causes Murray suddenly to remember his past. They build a sense of an individual who has lived with a triple-layered trauma: he was complicit in a life-threatening act without fully understanding why; he was betrayed by a friend; and he was misunderstood by those in authority. The flashbacks, then, mitigate against the initial presentation of Murray as an unscrupulous manipulator and encourage a developing degree of sympathy from the viewer. As with the sequences detailing Nelson's bridge phobia, they are shot in an expressionistic manner with a rapidly swirling camera filming from low and tilted angles, and an exaggerated soundtrack featuring, for instance, the headmaster's cries as he beats the young Murray, or Eileen's insistent question-cum-command, 'You do want to please me, don't you Michael?'

Murray is afflicted by a nervous tic which becomes more pronounced during the course of the programme until his left eye and his left arm twitch uncontrollably at moments of stress. This malfunction reaches a comic climax in Episode 4, in a section whose mode is closest to farce. Murray has been invited to the hotel bedroom of Barbara Douglas (played by Lindsay Duncan), the woman he is hoping to seduce. (Barbara, it transpires, is the younger sister of Eileen Critchley, Murray's former tormentor). There follows an extended, audacious comic sequence in which he seeks despairingly for some condoms, brushes with delegates at a Doctor Who convention,

continually loses his nerve attempting to knock at the appropriate bedroom door, and discovers that his wife is searching the hotel for him. The pleasurable effect for the viewer depends as much on Robert Lindsay's performance as Murray as it does on Bleasdale's writing. Lindsay presents Murray's loss of physical self-possession with impressive accomplishment. His comic timing and increasingly extravagant gestures are superbly controlled.

In the sequence above, Murray's trauma is treated in a comic manner. Its source, however, relates to his circumstances as much as to his personality. The balance between motivation and effect is carefully controlled in *GBH*. The programme suggests through its central characters a causative link between events in the public and professional sphere and individual psychological disturbance. Nelson and Murray both behave in idiosyncratic ways because of internal neuroses, but this trauma is exacerbated through the ministrations of external agencies. Thus, for instance, Nelson's neurosis worsens as he is victimised for working during the day of action. Murray's worsens as he becomes aware of the supposed presence in the city of Eileen Critchley, and his loss of control over the city's political life. The public and personal lives of each protagonist become increasingly unstable; the extent of interiorised disturbance is manifested in the escalating malfunction of their bodies. Importantly, *GBH* proposes that there is an inseparable connection between threatening events in the public sphere and individual mental and physical dissipation.

Behavioural disorder (individuals are no longer fully in control of their own bodies) is accompanied by a motif of spying and surveillance (personal space is subject to violation). Murray sets up recording equipment in a room at the Royal Imperial Hotel (one of his 'nerve centres' and a setting for much of the action of *GBH*). Thus he is able to compromise an investigative journalist, whom he subsequently employs to discover the whereabouts of his mother and of Eileen Critchley. A number of scenes take place in an office behind the hotel reception desk, through which Murray and the hotel manager can watch incoming visitors by means of a two-way mirror. Barbara Douglas is an agent for MI5, and inveigles herself into Murray's affections and into the dwellings of his mother and his former headmaster. She employs another journalist to secure files pertaining to Murray's schooldays. Nelson is scrutinised and intimidated by

a group of Murray's henchmen outside his school every morning. Later in the programme he comes upon an intruder in his holiday chalet; and he subsequently discovers that his house has been searched while he was away. Most insidiously, a team from MI5 is conspiring, through the unsuspecting Murray, to foster public grievance against the Labour Party and establish the conditions for renewed support for the right. Espionage is treated in comic terms at various points in *GBH*. More often, however, it amplifies one of the programme's central themes: that individuals' lives are circumscribed by supervision beyond their immediate knowledge or jurisdiction.

*GBH* therefore belongs with the paranoia dramas of the mid-1980s, although this possibility was not apparent to viewers and critics until some way into the programme. Indeed *GBH* provoked a range of mistaken or over-hasty assumptions about its political slant. The programme certainly wrongfooted a number of critics and viewers given that, as Peter Ansorge, Channel Four's commissioning editor for Drama, suggested, 'The end of the series is in its beginning, but in ways that nobody could have predicted from just watching the opening episode'.<sup>45</sup> Bleasdale had, up to the transmission of the first episode of *GBH*, been perceived as a writer of the left, even though he has frequently denied a party-political affiliation in his writing. The depiction of unemployment as a social ill in *Boys From the Blackstuff* and the pervasive anti-establishment tone of *The Monocled Mutineer* placed him squarely among the dissenting voices of the 1980s. The first episode of *GBH*, by contrast, appeared to indicate that the writer had performed a *volte face* and was now directing his anger at the Left – and a caricatured version of the Left, at that. As the drama developed, however, its real context – right-wing destabilisation – confounded these premature suppositions.

Initially it seems as if the satirised target of *GBH* is the 'loony left' of tabloid headlines, epitomised by the vain, self-aggrandising Murray. By Episode 3 it is clear that Murray himself is the target of a conspiracy involving what appears to a militant left-wing cell, organised by three sketchily-presented characters: the besuited Lou Barnes (played by Tom Georgeson), the leather-jacketed Peter (played by Andrew Schofield) and the Trotskyite intellectual Mervyn Sloane (played by Paul Daneman).

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<sup>45</sup> Peter Ansorge, 'GBH: what the papers said', *The Independent*, 24 July 1991, 13.

Murray agrees to their covert involvement as they explain how they can organise race riots which will enhance his own authority in the city. By Episode 4 it appears that this strategy is in fact being orchestrated for other ends by Barnes and Peter working alongside Barbara Douglas, an MI5 operative. By the end of the programme, their intervention is seen to be part of a right-wing conspiracy to damage the Labour Party.

Barnes, Peter and Barbara explain as much in Episode 5 to a journalist they have recruited. Their purpose, says Barnes, is 'To bring the far-left back to the time when they unquestionably lost millions of votes for the Labour Party.' In pursuing this goal, Peter deploys a group of paid hooligans: 'With a secret supply of tax-payers' money .. [I] funded and founded the most frightening selection of thugs and former boot boys,' he explains. He chauffeurs his mercenaries around the city in order variously to intimidate Nelson at his school, join his local Labour Party in order to secure his eviction, and assault black and Asian people to incite race riots in the city-centre.

Thus *GBH* represents right-wing destabilisation through two key representations: insidious plotting behind the scenes, which involves extensive surveillance and routine deception; and the instigation of physical and psychological violence against ordinary citizens, an interplay between extreme subtlety and brutality. This relates to the programme's depiction of the dynamics of civic power. Murray relies on bully-boy tactics – visits by henchmen, for instance, and the cursory appointment of his own men to executive positions on the council – to effect his own agenda. But it becomes clear that Barnes, Peter and Barbara are more perfidiously powerful. The left-wing demagogue is corrupt but naive; the right-wing spooks are corrupt and sophisticated.

*GBH* suggests finally that power is rooted within a British establishment whose mechanisms of social and political management are being tightened. The MI5 operatives meet – audaciously – in Nelson's house while it is being searched (its owner is on holiday). They are joined by a superior who arrives by helicopter, and whose grey hair, suit and clipped upper-middle class accent signify, in this instance, a London-based establishmentarian. A day of rioting has been planned for the forthcoming Friday which, he reports, has been

officially approved. Only a few of the very few are aware of what's really behind all this. ... Can't say I

agree wholeheartedly. Can't say I agree at all. Didn't do stunts like this when I first joined. Not to our fellow countrymen. Well, not often ... Brutal times ... Your father sends his regards, Baba.

'All those liberal doubts,' says Barbara, as he climbs into his helicopter. 'I know,' says Barnes. 'And he'd blowtorch his grandchildren for a peerage.' [Episode 5]

The scene modulates between the suggestion that secret service operations are entering a newly vicious phase, and the presentation of an age-old, ingrained cynicism. The MI5 officer forms a pleasing cameo, a clubbable old-school Tory lamenting the advent of an oikish and philistine age. In these short exchanges *GBH* accurately signals broader social shifts. The preceding decade had, after all, witnessed the growth of a share-owning democracy and the calculated erosion, on Mrs Thatcher's part, of the hitherto unchallenged privileges of the grandees of the old order. Exchanges such as these also betoken shifts in genre patterning. *GBH* draws upon an understanding of the covert operations of MI5 developed in previous thriller narratives. It is thus able to present the security operatives in new guises and scenarios. Here the exchanges are touched with a sardonic ennui, as opposed to the apprehension which characterised earlier serials.

This diminishes the cautionary aspects of the programme. The members of the Establishment featured in *GBH* still have an admonitory function, however, as is evidenced when Barbara meets her father in his chambers. 'What if the boy was innocent and we were all guilty?' she asks, accepting that there might be some familial responsibility for the treatment of the young Murray. 'All justice is revenge ... I feel no guilt,' her father says. Alternating big-close-ups of the pair, accompanied by reflective music, treat this as a key exchange of experiences and sensibilities. Barbara has to some extent shared the viewer's journey and come to understand Murray's present through his past psychological disturbance, a disturbance engineered through the machinations of others. Her father, by contrast, is detached and aloof. 'Such Olympian heights,' says Barbara. 'It must be cold up there, dada.' [Episode 7]

Exchanges like this accord *GBH* a metaphoric resonance, although this aspect of the programme has been challenged by James Saynor in *Sight and Sound*. Saynor argues that the characters in *GBH* 'function more as stagey mouthpieces for homilies

about fairness and freedom than embodiments of any of the delirium of the 80s ... At [the programme's] centre is a debating society exchange rather than any dramatic enactment of those ideas.'<sup>46</sup> While Nelson's final public address may well be given from the 'social realist lectern', to borrow Saynor's derogatory phrase, in other respects *GBH* enacts tensions pertinent to British society at the beginning of the 1990s. The programme builds a tapestry of idiosyncratic exchanges, for instance, some of which are only tangentially related to the development of plot or character, whose function is precisely to develop a sense of the *zeitgeist*. One of these occurs in Episode 5. The Nelson family are *en route* to their holiday destination when a skinhead carrying a can of lager steps into the road. Nelson swerves to avoid him, at which the skinhead throws beer at the car, spits on the windscreen and shouts abuse. Nelson gets out to remonstrate and the skinhead draws a Stanley knife. Nelson then pursues the skinhead in his car until the latter escapes by jumping over a fence. This sudden vignette – the drunken skinhead in a suburban housing estate – is unrelated to the programme's narrative but central to its evocation of social disintegration and an increasingly easy recourse to violence.

The skinhead and the hired thugs (whether Peter's or Murray's) are not characterised in any depth. They instead present a stereotyped image of a section of male youth ready to indulge in gratuitous brutality. Their acts of aggression are presented within a discourse of generalised unease which connects to the programme's more developed discourse – albeit one which operates at a similar level of generality – of pessimism in the face of organised political expression. That is not to say that *GBH* constitutes a rejection of the political process: Nelson's keynote speech towards the end of the programme asserts a coherent vision of solidarity based on Bevanite values of mutual support and social cohesion. It is, rather, organised politics at the level of council and state which the programme finds disempowering: ironically so, because its modes depend upon a perversion of the nominally transparent relationship between power and responsibility. *GBH* articulates a pervasive disenchantment with the political process which amounts to significantly more than a narrow critique of government policy.

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<sup>46</sup> James Saynor, 'Clogging Corruption', *Sight and Sound*, v1, n3 (July 1991), 25.

The malaise is in part attributed to the dangerously unaccountable power of the security forces. 'What if Number Ten Downing Street changes hands in the very near future,' the journalist, Bubbles, asks Barbara, during a conversation about their covert activities. 'We destroy a few files and then we carry on as usual,' she replies. 'It won't make any difference.' [Episode 6]

The rottenness, then, is deeply embedded; a theme reflected in other exchanges in the programme. Nelson, for instance, receives a package from an anonymous source, containing details of Murray's past and his corrupt practices as leader of the council. He must decide whether to publicise it. 'Who will I be destroying Murray for?' he asks. 'There's a poison about. There is, you know. And it's getting worse by the day ... You just get poisoned and you probably never know who poisoned you.' [Episode 6]

This is a thriller-like emphasis of paranoia. Its tone of extreme disenchantment is echoed by Nelson's wife in the final episode, when she observes to her husband: 'Things are rotten and they're rotten from the top down.' The final sequences of the programme illustrate this contention, colouring narrative resolution with an insistence on the governing presence of the secret services. Murray and Barbara seem to effect a final reconciliation, although Barbara in fact still delivers him to the police. They drive through a city now in the midst of riots and street violence. This urban chaos is observed from a safe distance by Barnes and Peter, the latter now changed out of his 'field' outfit – jeans and a leather jacket – into a tie and sitting at the wheel of a car. A long-shot shows the object of their satisfaction, as an explosion comes from the town hall. The machinations of the secret state have brought about a bleakly dystopian conclusion.

The final shot, however, shows Nelson's car as he drives it across a bridge: a suggestion that the sequence of events has allowed him to conquer one phobia at least. This image of confident new stability is balanced against the insistence that the covert activities of the MI5 agents have been largely undetected, unpunished and successful, supporting the programme's intimation that institutionalised corruption and injustice are, in 1991, endemic to British society. By the end of the programme the crucial opposition is not that between Murray and Nelson, but between the crude philanderings of the council leader and the silky efficiency of the security forces. As Hugh Hebert



suggests, '*GBH* as a title has the same inherent message as *1984*: there is always a reductive power around waiting to turn people into ciphers'.<sup>47</sup>

In addressing *GBH*'s themes and its mode of presentation, I have paid less attention to the programme's flaws. The narrative slackens in places and develops unevenly. There are repetitive elements. On occasion the comic mode imbalances the more straightforward scenes. *GBH* marks a development both in terms of serial drama and the use of the thriller genre, however. The programme's dramatising strategy is on the one hand extremely complicated, interleaving different dramatic styles. On the other hand it involves notable simplifications. Some of the characters, for instance, are palpably two-dimensional comic creations. This does not indicate the programme's naivety but its attempted complexity, which is further borne out in the connections the serial makes between the public and personal spheres. *GBH* lays especial emphasis on the personal trauma experienced by its two protagonists, but it demonstrates that they are both affected (indeed afflicted) by their culture, and act within that culture. As Judith Williamson observed:

*GBH* was a great deal richer than a lot of other drama in the way that it blended personal and political behaviour. It also kept you following, week after week, the tortuous electricity of power. In *GBH*, no one quite knows what it is or where it resides, even those who have it ... as *GBH* vividly showed, power is a circuit whose batteries lie, frequently, beyond our reach.<sup>48</sup>

In this respect *GBH* re-presents the theme of the hidden establishment which is central in earlier serials. It does so by reworking the thriller mode, using it within an audaciously volatile combination of genres. Both *Traffik* and *GBH* draw upon but move beyond the thematic and stylistic patterns of thriller serials transmitted only a few years earlier. By 1989 and 1991 respectively they were able to present extended thriller-inflected narratives with a detailed psychological base and an epic social scope.

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<sup>47</sup> Hugh Hebert, 'When good men hope', *The Guardian*, 19 July 1991, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Williamson, 'Why make a crisis out of a drama?', *The Guardian*, 1 August 1991, 22.

## 9 Re-presenting gender: *Prime Suspect* (1991)

The dramas centrally examined in the preceding chapters share a concern at some level with the changing relationship between the British state and the individual. This is not the case with the police procedural thriller *Prime Suspect*, transmitted in 1991. The drama is, by contrast, more optimistic than any addressed thus far. As with the earlier thrillers, however, *Prime Suspect* depicts a culture in transition, in this instance focusing centrally on female experience. The programme introduced a female protagonist operating in a predominantly male domain. In Jane Tennison (played by Helen Mirren) it possessed a character perhaps as defining of social change at the beginning of the 1990s as Yosser Hughes had been, in quite different ways, nearly ten years earlier in *Boys From the Blackstuff*. Here was a female Detective Chief Inspector: a woman in a position of power and responsibility, engaged in the tough world of police work.

*Prime Suspect* was instantly doubly interesting. It marked a cultural shift, asserting that it was now possible to represent a woman in such a position in a realist drama. Secondly, it marked a realignment of the parameters of genre. Most police and detective protagonists are male, and the viewer's experience of the ways in which they operate are coloured by the familiar tendencies of the genre. Whether the characters are primarily ratiocinative (as with *Ironside*, *Cannon* and *Morse*) or physically active (Regan, Hazell and Crockett) they operate according to unquestioned codes of masculinity. *Prime Suspect* plausibly projected a woman into the world of pathological detective work, with the result that the programme engages in two kinds of question:

how comfortable and representative is Tennison's rise? And can it be adequately dramatised within the constraints of the detective-thriller genre? My initial concern in the following pages will be with the evolution of television dramas dealing with women's experiences, for *Prime Suspect* does not stand in glorious isolation in this respect. I shall subsequently explore some of the defining characteristics of this unconventional police procedural drama. *Prime Suspect* provides another instance of the use of thriller elements alongside another genre. While it does not belong to the central body of conspiracy thrillers which took shape in 1985, it ~~does~~ resonates with the Thatcher era. In the closing section of this chapter I shall suggest that it projects a model of female individualism which does not entirely synchronise with that provided by the Prime Minister.

*Prime Suspect* proved so successful that it propelled its author, Lynda La Plante, into the ranks of television's most sought-after writers. La Plante developed the storyline to a subsequent *Prime Suspect* serial and then wrote a third herself. Three more two-hour television films were broadcast in 1995, although La Plante had no involvement in any of these. Her role in the first three serials is obviously crucial, however, in which case the qualities of *Prime Suspect* are not merely to do with a female protagonist but with female authorship. Here, then, are a group of stories which together form one of the most celebrated drama series of the early-1990s. They inevitably raise questions about the representation of women in mainstream television drama and suggest ways in which an ostensibly male genre can be appropriated to transforming effect. *Capessant!*

Before addressing *Prime Suspect* in particular, however, it is worth noting that this was not the first drama to highlight issues pertaining to both gender and genre. Throughout the 1980s and early-'90s, for the first time in British television, women were the protagonists of a *diverse* range of programmes – albeit that these still only constituted a small minority of television drama output. If some of the settings were familiar, there was nonetheless a shift towards an exploration of specifically female characters, communities and structures of feeling.

Part of this dynamic can be observed in soap operas. I have already commented

upon the consolidation of the genre during the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> One component in the success of soap operas like *Brookside*, *EastEnders* and the long-running *Coronation Street* in this period was a continuing focus on a variety of female characters, offering the viewer a range of subject-positions with which to empathise.<sup>2</sup> Similar empathic possibilities were presented in other forms of drama. The series *Tenko* (BBC, 1981-2, 1984), featured a group of women taken prisoners by the Japanese during the Second World War. *Juliet Bravo* (BBC, 1980-85) and *The Gentle Touch* (LWT, 1980-84) both featured a policewoman as protagonist. The central character of *The Gentle Touch*, Detective Inspector Maggie Forbes, was deemed popular enough to warrant a spinoff series, *C.A.T.S. Eyes* (TVS for LWT, 1985-87), in which she was one of a team of women working on secret assignments for the Home Office. The American series *Cagney and Lacey* drew on tougher police-genre models as the vehicle for its two female central characters, and Lynda La Plante's *Widows* (Euston Films, 1983) inverted the usual tropes of the crime genre by featuring a group of women who become criminals and successfully pull off the heist they plan throughout the serial.

*Cagney and Lacey* is similar to *Prime Suspect* in respect of its police setting, its presentation of both domestic and professional environments and its foregrounding of social issues. For these reasons it bears a little further discussion here. Created by Barbara Avedon and Barbara Corday, the programme focuses on the professional and domestic experiences of two women detectives in the New York Police Department. Julie D'Acci makes some salient observations:

The series was specifically targeted at a working women's audience; it was constructed as a "woman's programme" and was received by a large number of vocal women viewers ... it was the first dramatic narrative programme in television history to star two women. The characters were represented as active subjects of the narrative who solved their own cases both mentally and physically. They were rarely represented as "women-in-distress" and virtually never rescued by their male colleagues. As well as functioning in both the public and private spheres, they were portrayed as active subjects, rarely as

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<sup>1</sup> See pp. 70-71.

<sup>2</sup> This aspect of soap operas is emphasised by Christine Geraghty in her book *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

objects, of sexual desire.<sup>3</sup>

*Cagney and Lacey* was initially conceived by Avedon and Corday in movie form, specifically as a women-oriented film. The producer Barney Rosenzweig, who headed the film and series projects from inception, explains that he pitched the project to the Filmways [now Orion] executives as follows: 'I want to do a picture where we turn around a conventional genre piece ... with its traditional male situations and make it into the first real hit feminist film'.<sup>4</sup> Of course Rosenzweig had spotted a gap in the market: there had never to date been a female buddy movie. The film, broadcast on CBS on 8 October 1981, was followed by a series which ran, also on CBS, from March to August 1982. A new series began transmission in Autumn 1982, in which Sharon Gless became the third Cagney to be used, joining Tyne Daly's Lacey. The series was then decommissioned, but revived following a vigorous letter-writing campaign on the part of the viewers. Danae Clark reports Rosenzweig's explanations for such viewer-enthusiasm: 'Overwhelmingly, women responded to Cagney & Lacey's "complex, real women characters" and "honestly portrayed women's friendships". This held true even among women who tended not to care for "the usual cop shows".'<sup>5</sup>

The popularity of *Cagney and Lacey*, then, demonstrates the extent to which television series can 'rewrite' existing genre conventions. Cagney and Lacey wield guns, are involved in chases, swap insults with villains and often catch their criminals, just like their male counterparts. Their difference, of course, is their femaleness: the definition of which the programmes inspect and modulate. Many episodes address issues of social, and often explicitly female, concern: exploring, for instance, wife-murder, acquaintance rape (Cagney is attacked by a man she is dating), breast cancer, abortion and pornography. Each episode takes account of the 'everyday' emotional concerns of professional women. These are sometimes to do with the characters'

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<sup>3</sup> Julie D'Acci, 'The Case of Cagney and Lacey', in Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (eds), *Boxed In: Women and Television* (London and New York: Pandora Press, 1987), 204.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in D'Acci, 'The Case of Cagney and Lacey', 206. See also Danae Clark, 'Cagney & Lacey: Feminist Strategies of Detection' in Mary Ellen Brown (ed), *Television and Women's Culture: the Politics of the Popular* (London, Newbury Park and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1990), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, 'Cagney & Lacey', 118.

domestic circumstances, in Lacey's case centring on her relationship with her blue-collar husband, in Cagney's case explored through her experiences with a number of suitors, at least two of whom propose marriage to her.

*Cagney and Lacey* is not constrained by the limitations of the police-detective genre. It foregrounds the protagonists' emotions and experiences within and beyond the conventions of the police-procedural narrative rather than merely replicating its criminal/chase/capture structure. Thus the more orthodox components of the detective drama are not entirely displaced: Cagney and Lacey still need to catch criminals – that's their job. They are rather contextualised among the many interconnecting strands – personal, social and professional – which make the stories interesting. This accords with a shift in US drama series in this period, as discussed earlier,<sup>6</sup> whereby personal relationships and domestic issues become as central to the narrative as workplace- and action-oriented sequences.

Viewers of British television had their first acquaintance with Gless and Daly's Cagney and Lacey in 1982. The series slotted comfortably into BBC2's evening schedule, transmitting at this stage in peak time at 21.05. There were series every year until 1988. By 1987 the programme was popular enough with British audiences to merit the transmission of a series of 15 episodes (3/1/87-18/4/87), another of five episodes (16/5/87-13/6/87), a single episode in July (11/7/87), then a series of twelve episodes crossing into 1988 (14/11/87-13/2/88) – an impressively extensive run. *Cagney and Lacey* therefore impinged on the British viewer's consciousness in much the same way as other American series, like *Starsky and Hutch* (1979) before it and *Miami Vice* (1990) since, becoming an established part of British television schedules. *Cagney and Lacey* featured women who were highly professionally competent, whose emotional lives were complex and who operated with marked success in a domain usually held to be male. Through the series British viewers were familiarised with a negotiation of the police-detective genre which opened a space for the exploration of specifically female structures of feeling.

A number of British serials in this period presented representations of women's experiences which were new to mainstream television. *The Life and Loves of a She-*

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<sup>6</sup> See pp. 72-3.

*Devil* (BBC, 1986), adapted by Ted Whitehead from the novel by Fay Weldon, tells the story of a woman who becomes a 'shape-changer', taking on six different identities throughout the programme.<sup>7</sup> She pursues a life of libidinous self-absorption which includes affairs with a judge and a priest and lesbian relationships with two other women, with the final aim of subordinating her husband and destroying his mistress – ambitions which are triumphantly fulfilled. *The Manageress* (Zed Productions for C4, 1989-90) featured a woman as the manager of a top British football team. Given the entirely male orientation of professional football in Britain, this was as explicit an attempt as possible to address questions of gender-stereotyping. Jeanette Winterson's adaptation of her own novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (BBC, 1990), traces the childhood, adolescence and early womanhood of Jess, brought up by strict parents in a pentecostal religion and a largely constraining northern working class community. The serial focuses on specifically female experience, read necessarily against a wider social backdrop: the half-understood tribulations of a free-spirited young girl are mapped against the dominating procedures of church and family. In this context Jess's lesbianism is presented not only as romantic or sexual orientation, but as an authentic site of self-knowledge, tender physical fulfillment, and sexual and emotional integrity.

These series and serials are all very disparate and have diverse meaning-effects and ideological implications.<sup>8</sup> It is certainly not the case that there is anything as discrete as a new genre of 'women's drama' which emerged during the 1980s. It is fair to say, however, that there was an extension both of modes and subject matter in the presentation of women's experiences. Broadly speaking, this involved focusing on women protagonists in contexts which had previously been represented from a male point of view; and foregrounding and validating aspects of female desire, in some instances through fantastical narratives. These programmes would all bear much fuller discussion in their own right. I mention them here merely to indicate that by the time *Prime Suspect* was transmitted in 1991 some dramas on British television had already

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of the programme, see Liz Bird and Jo Eliot, 'The Life and Loves of a She-Devil (Fay Weldon – Ted Whitehead)', in George Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 214-233.

<sup>8</sup> Apparently La Plante was further confirmed in her desire to write television drama after appearing as an actress in *The Gentle Touch*, recalling that 'I just couldn't believe the script I'd been given'. Quoted in Philip Purser, 'Prejudice? It's a fair cop', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 April 1991, 14.

begun to redefine conventional notions of gender. Lynda La Plante's thriller, then, takes its place in an emerging body of work dealing more fully than ever before in mainstream television with female experience.

Paradoxically La Plante, an actress who turned to screenwriting, is noted for her facility with tough 'male' settings and genres. The pleasure offered by her first major serial, *Widows*, lies partly in its transformation of the terms of the crime-thriller genre. The serial features three women whose husbands appear to have died while engaged in an armed robbery. Dolly Rawlins, wife of the gang leader Harry Rawlins, takes over her husband's criminal activities and involves the other widows in her business. Thus the central women characters operate as criminals. As Charlotte Brunson notes, their decision to carry out a robbery 'moves the widows into the narrative space of heroes. It is also this decision which delightfully makes them, in the first series, undetectable, because they are, within the terms of the genre, inconceivable.'<sup>9</sup> There is, you might say, an element of *verfremdung* to this. Brunson suggests that 'The pleasure of the series lies in the way in which the familiar visual imagery of the genre is "made strange" as we watch women mastering the skills and physical postures of the crime series'.<sup>10</sup>

*Widows* (1983) proved a success. A sequel, *Widows 2*, was transmitted in 1985. La Plante was dissatisfied with the production and disowned the end result, and she did not come to public attention again until 1991 in the wake of the success of *Prime Suspect*. Some of the scripts which were swiftly developed at this point had been with television executives for some years. *Civvies* (BBC, 1992) follows a group of ex-paratroopers who, unable to find work, are attracted to crime. One BBC executive called the drama 'the most violent home-produced series the BBC has ever made'.<sup>11</sup> *Seconds Out* (BBC, 1992), transmitted within BBC1's *Screen One* strand, features an unlicensed boxer who is falsely accused of being a rapist. *Framed* (Anglia, 1992) is a

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Brunson, 'Men's genres for women', in Baehr and Dyer (eds), *Boxed In*, 187. For an account of *Widows*, see Gillian Skirrow, 'Widows', in Manuel Alvarado and John Stewart (eds), *Made for Television: Euston Films Limited* (London: BFI and Thames TV International, 1985), 174-184.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Sue Summers, "'I hope to God this *does* cause a stir'", *The Independent*, 23 September 1992, 15.



four-part thriller serial about a police informer with extensive underworld connections. *Comics* (Cinema Verity for C4, 1993), a short thriller serial, follows an American stand-up comedian and the young black man who befriends him, as they become embroiled in London's underworld. *The Lifeboat* (Bloom Street Productions for BBC Wales, 1994) is a drama serial featuring the men of the Penrhys lifeboat. *The Governor* (La Plante Productions for ITV, 1995) features a woman in charge of an all-male prison. In *She's Out* (Cinema Verity and La Plante Productions for Carlton, 1995) La Plante returned to the character Dolly Rawlins, the leading 'widow' of the earlier serials, now released from prison and in search of jewels she has stored. La Plante has also written novels -*The Legacy* and *The Talisman*, published by Pan Books, and *Entwined*, published by Sidgwick and Jackson – as well as an account of the international operations of the Mafia, *Bella Mafia*.

It is clear from this simple list that La Plante's dramas are often set in male subcultures, on the cusp between the 'ordinary' and the underworld. Their thriller-inflected narratives display a fascination with transgressive behaviour. They dwell upon forms of aggressive masculinity or a 'finessing' of masculine behaviour by women characters, who then compete with men on their own terms. La Plante's fictions are underpinned by extensive research. In writing *Widows* she talked to members of the police force, armed robbers and prostitutes. For *Prime Suspect* she interviewed imprisoned rapists, and mapped out the character Tennison after talking extensively with Jackie Malton who at the time, according to an *Observer* profile, was 'one of only three female DCIs out of a total of 183 working in the Metropolitan Police'.<sup>12</sup> Her narratives often feature strong action and explicit details of violence, and are suffused with strikingly realistic dialogue, often used verbatim from the interviews she has conducted. The veracity of the environment depicted is insisted upon. That is not to suggest that any of these pieces have a predominantly documentary aspect – they are too overtly narrativised and dramatised for that – but they do bear a heavy inscription of actuality: a feature which is important to the effect of *Prime Suspect*.

The first *Prime Suspect* drama was transmitted across the ITV network on two consecutive nights, 7 and 8 April 1991. The first part, on the Sunday evening, was two

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<sup>12</sup> Yvonne Roberts, 'Tough lady with the blue lamp', *The Observer*, 14 April 1991, 55.

hours long. Parts two and three, the next night, were each an hour long and were divided by ITN's *News at Ten*. This scheduling pattern was repeated for the two subsequent four-hour *Prime Suspect* serials. In 1995 ITV broadcast a series of three individual dramas, each two hours in duration. The format of the first three programmes provides around three-and-a-half hours of drama, allowing for commercial breaks and continuity announcements. It enables the development of a complex storyline, but does not demand an ongoing commitment from the viewer akin to that of the six-hour serial in weekly episodes. The viewing experience is therefore much more concentrated and intense.

*Prime Suspect* gained a large audience, attracting an estimated 13.93 million viewers the first evening and 14.11 million the second. It also gained many column inches in terms of reviews and feature material in the press, and won the 'best drama' award for 1991 from both the Royal Television Society and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. *Prime Suspect 2*, written by Allan Cubitt from a storyline devised by La Plante, was transmitted on 15 and 16 December 1992, gaining audiences of 14.27 million viewers and 14.43 viewers respectively. *Prime Suspect 3*, written by La Plante, was transmitted on 19 and 20 December 1993, gaining audiences of 14.27 million and 14.03 million viewers. Granada Television made three more two-hour dramas which were transmitted in 1995. La Plante made no contribution to any of these, but by this stage *Prime Suspect* had gained an identity and a momentum which did not necessitate her continuing involvement.

All the *Prime Suspect* dramas feature Jane Tennison (played by Helen Mirren) who, at the start of the series, is a Detective Chief Inspector in the Metropolitan Police. All concentrate on a particular social issue which is independent of, but still connects with, the initial puzzle of the detective case. In the first story the focus is on Tennison's self-assertion in the face of vigorous sexism at work; in the second it is on racism; in the third it is on the covert power of the Establishment. That is not to say that these have been treated as 'promotable' stories in quite the way that some of the *Cagney and Lacey* episodes have in America, where the focus was on an even more specific issue; but their social relevance is insisted upon throughout. All three stories also feature crimes emanating from 'deviant' sexual practices: prostitution in the first, pornography and

rape in the second and paedophilia and transvestisism in the third. The thriller's familiar concern with violation is very much in evidence.

All these dramas were extremely popular, but the success of the series lies in the impact made by the first programme, which in many ways is the most remarkable. In its interrogation of both gender and genre it is the most raw, the most testing drama of them all. I shall devote the rest of the chapter to an analysis of this most powerful production.<sup>13</sup>

In the first *Prime Suspect* story, Tennison takes over the enquiry into the brutal murder of a prostitute when a colleague, DCI Shefford, suffers a heart attack. Her presence is greatly resented by the men in a mostly-male team, who in the first half of the programme obstruct her handling of the case and subvert her authority. Shefford had brought in a prime suspect, George Marlow, who convincingly asserts his innocence. Tennison ascertains that there is not enough evidence to convict Marlow in court and allows him to go free, much to the dismay of her colleagues. The ramifications of the case broaden as it becomes clear that the team are hunting not for the murderer of one prostitute but for a serial killer of women. The drama then follows the process by which the guilt of the prime suspect is proven beyond doubt. Meanwhile as Tennison becomes bound up in the case, her partner Peter finds her increasingly remote and eventually leaves her. Pressures at work are compounded by pressures at home.

It quickly becomes apparent that Tennison is embarked on a double quest. Firstly she must solve the case. Here the conventional double-narrative of detective drama operates: the main narrative shows Tennison and her team piecing together the (continuing) narrative of criminality, as they assemble the true history of events which took place before the enquiry began. Both narratives are simultaneously resolved near the end of the programme, as the police follow their suspect to a lock-up garage which contains vital missing evidence.

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<sup>13</sup> For a review which unfavourably compares *Prime Suspect 2* with its precursor, see Jenny Diski, 'Skeletons and corpses', *Sight and Sound*, v3, n1, January 1993, 4.

Tennison's second quest, and thus another narrative strand, is to assert her capability in a job ordinarily performed by men. This she does in the face of sexist prejudice in the workplace, and amid disturbance to her domestic circumstances. This quest is achieved some time before the end of the programme; but Tennison's competence is finally endorsed by the success of the murder enquiry. In that case, *Prime Suspect* works towards an especially intensified denouement, in which the two essential quests and their three different strands of narrative are all resolved simultaneously.

Newspaper reviewers of *Prime Suspect* found the programme's realism especially noteworthy. According to the *Sunday Times*, 'it was, simply, one of the grittiest and most gripping dramas of recent memory ... What separated *Prime Suspect* from a thousand US cop shows ... was its realism.'<sup>14</sup> In fact the *Daily Mail* found the programme-makers 'sometimes over-zealous in showing us the grisly evidence'.<sup>15</sup> Chris Dunkley noted in the *Financial Times* that, '*Prime Suspect*, which arrived on ITV only minutes after Episode 1 of [*The*] *Darling Buds* [*of May*] had finished, could hardly have been more different; we were switched from rustic daydream to urban nightmare'.<sup>16</sup>

This particular nightmare was portrayed by means of a pervading realism, enhanced by Christopher Menaul's direction, which allowed a graphic depiction of the brutality of the murders. The programme opens, unusually, without any credit-sequence music. Instead there is a fade from silence to the wild sound of a street at night, and a group of vehicles – including police cars – at what is obviously an incident of some kind. A voice from a police radio is half-audible. It seems that the principles of *verité* drama-making are being observed, but the programme also displays a more filmic mode during this sequence. The camera, on a crane, comes down from the establishing high shot of the street to follow the plain clothes officer, Shefford, as he climbs out of his car and enters the building. Already the signifiers of sound and image have alerted the viewer that s/he is witnessing a disruptive, significant event; one which bears the

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<sup>14</sup> *Sunday Times*, 14 April 1991 [author not known: excerpted on BFI *Prime Suspect* fiche].

<sup>15</sup> Peter Paterson, 'A plain Jane I'd rush home to', *Daily Mail*, 9 April 1991, 24.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Dunkley, *Financial Times*, 10 April 1991, 17.

hallmarks of authenticity; but which is simultaneously rendered with the aesthetic sophistication – and concomitant promise of viewing pleasure – of a feature film.

It transpires that Shefford has been called from a night club to what appears to be the scene of a particularly brutal murder. When he arrives in the appropriate room in the building, the pathologist is already with the body recording his findings. There is a close-up of a thermometer as the pathologist records the details: 'Rectal temperature at 2.12am is 35.8 degrees'. The scene cuts to the mortuary, where the corpse is still on full display, and the camera shows the stab wounds, bruising and marks of a clamp as the pathologist describes them. 'I reckon she's got semen in virtually every orifice,' he adds.

The opening sequences establish filming and textual strategies which will be important throughout.<sup>17</sup> Cramped camerawork, long takes and acoustic treatments emphasising wild sound give the programme in places a documentary effect. On the other hand the scene in the bedroom shows only glimpses of the body. The camera regulates an economy of knowledge whereby the viewer is encouraged to want to see more and know more than is actually shown. When the image cuts to the scene in the morgue, the brief and sudden close-ups of the wounds are more effective for having been deferred. On a narrational level, the programme plays with the viewer's expectation without ever undermining it. The opening sequences appear to establish Shefford as the protagonist of the drama – a male detective at a murder enquiry in a genre programme – preparing for the drama's central thesis that Tennison's accession is an active displacement of male authority.

The severe nature of the injuries to the victim, it is implied, is the reason that Shefford declines to look more than cursorily at her corpse. This turns out to be a significant detail. When Tennison takes over the case she insists on closely examining the body, which enables her to reveal that it has been wrongly identified. She notices, for instance, that the corpse has smaller feet than the woman assumed to have been the victim. She is attended at the mortuary by DC Jones, a young man who, in a moment of mordant comedy characteristic of the series, moves unsteadily to the toilet once

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<sup>17</sup> I owe a couple of the observations in this paragraph to sessions with John Beacham and MA students in the Media and Communications Department at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Tennison coolly notices that he is unsettled by what he has seen.

According to La Plante, it was essential that the opening sequences were both graphic and disturbing:

I particularly chose a very brutal, obviously violent murder that had to be seen by both the police officers on the case and by the viewers, because I wanted to show that a female in command has to show as little emotion as her male counterpart, if not no emotion at all ... I couldn't have an ordinary crime, because it wouldn't be such a battle for viewers to watch a woman looking at a corpse, holding a corpse's hand, checking the feet and so on. You needed to see her detachment.<sup>18</sup>

Of course the apparent realism of *Prime Suspect* consists of a highly controlled presentation of significant details, relevant to both character and plot development, but which also play, comically at times, on the more voyeuristic opportunities presented by mutilated bodies. This is not entirely gratuitous. Importantly the graphic depiction of the state of the corpses operates on more than a vividly specular, realist level. Tennison's own reactions form part of the evidence by which she is established as credible, controlled and highly professional.

The beginning of the programme offers a behind-the-scenes account of police procedure, but inflects it in unorthodox ways which quickly embrace the establishment of Tennison's subject-position. It becomes clear that Shefford and his team are pursuing a station 'record': that of charging a suspect as soon after the beginning of a murder investigation as possible. Tennison shares an elevator with Shefford and two officers as the men discuss the possibility of setting an impressive new mark. Tennison's disdain is apparent. The camera films over her shoulder as she looks out of a window to see the men race off in a car. The introduction at this point of a reflective mood music, one of the musical themes which runs through the whole programme, helps position the viewer with Tennison, disapproving of a form of policing which is competitive, aggressive and mechanically result-oriented.

Sexism within the police appears casual but institutionalised. Tennison discovers,

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Angus Towler, 'Blossoming once more', *The Stage and Television Today*, May 2 1991, 23.

for instance, that the phone call alerting the station of the murder came while she was the duty officer: she, not Shefford, should have been the first officer notified. When Shefford has suffered his heart attack, Tennison requests of her superior officer, Detective Chief Superintendent Michael Kernan (played by John Benfield), that she take over the enquiry. Kernan promises her that he will consider it, then as soon as she has left the room, in an explicit narrative development, phones to request information on all the other DCIs who are available to take over the case. The fact that Tennison gets the job owes something to 'masculine' qualities she is supposed to have exhibited in her 'past' before the events which the programme depicts. Kernan expresses his reservations about her to his Commander, but is told that, now that the opportunity has arisen, it is politic for him to appoint a woman. 'Oh, I see,' he says. 'The ball's in my court?'

'Flying Squad reckon she's got 'em,' says the Commander.

'What?' asks Kernan.

'Balls,' replies the Commander. Tennison's capabilities are confirmed, but in the language of male assertiveness.

One of Tennison's immediate tasks is to counter the pathological sexism of Sergeant Otley (played with reptilian effectiveness by Tom Bell), who is vituperative and obstructionist. Tennison has him transferred, but this only removes her most vigorous opponent, and the codes of a male-oriented workplace remain intact. There is a telling sequence in which the men are at a boxing match between one of their number, Burkin, and a black policeman, part of the entertainment at a benefit-evening for the family of the now-deceased Shefford. The scene is lit and filmed in order to emphasise the characteristics of a particularly male event. A hand-held camera is used for close-ups of the boxers, and the soundtrack emphasises their grunts, blows and the cheering of the crowd, so that if anything the fight is rendered more intensively than the coverage ordinarily provided of televised boxing matches. Burkin's colleagues, having been drinking all evening, are over-lit so as to appear unappealingly white and sweaty. Burkin, now bloodied, wins the fight, to victory chants from his colleagues, whose raised arms have all the appearance of fascist salutations.

The sequence conflates an exclusively masculine setting, an appetite for violence

and an ugly supremacist ideology. Thus the moral rightness of the police force is not taken for granted. Instead the programme insists upon the fact that the assumptions, indeed prejudices, that operate within the force are pervasive and deeply ingrained. That said, the 'natural' authority of the police is never really questioned within the narrative: there is no doubt that the quest to establish the identity of the serial killer and then convict him is just. But the police are not presented as unblemished heroes. The men appear boorish at times and blokeish throughout. Police corruption also figures. Otley hides a notebook that links Shefford with the murdered prostitute, while the race to break the record (which Otley later reveals to be a joke, 'to gee up the lads') entails slippages of fidelity in dealing scrupulously with the evidence. The actual cases of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four had already established, embarrassingly for the police, that corruption and inefficiency within the force might indeed lead to the imprisonment of innocent men, a context which afforded the fictional *Prime Suspect* an extra degree of authenticity.

In any case, the opening sequences of *Prime Suspect* set a classic thriller narrative in motion: there has been a transgressive act; its consequence (the mutilated body) is graphically depicted; but there is a double quest. Tennison must solve the case, which means initially 'unsolving' it, since Marlow was accused on faulty and insufficient evidence; and she must overcome the destructive sexism of the workplace. The double nature of the quest is linked for most of the programme. As Amy Taubin notes:

It's not a question of will *he* kill again (that's never at issue) but how will *she* trap him. Like *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Prime Suspect* reinvents both the psychological thriller and the police procedural, not merely by making the detective a woman ... but by allowing her to triumph over the misogyny that's both outside and within the law.<sup>19</sup>

*Prime Suspect* is unusual in its treatment of its antagonist. George Marlow (played by John Bowe), is suspected by the police of being a serial killer of young women, but

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<sup>19</sup> Amy Taubin, 'Misogyny, She Wrote', *Village Voice*, 28 January 1992, 50 [Taubin's emphases].



pleads his innocence for almost the whole of the programme in terms which make *him* appear to be the victim. Marlow seems far removed from drama's more usual villains and murderers. It is made relatively easy to empathise with him. He is harrassed by the police (they storm into his flat, then establish a round-the-clock watch). When he is first interviewed, he admits that he did pay for sex with the victim on the night of the murder, but starts to cry when he asserts his innocence. He even expresses his sorrow at the death of DCI Shefford. 'All he's guilty of is having sex,' Marlow's wife Moyra (played by Zoe Wanamaker) snaps at Tennison, and it is made easy for the viewer to agree. When Moyra herself seems suspicious, Marlow insists, 'I didn't do it, I didn't do it'. He appears quite plausibly an innocent victim of circumstance.

Of course Marlow *might* be lying, so the viewer's need to know the facts of the matter is especially strong. La Plante has suggested that the suspect's guilt was obvious:

That is the way that most cases end. I distrust all those Morses and Taggarts and Wexfords who produce a surprise culprit out of the hat. Every piece of evidence in *Prime Suspect* pointed to George Marlow. Every piece of evidence the police had, the viewer saw. There were no red herrings ... Because he was a plausible liar, everyone wanted to believe him. Well, the Yorkshire Ripper was a plausible liar; they had him in five times and let him go.<sup>20</sup>

Even so, when it is revealed that DCI Shefford was connected with two of the prostitutes who had been murdered, a red herring, however insubstantial, does enter the case. And if Marlow is a plausible liar, part of the viewing pleasure is being able – however speculatively – to take the part of a character who might indeed be wrongly convicted for a series of terrible crimes.

Marlow is certainly accorded a significant amount of screen time, not least through intimate scenes which the viewer sees but which obviously exclude the police and detectives. These include exchanges between Marlow and Moyra in their flat, and a scene in which Marlow visits his mother in a home for the elderly. This latter is itself an example of the scope afforded by the four-hour format, and shows the programme-

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Purser, 'Prejudice? It's a fair cop', 14.

makers taking the opportunity to interrupt the narrative in order to dwell more reflectively on an aspect of the antagonist's personality.

Marlow comes into the communal sitting room at the home singing 'You'll Never Walk Alone', approaches his mother, who is in a wheelchair, and wheels her out as she joins in the song, to bemused gazes from the other inhabitants and their visitors. It is an unconventional episode, implying the closeness – but also possibly the dependence on sentimentality – of the relationship between mother and son.

This friction – between a depiction of mother-son bonding and a suggestion of non-normality<sup>u</sup> – is maintained throughout the sequence. Marlow takes his mother to a deserted pier. He again asserts his innocence, his mother declares her love for him, and he kisses her and wheels her around the pier singing 'Why am I always the bridesmaid?'. The sequence seems to strengthen Marlow's assertion of innocence. He is caring and sensitive, a 'good' son, capable of expressing the warmest love for his mother. But there is another level of signification which is more disturbing. Marlow's mother wears bright, heavily applied lipstick, not in itself uncommon, but perhaps a subliminal bridge between the contrived attractiveness of her own appearance and the assumed sexual promise of the prostitutes Marlow has murdered. He kisses her on the lips, again unusual in a mother-son context. And when they join together in the song which closes the sequence, the camera pulls up, around and away in an expensive helicopter shot (allowed a long take), revealing the idiosyncrasy of the situation. The narration is suddenly more objective: here are a suspected murderer and his mother crooning a sentimental ballad together, one rainy evening on a deserted pier.

Marlow, then, is a 'suspicious' personality. There is a tension between his seeming ordinariness (he is the archetypal man-next-door, the convivial 'good bloke' of pub mythology) and his possible vicious sickness. He displays a dubious excess of niceness. His easy-going manner is continually juxtaposed with the facts of the case. During the programme's denouement, when the lock-up garage Marlow rents is finally discovered by the police, there is a focus again on the way in which Marlow killed his victims, first shackling them to the wall and sexually abusing them.

Here *Prime Suspect* resembles thriller narratives whose criminals are interesting precisely for their criminality – the more transgressive, the more fascinating. The

organisation of the narrative around the gendered difference between Tennison and Marlow, however, points up the *maleness* of his violence. In *Prime Suspect*, Marlow embodies the notion that all men, no matter how calm and controlled they seem, have the potential for violence within them. In any case, by the end of the programme one is reminded of Annette Kuhn's comment in *The Power of the Image* regarding men's use of pornography: 'For me, looking at pornography and analysing its appeal to a certain type of masculinity produced the view, paradoxically perhaps, that if anything in our culture is unfathomable, it is masculinity itself'.<sup>21</sup> Whether masculinity is indeed ineffable is open to question; but of course a four-hour television programme cannot plumb all the putative psychological and historical circumstances of a character's life. In *Prime Suspect* Marlow is finally unfathomable; a seemingly sensitive and chivalrous man who is also a brutal murderer. Thus the programme depends upon a vision of masculinity as utterly contradictory. In this sense Marlow is, paradoxically, in the same camp as the policemen. They too are contradictory, both the purveyors of social justice and the perpetrators of regressive prejudices.

The main dynamic of *Prime Suspect*, however, lies in its rewriting of screen conventions of femininity. This is most evident in the characterisation of Tennison but also applies to Marlow's wife Moyra and to a lesser extent to the prostitutes whom Tennison interviews. Clearly the *representation* of women is at issue. Firstly the viewer is confronted with various images of women as victims: literally, in the graphic photographs of maimed and murdered women, which ubiquitously adorn the walls of the incident room; and narratively, in Tennison's predicaments at home (she is not supported by her partner) and at work (she is discriminated against); and in Moyra's final positioning as a woman who has allowed herself to pervert the truth. Let us consider Moyra first.

Towards the end of the programme, Moyra 'cracks' and changes her account of Marlow's movements on the night of the murder of one of the women, thus ruining his alibi. She is induced to this when Tennison shows her pictures of the maimed and murdered victims. In a moment of horror which is both empathic and suddenly self-

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<sup>21</sup> Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 20.

aware, Moyra exclaims, 'He did it to me once. But I – I didn't like it. Tied my – hands – a leather strap,' at which point she starts to retch. In this the programme displays a recurring mechanism which it shares with a number of textually rich thrillers: the viewer is continually encouraged to reassess events that have already been shown in the light of new evidence. All the preceding exchanges between Marlow and his partner suddenly have a different cast. As Amy Taubin suggests, 'one good reason to watch the show a second time is to focus on Wanamaker's enigmatic performance once you've found out what she's up to'.<sup>22</sup>

This moment is also very deftly filmed. As Moyra is retching there is a close-up on Tennison as she looks across to WPC Havers. Tennison's expression is perhaps ambiguous, but Havers shows undisguised satisfaction that the alibi has finally been dismantled. In the prelude to the confession, Moyra requests that the men in the interview room, including her solicitor, leave. She then reveals the truth, only able to share these awful intimacies with other women. What could have been a moment of sisterhood, however, is presented in more complicated terms. Moyra is a tough woman, once a prostitute herself, who has covered up for her partner despite the brutality of his crimes. She is ultimately a victim herself, not simply because she has partnered the 'wrong' man, but because her toughness proved to be inappropriate. The viewer is suddenly aware of a shift in identification: Moyra becomes one of a group of violated women rather than a shield for her partner. Tennison and Havers, on the other hand, are the victors. They now have their man.

If woman-as-victim is an age-old structure, a new one is mapped against it which recognises the validity of women's experiences. While prostitutes are routinely marginalised and stigmatised, for instance, they are treated with less opprobrium in *Prime Suspect*. Tennison visits a group of prostitutes in Oldham, conversing with them on even terms by means of an interview conducted in a pub (more conventionally a male space). The women are additionally bonded when one of the customers in the pub, assuming that Tennison too is a prostitute, propositions her. It is no longer possible to see the prostitutes simply as objects of male desire, or as victims. That said, any sense of sisterhood is immediately contradicted when Tennison refers to a dinner

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<sup>22</sup> Taubin, 'Misogyny, She Wrote', 50.

party she is supposed to attend that evening, and a close-up on the other women as they look at each other emphasises their difference: dinner parties are the domain of the professional middle classes.

If this complicates the representation of women, the process is most emphatically carried through in the characterisation of Tennison. She is a woman in a position of power usually accorded to men. Gillian Skirrow noted the complications that this can entail in her discussion of the character Kate Longton, a police officer in the series *Juliet Bravo*:

There seems to be something of a contradiction built into the authority role, even on-screen ... Kate has to represent the stability, not to say staticness, of an authority figure, but at the same time what is felt to give the series its edge, its element of risk, is the fact that she is a woman.<sup>23</sup>

Skirrow finds that the construction of Kate Longton's character reveals 'an almost sadistic curiosity' on the part of the programme makers, for whom Longton's femaleness is exotic. Thus

the whole basis of the series is in fact questioning her authority, which perhaps accounts for the lack of risk in her behaviour as it appears in the scripts. Whenever she is shown to be wrong, it is because she has let her womanly emotions interfere with her judgment.<sup>24</sup>

In *Prime Suspect*, by contrast, 'womanly emotions' never account for Tennison's successes or mistakes. She is instead shown to be both rigorously methodical and capable of taking calculated risks. That said, the character is 'static' in another sense. In programmes where the protagonist embodies a set of values or behavioural traits which might loosely be defined as 'oppositional' – at variance with the dominant discourse – there is little evidence of his/her values or ideas being radically altered through the course of the programme. Instead the programme simply identifies and explores a set of (perhaps irreconcilable) oppositions; or the characters around the protagonist have *their*

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<sup>23</sup> Gillian Skirrow, 'Women/acting/power', in Baehr and Dyer (eds), *Boxed In*, 174.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

views or behaviour challenged and changed.

In *Edge of Darkness*, for example, Craven's values radically alter so that he espouses an entirely different set of opinions than was the case at the beginning of the programme. Similarly in *Traffik*, the cabinet minister Jack Lithgow substantially adjusts both his views on the drug trade and his behaviour towards his heroin-addicted daughter. Craven and Lithgow are explicitly constructed as figures of authority working *within* the invisible parameters of the Establishment. Hence the radical transformation of their beliefs as each becomes, to put it simply, anti-establishment, as events in the narrative impinge on them personally.

Some dramas operate from a very different initial premise. In *A Very British Coup* and *Prime Suspect*, for instance, the respective central characters, Perkins and Tennison, are figures of authority to some extent *outside* the orthodox codes of the Establishment, and are thus defined in terms of what they are not: politically conservative, in Perkins' case, and male, in Tennison's case. The narratives of both programmes do not depend on altering the perspective of the central character, as happens in many narrative trajectories, but on juxtaposing 'orthodox' and 'unorthodox' sets of behaviour, favouring the 'unorthodox' by the end of the programme.

In *Prime Suspect*, then, Tennison's behaviour and value-system remain unchanged, but her status is finally vindicated. DCS Kernan at one point attempts to replace her with another DCI, only for every member of her team to sign a letter refusing to work under the replacement: a drastic turnaround compared to their initial reluctance to work under Tennison. This triumph is underlined at the close of the programme, once Marlow has confessed to the murders. The team sings, 'Why was she born so beautiful, Why was she born at all?' as Tennison enters the incident room: a neat closure which recognises that the team's sexism has been eroded, at least in part, but ironically acknowledges the music-hall language of masculine approval.

This is not to say that Tennison is presented uncritically. In a particularly multi-faceted sequence, she is interviewed on *Crime Night* (a fictionalised version of the BBC's *Crimewatch*), having asked her family to record the broadcast. The viewer is shown parts of the *Crime Night* interview as watched on televisions at various different locations, thus cross-referencing the reactions of those watching: Marlow, the parents

of one of the murder victims, Tennison's family, and the by now obsessively sexist Otley. When Tennison arrives at her parents' house she discovers that her father had wrongly set the video and recorded ballroom dancing instead. It is an ambivalent moment. It might be comic, but Tennison's reaction is aggressive; the viewer is invited to understand her anger, as she is now fully immersed in solving the case, but still presented with a character who has not been romanticised.

The special pressures under which Tennison is operating are made most apparent in what one might term 'corridor moments', in which she is shown alone, reacting in brief private moments to news or events that the viewer has just witnessed. These moments are situated, significantly, in places outside office rooms and removed from her colleagues, although still within the public working environment. They afford the viewer a privileged glimpse of Tennison at work, but removed from work, at her most private and exposed.

The first corridor moment shows Tennison coming out of the DCS's office. She has just been informed that she is to take over the enquiry. She clenches her fists in an expression of extreme pleasure. The image cuts to a scene which shows the dismay of the men as the decision is announced, a juxtapositional trope which emphasises the team's sexism and, semi-comically, puts Tennison's delight in context: her authority will be questioned later in the narrative.

The second corridor moment comes after Tennison's first address to her team. She is assertive and decisive. She imparts her discovery that a corpse has been wrongly identified, and outlines an appropriate, altered set of objectives. The team's resentment is made clear, but the briefing passes off successfully as Tennison decisively cuts down the interjection of DS Otley. 'Look, I know you asked for this case specifically, but,' says Otley. 'If you don't like it, put in for a transfer,' replies Tennison, cutting him off. She steps outside the room, leans with her back to the corridor wall, an expression of relief on her face, and lights a cigarette. Again it is a caesura in the dramatic action, a structural device which invites the viewer to dwell on the emotional implications for Tennison, aside from the action-oriented drive of the plot.

Another corridor moment occurs after Tennison's interview with a father who has just been told that his daughter has been murdered. In her eagerness for information,

Tennison appears unconcerned at his grief. It is characteristic of the programme's complexity that it should be Burkin, one of the most 'blokeish' of her colleagues, who pulls Tennison from the room and chides her for her insensitivity. She remains outside for a moment, suddenly confronted with the ramifications of her urgency.

It is usual for drama on screen to operate a silent system of signification, implying the emotional- and thought-processes of characters without needing to 'literalise' them in the dialogue. This is the case in *Prime Suspect*, not least – sometimes to comic effect – with some of the more minor characters. Early in the drama, for instance, DC Jones is to drive Tennison to the mortuary. He opens the rear driver-side door as she approaches the car, but she continues wordlessly along the other side of car and uses the front passenger-side door. As Jones turns round the camera catches his look of pained resignation: the boss is sitting next to him, and she is no respecter of the comfortable codes of etiquette.

The corridor moments stand apart, however, as they are an important means by which the programme mediates its focus on Tennison. They are intrinsically private, bringing the viewer into a voyeuristic relationship with the image: catching the character, as it were, unawares. What model of spectatorship is brought into play here? In her classic account of representation in Hollywood cinema, Laura Mulvey argues that women are been subject to the 'controlling male gaze':

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly ... cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.<sup>25</sup>

Representations of women on screen, then, have been tailored to a male look; structured to satisfy certain mythic or fantasising assumptions on the part of the (male) viewer, himself imbricated in the codes of a patriarchal, phallographic society.

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<sup>25</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, v16, n3 (autumn 1975), 11, 17. For a discussion of Mulvey's article and its implications with regard to spectatorship, see Liesbet van Zoonen, 'Chapter 6: Spectatorship and the Gaze', *Feminist Media Studies* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), 87-104.



In *Prime Suspect*, however, Tennison is present rather than absent, articulate rather than silent, central rather than marginal, the subject rather than the object. By the end, the narrative has enhanced her status, endorsed her professional capabilities and fractured the prejudices of her colleagues. It would over-simplify matters, however, to suggest that *Prime Suspect* operates a narrative uncomplicatedly built around female desire and female point-of-view. The programme shifts from Tennison's point of view to those of her colleagues and of George Marlow, even if these are contained within a clear narrational endorsement of Tennison's quest to prove herself and to convict the killer. And what of the *filming* mode by which Tennison is represented? She is the main object of the viewer's gaze: is there a mode of fantasy-objectification which operates aside from narrational endorsement of her status?

It is a difficult case to argue. There are no moments where the camera lingers on parts of Tennison's body, savouring a depersonalised sexuality. There might even have been a spurious justification for this, if the director had wished to give point-of-view shots of Tennison as seen through the eyes of some of her male colleagues. This device is used in an ironising way, for instance, in *The Singing Detective*, when the camera slowly pans up Mrs Marlow's stockinged legs as she is surreptitiously ogled by the soldiers with whom she shares a train carriage. Mid-shots of Tennison show her in a work or domestic context, and appear to eschew any temptation to concentrate on her bodily form. When she is shown in bed with Peter, her partner, the sequences are not made erotic through explicit or excessive focus on Tennison's body: in fact the one moment when the couple start to make love, they are disturbed by Peter's son from a previous marriage. The point – underpinned by the camera rhetoric, with its absence of glamourising effects – is that Tennison is not primarily characterised as a function of stereotypical femininity. She is neither a Mother, a Wife, a Mistress or a Whore – some of the templates which have formed previous representations of women. In *Prime Suspect* the 'patterns of fascination', to use Laura Mulvey's phrase, are not male-oriented.

Admittedly the corridor moments identified above involve the viewer in a position of emphasised specularity. Moreover these pauses in the story point up Tennison's *gendered* progress through the narrative, and they demand recognition of her

*femaleness*. It is clear throughout that Tennison faces extra demands and pressures because she is a woman; but this is not a case of textual special-pleading. Instead the viewer is allowed 'privileged' voyeuristic glimpses of Tennison not in order to objectify her but in order to recognise more clearly the points of friction between gender and professional life. At no point is Tennison's femaleness sublimated, however. While she is defined, at least by the men in the programme, as a woman with 'balls', the viewer is made aware that she succeeds not because she operates in an exclusively 'masculine' way, which would simply serve to reinforce existing patterns of marginalisation, but because she is a woman who is good at her job.

Clinching evidence that Tennison's character is not constructed to require a male gaze was ironically provided by some of the programme's reviewers, who (to a man) commented on Helen Mirren's plain dress and haircut and lack of make-up.<sup>26</sup> Of course nobody comments on Inspector Morse's unadventurous haircut or Taggart's rather dowdy suits. Even so, while Tennison was still being defined by her appearance it was now on account of her *difference* from other screen heroines. She represented, it seemed, a new kind of professional woman.

A number of feminist film and television critics have argued in favour of drama which provides explicitly positive female role models.<sup>27</sup> According to Annette Kuhn, 'for a feminist ... pleasure may arise in the process of identifying with a strong and independent female character who is able to control the process of the narrative and its fictional events in such a way as to bring about a resolution in which she "wins" in some way'.<sup>28</sup> The terminology is questionable here. A character in a drama is, after all, a function of a text's processes, not an instigator or 'controller' of them. But Kuhn's point is that viewing pleasure often derives from witnessing female characters whose 'active' capabilities are validated by the narrative.

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<sup>26</sup> See Martyn Harris, 'Fair cop', *The Spectator*, 13 April 1991, 47; Peter Paterson, 'A plain Jane I'd rush home to', *Daily Mail*, 9 April 1991, 24; and David Thomas, 'TV Review', *Sunday Express*, 8 December 1991, 63.

<sup>27</sup> For a brief overview of feminist responses to television see Mary Ellen Brown, 'Introduction: Feminist Cultural Television Criticism – Culture, Theory and Practice', in Brown (ed), *Television and Women's Culture*, 11-22.

<sup>28</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and the Cinema* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 133.

Perhaps the notion of a role model is too idealising, however. A more flexible version of the relationship between heroine and viewer is provided by Ien Ang in a discussion of strong female characters in television drama:

female fictional characters such as Sue Ellen Ewing [in *Dallas*] or Christine Cagney [in *Cagney and Lacey*] cannot be conceptualised as realistic images of women, but as textual constructions of possible *modes of femininity* ... In relation to this, they do not function as role models but are symbolic realisations of feminine subject positions with which viewers can identify *in fantasy*.<sup>29</sup>

One accepts the caution that characters in a drama are never 'real', but the identifications they permit still relate to dominant patterns in society, which they can be expected in various ways to confirm or repudiate. In that sense Ang's emphasis on *fantasy* identifications should not be read as marking an escape from culture, but an assertion of its permeation into both representation and desire.

What of the intersections of culture and representation in *Prime Suspect*? Given that Tennison is a strong woman at the head of a group of men, and given the dominance of Margaret Thatcher in British public life throughout the 1980s, it is obviously tempting to look for convergences between the fictional policewoman and the actual politician. Undoubtedly Thatcher, as Britain's first ever woman Prime Minister, represented new heights of achievement for women in public life, although her status as an object of feminist admiration was always hotly disputed. The characterisation of Tennison does not appear to draw on Mrs Thatcher's personality or style of leadership, but merely on the structural similarity of being a woman in a position of power. Paradoxically the very fact of dramatisation means that the viewer sees more of the fictional character – including her private moments of vulnerability – than they ever would of the actual Prime Minister. Moreover the viewer's identification with the detective is not invited simply on the basis of her power but rather depends upon the ways in which she expresses and negotiates power. It is here that the 'Tennison style' is different from the 'Thatcher style'

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<sup>29</sup> Ien Ang, 'Melodramatic Identifications: Television Fiction and Women's Fantasy', in Brown (ed), *Television and Women's Culture*, 83 [Ang's emphases].

As previously discussed, thriller narratives depend on a movement from uncertainty towards knowledge. In *Prime Suspect* this is towards a resolution which vindicates Tennison – and femaleness – not in phallogocentric terms of simply *knowing more* than any of the other characters, but in terms of *knowing how to operate*. The programme's economy of knowledge is again relevant. The narration does not accord Tennison special privileges. There are scenes which the viewer sees which remain 'hidden' to her. The viewer at times knows more than the investigator, and at all other points shares the knowledge that Tennison has, another guarantee of the drama's realist-effect. There are no sudden revelations pulled from her (or rather the narrative's) sleeve, so the viewer is not kept permanently in the shadow of an omniscient Poirot-like detective. This equality of knowledge furthers the viewer's identification with the protagonist, discovering things as she does in a narrational flow of suspense and revelation. In this and in the presentation of Tennison's double quest (she must solve the crime and combat sexism) *Prime Suspect* draws heavily on some of the patterns and strategies of the thriller.

The programme can be seen as one of 'Thatcher's thrillers' in a more subtle sense, in that – as with the dramas already examined in this study – it negotiates and redefines new cultural formations. By the same token it also redefines the possibilities of the police procedural genre. In arriving at knowledge, Tennison is not solely gung-ho or purely cognitive – both models of behaviour in other police-genre dramas with male protagonists. In accordance with the programme's realist strategies she is a more complete character than that. In accordance with its sexual-political agenda, this very completeness is part of her success. She is sensitive but sharp, a woman who rewrites orthodoxy and succeeds in an conventionally male environment. Thus she is both of the Establishment and oppositional to it, setting in motion a subtle negotiation with contemporary social process.

Tennison does not forego the aid and advice of male colleagues: indeed she brings in her 'own' man, DS Terry Amson, who is immediately a supportive working partner. She is nonetheless self-possessed, a figure of complex individual strength which the subsequent *Prime Suspect* stories were able to take for granted. Where Cagney and Lacey were a team, she is alone. And while the thriller narrative of *Prime Suspect* is,

classically, a story of violation and subsequent control, its central character disrupts some of the orthodoxies of the genre in a lasting manner.

This returns us to Lynda La Plante. The success of the *Prime Suspect* dramas allowed the writer to become a producer of her own projects. She was an executive producer of *The Lifeboat*, for instance, and her company La Plante Productions was involved in *The Governor* and *She's Out*. This was true of other eminent dramatists of the period. Alan Bleasdale and Dennis Potter, for instance, after consolidating their success as writers, were able to take executive positions in subsequent productions of their own work. In this respect British television is perhaps moving closer to American models of production where 'star' writers also operate at an executive level. Michael Crichton (the screenwriter of films including *The Andromeda Strain* and *Jurassic Park*, and the executive producer of the television series *ER*) and Steven Bochco (the writer-deviser of *Hill Street Blues*, *LA Law* and *NYPD Blue*) are among the better-known examples. In La Plante's case the move into production accords with a slow but steady increase in the number of women in executive positions in British television. In his chapter devoted to women producers, Jeremy Tunstall notes that 'by 1993 there were four women on the thirteen-person BBC Board of Management. At some point soon after the year 2000 a majority of senior producers in British television may be women; and women may occupy one-half of the top positions in the BBC by 2000.'<sup>30</sup>

In this the television industry is perhaps in step with a number of other institutions, and *Prime Suspect* itself bears witness to this gradual social change. Its protagonist is therefore pivotal, breaching the perceived limitations of both gender and genre. As a woman unto herself, Tennison provides a new image for women of her era. After a decade in which an emerging class of female professionals became increasingly powerful and visible, she represents exciting possibilities for female individualism at the beginning of the 1990s.

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<sup>30</sup> Jeremy Tunstall, *Television Producers* (London: Routledge, 1993), 173.

## 10 Deepening subjectivity: *The Singing Detective* (1986)

*The Singing Detective* is the most unorthodox of all the dramas examined in these pages. Unlike the serials addressed thus far, it has no apparent concern with developments in the public sphere. It is included here not merely because it is one of the most innovative British television serials of the 1980s – indeed of any decade – but because it demonstrates an outer limit of the thriller idiom in the period. The thriller's main expression during the Thatcher years was in paranoia dramas addressing the motifs of the secret state and the hidden establishment. In *The Singing Detective*, by contrast, the thriller mode is refracted in a highly stylised pastiche of pulp fiction and B-movie conventions. It is nonetheless crucial to the effectiveness of a profoundly subjective drama.

In the following pages I shall explore *The Singing Detective*'s place in the work of its writer Dennis Potter, then assess the programme's ironic modulations of thriller elements alongside its more extensive formal innovations. The latter suggest that *The Singing Detective* is a resolutely postmodern text, but I shall argue that it is inscribed with a set of values which are obliquely critical of the dominant culture of the 1980s.

*The Singing Detective* was not among the most popular drama serials of the period. When it was first transmitted at the end of 1986 it gained an average audience of 7.2 million viewers. This was a highly complex television drama. Its multiple narrative

lines fused and intersected in initially mystifying ways. Disturbing images showed its central character, ravaged by a serious skin illness, almost naked on his hospital bed. The ratings, then, were perhaps surprisingly buoyant for so unusual and demanding a programme. As the serial's director Jon Amiel observed, *The Singing Detective*

had the faith in its audience to say, this human mystery is of such consummate complexity that you'll want to stay involved and continue to watch. And they did. The lesson I learnt, with great humility, was never ever underestimate your audience.<sup>1</sup>

The programme was accorded substantial recognition in the clutch of awards made to it within the television industry.<sup>2</sup> It marked, too, a significant stage in its writer Dennis Potter's development as a TV dramatist. Indeed Fay Weldon suggested that the serial established Potter as 'the best television playwright *in the world*'.<sup>3</sup>

Not every viewer was as appreciative. The programme was accompanied by controversy on account of the graphic sequence in Episode 3 which intercuts two scenes: one shows a couple making love in the woods; the other features the attentions of hospital staff around the bed of an elderly man who has just had a heart attack. The sequence makes grimly witty connections between sex and death (the sound of the hospital oxygen pump, for instance, ~~slides~~<sup>overlaps</sup> with the gasps of the lovers) in a manner which some viewers found distasteful and offensive. This is the epicentre of the drama, however: a scene which explains a number of questions concerning the central character. It is also entirely characteristic of its writer's work. On a thematic level, desire is mingled with death, and love with loss, while on a formal level, as I shall discuss a little later, the sequence depends upon the filmic organisation of point of view and upon its editing structure. Certainly Potter was developing a form of drama which

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Joost Hunningher, 'The Singing Detective (Dennis Potter): Who done it?', in George Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 239.

<sup>2</sup> These include Best Single Drama (Broadcasting Press Guild), Best Mini-series (New York Film and Television Awards), Best Limited Serial (BANFF), Best Actor - Michael Gambon (BAFTA), and Best Design (Royal Television Society).

<sup>3</sup> Fay Weldon, 'Real life, real sex – real television', *London Standard*, 2 December 1986, 7 [Weldon's emphasis]. For an admiring, semi-biographical account of Potter's work, see Peter Stead, *Dennis Potter* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1993).

fully utilised the potentialities of the television medium. *The Singing Detective* is poetic and non-naturalistic, quite different to the main body of television drama. In that sense it is far from representative of the drama of the period. In certain other aspects – its seemingly postmodern techniques of fragmentation, eclectic mix of genre references and highly subjective focus – it exuded a sensibility that was absolutely of its era. It is perhaps the most skilfully realised work of one of Britain's most significant contemporary dramatists. In this respect the contributions of other members of the production team are crucial. Of special interest for the purposes of the present study are the ways in which Potter and Amiel take conventional thriller-genre references and weave them into a very different format. The programme is constructed as a subtle and ironic psychological thriller in which the central quest is the discovery of a profoundly personal salvation.

On Potter's death in 1994, *The Guardian* ran a number of tributes from people in the television industry.<sup>4</sup> For Anthony Minghella, 'Dennis Potter was the best television dramatist.' For Lynda La Plante, 'He lifted [the television medium] to a far higher plane than any other TV writer.' For Michael Grade, 'No one will ever better the body of work he leaves.' The fact that Potter has come to be seen as a unique talent – perhaps the last of his kind – rather than one among many experimental television artists is an indictment of the homogenising tendencies of television, as much as a tribute to his own originality. It is worth briefly remarking on some of Potter's work, not least in order to address his development of anti-naturalistic TV techniques. He is pre-eminent among a handful of television dramatists who have radically explored the potentialities of the medium through dramas made nonetheless for national broadcast. Elements of *The Singing Detective* depend on this earlier work and connect with Potter's long-standing antipathy towards television naturalism. The trouble with most television programmes, Potter suggests, is that

what is transmitted is almost made to appear *The Way Life Is*. The set is purporting to show us reality. By far the dominant mode in television is Naturalism: and so it is that most television ends up offering its viewers a means of orientating themselves towards the generally received notions of 'reality' – that

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<sup>4</sup> 'Programmes from heaven', *The Guardian*, 8 June 1994, Second Section, 2-4.



is, the way things are, which is more or less the way things have to be ...

When you have a book in your hands, or when sitting in a darkened theatre, you would be a bit of a fool to doubt that what you are experiencing is a 'made' piece of work ... But one of the dilemmas of the would-be 'serious' playwright working in the small strand of television which still permits such things ... is, straight away, how to show that there is a frame in the picture when most of the surrounding material is busy showing the picture in the frame. How, in short, to insist that a play is a play: or how to *disorientate* the viewer while he or she, and your work, is smack in the middle of the orientating process which television perpetually uses.<sup>5</sup>

The piece as a whole is cavalier but persuasive. Potter laments the aesthetic conservatism of 'the dominant mode' and suggests that it is part of a more insidious discourse. 'Television is the paradigm of the "occupying power",' <sup>6</sup> he argues. Television drama thus provides bland representations rather than imaginative and challenging explorations of real relationships between people. Potter never quite explains in this piece what he means by the 'occupying power', although he used the phrase again, entitling his James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture at the 1993 Edinburgh Television Festival 'Occupying Powers'. In the lecture he elaborates a little: 'Our own land was in the hands of others, and these others were not interested in our growth, or emancipation. And that is what defines an occupying power.'<sup>7</sup> There is a sense that Potter is addressing not only a particular political/ideological complex, but a whole system which <sup>1</sup>~~mitigates~~ <sup>2</sup>mitigates against individual freedom and against progressive artistic production. The innovative and inquiring writer in this case is always kept at the margins of television.

Potter's argument in the earlier piece is most explicit in its call for drama to 'show the frame in the picture', an open-handedness reminiscent of Brecht's similar strategy in the theatre, where the work of art foregrounds precisely its artificiality.<sup>8</sup> Certainly

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<sup>5</sup> Dennis Potter, 'Some Sort of Preface...', *Waiting for the Boat* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 29-30 [Potter's emphasis].

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Potter, 'The James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, Edinburgh Film Festival, 1993', *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews and a Lecture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 44.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, John Fuegi, *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos, According to Plan* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 33.

some elements of Potter's work – the direct address to camera, for instance, in *Brimstone and Treacle* (breaking the 'fourth wall') or the deliberately contrived happy ending of *Pennies From Heaven* (parodying 'bourgeois' narrative closure) – closely correlate to those employed by Brecht in plays like *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Good Person of Sezuán*.

Without straining the comparison, it is true that in much of his work Potter, like Brecht before him, is keenly aware of the impact that social and historical forces have on the lives of individuals. Arguably this, rather than a solely aesthetic concern to steer away from naturalism, defines much of his work. Indeed in Potter's dramas preceding *The Singing Detective* and *Blackeyes* (1989) the anti-naturalist tendency is fed by a single device or premise, while the programmes themselves mark a direct engagement with particular social issues.

The premise in the play *Son of Man* (BBC, 1969), for instance, is that Jesus is an 'ordinary' man, prone to outbursts of frustration and anger. The play was shot on video in three days in a studio, as part of the *Wednesday Play* season. The result is a form of intense, studio-centred realism, where the emphasis is on a Christ understandable in terms of human psychology. In *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* and *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* (both BBC, 1965) the device is that adult actors play children in flashback scenes. The dramas explore the difficulties in a father/son relationship where Nigel, the son, finds that his education has altered his political position, which leads him to stand more aloof from his family. The device of having adults play children is used again in *Blue Remembered Hills* (BBC, 1979), a play which is otherwise conventional in structure. The games of a group of selfish, spiteful and malicious children lead to the death of one of their number, and on one level the play is an analysis of forms of social interaction. The device in Potter's successful six-part serial *Pennies From Heaven* (BBC, 1978) is to have the actors lip-synch to songs from the 1930s. Thus characters in the drama suddenly reveal their desires or emotional states through the banal yet expressive lyrics of the song. The device cleverly draws on some of the mechanisms of pleasure of the musical, but the songs are more vividly mediated, palpably grafted on to both character and narrative. As Potter explained:

these were genuine artefacts from the past that had been cannibalized and transformed into the workings of the head. If the characters had sung them it would have been a musical. The surrounding dialogue could have remained exactly the same, but the whole effect would have collapsed. That is the mystery.<sup>9</sup>

Potter developed the poignant and ironic possibilities of this device in *The Singing Detective* and *Lipstick on Your Collar* (Whistling Gypsy Productions for C4, 1993), which featured songs from the 1940s and '50s respectively. In each case the musical items help to root the events of the drama in the appropriate period setting, yet their stylised use throws into relief the structures of feeling which permeate the songs, and hence the lives of the characters.

*Brimstone and Treacle* (produced in 1976 but banned by the BBC's then-Director General, Alasdair Milne, and only transmitted in 1987), was made before *Pennies from Heaven* but is in many ways a more volatile combination of elements. The devil, in human form, paradoxically impels a young woman's recovery from a coma by raping her. A number of anti-naturalist techniques are employed, including direct address to camera, the use of song as ironic commentary, and occasional flashback as a means of gradually revealing crucial events. But the play has a clear social reference. The devil inveigles himself into the home of a suburban racist, and it is precisely the values of a petty-bourgeois, narrowly conventional lower-middle-class man which the programme is concerned to interrogate. The same values, indeed, which impel the flight from suburbia – albeit a 1930s suburbia – of the central characters in *Pennies From Heaven*.

Until *The Singing Detective*, then, Potter's dramas are structured around social concerns which are at least as defining as their aesthetic strategies. With *The Singing Detective* and *Blackeyes* (BBC, 1989), the social and cultural dimensions of the work are compounded by a more thoroughgoing exploration of psychology and personal identity. In both serials Potter fragments the personality of the central character *and* the narrative frame in which the character is held. The four-part serial *Blackeyes* goes furthest in this respect, extending some of the concerns of *The Singing Detective* before it. The programme's eponymous central character is a fashion model of studiously

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<sup>9</sup> In Graham Fuller (ed), *Potter on Potter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 85. Fuller's book contains interviews with Potter about his various works, and includes a full filmography.

blank personality, a passive object of male desire. It transpires that she is a character in a story written by another character, while the 'main' story is being rewritten by its author's niece. This seemingly endless play of stories-within-stories is compounded when Potter enters the text in the form of his own voiceover, in which he comments on aspects of the drama. Every text in *Blackeyes* is subject to a meta-text. Such a naked acknowledgement of authorship was further appropriate in that Potter also directed the programme.

In some respects *Blackeyes* is radically anti-narrative: it fits together like a Russian doll rather than unfolding in a linear chronological fashion. Moreover it is radically anti-character, in that any empathic relationship with *Blackeyes* on the part of the viewer is disallowed. *Blackeyes* displays scant emotion, has little personality to speak of, no proper name and apparently no history. Her nature as creation-of-the-artist is made explicit. The programme therefore explores *Blackeyes*' construction as a cipher for fetishistic male fantasies. It also examines the status of authorship (when can a work be said to be 'personal' or 'truthful'?) and the subjective nature of the creative act. In this case 'writing' cannot escape the inscription of the author's individual desire and ideology.

*Blackeyes* was poorly received by the public and critics alike. One could argue that it was simply too avant garde to sustain a sizeable audience over its four-week run, but additional reasons suggest themselves. The programme's assertion that there is a base level of depravity in male desire only operated as a generalised informing concept. The serial in fact did not avoid reproducing the male gaze it was attempting to deconstruct. Potter's direction relied extensively on long takes, dollying around *Blackeyes* and slowly zooming in and out, obsessively fixing and framing her. It was as if the camera rhetoric was forbidding the distance from the subject which the written text and Potter's voiceover demanded. The programme nevertheless marked an extended consideration of the connections between subjectivity and creativity. 'Potter is now using television as James Joyce used the novel and Van Gogh used painting: as a multi-layered medium of intense self-expression,'<sup>10</sup> wrote Christopher Dunkley. The remark applies just as well to the stream-of-consciousness style of *The Singing Detective*, transmitted three

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher Dunkley, 'A funny sort of feminist', *Financial Times*, 29 November 1989, 25.

years prior to *Blackeyes* and a far more coherent work.

One must sound a note of caution, however, concerning the commonly-voiced notion that in these latter dramas Potter is dealing exclusively with the subjective sphere. Raymond Williams made a pertinent observation as long ago as 1970 in a review of Potter's play *Lay Down Your Arms*, which might apply out of context:

explication of a play like *Lay Down Your Arms* is now, in orthodox terms, personal, because any social explication would clarify more difficult issues. I don't mean only the irrelevant ascription of the play to Dennis Potter's personal experience. That's a way of sentimentalising it, or more often of writing it off. I mean the explication of the crisis in orthodox personal terms ... what is being reacted to, what is there to be adjusted to, what is finally rejected [by the play's central character], does not need to come under scrutiny.<sup>11</sup>

The point Williams emphasises, applies, seventeen years later, to *The Singing Detective*. Critics measured the programme against known biographical details concerning Potter's illness (he suffered from psoriasis, as does the central character in *The Singing Detective*) and responded to it as an exclusively personal drama. There is nonetheless a social context within which the subject is placed. The connections between this and the programme's exploration of the self thus become extremely interesting.

*The Singing Detective* was transmitted on BBC1 in six episodes in 1987. The programme drew upon genres already familiar to the viewer: the hospital drama, the 1940s private eye thriller, the costume drama (in this case evoking a wartime Britain in the 1940s) – elements connected by means of their relationship to the central character, Philip Marlow, a writer of cheap detective fiction. Marlow is bed-ridden in hospital, suffering from psoriatic arthropathy, a condition which induces chronic lesions on his body and leaves him hardly able to move. Severe fluctuations in his body temperature

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Against Adjustment', in Alan O'Connor (ed), *Raymond Williams on Television: Selected Writings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 104.

mean that he is prone to hallucinate. With only partial control over his consciousness he reconstructs in his mind a paperback thriller he has written (*The Singing Detective*) and formative events in his childhood in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, then in London. The ongoing effect these have on his adult sensibility is eventually made clear. He also invents a contemporary thriller story involving his wife, in which she betrays him sexually and professionally.

There are thus four main narrative strands: the contemporary narrative set in the hospital; the narrative set in the 1940s which tells of a period during Marlow's boyhood; the narrative of Marlow's detective novel, *The Singing Detective*, also set in the 1940s; and the 'imagined' contemporary thriller narrative. These meld together through their connection with Marlow. The programme thus explores the complicated nexus of material, historical and emotional forces which structure a particular individual's life, and the ways in which these are refracted in both conscious behaviour and the Unconscious. In his various movies-of-the-mind Marlow is a kind of *Deus ex Machina*, manipulating his various stories. He is also a man imposed on by his illness and imagination, however, where 'real' and 'fictional' worlds are insidiously connected. The tension between the two modes – telling the story (active) and suffering it (passive) is crucial to the programme as a whole, for it allows the exploration of processes of memory and artistic creativity. This, rather than the production of a strong narrative, is the programme's central concern.

In an interview in the BBC arts programme *Arena* in 1987, Dennis Potter observed that 'what I was trying to do with *The Singing Detective* was to make the whole thing a detective story, but a detective story about how you find out about yourself'.<sup>12</sup> The detective mode is made to seem particularly appropriate. There are clearly-signposted 'clues' as to determining factors in Marlow's psychological make-up, and the programme entails a long and detailed search for coherence – a 'right' interpretation of an individual's personal and psychological history – in order to enable a meaningful resolution. The detective figure in this case is trebled. Firstly there is the psychotherapist who is involved in Marlow's treatment. He is not so much a doctor as

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<sup>12</sup> 'Dennis Potter', *Arena*, BBC, 30 January 1987. A transcript of this interview is included in Potter, *Seeing the Blossom*, 59-72.

a detective of the mind, and his questions and goadings contribute to Marlow's eventual (partial) recovery. The professional detective, of course, is found in the story which Marlow has written. And Marlow himself is continually piecing together memories and imaginations, mulling over the evidence of his own case history until everything falls into place. The narrative is often elliptical but its hermeneutic impulsion is emphasised through the activities of these various characters. In fact – layer upon layer! – there are perhaps two more sleuths to consider, as Ib Bondebjerg points out: 'the two ultimate detectives are of course the viewer and the super-narrator behind it all, Dennis Potter'.<sup>13</sup>

Bondebjerg notes that Potter had previously written the script for *Gorky Park* (USA, 1983):

a film with an intriguing, political thriller plot. As an author Potter thus has first-hand knowledge of the classical narrative tradition of the Hollywood thriller, which forms the background of the intertextual and meta-fictional play with crime fiction narration clichés in ... *The Singing Detective*.<sup>14</sup>

As this implies, the conscious *play* with genre conventions is as important to the narrative as any intrinsic charge they might bring. *The Singing Detective* draws on the detective thriller's nexus of mystery, threat and explication, not merely in the story which Marlow re-imagines, but in the narrative as a whole. It sets an investigation in process, addressing the mystery of Marlow's suffering. The solution to this mystery partly lies in unravelling the evidence – Marlow's past and his fiction – which thus offers the possibility for a highly foregrounded treatment of the detective-thriller genre.

The sequences from Marlow's pulp detective novel are rendered in a semi-ironical pastiche. References to the world of film and paperback thrillers abound in the images employed, and even Marlow's name is a nod in the direction of the private eye Raymond Chandler famously created. 'You'd think my mother would have had more sense than to call me Philip, wouldn't you?' says Marlow. 'I mean, with a name like

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<sup>13</sup> Ib Bondebjerg, 'Intertextuality and metafiction: Genre and narration in the television fiction of Dennis Potter', in Michael Skovmand and Kim Schrøder (eds), *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 175.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

Marlow. Philip Marlowe. I haven't got an "e" on the end, but it sounds the same. ... What else could I have done except write detective stories?'<sup>15</sup> Potter teasingly invites the viewer's cognisance of the reference by adding an anagrammatical 'e' as the initial of the writer's middle name: he is 'P.E. Marlow'.

The evocation of an older thriller world is calculatedly derivative, as evidenced in Potter's script and in director Jon Amiel's televisual realisation. Amiel had previously worked as a literary manager in the theatre, a script editor in television and then as the director of several *Play for Today* projects. He was some way down the list of directors the producer Kenith Trodd approached to work on *The Singing Detective*.<sup>16</sup> Having secured the job, however, he proved to be highly sensitive to the nuances of style, atmosphere and expression in the script, and the fluid rhythm of the serial owes much to his direction. Potter's opening scene-setting indicates 'A misty, moody, highly atmospheric "thrillerish", winter's evening in London, 1945'.<sup>17</sup> Amiel obliges with the film grammar of a previous era, slow pans along the ground and walls of a dank, back-street setting. The filming of these sequences is highly stylised. Amiel explains that 'for the genre thriller I evolved with Ken Westbury [the director of photography] a distinctively old-fashioned style of lighting ... using hard source lights, key lights, pin spots, charley bars to get angles of light, a very distinctive noir lighting style'.<sup>18</sup> These scenes stand out even more markedly when set against the hospital scenes, filmed in bright lighting, or the scenes from Marlow's childhood, rendered in muted sepia colours. Such technical attention responds directly to the script. Potter's *mise en scène* directions often indicate a filmic concentration on the (perhaps derivative) poetry of an image. They are suggestive rather than empirical; atmospheric sketches which indicate a writer concerned with 'feel' as much as dialogue and narrative. The scripted version of Episode 2, for instance, opens with the following:

The Thames at Hammersmith slip-slaps and glistens and blobs in the moonlight, and, in stages, the

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<sup>15</sup> Dennis Potter, *The Singing Detective* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 21-22.

<sup>16</sup> See Hunningher, 'The Singing Detective', 242.

<sup>17</sup> Potter, *The Singing Detective*, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Hunningher, 'The Singing Detective', 245.



moon itself is half glimpsed, breaks up, and then is fully seen, floating mysteriously in the oily-black water. "Limehouse Blues", in the Ambrose version, begins to be heard. The gilded bridge is empty and silvered a little in the moonlight. ...

Unexpectedly there *is* someone on the bridge after all. *The Singing Detective*, in his 1945 garb, is on the pedestrian walk, a hand on the wooden-topped rail, looking at the slow, dark river, and smoking a cigarette.<sup>19</sup>

B-movie thriller references are invoked throughout. The settings are variously rainy, misty or shadowy, often only seen at night. There is a stake-out and a shoot-out, and there are mysterious nightclub hostesses and gangster figures (the 'two mysterious men') who are at best two-dimensional. The Singing Detective wears a raincoat and snap-brim fedora, smokes cigarettes and speaks a voiceover characteristic of 1940s *films noirs*, in which he recapitulates the narrative in an aphoristic, side-of-the-mouth style, his speech full of parodic transatlantic idioms. 'And so the man went down the hole, like Alice,' he says in a characteristic voiceover. 'But there were no bunny rabbits down there. It wasn't that sort of hole. It was a rat-hole.'<sup>20</sup>

The genre-references are easy to read, but their 'artificiality' – their status precisely as *reconstructions* from genre models – is insisted upon at various levels within the programme. The enigmatic speech of the detective Marlow (he is named after his creator), for instance, gives rise to a little joke: 'I have no idea what you mean,' another character snaps at him. 'Really. No idea of what you are talking about. Isn't it possible for you to talk properly, in ordinary, decent English?'<sup>21</sup>

Potter wryly recognises some characteristic strategies of the genre from which he borrows. The detective Marlow, as his 'handle' implies, sings in a dance band. In one scene he is crooning 'The Umbrella Man', holding an umbrella as a prop. He is about to be shot at by the two mysterious men who have been observing him from the dance hall balcony. Potter's written direction describes the shooting thus:

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<sup>19</sup> Potter, *The Singing Detective*, 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Marlow dives low and swings his umbrella up across himself ... The bullet holes are torn in the fabric of the umbrella in such a way, such a pattern, that anyone behind it must be killed. But Marlow is, almost magically, not behind the bullet-riddled umbrella ...<sup>22</sup>

Marlow commences firing at the two mysterious men who 'are hurtling at break-neck speed for the exit. And the lugubrious barman, unfazed, continues wiping the glasses. Trapped in an old tradition.' Narrative incongruities such as this have a function beyond recalling the ubiquitous strategies of the 1940s thriller (the indestructible hero; the discreetly unnoticing barman). They are little swerves of logic belonging not only to the overheated B-movie but to the thought process of the hallucinating Marlow. It is partly the *disconnectedness* of the thriller story – its stops and starts, its minor illogicalities, the ways in which characters in one sequence are substituted in another – which *connects* it to the experience of the central character in his hospital bed.

Importantly, then, the thriller element is not a gratuitous 'extra', the opportunity for stylistic relief or slyly humorous parody. The exegesis of the thriller story is made central to the larger exegesis of Marlow's own (partial and ongoing) recovery from illness. As such it is as real to Marlow as the bed in which he lies. Its objective materiality is underlined when it is shown within the programme as a book – *The Singing Detective*, the text itself – which one of the patients in Marlow's ward is reading. It appears too on the desk of the psychotherapist, who clearly hopes that a perusal of the fiction might afford an insight into the psychology of the writer, whose story may contain clues as to his own case history. 'It's a detective story, isn't it?' he says to Marlow. ' ... I know the clues are supposed to point in the direction of the murderer. But what if they also reveal the *victim* a little more clearly?'<sup>23</sup> Marlow scornfully responds to this as nothing better than cheap psychology. But the narrative of *The Singing Detective* is precisely constructed to demonstrate that the 'story' is a collection of meaning-saturated elements, neither arbitrary nor entirely genre-derived. Instead they have a bearing on Marlow, the central character, and thereby on the thematic concerns of the programme as a whole. The thriller pastiche is thus

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<sup>22</sup> Potter, *The Singing Detective*, 192.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

sophisticated. The programme acknowledges that it is 'cheap', second-hand and packed with cliché. The tone here is ironical and in part comic. Yet it is crucial to the programme's serious core: its exploration of the ways in which the suffering writer remembers, reconstructs and indeed is constructed by his past.

The drama necessarily connects and overlaps its various narrative strands. Let us consider a sequence in Episode 3 to explore the ways in which this is effected.<sup>24</sup> Marlow is with Gibbon, the psychotherapist, who enthusiastically claims that Marlow is making progress. 'I never went to see Billy Graham,' says Marlow, seemingly offended at Gibbon's excess of feeling. 'But there *is* someone you remind me of.'

Cut to a new scene in the schoolroom of Marlow's youth, where his teacher is beating time to a class rendition of 'It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow', a saccharine 1940s song. The initial connection between scenes is a character in Marlow's memory, but the tinselly optimism of the song contrasts with Marlow's quietly savage irony, elaborating the cynical mode of the character throughout. As the song ends there is a voiceover from the detective: 'I knew I was ankle-deep in the mess ...' – a reference to the fact that the young Philip is about to be accused of excreting on the teacher's desk; but also to the difficulties currently faced by the (fictional) detective in his enquiry into the disappearance of a prostitute. The voiceover ~~slides~~ <sup>collapses</sup> slides different times, places and narrative levels. In the terms of the programme, the detective is a fictional character; but his voiceover embraces an 'actual' event in Marlow's past. Of course it is spoken by Michael Gambon, the actor playing Marlow in both incarnations. The text segues elegantly between 'actual' and fictional.

Cut to the thriller world; specifically the image of a blonde woman in a fur coat, standing by a lamppost on the river embankment at Hammersmith. The woman is played by Alison Steadman, who also plays Philip's mother, Mrs Marlow: another relevant doubling, which will bear further discussion.

Cut to an interior scene, where the detective is in the middle of a meeting with his client Binney, at the latter's Hammersmith flat. When, on Marlow's advice, Binney looks out of the window, he sees the blonde woman who immediately starts to 'sing' (in lip-synch) Marlene Dietrich's recording of 'Lili Marlene'. The song later recurs in a

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<sup>24</sup> Potter, *The Singing Detective*, 98-106.

'real' setting, when it is played on a gramophone at the London house of Mrs Marlow's parents.

The sequence effortlessly elides Marlow's 'present' in the hospital, his 'past' in the Forest of Dean and London, and his imagined thriller world. This involves a transference of character from one narrative into another. The teacher, it transpires, becomes elsewhere a living scarecrow in the boy Philip's imagination. The mother is reinvented into a deliberately overdetermined stereotype, part-prostitute, part-vamp, part-secret agent. There is a *psychological* connection here too, which relies on the viewer's awareness of events in Marlow's past which helped determine his fraught and painful relationship with his mother. The programme's doubling, sometimes trebling, of actors is almost unknown in television drama, which generally observes the code of realism that different characters in a story be played by different actors. Doubling is a crucial aspect of *The Singing Detective's* non-naturalism, however. Michael Gambon plays Marlow and his alter-ego, the detective. Janet Henfrey plays the teacher and the scarecrow. Alison Steadman plays the mother and the vamp. Patrick Malahide plays the spy Binney, the lover Raymond Binney, and the treacherous film producer Finney. Other actors also appear in different narrative spaces. George Rossi and Ron Cook, for instance, who play the two mysterious men, can be spotted as 'ordinary' members of the audience at the working men's club where Marlow's father performs. This patchwork of doubling smooths the path from 'real' narrative worlds (the 1940s of Marlow's boyhood and the present setting in the hospital) into imaginary ones peopled by characters reinvented from Marlow's acquaintances.

Camera and editing techniques amplify these connecting devices. There is an extensive recourse to cross-fades, a standard method of passing from one place or state to another in consecutive shots. Here, however, the dissolve is especially appropriate in melting the distinctions between narrative spaces, which are instead smoothly conjoined for the viewer's benefit. Soundtracks from one narrative overlay images from another. This is more than the straightforward use of asynchronism as a way of passing from one shot to another. Sometimes the sound has no correlation with any image in a sequence, but is instead 'remembered' by Marlow from an event which the viewer has already seen, or one which the drama has yet to depict. Key sounds, phrases and

images are repeated (the cawing of rooks; Mrs Marlow's cry of 'Philip!'), often as small individual items within densely-edited hallucination sequences which flit between all the narratives on offer. Indeed in places these depart from a linear narrative mode altogether, to pool fragments of significant sounds and images. As Bondebjerg notes, 'the text may suddenly turn into a symbolic or radical text, using a modernist montage technique and editing, a stream of images like a spider web that make patterns of a non-narrative kind.'<sup>25</sup>

One such montage sequence occurs in Episode 5, and might be represented as follows:

<i>image</i>	<i>sound</i>
	Suspense music throughout.
Raymond and Mrs Marlow make love in the forest.	Philip's voice: 'What's 'im 'a doin' to our Mam?'
Sonya kisses Binney, running her red fingernail down his cheek.	Philip's voice: 'Mam, Mam, Mam ...'
Philip watches his mother and Raymond making love.	
Mrs Marlow applies her lipstick.	
Marlow lies in his hospital bed.	
Sonya applies her lipstick.	Sonya's voice: 'I mean, how long's it take?'
Binney wipes Sonya's lipstick off her lips with his thumb.	
Philip is sitting in a tree and squashes a ladybird with his thumb.	
Binney looks at his thumb.	Binney's voice: 'Oof!' in disapproval.
Philip looks at his thumb.	
Binney slaps Sonya.	A woman starts to cry.

The sequence is rich in signifying elements, connecting the lovers' act, prostitution,

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<sup>25</sup> Bondebjerg, 'Intertextuality and metafiction', 177.

female self-presentation and male violence, while the soundtrack accompanies this with the young boy's question, the prostitute's casual expression of <sup>lack of</sup> disinterest (this from an earlier sequence), the man's displeasure and the woman's pain, all modulated by the thriller music. The voiceover from Sonya, incidentally, comes from yet another narrative time-frame: there has been a scene in which Marlow, perhaps five or ten years younger than in the 'present', has sex with a prostitute played by the actress who also plays Sonya, the night-club hostess. The application of lipstick connects Mrs Marlow and Sonya. The act of looking at one's thumb connects Philip and Binney. Their acts of violence reveal disturbing connections between power and disgust, with misogynistic overtones. The viewer is invited to piece all these elements together specifically as they apply to Marlow.

Music forms an additional connecting device in that songs from the 1940s are used as a form of cement, binding different narrative worlds and belonging, sometimes simultaneously, to a 'remembered' moment from Marlow's youth, a semi-surreal one from the thriller world, or a darkly comic one in the present. The songs momentarily collapse time, character and plot. They provide what Bondebjerg describes as 'overloaded semiotic junctions in the text':<sup>26</sup> points at which meaning laps between the song itself and the narrative lines through which it flows. Their evocation of simplistic desire and cheap philosophy ('You've got to latch on to the affirmative', 'You always hurt the one you love', 'I'm gonna buy a paper doll that I can call my own') is cast in a bitterly ironical light, operating nonetheless as a nostalgic comforter. Potter describes popular songs as latter-day psalms: 'They are both ludicrous and banal, reducing everything to the utmost simplification, but also, at the same time, saying, "Yes, there is another order of seeing, there is another way, there is another reality."<sup>27</sup> This doubleness is crucial. Marlow, of course, exhibits both a bilious despoliation of sentiment and a deep-seated attachment to the past.

This accords with Potter's claim (albeit one stated long before the transmission of *The Singing Detective*) that his work deals with sensibility rather than surface appearance: 'Basically I'm much more concerned with interior drama than with external

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<sup>26</sup> Bondebjerg, 'Intertextuality and metafiction', 169.

<sup>27</sup> In Fuller (ed), *Potter on Potter*, 86.

realities. Certainly one of the strands in TV drama is that of the interiorising process, the concern with people's fantasies and feelings about the shape of their lives, and about themselves'.<sup>28</sup> The protagonist of *The Singing Detective* is more fully understood through consideration of events and relationships in his past, and of the ways in which these impinge on his 'fantasies and feelings'. Consider, for instance, the recurring image of a drowned woman, just pulled out of the Thames, whose identity is initially not revealed. As the narrative strands develop the image recurs but features different victims. The woman is seen to be Sonia, the prostitute; Nicola, Marlow's wife; and finally, once it becomes clear that Marlow's mother committed suicide by drowning, Mrs Marlow. The viewer, it seems, is being offered a classic case of Freudian displacement (the 'real' woman is substituted by others) within an anxious repetition compulsion, the necessity continually to revisit and re-imagine the death of the mother. This amplifies psychological and emotional themes. In the controversial passage in Episode 3 to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter, the young Philip observes his mother having sex with her lover in the woods. Although Mrs Marlow is complicit, the event is partly depicted as an act of violation: Raymond seems particularly insensitive after having sex. It is also shown quite categorically from Philip's point of view, with shots of him anxiously watching, and shots of the lovers taken through the foliage from his low-level vantage point. It is clear from this moment onwards that the single event had a traumatic effect on the boy, and coloured not only his relationship with his mother but his capacity for social relationships in general, and with women in particular.

Having chosen such raw material Potter could have expanded upon it in a number of ways. It is arguably the reflex of a deeply misogynistic text that Marlow's boyhood experience *explains* his vexed relationships with women as a whole. Point-of-view is shared between Marlow, the boy Philip, the Singing Detective and, importantly, the camera in a more narratorial sense; but never by any of the women characters. This textual mode was to resurface in yet more problematic form in *Blackeyes* two years later. For the moment, however, this simply reinforces the point that *The Singing*

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<sup>28</sup> Philip Purser, 'Dennis Potter', in George Brandt (ed), *British Television Drama* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 175.

*Detective* depends on evoking the memory and emotion of a single individual, on a sustained level which fundamentally differentiates it from the plot-oriented output of staple TV drama. Even the initially surprising images – the scarecrow’s head which whirls round one hundred and eighty degrees and begins singing; the doctors who break into ‘Dry Bones’; the father crooning alone in the deserted dance hall – are explicable in this light. They belong to an obsessively unsettling dreamworld yet correspond to actual anxieties; hence they contribute to the formation of a structure of *feeling* for the central character.

It is initially tempting to emphasise a postmodern aspect to *The Singing Detective*. In his influential essay ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’,<sup>29</sup> Fredric Jameson suggests that there are two distinctive features to postmodernism: a reaction against the established forms of high modernism; and an effacement of ‘separations’ between and within works, especially between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture. By ‘high modernism’ Jameson means both a body of art-works and a cultural sensibility prevalent in the first decades of this century, the impact of which have reverberated ever since. According to an analysis of this kind, the ‘classic’ art works of this period – texts by the likes of Eliot, Pound, Lawrence and Joyce – are supremely aestheticised. Their shared assumption is that artistic expression can indeed be refined into concentrated slivers of meaning or representation (in Pound’s case, the more concentrated, the more ‘perfect’); and that each manifestation stands apart from expression in other art forms. In other words a poet expresses his/her truth through poetry; a novelist through the novel.

Postmodern works, by contrast, liquefy the barriers between art forms. A dance/performance might also incorporate video, and simultaneously be an installation. They revisit or ‘quote’ from various sources, mixing high and mass culture in a blithely undifferentiating melting pot. More disturbingly for advocates of the Modernist project,

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<sup>29</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, in E. Ann Kaplan (ed), *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), 13-29. An earlier version of this essay is collected in Hal Foster (ed), *Postmodern Culture* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1985), 111-125.



they often appear *not* to have any meaning – not even a conscious nonsensicality as with Dada. There is no final referential truth. Instead they respond blandly to the flux of experience, the significance of which they refuse to speculate upon.

This is an admittedly caricatural outline, but the view that postmodernism marks a decisive break from modernism has remained influential. *The Singing Detective*'s strategies certainly make for complexity rather than clarity. It thus seems radically divorced from the clean storylines which motor most television drama; and, as tellingly, from the stripped, closed self-sufficiency of the modernist art-work. The programme self-consciously revisits other genre models. One can tentatively observe Jameson's formulation at work: *The Singing Detective* melds popular forms – the popular song, the detective thriller – into a more serious (high) narrative concerning subjectivity. Furthermore, its various narrative strands do not operate on a plot/sub-plot basis. They are made equally significant, seeping into each other in a way that exemplifies what David Harvey has described as 'the deconstructionist impulse ... to look inside one text for another, dissolve one text into another, or build one text into another'.<sup>30</sup> An effacement of separations occurs in *The Singing Detective* right at the point of artistic production, between the narrative strands themselves.

Another characteristic of postmodernist work is its recurring fascination with 'metafiction', described in Steven Connor's handy phrase as 'the exploration by literary texts of their own nature and status as fiction'.<sup>31</sup> In other words, there is a continual stress on the 'artificiality' of the art work, its incapacity ever to be fully 'real' or fully mimetic. This is figured in two different ways in *The Singing Detective*. The most obvious indicators of the programme's 'contrived' nature are the lip-synched renditions of 1940s songs, running across all the narrative strands, with the vocal line often shared, quite improbably at times, between different characters. The programme expands upon this in its exploration of fiction as an act of deliberate artistic construction. It is important that the book Marlow has written (*The Singing Detective*) 'belongs' to him, for his reconstruction of its story is depicted not just as an act of

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<sup>30</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 51.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 123.

memory but as one of anguished creativity. Writerly agony becomes (to use a pun) literal: when Marlow is well enough at least to write with a pen strapped to his hand, the endeavour is difficult and painful. It is also, paradoxically, deeply and naively pleasurable. The focus here is on the physical business of getting words on the page. The physiotherapist attending Marlow reads his script: 'Upwards strokes ... and downward slopes and a comma curls ...'<sup>32</sup> Writing entails making shapes on a piece of paper: artistic creation is a physical job of work. One might observe, incidentally, that the Singing Detective's catchphrase, 'Am I right, or am I right?' is a metonymic slide from 'Can I write, or can I write?'

If writing is literally 'manufacture' – handiwork, as it were – it is but a short step to insist upon the concomitant fabrication and intrinsically artificial nature of narrative plotting. This is made manifest in *The Singing Detective*. Marlow lies in bed day-dreaming the contemporary thriller element of the programme in a manner which at times sees characters themselves 'speak' the writing. Nicola, his wife, emerges from one bedside visit to observe to her lover:

Oh comma he's a morbid creature exclamation mark And he thinks I'm going back to him exclamation mark

They look at each other. They embrace, kiss, half break.

(Laugh) Oh, he's a morbid creature! And he thinks I'm going back to him!<sup>33</sup>

Interestingly the narrative of this element involves the theft of Marlow's film treatment of the paperback *The Singing Detective*, which Nicola's lover is attempting to pass off as his own work. Hence Marlow's text is 'stolen' or 'lost'. This echoes a more generalised theme. Marlow attempts to reimagine his story, which continually slips and fragments as its elements fade, blur and overlap. If not himself a postmodern author, he is surely a figure in a postmodern text whose effect is based upon an evocative matrix of fracture and disruption?

It is possible, on the other hand, to argue that there are works which both embody

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<sup>32</sup> Potter, *The Singing Detective*, 226.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

the complex fragmentariness of contemporary social life *and* embark on a modernist quest for meaning; so that they are, in Terry Eagleton's wry description, 'still agonizedly caught up in metaphysical depth and wretchedness, still able to experience psychic fragmentation and social alienation as spiritually wounding'.<sup>34</sup> The multiple layers of *The Singing Detective* conceal a deeper unity of this nature. The programme is ultimately about the subjective state and thought process of a single individual. Marlow as a character is reminiscent of Strindberg's conception of the author-as-dreamer, someone who, in Strindberg's words, transcribes the

shape of a dream. Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble. But one consciousness rules over them all, that of the dreamer.<sup>35</sup>

The most obvious collection point in the programme for all the shifts, evasions and half-memories of dream is in Marlow's present-experience. Thus rather than being a postmodern exhibition of blithe discontinuities, *The Singing Detective* affirms the *depth* of its central character and the meanings which he discovers and articulates. This gives rise to a revealing tension. The form of *The Singing Detective* makes it a primarily subjective work. In this respect Marlow's experiences and utterances are presented as plausible and authentic. The viewer is nonetheless invited to dissent from the value-system which Marlow expounds, which is isolationist, anti-redemptive and anti-humanist. 'We all have blood on our teeth,' he characteristically remarks,<sup>36</sup> and his pessimism is underpinned by a bleakly metaphysical ontology. 'The rain, it falls,' he says to Gibbon:

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<sup>34</sup> Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *Against the Grain: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 1986), 143.

<sup>35</sup> Johan August Strindberg, 'Author's Note' to *A Dream Play*, in Michael Meyer (ed), *Strindberg: Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1988), 175.

<sup>36</sup> Potter, *The Singing Detective*, 211.

The sun, it shines. The wind blows. And that's what it's like. You're buffeted by this, by that, and it is nothing to do with you. ... And all the time there is this canopy stretching over you -

GIBBON: (*determined to interrupt*) What canopy? ...

MARLOW: Things-as-they-are. (*Almost laughs in scorn*) Fate. ...

Then suddenly, with a savagery which implies the opposite of what he is saying.

- I believe in no systems, no ideologies, no religion, nothing like that. ... I just think that from time to time, and at random, you are visited by what you cannot know cannot predict cannot control cannot change cannot understand and cannot cannot cannot escape – Fate. (*Little shrug.*) Why not? 'S good old word.<sup>37</sup>

The revealing direction in the middle of this passage ('with a savagery which implies the opposite of what he is saying') hints at one of the motors of Michael Gambon's fine performance as Marlow. The actor strikes a balance between a character who is bitterly misanthropic to the point of personal abusiveness; and who needs to become more sensitised – to his own history, and therefore his own relationships with other individuals – in order to recover. For the central narrative of *The Singing Detective* concerns Marlow's progress from sickness to – relatively speaking – health. Marlow gets better because he *understands* the connection between events in his past and the operation of his creative subconscious.

There is a moral dimension to this, to do with self-knowledge and the admission of responsibility. In the final episode Marlow confesses to Gibbon his 'framing' of Mark Binney, a backward boy in his class, for his own act of defecation. The teacher thus thrashed Binney instead of Philip. Marlow explains that Binney, years later, had been admitted to an asylum, 'a complete nutter'. The implication is that in a shadowy way Marlow is partly responsible. Responsible, too, perhaps, in some corner of the boy's anxiety, for the suicide of his mother; an awful criminality awaiting discovery. After this confession he breaks down and cries, at which Gibbon seizes the moment and urges his patient to stand and walk. Marlow makes the attempt, and succeeds (amid their shared 'rendition' of 'Into Each Life Some Rain Must Fall'). He has faced the fullness of his past and in the process is nearly healed. Potter remarked in an interview

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<sup>37</sup> Potter, *The Singing Detective*, 171-2.

that 'behind all those selves that are being sold things *remains* the other, unique sovereign individual. ...that sovereignty ... is the most precious of all the human capacities, even beyond language.'<sup>38</sup> In this sense – in the commingling of subjective sensitivity and moral awareness – the programme fosters its central vision of liberal individualism.

Marlow replays his psychological trauma through a desperate, over-heated refraction of life into parodic fiction but is then able to emerge again from fiction into the 'real' world. Illness in this case is a metaphor for a rejection of society, where the entire project of the serial is to *restore* Marlow to society. This is only made possible when Marlow has understood his own history. The Singing Detective's recourse to certain thriller structures is thus highly appropriate. The hermeneutic drive of the thriller – its pattern of disruption, mystery and explication – is reproduced here. The thriller inflections of the drama intensify the narration of the protagonist's escape from that which threatens him, and help regulate the flow of information. The process is one of healing, crucially bound up with the text's epistemophilic drive. Marlow and the viewer gain knowledge. For all its fragmentariness, disparate references and arbitrary mysteriousness, *The Singing Detective* is determined by a quest for coherence – a quest which has a fundamentally optimistic dimension. Marlow leaves hospital, cheerfully, on the arm of the wife he has maligned throughout. They walk along the hospital corridor away from the fixed camera: an ironic nod at the closure of Westerns, whose heroes stoically ride off into their own hard-earned sunsets.

Towards the beginning of this chapter I noted Potter's remark that *The Singing Detective* is 'a detective story about how you find out about yourself'. This implies a predominantly *personal* focus, but the programme also makes it clear that successful self-analysis needs a fuller and in some respects harmonious social context. It is less surprising, then, that what appears to be the *actual* detective story, the 1940s thriller, remains misty and unconcluded, at least in terms of understanding exactly how each character fits into the story and how the story ends. Its signification, however, is not in these local details but in its shared relationship with the whole. The thriller element provides both a source of comfort (the construction of a work of fiction); an enjoyable

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<sup>38</sup> 'Dennis Potter', *Arena*.

artefact (the detective story); and a hermeneutic model (the piecing together of clues from disparate sources). This enables not only the examination of subjectivity but the construction – and subtextual assertion – of a value-system which in places contradicts the proffered opinions of the central character.

*The Singing Detective* is not among the conspiracy thrillers which coalesce as a sub-genre in the 1980s, but it does share with these serials certain crucial tendencies: namely the sophisticated use of a thriller-like narrative structure and the central theme of the alienated individual. Exploring the status of an alienated subject *and* the possibilities for a nourishing value-system is a difficult balancing act. As *The Singing Detective* indicates, along with the other serials centrally examined in this study, the endeavour is absolutely characteristic of drama of this period. To that extent *The Singing Detective* belongs squarely to the Thatcher era. I shall examine the connection between the imperatives of Thatcherism and this sharpened dramatic focus on both individual identity and questions of cultural value in the final chapter.

## **1 1 Narrative and ideology in British television thriller serials**

Many of the serials addressed in these pages share a conspicuous tendency. Their narrative closures are often partial, ambiguous and pessimistic, rather than affirmative and resolving. Narration is a basic process within culture, and fictional narratives are usually completed in a definite and conclusive fashion. This is not a rule, of course – but the fact that so many dramas of the period are enigmatic, inconclusive or both is surely most significant. In moving towards my own conclusion, then, I shall examine thriller serials of the 1980s in the light of this extremely uncommon phenomenon. I shall initially address some salient features of narrative, and suggest that shifts in narrative structure can be explained in relation to broader variations within culture. Such shifts in narrative organisation have an ideological dimension. The remarks made in this chapter do not apply uniformly to all the serials examined thus far, but they indicate a continuum which takes in a surprisingly large number.

It is at first sight possible to separate critical accounts of narrative into two broad approaches: those concerned predominantly with form and structure, and those whose main interest is with the ways in which narrative negotiates meaning and perhaps has mythic resonances. Formalist accounts explain that narratives are structured according to basic components and patterns and display certain recurrent formal tendencies. In his influential *Morphology of the Folktale*, for instance, the philologist Vladimir Propp examines a hundred Russian folktales, revealing that each demonstrates a nearly identical structure based on the relationship between thirty-one narrative units, or

'functions'.<sup>1</sup> Propp identifies these functions in terms which refer to action (as opposed to, say, literary or psychological categories) and divides them into six subsets named in terms of proto-typical situations. Thus, for instance, the section entitled 'Struggle' includes function 16: 'The hero and villain join in direct combat'; the section entitled 'Recognition' includes function 31: 'The hero is married and crowned'. The identification of these functions occurs independently of conventional preoccupations with character and theme. Propp's analysis is (highly) culturally specific – its subject, Russian folk tales, implies a sharp distinctiveness of geography and genre. It does not seek to read the cultural or ideological co-ordinates of a text, however, but the relationship between components whose function derives purely from the mechanisms of narrative process.

A more materialist approach to narrative treats storytelling as an act of cultural signification: narratives are shared acts of communication which reveal, or are inscribed by, subjects, concerns and tensions particular to the period in which the narrative is constructed. This view is articulated by Edward Said:

stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future – these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative.<sup>2</sup>

Narrative is one of the grounds on which discourses of power and issues of cultural difference are played out. This means that narrative is not some peripheral extra, a mere adjunct to people's working lives indulged in during leisure time. It is both more pervasive and more fundamental. In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson theorises 'the all-informing process of *narrative*, which I take to be (here using the shorthand of philosophical idealism) the central function or *instance* of the human

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<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Propp, translated by Laurence Scott, *The Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), xiii.



mind.’<sup>3</sup> Whilst it might appear from this – as indeed from the title of the book – that Jameson’s main concern is with the psychological ramifications of narrative, he argues throughout for a much broader perspective: for narrative is riven with ‘the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production’.<sup>4</sup>

Narrative in this sense need not refer only to fictional stories. We now understand that principles of narration apply to a range of texts of different natures. Thus one might point to the narratives developed in rock videos, or newspaper reports, or recipes for sponge cakes. Edward Branigan suggests that such a range of possibilities ‘demonstrates that narrative should not be seen as exclusively *fictional* but instead should merely be contrasted to *other (nonnarrative) ways of assembling and understanding data*’.<sup>5</sup> Narrative is concerned with organising information, although it is a basic principle of narration that information is presented within some kind of developmental framework. As Dennis Porter observes, ‘Probably the most common model for narrative is ... that of the difficult journey through a country without maps.’<sup>6</sup> For narrative both surprises, reveals and, in a literal sense – as the text is already laid out before the reader – leads the way. Development will usually be chronological. Narratives are generally time-based and causal: because *x* happens, *y* is the result. That is not to say that narrational information needs to show or present the entire narrative to which it refers. There is a single-frame Larson cartoon, for instance, which shows some unassuming suburbanite polishing his car. A bird sits smugly on a telephone wire directly above the gleaming vehicle. The caption at the bottom of the picture reads, ‘You are mine, all mine.’ Clearly the man will finish the job and the bird’s dropping will then disfigure his hard work. The cartoon is thus narrational in that it depends upon the construction of a set of events contingent on the information initially presented. Its humour partly derives from the fact that the dreadful act is yet to happen.

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<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 13 [Jameson’s emphases].

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1 [Branigan’s emphasis].

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 62.

The cartoon is funny, moreover, not because of this delightful sense of impending disaster but because one reads further into the representations. The man's pride in his vehicle – an icon of material comfort – is based upon a false sense of security. He has polished in vain. The bird, meanwhile, is anthropomorphised: it is not an innocent agent but displays a mischievous sense of intention and a blithe command of timing. The small, insignificant bird is about to 'win'. Narratives, then, are further developmental in that they are grounded in the perceptual activities of the reader or viewer: in order to be effective, narrative demands a process of cognition. The reader pieces together – *understands* – the relationship between *x* and *y*.

The narrative 'journey' is not simply a way of passing time. Even the most neutral definition of narrative would insist that it is a site for signification, while in Said's and Jameson's sense, above, narratives are inscribed with the tensions and negotiations particular to a culture. The meanings which structure a fictional narrative may not be intentionally created by its author or production team, and may be perceived differently by separate readers or viewers. The point is that narrative is not 'innocent'. Instead it is packed with culturally relevant signification.

It has long been a premise of critics on the Left that narratives can be read or viewed 'culturally', with an awareness of their historical and political inscriptions to which there will clearly be ideological implications. This view is by no means incompatible with a more formal approach to narrative, one concerned with basic elements and internal structures.<sup>7</sup> Not for the first time in this study I propose to turn to Tzvetan Todorov, whose account of narrative process – itself influenced by Propp's work – implies a bridge between formal and cultural approaches. Todorov describes a classic narrative pattern whereby an initial situation of equilibrium is disturbed, there is an effect of complication, and equilibrium is finally restored:

The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term "equilibrium", which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of narrative which finds connections between 'structural' and 'mythic' considerations, see John Fiske, 'Chapter 8: Narrative', *Television Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 128-148.

system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement.<sup>8</sup>

In a later piece Todorov addresses what he sees as the two principles of narrative: 'the principle of succession and the principle of transformation'.<sup>9</sup> The principle of succession is explained by the fact that narration takes place within time and deals with a series of actions or events, usually consequent on each other in some manner. But the dynamic of narrative is provided by the principle of transformation, a shift from one state to another, or from one level of knowledge to another. Todorov suggests that the two principles are not by nature co-existent but are in opposition. They are related according to an abstract logic appropriate to 'the organizing ideology of the work as a whole'.<sup>10</sup>

This is an interesting move, for it suggests that no account of narrative process will be complete without consideration of the ideological coordinates of a text. Thus one may well describe the shift from one equilibrium to another, but this will not, as it were, be the whole story. The nature of the equilibrium needs closer inspection – especially in terms of the transformation which the text effects between the states of equilibrium at the beginning and end of the fiction. Does the narrative simply return to the situation established at the outset? Has anything been gained, or lost, or learned in the process? To what extent is the reader/viewer invited to identify with characters who are subject to the narrative's transformations? Is the closing equilibrium palliative and clinching, or is it shot through with complications? 'Equilibrium' implies a balanced calm, surely an inappropriate description of the situation at the end of some narratives?

The notion of a satisfying, concluding equilibrium applies most obviously to 'classic' narratives. In his account of narration in American movies produced between 1917 and 1960 David Bordwell explains how this operates:

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<sup>8</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, 'Structural Analysis of Narrative', in Robert Con Davis (ed), *Contemporary Literary Criticism: modernism through postmodernism* (White Plains: Longman, 1986), 328.

<sup>9</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, translated by Catherine Porter, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

The classical Hollywood film presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or non-achievement of the goals.<sup>11</sup>

Of course this does not describe an *inevitable* feature of narration, but the naturalisation of a dominant mode. There are many ways of telling stories and many ways of ending them. The 'decisive victory' and the clarity of resolution is intrinsic to classic narrative pattern – but not necessarily a function of all narration. Perhaps Todorov's terminology is a little misleading. 'Equilibrium' need not describe a state of calm conclusion; merely a point at which it is possible to cease narrating. This moment, however, whether or not it is 'resolving', reverberates back through the events already narrated. Quite simply, the way in which a narrative is resolved is of the utmost importance. As Dennis Porter observes: 'Reading fiction of all kinds is an activity which generates tension that can be relieved only through the experience of an end. All story telling involves the raising of questions, the implied promise of an answer, and, in traditional narrative at least, the provision of that answer in time.'<sup>12</sup>

Fictional narrative generally involves an intrinsic measure of suspense, a process of revelation and discovery, and relieving closure. My contention in the pages that follow is that television thrillers of the 1980s do not provide reassuring closure. If they settle upon a state of equilibrium, it is a balance which is temporary rather than final. In that sense their narratives are 'unfinished', for they often imply events which continue beyond the confines of the programme. The key relationship, then, is one between structure and effect. The thriller serials suggest the emergence of an interesting new convention – new, that is, in the extent to which one observes it in a number of dramas of the period. This is the convention of the partially unresolved ending. Given that narrative is a ground upon which cultural meanings are contended, this formal development surely connects with the organising cultural pressures which shape the text? The subsequent analysis in this chapter bears a trace of formalism in that it

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<sup>11</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1988), 157.

<sup>12</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 51.

identifies a recurrent narrative structure. The emergence of such a pattern, however, can be accounted for according to a cultural understanding of narrative. Before examining these questions more closely it is necessary to introduce one further observation with regard to narrative process.

The Russian Formalists first developed the classic distinction between *fabula* ('story' – that of which the text speaks) and *syuzhet* ('plot' – the textual organisation of this story).<sup>13</sup> The first term refers to an implied or adduced set of events and actions (the content of the narrative), the second to their orchestration through the plot. Thus, to take an obvious example, it is part of the whole narrative of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that Hamlet leaves Denmark on a ship bound for England but that he returns having escaped the supervision of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. These events are not shown by the text as part of a chronological account of Hamlet's life. Instead the audience first hears of Hamlet's return to Denmark by way of a letter which Claudius reads, then a few scenes later Hamlet mentions in a conversation with Horatio that a 'sea-fight' was the means of his escape from his treacherous chaperones. The plot conveys this information after Hamlet's return and his inadvertent presence at Ophelia's funeral, by which stage the text raises questions to do with death, love, jealousy and Hamlet's definitive knowledge of Claudius's duplicity. It is important to know that Hamlet did not complete the proposed voyage to England, but not to experience 'first-hand' the events which account for his return. Story and plot are clearly not the same thing.

Information crucial to the story is not necessarily shown by the plot. This straightforward observation is especially pertinent in thrillers which in any case depend upon the generation of mystery and suspense. It is necessary that the reader/viewer does not know all the circumstances which account for the events narrated – otherwise the fiction would be in vain, unable to generate the appropriate pleasures. The difference between story and plot, however, is not just a case of what is shown, but of *the ways in which* it is shown. The French theorist Gérard Genette developed this distinction by positing three elements to an analysis of narrative: these are *histoire* (the story), *récit* (the text which tells the story) and *narration* (the act of producing and

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<sup>13</sup> For an account of these terms in relation to narration in film, see Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 49-57.

disseminating the narrative). Rimmon-Kenan translates the three terms as 'story', 'text' and 'narration' respectively, and summarises their qualities as follows:

'Story' designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events.

Whereas 'story' is a succession of events, 'text' is a spoken or written [or, we might add, visual] discourse which undertakes their telling. Put more simply, the text is what we read. In it, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order, the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective ...

Since the text is spoken or written discourse, it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect – 'narration'.<sup>14</sup>

Genette's *Narrative Discourse* addresses literature, and its author insists upon the importance of tenses and the role of the narrator, whether fictional – a character in the story – or actual (the author).<sup>15</sup> These considerations are more difficult to account for in television drama, which by definition 'shows' as visual representation, rather than recounts or 'remembers' as written literature. The past tense is thus only immediately available in screen fiction in flashbacks, and even here it is rare for the 'pastness' of these to be insisted upon throughout their duration. Additionally, narration in television drama tends conventionally to be in the third-person, as suits the apparently objective operation of the camera, showing characters' actions. One consequence of Genette's analysis which is directly relevant to television drama, however, is his crucial recognition that *the mode of telling stands in relation to the story told*. The sum of thriller narratives does not lie solely in the events of the narrative, the combination of mystery, threat and the experience of the protagonist. It also involves the method of telling – the very fact, in the case of the thriller, that the protagonist's present-experience is stressed and that the hermeneutic process is heightened.

What is the mode of narration of 1980s and '90s television thriller serials? Firstly

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<sup>14</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 3. See also Jeremy Tambling, *Narrative and Ideology* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Gérard Genette, translated by Jane E. Lewin, *Narrative Discourse* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

they are nearly all filmed in the mode of classical third-person narration, where the camera observes (more or less) psychologically-developed characters, acting in a recognisably 'real' world. There is rarely any recourse to flashback, and where there is (in *Edge of Darkness*, for example, or in *Die Kinder*) it is to present information crucial to an understanding of the characters in their present circumstances. If we take *The Singing Detective* as an exception, for reasons addressed earlier, there are usually no 'framing' devices in 1980s and '90s thriller serials which signal the artificiality – the 'filmness' – of the drama. Instead the mode is one of realism.

This is admittedly a generalisation. In a few instances – *Dead Head* and *Never Come Back*, for instance – there is an element of pastiche and an overt presentation of the filmic strategies of the thriller idiom, as previously discussed in Chapter 5. Even here, however, the drama's interior dynamics – the threat which hangs over its central characters, the trauma which they experience and the suspense generated through their contact with powerful institutions and agencies – are presented as necessarily plausible. There is thus a realistic structure of feeling, even where the form of the drama is overtly fictionalised.

In the dramas which I see as forming the core of the genre, however (programmes like *Bird of Prey*, *Edge of Darkness*, *The Detective*, *A Very British Coup*, *Traffik*, *Children of the North* and *Die Kinder*), the mode is one of dramatic realism. These programmes are not comic, nor romantic. They are not self-parodying, nor marked by pastiche or burlesque. They are notable for their seriousness, their 'straightness'. They are set in the present or, in the case of *A Very British Coup*, the near-future, and engage in depth with the traumatised experiences of their protagonists. They project their protagonists through a typical thriller narrative which involves the speedy complication of an initial state of relative equilibrium; the evocation of their traumatised present-experience; revelations as to the cause of such disturbance; and denouements which, to various degrees, markedly fail to provide a final, resolving closure. Equilibrium is not completely restored.

This latter aspect, I suggest, is crucially important. Rimmon-Kenan grants that 'causality and closure (i.e. a sense of completion) may be the most interesting features

of stories, and the features on which their argument as stories is most often judged'.<sup>16</sup> Of course the absence of a sense of completion may be no less interesting. Genette's concept of 'narration' is again pertinent. Narrative closure – or partial closure – is of relevance not simply in story terms but for the ways in which it is handled. If narrative closure is not 'complete' or fully resolving, this might imply a failure on the level of narration itself – an inability finally, conclusively, to tell the whole story. What are we to make of a set of dramas whose closures are not conclusive? What accounts for these stories whose endings are so fraught with indeterminacy and ambivalence?

Let us take stock of the conclusions to the programmes to which I have given most particular attention. *Edge of Darkness* ends with a shot of small, black-petalled flowers quivering in the breeze. The theme music plays and the credits roll over this image. The black flowers have been mentioned earlier in the narrative. Craven's daughter Emma tells him the following story:

Millions of years ago when the earth was cold, it looked as if life on the planet would cease to exist. But black flowers began to grow, multiplying across its face, till the entire landscape was covered with blooms. Slowly the blackness of the flowers sucked in the heat of the sun, and life began to evolve again.<sup>17</sup>

Prior to the final image, Craven, dying of radiation sickness, has been standing on a hillside overlooking a Scottish loch. Troy Kennedy Martin's script notes that the flowers grow on 'the spot where Craven stood'.<sup>18</sup> There is a hint of transubstantiation, and a more definite sense of mythic optimism. The flowers indicate the earth's ineffable capacity for regeneration. Life wins out over death.

This utopian gesture is contrasted by a much more sardonic tone, in a voiceover which details the civil servant Harcourt's letter to another character. Harcourt has come to the loch to observe the removal of a cache of plutonium, after which he is chauffeured away from the scene:

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<sup>16</sup> Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Troy Kennedy Martin, *Edge of Darkness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 165.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.



You asked about Craven. The last we saw of him was up on the hill overlooking the loch, staring down at us like a wild animal. Neither myself nor Pendleton felt it appropriate to wave. Besides, by my reckoning, he was not long for this world. ... I only wished we could have shouted out some words of comfort ... told him that in the end, the earth, Emma's beloved Gaia, would be saved from ultimate destruction – and that the good in all of us would prevail ... but in the circumstances, I don't think he would have believed it.<sup>19</sup>

The representatives of the Government drive away while Craven is left to die 'like an animal'. The mysteries generated by the narrative have been solved but their source remains potent. Harcourt and his colleague Pendleton have discovered that the Government itself sanctioned the covert reprocessing of plutonium, with devastating consequences to individuals within the drama, including the protagonist Craven. Unlike earlier detective and thriller fiction, the revelation of the mystery is not accompanied by the extinction or neutralisation of the threat. This is made clear a little earlier. The gunfight between the maverick agent Jedburgh and members of the CIA is intercut with scenes from a dinner at Gleneagles Hotel, featuring Pendleton, Harcourt, a Government minister and the nuclear entrepreneurs Bennett and Grogan. They discuss a forthcoming diplomatic initiative, the 'Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty', in tones which make it clear that this is just another in a procession of negotiations. The *mise en scène* – with the group of characters (all in evening dress) tightly framed, or filmed in close-ups – emphasises their physical closeness, connoting the complicity between the commercial and political communities which partly explains the events of the programme. It is still business as usual for members of the Establishment. The final images, then, have an unresolvable ambivalence. They project an ecological optimism with regard to the future of the planet, but a residual pessimism with regard to present-day, material operations in the political sphere.

The ending of *A Very British Coup* is more acutely anxious. A voiceover of a radio news bulletin announces that a statement will soon be issued from Buckingham Palace clarifying 'the constitutional situation'. The final shot shows a sign which reads

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<sup>19</sup> Kennedy Martin, *Edge of Darkness*, 178.

'Polling Station', then pans behind a silhouette, which perhaps shows a soldier with the butt of a rifle held at his side. The image is entirely obscured behind the silhouette, and this effective fade to black is accompanied by a fade of the radio bulletin while the noise of a helicopter and voices on a police or army radio are quickly cross-faded up. There is a sudden cut to silence.

As with *Edge of Darkness*, the programme's closure is full of ambivalence. The final images suggest the coup of the title, effected by the military presumably at the behest of the collection of anti-socialist interests which the programme projects as Perkins' opponents. They suggest, at the very least, a state of civil unrest. Even so, there is again a countervailing assertion of optimism, however delicate its register. Perkins' Prime Ministerial Broadcast, in which he details the plot to discredit him and calls a general election, is itself presented as an act of decisive honesty and bravura. It is followed by a small and poetic insert. Perkins' ex-lover, Helen, records on her cassette recorder a message of support. She slips the tape, along with a dried red flower petal, into an envelope. It need hardly be added that the colour of the petal is significant. In *Edge of Darkness* the black flowers are paradoxically not deathly but denote life-out-of-death. In *A Very British Coup*, of course, the petal is coloured the red of socialism. The credits roll over the black screen, then a thin whistle begins. By the end of the credit sequence its tune has modulated into 'The Red Flag'. This lone whistle, so fragile and yet so insouciant, implicitly connects to Perkins who in the final scenes whistles 'The Red Flag' as he shaves, much as he did at the very beginning of the programme. Developments in the public world of the narrative are depicted with some foreboding, but they are countered with a more optimistic strain, located here in an assertion of socialist identity which the programme has endorsed throughout.

Other narrative closures are similarly double-edged. As already noted, *Traffik* ends with the implicit promise that the German drug barons will finally be brought to justice, even though they are triumphant at the programme's close. It is, one assumes, merely a Pyrrhic moment of celebration. Lithgow, the MP, has left the Government but become a public figure campaigning for changes to the ways in which society deals with drug addiction and its associated industries. This, too, suspends final and positive achievement until an imagined future which the narrative does not visit. And the

Pakistani farmer, Fazal, is reunited with his sons, but their reunion is muted and underscores the fact that Fazal's wife has recently died. Each of the three narrative lines offers a conclusion which balances an awareness of defeat with an ongoing process of social healing. The coexistence of both modes is defining.

*GBH* ends with one of its protagonists, Jim Nelson, released from the traumas he has suffered throughout the narrative, and apparently cured of his phobias; and the other, Michael Murray, arrested for his palpable abuses of power. But again the sense is of a system – which legitimates the insidious operations of the nation's security services – whose effectivity remains unchanged and whose actions are projected as a matter of course into the future. Even *Prime Suspect*, which concludes with the resounding victory of its protagonist, has a final short sequence in which the serial killer, Marlowe, pleads 'Not guilty' to the incriminating array of charges made against him. It is a theatrical moment which underscores, through shot and reverse-shot close-ups, the programme's central conflict between the protagonist Tennison and the antagonist Marlowe. It introduces a final tremor of doubt into the otherwise smooth process of celebratory narrative closure.

The only drama of the six which I have centrally examined to end on an unequivocally optimistic note is *The Singing Detective*, whose protagonist is able to leave hospital on the arm of his wife. The final sound, however, as they walk along the hospital corridor, is of the birdsong in the forest where the young Philip spent much of his childhood – a nostalgic evocation of another time and another place, the location of Marlow's boyhood trauma. Even in 'health' lies the shadow of one's distress.

A greater sense of loss and defeat colours the closures of other thrillers made during this period. *The Detective* ends with the funeral of the protagonist's friend and colleague, Penfield. A theatrical scene is arranged: Crocker, the detective, stands looking across the graveyard towards the church. The image shows the church in long-shot from Crocker's point of view, as other major characters in the drama – his immediate police superior, his brother-in-law, a colleague who is an MI5 'plant', and a major in MI5 – walk into frame as they leave the funeral. Each pauses and looks at Crocker – that is, straight at the camera. The image cuts to a close-up of Crocker. The collective effect is accusatory: Crocker has gone too far, been too stubborn and

unyielding in his pursuit of the truth. In coercing Penfield's involvement in his inquiries he is perhaps responsible for his death. The question surfaces: how, in any case, did Penfield die? It is left unresolved as to whether he was killed by the security services or in fact committed suicide. The sequence invites the audience to speculate with Crocker. He has been used and made a fool of. Crocker walks out of frame with his wife, leaving the camera fixed on the church and the graveyard in a dusting of snow. The connotations are frigid and deathly. There is an iris to black, and the programme's theme music plays, a slow, elegiac version of 'Greensleeves'; a ballad in a lamenting minor key which evokes an older England. This cluster of meaning-effects poses some uncomfortable questions. Has Crocker's quest for justice been in vain? What *are* the values which underpin the new England? The closing sequence suggests only the most pessimistic conclusions.

*Never Come Back* similarly ends with its protagonist alive but isolated and defeated, the victim of an inexorably more powerful machine. *The Real Eddy English* ends with its protagonist in jail, wrongfully imprisoned, as the theme music ('I left my heart in an English garden') invites the viewer to speculate as to who 'belongs' in modern Britain. And while a thriller like *The Price* is less ostensibly dystopian, the drama concludes with what appears to be an impasse between its central characters, a husband and wife. She is pregnant with a child he wants aborted.

This tendency towards either pessimistic or ambivalent narrative closure is also evident in British film thrillers of the 1980s and early '90s. So prevalent was the thriller mode during this period, and so striking the absence of decisive and affirmative narrative closure in these dramas, that it is worth briefly mentioning some of the films which also fall into this pattern. They confirm the emergence of a conspicuous trend in British screen fiction. The denouement of *Defence of the Realm* begins with Nick Mullen in his flat. He has pieced together evidence which indicates a Government cover-up of an incident at an American military base in England which nearly led to a nuclear catastrophe. He has despatched accounts of his story to foreign newspapers and is now in his flat listening to music. There are two close-up shots of the record player's arm as the record plays. Mullen goes to answer a knock at the door, and as he does so – his visitor is a woman who has helped him: perhaps this is the beginning of a

romance? – the sequence is intercut with another which shows the security services opening one of Mullen’s retrieved envelopes. His story, it seems, will never be made public. Nina steps into the hall and the image cuts to another close-up of the record arm as it comes back to rest. There is an explosion. Mullen’s record player has been booby-trapped.

One fleeting shot shows Mullen and Nina falling back towards the front door with the blast. Then a series of shots show newspapers being printed at a huge press. A rapidly-edited closing sequence, accompanied by pulsating music, shows a telex report of Mullen’s story in the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Headlines in *The Guardian* and *Herald Tribune* allege that there has been a Government cover-up. Voiceovers convey questions asked in the House of Commons. The cacophony rises as the last long-shot shows the Houses of Parliament. It is a cataclysmic yet partially triumphant ending. Mullen’s story has been released after all. The journalist himself is probably – but not necessarily – dead. The closing shot questions the status of Parliament: is it the centre of British democracy or the source of ruthless repression?

*Hidden Agenda* ends with a confrontation between Ingrid, an American civil rights campaigner, and Kerrigan, a high-ranking CID officer who has come to Belfast to conduct an inquiry into the shooting of Ingrid’s partner, a prominent American lawyer and civil rights campaigner. Kerrigan has discovered that the shooting was carried out in order to suppress the release of a cassette tape, which contains evidence of a plot among prominent members of the Establishment to smear Harold Wilson and secure the advent of a right-wing Government. (Again the revelations in Peter Wright’s *Spycatcher* give the plot a stamp of authenticity.) The film is as explicit as it can be in its references to actual circumstances. The smoothly corrupt Alec Nevin, for instance, is a barely-disguised reference to Airey Neave, Mrs Thatcher’s campaign manager in the Conservative Party leadership election in which she defeated Edward Heath.

Kerrigan, initially presented as an incorruptible officer of the law, finally succumbs to the knowledge that, should he press the allegations home, he will pay for it with his job, and perhaps even his life. Thus the encounter between the policeman and the civil rights activist takes on a personal and moral tone. Kerrigan is at the airport, about to catch a flight back to London. He sees Ingrid looking for him in the concourse and

goes to meet her. Their final exchange is as follows:

**KERRIGAN:** Go back to America. Get out of Belfast. You're in danger here. Ingrid, it's finished.

**INGRID:** Not for them it isn't. Not for Nevin and the others. They're not going to disappear, you know. They're still in place. You have a plane to catch, Mr Kerrigan.

He watches her as she runs off. The last frame freezes on Kerrigan taking his coat from his secretary at the boarding gate.

It might appear that Kerrigan has indeed reneged on his principles, but the presentation of the character is more complex. He is depicted as a policeman whose affiliation is not the unquestioning one of duty, but rather to a firm sense of justice. He takes personal risks during the course of the drama (visiting a Republican club in the Falls Road, for instance), and a number of scenes detail his concern at the evidence of treason which he uncovers. He finds himself faced with the irrevocable fact that the perpetrators are so powerful that any actions he were to take would not finally succeed. It becomes a stark choice between principle for its own sake, and pragmatism. When Ingrid leaves, a shot of Kerrigan watching her, his hand to his face, invites the viewer to 'read' his indecision and remorse. It is a moment of deeply inscribed agitation. Given the viewer's positioning with Kerrigan during the drama, he is not presented here straightforwardly as a turncoat. Ingrid leaves to pursue her quest for justice, Kerrigan does not. The real malevolence is located elsewhere: among the group of powerful plotters in the heart of the political establishment. Although it encourages an empathic relationship with its protagonists, the drama foregrounds a political dimension as much as a personal one, as is made absolutely clear at the end of the film. As the final image freezes a caption comes up on the screen:

"It is like the layers of an onion, and the more you peel them away, the more you feel like crying. There are two laws running the country: one for the security services and one for the rest of us." James Miller, ex-MI5 agent.

The closing comment, a written text from an 'authoritative' source, has a starkly

pessimistic finality.

The British thriller *Stormy Monday* (1987, directed by Mike Figgis) focuses on commercial expansionism in Newcastle. The film's antagonist is an American entrepreneur, Cosmo (played by Tommy Lee Jones) who is part of the extensive American involvement in local regeneration initiatives. It transpires that he has both legitimate and illegitimate business operations in the US which are the subject of a Senate enquiry, and that he is laundering money in Newcastle. He is the head of a violent and corrupt organisation for whom Britain presents a new site of opportunity. At the end of the film a jazz musician and his girlfriend are blown up as they leave a nightclub. The car-bomb to which they fall victim was intended for the film's protagonist, Brendan (played by Sean Bean). In a final showdown with Cosmo, Brendan points a gun at the American, but does not shoot. The film thus ends with the civic and commercial corruption at the heart of the narrative still unchecked, and its villain 'unpurged'.

I do not want to suggest that the structures and effects of these various dramas are entirely the same, and I hope that the discussion in earlier chapters has emphasised some of their particularities. There is nonetheless an astonishing convergence of tone and effect in their denouements. One can sense the emergence of a dominant procedure in terms of pessimistic or, at best, ambivalent narrative closure. Resolution is often indeterminate, so that the stories diffuse into complicated 'unclosed' endings. Equilibrium is never conclusively restored. Instead, it is only partial, or it is accompanied by an effect of despoliation, or it is implied that the events of the drama carry beyond the plot into an unreassuring near-future. Often the denouement projects any improvements to the world of the narrative into a future which the programme simply does not show. There is certainly no sense that the dramatic world is subject to the overarching comforts provided by an essentially benign universe.

What does become clear in these dramas, however, is the source of the threat that their narratives depict. In every case this is located somewhere within the public sphere, in organisations, institutions or networks which operate in the civic realm. In a number of dramas – as in *Bird of Prey*, *The Detective*, *In the Secret State*, *The Whistleblower* and *Hidden Agenda* – it is the security services, unaccountable and insidiously

effective, which provide the major threat. In all these there is at least some connection with members of the Government or the political executive, who instigate or sanction covert policing operations in the first place. Other dramas like *The Price*, *The Real Eddy English*, *Thin Air* and *Chain* locate the source of threat at a distance from central political power, positing corruption in local and regional organisations, or observing the ways in which commercial activity impinges on individual integrity. In all cases, however, the threat is not accounted for by some malevolent madman, a power-crazed villain or the boss of a criminal underground organisation. Instead it grows from within the heart of British public life. To that extent, the public realm of these thrillers is depicted as one permeated with corruption and flawed by fundamental abuses of power and responsibility.

The effect is more complex when one considers the intertwining of personal and public themes in these programmes. The protagonists of the thriller serials often undergo traumatising and life-threatening experiences with which the viewer is invited to empathise. This is a familiar strategy in the thriller, but the personal focus is deepened here by an emphasis on the private, domestic and emotional lives of the protagonists. The viewer gradually pieces together an intensely personal context, and simultaneously gains an understanding of the significance of public events in the drama. In some cases the two realms, public and personal, come together as a single subjective field of considerable emotional complexity, as is the case with regard to Craven in *Edge of Darkness* and Lithgow in *Traffik*. The public realm, then, is not presented as a study of competing political forces, or a space in which executive actions are straightforwardly played out. It is shown through the point of view and the experiences of the protagonists, whose lives quite literally are changed by their contact with the public and political world. Due to the thriller's characteristic emphasis on present-experience, the protagonist's actions in the public sphere are not so much depicted in coolly objective terms as treated *experientially*. The public is therefore not separable from the private. It structures personal experience. Addressing the American films *Our Man Flint* (1965) and *The Silencers* (1966), Raymond Durgnat notes that 'The political overtones of the movies appear only if you extrapolate from the personal



sphere to the political, which most audiences don't.'<sup>20</sup> The most effective TV thriller serials in the 1980s insist on this extrapolation.

The programmes addressed in this study are historically specific. They are mostly set in contemporary Britain. Their storylines involve events of considerable public significance, often with clear political implications. These events are of great moment for the individual protagonists. In this respect the serials are extensively public and private in scope. Their narratives focus on the 'authentic' emotional circumstances of the protagonist, which inextricably connect with the developments in the public sphere. The interrelationships are pronounced, which makes narrative resolution so significant. A dominant pattern here involves a tone of ambivalent pessimism and an inability to 'finish' the story. The causes of such indeterminacy are to be found *in the relationship between personal and public realms*.

This relationship accounts for an emergent tone in political thrillers, a delicate register of individual sensibility. The viewer understands that there are certain things of value to the protagonists. These generally revolve around professional considerations (responsibility to colleagues and to abstract standards of behaviour) and domestic attachments (to loved ones, often offspring or partners). When events in the public sphere impact against these fully-realised individual lives, the viewer is confronted by an awful opposition: on the one hand there is the inexorable momentum of contemporary politics; on the other there is an attempt to preserve a fragile sense of self and self-worth. When this proves difficult, even impossible, the programmes evince a particular tone, both wistful and full of foreboding. Narrative resolutions in thriller serials of the period lament lost opportunities or brutal realities, and offer isolated strands of optimism against a more palpable backdrop of pessimism.

In what ways can these tendencies be described as ideological? Terry Eagleton recommends a neutral definition of the term 'ideology', where the word signifies 'any kind of intersection between belief systems and political power ... [or] any fairly central conjuncture between discourse and power'.<sup>21</sup> This is distinct from an understanding of

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 32.

<sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 6, 28.

ideology as signifying 'false' consciousness, or as being applicable solely to the ways in which a dominant discourse is legitimated – a position associated with Althusser's analysis of 'ideological state apparatuses', the institutions and organised social forms (as, for instance, the family, the school, the church and the company) which structure the lives of individuals according to certain political interests on the part of the ruling class.<sup>22</sup>

Ideology can occur in many manifestations, and expressions of resistance to orthodox social forms are no less ideological – structured according to certain perhaps unspoken beliefs – than are those 'coercive' forms themselves. Moreover if ideology is to do with a relationship between discourse and power, it is in need of cultural and historical definition. One can ascribe context, specificity of interests and nuances of articulation to such a relationship. Ideology is thus a discursive phenomenon, readable at the points of cultural tension at which it forms. As Eagleton observes, 'this at once emphasises its materiality ... and preserves the sense that it is essentially concerned with *meanings*.'<sup>23</sup>

It is clear in the denouements to the thrillers addressed above that there are, in general, two swells of meaning which have a bearing on discourse and power. The first simply recognises, in 'realist' terms, the state of the world of the narrative – a world, it is suggested, which accords with that of the viewer. It is a world where the political executive has become more sophisticated in its exercise of power. Where government agencies are increasingly unaccountable and where their interests increasingly accord with those of the commercial and military-industrial sectors. Where policing takes on dimensions which are less to do with the safety of the individual and more to do with coercive forms of social control. These are the premises of the paranoia thrillers of the 1980s. They are not dispelled by the end of the narrative but confirmed as part of the status quo of the world which the narrative depicts. They are ideological in that they are shown precisely to operate through a set of political imperatives, grounded in the

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<sup>22</sup> Althusser did not simply address false consciousness, but recognised more generally that ideology is manifested through social practices. There is nonetheless an emphasis in Althusserian thinking that these have a limiting and constraining influence. See Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1984), 1-60.

<sup>23</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, 194.

executive's manipulation and maintenance of power. In general the process of the narrative confirms that the political executive is empowered, the protagonist disempowered.

The second swell of meanings takes up a position with regard to such a world. This is most usually the case through the development of the viewer's sympathy with the protagonist of the drama, someone who suffers at the hands of the executive. The viewer sympathises with the protagonist's trauma, understands its source in the actions of the executive, and condemns these actions. This is no different to the usual operations of thriller narratives, encouraging identification with the protagonist. The residual nature of the threat, however – the fact that it is precisely still in place by the end of the narrative – gives these programmes a decisive inflection. In this case irruptions of wickedness in the social sphere are not 'tidied up', as happens, for instance, in mystery-thrillers by authors ranging from Conan Doyle to Ian Fleming to Ken Follett. The protagonist is not freed or saved by the end of the drama but still implicated in a world of threat and disturbance which has recognisably political roots.

This tendency is not in itself new. Jerry Palmer makes a distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' thrillers, numbering the work of writers like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett among the latter. 'Positive' thrillers end by clearing up the complications that the narrative has presented. 'Negative' thrillers leave the reader feeling 'that the same thing will happen all over again very shortly, that one particular piece of evil has been scotched, but not that evil in general has been extirpated'.<sup>24</sup> If the hero fails entirely, Palmer suggests that the reader is 'in the presence of a form that is breaking with the thriller tradition'.<sup>25</sup> By this token, 1980s and '90s thriller serials are located somewhere between the 'negative' and the 'new'. Their protagonists do not always fail entirely; nor, in most cases, do they succeed. In some narratives – as is the case in *Edge of Darkness*, *A Very British Coup* and *Traffik*, for instance – the emphasis is clearly not on the 'scotching' of one particular source of threat, but on its prevalence in the first place.

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<sup>24</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

It is difficult to identify an absolute dependence upon *established* generic patterning in the denouements of these programmes. A commonplace assumption holds that genres regularise conventions of narrative, leading the audience to expect certain processes and indeed find in this familiarity a source of pleasure. Stephen Neale suggests that 'The existence of genres means that the spectator, precisely, will always know that everything will be "made right in the end", that everything will cohere, that any threat or any danger in the narrative process itself will always be contained.'<sup>26</sup> This is an understandable assertion with regard to the Hollywood detective thrillers, musicals and westerns which Neale in part addresses. It is manifestly not the case with 1980s and '90s thriller serials, however, which refuse such comforting closures. The threat offered within the narrative process is not only not 'contained', it is explicitly shown to be still active. Such narrative closure is highly unusual in television drama, which generally observes the Aristotelian dictum that stories must finish conclusively. Jeremy Tambling summarises this convention when he remarks that 'The expectation of an ending ... is that all anxiety will be quelled.'<sup>27</sup> In programmes like *Edge of Darkness*, *The Detective*, *A Very British Coup* and *GBH* the anxiety generated by the narrative is not quelled but instead allowed to linger.

Through various devices, including the careful treatment of *mise en scène* and references to contemporary events, these serials address British culture at the time of their transmission. They deal with the present. Given drama's ability precisely to represent, they *narrativise* the present offering viewers a dramatised history of their own contemporary society. The absence of a complete narrative closure, however, refuses to confirm, solidify or celebrate such a history. 1980s thriller narratives thus constitute a gesture of opposition, however obliquely expressed. They present an affective realm of feeling filled with values which appear contradictory to those of the dominant cultural discourse. It is in this sense that 1980s thriller serials are most decisively ideological. The thriller narrative leads the viewer to sympathise with the protagonist. The source of the protagonist's trauma is located in the public sphere and shown to derive from the operation of government agencies or other organisations

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Tambling, *Narrative and Ideology*, 73.

whose legitimation derives in general terms from central government. The narrative is unable to provide a clinching, 'victorious' resolution. This is, indeed, part of the realist effect of 1980s thrillers. Their premise is often that corruption and covert activity are now intrinsic to public life in Britain. It would therefore be a fantasising, 'fictional' gesture to subject the protagonist to such a world only to have him/her magically defeat it by the close of the drama. In fact, as I observed in Chapter 5, this is actually the case with *Bird of Prey*, transmitted in 1982, whose protagonist defeats 'the system'. This must be seen as an early text in the terms of 1980s thrillers: subsequent serials did not effect such a bare-faced transgression of plausibility. But the very fact that these programmes leave the viewer with such a lingering sense of defeat and loss is in itself extremely important. 'Unclosed' endings are far from the norm in most narrative fiction, let alone in mainstream television drama serials. This highly unusual occurrence in thrillers of the period is forged by, and simultaneously makes manifest, inexorable new constraints which appear to dominate life in Britain in the 1980s.

## 12 Conclusion: Thrillers and Thatcherism

In his essay 'Literature and Sociology' Raymond Williams elaborates on the argument, introduced in his book *Marxism and Literature*, that certain historically grouped texts display an identifiable 'structure of feeling'. This is partly, as the word 'structure' implies, a question of their tendency towards a loosely shared artistic form:

A correspondence of content between a writer and his world is less significant than this correspondence of organization, of structure. A relation of content may be mere reflection, but a relation of structure, often occurring where there is no apparent relation of content, can show us the organizing principle by which a particular view of the world, and from that the coherence of the social group which maintains it, really operates in consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

Artistic form, then, need not be accounted for according to the vulgar differentiation between form and content. Instead it emerges and is itself inscribed in relation to inchoate shifts of social formation. There is an inextricable and often imperceptible relationship between artforms and the culture in which they are embedded. The two terms of the relationship are equally pertinent: on the one side is the text itself, shaped in a particular cultural moment; on the other there is the culture which both 'writes' and is itself 'written into' the text. Thus Williams addresses

the dramatization of a process, the making of a fiction, in which the constituting elements, of real

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Literature and Sociology: In Memory of Lucien Goldmann', *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 1980), 23. See also Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-135.

social life and beliefs, were simultaneously actualized and in an important way differently experienced ... these creative acts compose, within a historical period, a specific community: a community visible in the structure of feeling and demonstrable, above all, in fundamental choices of form.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of 'fictionalisation' is important. Fiction is a way of re-imagining the familiar, of shaping through representation actual concerns and cultural forces. This is likely to be not an arbitrary individual act, the work of a lone writer in splendid isolation, but inescapably part of a broader cultural current. Thus 'structure' implies not only the organising elements of any one text, but a shared body of techniques or codes which can be traced in a number of works. Even the word 'feeling', so often used in the Romantic sense to describe the moods of the individual artist-poet, has this broader application. It describes a larger set of (perhaps unformulated) beliefs, experiences and emotional resonances percolating a society at any particular historical moment. By a neat epistemological conjunction, Williams' term captures both the concreteness of particular artworks in a particular age, and the fluidity of the beliefs, desires and emotions they express. As Terry Eagleton summarises, Williams' notion of a structure of feeling describes 'those elusive, impalpable forms of social consciousness which are at once as evanescent as "feeling" suggests, but nevertheless display a significant configuration captured in the term "structure".'<sup>3</sup>

It is in this sense that I see the importance of television thriller serials. In themselves, various individual programmes might be less interesting than others, certainly less aesthetically complex. As I discussed in Chapter 5, not all thrillers made in this period share significant convergences of content. But they do share a structure of feeling: their organising principles connect with the culture of which they speak and in which they are made. Together they bear witness to a set of prevailing concerns, and are structured around the dominant aesthetic strategies which best dramatise those concerns. It is not a matter of happenstance that a large number of thrillers were made in this period. It is not that, but for the blithe workings of fate, they might have emerged in only slightly different form in the 1960s or the 1990s. They are as

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, 'Literature and Sociology: In Memory of Lucien Goldmann', 25.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 48.

embedded in – and eloquent of – their era as some of the more obtrusive icons of Thatcherism.

What, then, is the relationship between thriller serials and British culture in the 1980s? As I have already suggested, the period was subject to the dominance of Thatcherism, a complicated set of social beliefs and political practices. It is necessary first to explore Thatcherism a little more closely in order to see how thriller serials connect with this most potent of formations.

Thatcherism can partly be seen as a consequence to a breakdown of the political consensus which existed in Britain the 1950s and '60s. On a global level its roots can be found in the history of post-war political and cultural change in advanced capitalist societies. More specifically, it emerges as a response to the recession which hit the world economy in the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> That said, it also had its own characteristics and a dynamic particular to Britain in the 1980s, which it will be my concern to examine more closely here. It is also fair to say that Thatcherism did not seamlessly interlock with the political structures of 1970s Britain: it broke them. Among the most remarkable aspects of Thatcherism were its audacity, its comprehensiveness and its sheer newness. It split the currents of consensus politics, overturned previously unquestioned assumptions about the centrality of the welfare state and 'one-nation' politics, and reconceived the relationship between the government and the citizen.

Thatcherism had an intellectual basis traceable to the work of Milton Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek and Keith Joseph and sustained by think-tanks including the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Centre for Policy Studies (founded in 1974) and the Adam Smith Institute (founded in 1979). This does not mean that Thatcherism was smoothly coherent, however, as a codified doctrine leading inexorably to a set of policy initiatives. It is instead compounded of striking tensions and contradictions. These circulate most notoriously around the relationships between *laissez faire* economic practices and the growth of coercive, centralist government supervision; between the 'freeing' of the individual and the circumscribing of individuals by new forms of social

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, 'Section 1: The Background' in Stuart Hall and Martin Jaques (eds), *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 19-105; Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 9; and Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Houndsmill and London: Macmillan, 1988), 4-9.



control; between a concept of the nation as that which is dear and defining, and the erosion of protectionist national barriers in accordance with the international operations of late-capitalism; between radical change and nostalgic Conservatism; and between the expression of rigorous moral codes and a sense (to some onlookers, at least) of spiritual and ethical abandonment, symbolised by the shaming statistic of three million people unemployed. The ~~elision~~<sup>conjunction</sup> of these apparent contradictions is an absolutely defining aspect of Thatcherism, and finds a resonance in the thriller serials which in part dramatised the 1980s.

Margaret Thatcher's 1979 election victory was achieved with 43.9% of the vote. The Conservative Party's majority in the House of Commons was 43 seats. In the subsequent general elections which she fought as leader, in 1983 and 1987, the Tories scored a similar percentage of the vote but saw their parliamentary majority soar. This indicates that while Thatcherism became the dominant political expression in Britain during the period, it was not founded on an overwhelming bedrock of popular support. Indeed, as Eagleton drily suggests:

Thatcher was not where she was because the British people loyally identified with her values; she was where she was *despite* the fact that they did not. If there is indeed a "dominant ideology" in contemporary Britain, it does not appear to be particularly successful.<sup>5</sup>

The *success* of Thatcherism, of course, was not necessarily in its conversion of the British – although this was a project close to Mrs Thatcher's heart<sup>6</sup> – but in its structural and practical effects. Andrew Gamble observes that the Tories' 1979 election victory 'did allow the Conservative leaders to claim a *mandate* and ... to set about the implementation of a highly partisan programme with great vigour, enthusiasm and confidence'.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Eagleton, *Ideology*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> As the Prime Minister said, 'economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.' Quoted in Bob Jessop, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley and Tom Ling, *Thatcherism: A Tale of Two Nations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Gamble, 'Thatcherism and Conservative Politics', in Hall and Jacques (eds), *The Politics of Thatcherism*, 110 [my emphasis].

In an early and influential article on Thatcherism, Stuart Hall identified two major tributaries which would feed into this programme:

Thatcherite populism is a particularly rich mix. It combines the resonant themes of organic Toryism – nation, family, duty, authority, standards, traditionalism – with the aggressive themes of a revived neo-liberalism – self-interest, competitive individualism, anti-statism.<sup>8</sup>

These divergent right-wing themes are soldered together through both rhetoric and praxis. Thatcherism is hegemonic in that it melds these apparently divergent tendencies in order to sustain its dominance in the sphere of ideas and beliefs as well as that of policies and initiatives. Thus according to Hall its ‘highly contradictory strategy’ is quite understandably “‘anti-statist” in its ideological self-representation *and* highly state-centralist and dirigiste in many of its strategic operations’.<sup>9</sup> Thatcherism is contradictory but not therefore incoherent. It is the mobilisation of *both* forms of right-wing expression – the liberal and the coercive – which paradoxically sharpens its definition and accounts for its striking momentum. The implications of Hall’s analyses were widely taken up, especially in the journal *Marxism Today*, and can be traced, for instance, to the essays collected in *The Ideology of the New Right*, which explore the ramifications of this fusion of neo-liberal and neo-conservative expressions.<sup>10</sup>

Hall addressed another related characteristic of the new-Right formation, identifiable even before Mrs Thatcher took office: its development of ‘authoritarian populism’.<sup>11</sup> As already observed, the radical Right promoted coercive social and economic recommendations at the expense of consensual models of political process. This trend became consolidated into a political phenomenon, but had all the *appearance* of merely being consonant with a tide of popular opinion. The new Right, it seemed, was not leading the people by the nose but articulating feelings which were already in

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<sup>8</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘The Great Moving Right Show’, in Hall and Jacques (eds), *The Politics of Thatcherism*, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Authoritarian Populism: A Reply by Stuart Hall’, in Jessop *et al.*, *Thatcherism*, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Levitas (ed), *The Ideology of the New Right* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> For Stuart Hall’s recapitulation of this concept, see his chapter, ‘Authoritarian Populism’ in Jessop *et al.*, *Thatcherism*, 99-108.

the air. There is a peculiar mix of coercion and demotic appeal – hence Hall’s neat phrase ‘authoritarian populism’. Again the motor of the phenomenon lies in its apparent contradictoriness. The dominance of Thatcherism rested on a combination of remorseless ‘top-down’ impositions and a proclaimed widespread grass-roots appeal.

These contradictory elements clearly make for a highly volatile political culture. I argued in the Introduction to this study that the Thatcher era was especially notable for the divisions it engendered and for the sets of conflicts which arose throughout Mrs Thatcher’s premiership. These take the form of obvious clashes – between the Government and the miners or Poll Tax demonstrators, for instance, or between the military forces of Britain and Argentina – and of less clearly proscribed divisions. The latter include contentions over a wide range of social institutions and practices. A fairly random sample might take in the nature of the family, the responsibility of the school, the status of the National Health Service and the role of the BBC. Members of the Conservative Party themselves expressed different views on these issues, so there was not always a clear division between the Government and its opponents. The important point is that the period was saturated with contention, whereby society itself was a site for the most bitter disputation. Indeed there was no longer a shared understanding of what ‘society’ meant. Much Conservative rhetoric in this period draws on the imagery of a mission to change society, to project it into the future – hence Mrs Thatcher’s steely claim that ‘the lady’s not for turning’. On the other hand there was a rhetorical commitment to the nostalgic idea of an older Britain – hence the Prime Minister’s notorious invocation of Victorian Values. The point of convergence in these gestures is that the present is unsatisfactory and must be altered.

This in part accounts for the radicalism of Thatcherism. It was a movement which sought not consolidation but change, and change by its very nature is unsettling. There is always, however, a matrix and a rhythm within which change occurs. In the Thatcher era this matrix was not structured around unification, but division. Joel Krieger argues that the Thatcher project was ‘de-integrative’, fissuring society along the lines of region, race, class, gender and quality of welfare. As Krieger argues, ‘The Thatcher regime has consistently replaced welfarist/integrative *ideology* with a competitive “them-and-us” rhetoric of a xenophobic and crudely Darwinist

capitalism.’<sup>12</sup> The Thatcherite drive is towards dissolution and fragmentation, effected through ‘an assault on equilibrating mechanisms’.<sup>13</sup> Krieger finds continual areas of overlap between the rise and consolidation of Reaganism in America with Thatcherism in Britain. In any event, the new Right is far removed from older-style one-nation British Toryism. Again there is a fundamental contradiction. Thatcherism is a two-nations project, highlighting divisions between rich and poor, north and south, employer and employee. On the other hand there is a coercive impetus towards a one-nation ideal where everyone is assumed to share beliefs about national interests and identity, self-sufficiency, and the primacy of the family and the individual over larger collective organisations.<sup>14</sup>

In what ways do television thriller serials made during the Thatcher era resonate with these issues and tendencies? We are returned to the relationship between genre and society. According to Stephen Neale:

genres and their meanings have an active role and a social effectivity of their own, to the extent that they function actively as components within the construction of socio-historical reality, rather than simply as reflections of it. They are determining factors, not simply determined ones.<sup>15</sup>

This is a grand and exaggerated claim. Television programmes (and texts in other media, for that matter) do not, uniquely in themselves, shape a particular social discourse. Neale’s comment is pertinent, on the other hand, in indicating that these programmes do not simply ‘reflect’ their world or ‘react’ to certain aspects of it. They are caught up in a much more complex web of meanings and significations which articulate a set of responses to the dominant discourse and which are themselves within the current of cultural evolution. This, I believe, is the case with the thriller serials which have formed the focus of this study. They were made and transmitted during a

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<sup>12</sup> Joel Krieger, *Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Decline* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 92 [Krieger’s emphasis].

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Thatcherism as a ‘two nations’ project, see Jessop *et al.*, *Thatcherism*, 87-89; and Andrew Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Houndsmill and London: Macmillan, 1988), 214-5.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 16.

period of categoric social and political change. They partly reflect some of these changes in their story-content. More particularly, however, they reveal a structure of feeling which bespeaks changing cultural patterns and which is, as I shall discuss below, both consonant and dissonant with these patterns. They are inscribed with the struggles over meaning which run through the period as a whole.

The thriller form is peculiarly appropriate for such a project. A number of critics have noted detective and thriller narratives becoming popular at moments of social change and transition. John Cawelti, for instance, relates the emergence of the classical detective story formula to broader patterns of economic change, to a shift in the ethos of individuality and to a new interest in psychological states.<sup>16</sup> Ken Worpole suggests that thrillers are often in the vanguard of literature which responds to new social formations, and remarks on a cultural-political context for American thriller stories and novels of the 1920s and '30s: 'for a very large reading public the American thriller confirmed that big business and corrupt politicians combined between them to run the major cities of Europe and America, and could often count on a compliant police force to facilitate and consolidate the tyrannies of these wholly corrupt and ruthless alliances.'<sup>17</sup> Dennis Porter further notes that 1929 saw the publication in America of Dashiell Hammett's first novel, *Red Harvest*, and the inauguration of 'the first depression president', the conservative Hoover. Porter suggests that 'The private eye began to flourish in popular literature at a time that coincided with a major crisis of American individualism as the political philosophy of industrial capitalism.'<sup>18</sup> J.P. Telotte observes that *film noir* emerges in the 1940s in America at a time of high unemployment, inflation, labour strife and markedly shifting patterns of social organisation and expression.<sup>19</sup> And, as Sally Munt and Glenwood Irons have discussed, the recent growth of private eye thrillers written by women can be seen as a feminist response to established and (in novels by the likes of Sara Paretsky and Sarah

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<sup>16</sup> See John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 101-4.

<sup>17</sup> Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives*, (London: Verso, 1983), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 176-7.

<sup>19</sup> J.P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), 4.

Dunant) corrupt bastions of male dominance. These texts mark a cultural moment where orthodoxies relating to both gender and to the thriller genre are coming under rigorous scrutiny.<sup>20</sup>

The related forms of detective and crime fiction – all with a thriller inflection – have coalesced at points of cultural and political tension throughout the Twentieth Century, and narrativise and dramatise some of those tensions. There may well be an element of displacement about this. If social structures are changing and old certainties falling apart, this is not necessarily *mirrored* in contemporary fiction. Instead, to recapitulate Williams' point, one might expect to find not a correspondence of content but a correspondence of organisation or structure. The thriller is not a quiescent or reflective form. It is structured around clear, polarised divisions between protagonist and antagonist(s). It features a narrative which is often fast-paced and which often moves 'jerkily' from climax to climax rather than in a smooth, reflective fashion. It is a combative form. It usually depends upon a process whereby a mystery is presented and the source of that mystery gradually revealed. It is thus fundamentally hermeneutic in stimulating the reader/viewer's desire to *know*, to see how the events of the narrative fall into place. Thrillers, then, are about threat and explication. They are particularly suited to periods of uncertainty and change.

Telotte observes that 'the *film noir* seems fundamentally *about* violations'.<sup>21</sup> This is the case with thrillers in general, and one is reminded of Jerry Palmer's observation that the 'crimes committed in the thriller must be disgustingly wrong, not just criminal in the technical sense'.<sup>22</sup> What is violated in 1980s thriller serials? As I have discussed, the narrative process usually details the disruption of the protagonist's professional life, his/her domestic well-being, and the integrity of his/her family. Moreover the protagonist suffers deeply at the level of *Self* – whether physically, psychologically or both. Violation in thrillers of the period is extensive and is

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<sup>20</sup> Sally R. Munt, *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the crime novel* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); and Glenwood Irons, 'New Women Detectives: G is for Gender-Bending', in Irons (ed), *Gender, Language and Myth: Essays on Popular Narrative* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 127-141.

<sup>21</sup> Telotte, *Voices in the Dark*, 2 [Telotte's emphasis].

<sup>22</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 16.

perpetrated upon – indeed *felt* by – the individual protagonists with whom the viewer is invited to sympathise. It is experienced both in the external circumstances of the protagonist's activities and in his/her private and personal life as well.

By what or whom is this violation wrought? As we have seen, thriller serials depict a network of threat whose derivation is largely social and political. The forces which disrupt the protagonist's life are explained by the actions of the state's security services, other government agencies, other institutions ostensibly serving the 'public good', and commercial entrepreneurs exploiting new-found opportunities. The crisis which thriller serials dramatise, then, is a crisis of public legitimation: they narrativise a process whereby the agencies of the *civis* in fact operate to confound the freedom and well-being of individual citizens.

Something similar has of course appeared in genre fiction in the past, notably in the private eye thrillers of the 1920s to '40s. Civic corruption is ingrained within the fictional worlds of hard-boiled detective stories like those of Hammett and Chandler. As Dennis Porter observes:

Violent acts are no longer aberrations or isolated events but, as the frequency of beatings and shoot-outs suggests, endemic. ... the victims are ordinary citizens who have recourse neither to their political leaders nor to the law because both politics and law enforcement are part of the corrupt system.<sup>23</sup>

A similar sense of the sheerly indigenous nature of corruption is prevalent in later crime fiction. John Cawelti comments on a shift of focus in crime fictions since the 1950s, where both 'value' and power are located not in the actions of individuals but in the large organisation. Thus a text like *The Godfather* (both the novel and the film) lays out in allegorical form the new structures of corporatism taking hold in America in the middle decades of the Twentieth Century. They reveal, however, a

deep uncertainty about the adequacy of our traditional social institutions to meet the needs of individuals for security, for justice, for a sense of significance. ... [this suggests] the dark message that America is a society of criminals, or the still more disturbing irony that a "family" of criminals might

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<sup>23</sup> Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime*, 197-8.

be more humanly interesting and morally satisfactory than a society of empty routines, irresponsibly powerful organizations, widespread corruption and meaningless violence.<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere Cawelti and Rosenberg observe a similar effect in the fiction of Ian Fleming, which also presents a vision of modern society as dominated by new corporate and bureaucratic organisations. The irony – and one of the motors of Fleming’s narratives – is that modern citizens are ‘inextricably bound to and basically alienated from the bureaucracies that order our lives’.<sup>25</sup>

These various comments bear out the thriller’s prevailing fascination with the relationship between criminality and social structures. They also seem directly applicable to 1980s British thriller serials, which treat corruption as endemic to social organisation and depict a profoundly alienatory relationship between individual citizens and large state bureaucracies. The differences between thriller serials and earlier crime fictions, however, are to do with both degree and focus. There is an intensity of observation of the centres of political power which is new to British television, and indeed to the thriller. Never before have so many dramas featured scenes set in government offices, in rooms in the Houses of Parliament and in the homes of the most powerful people in the land. There is a movement towards the sources of actual political and civic power, a fascination with the processes by which power is disseminated, and a desire to depict the minutiae of these processes. There is a sense of *revealing* or *uncovering* how power really operates in contemporary Britain. That said, the characters in these spheres are rarely at the very centre of the narrative. Where this is the case – as with Perkins in *A Very British Coup* and Lithgow in *Traffik* – their function is as individuals who come into conflict with the Establishment. The representation of political process is always from the ‘outside’, even while the drama depicts in realist terms the machinery of the state: the various meetings, coded conversations and commands of the executive.

It is here, incidentally, that the Formalist distinction between ‘story’ and ‘plot’

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<sup>24</sup> Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg, *The Spy Story* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 136.



becomes interesting. The 'story' of most thriller serials of the period centrally includes the operations of state agencies. The 'plot', however, focuses on the protagonist who is a victim of these operations. Political power is addressed from the perspective of those it has harmed. There is perhaps a resonance in this dramatising strategy with one of the developments regarding government process under Thatcherism. Vernon Bogdanor puts it quite bluntly: 'It is a paradox that a [political] programme designed to widen individual choice has as one of its consequences a massive increase in the power of central government, and a decline in the influence of local communities and intermediate institutions.'<sup>26</sup> 1980s thriller serials dramatise this shift towards narrowly-centralised power bases. They depict the small networks within which power circulates, but they do so in a fictionalising mode which is always from the perspective of the outsider. Their fascination with political process, then, is developed through an especially intensive representation: that of the alienation of their protagonists from actual centres of power. This is more particularly interesting in that many thriller serials of the 1980s narrate the *transformation* of the lives of their protagonists. I can think of no other historical grouping of thrillers whose protagonists are so regularly, completely and irrevocably transformed in one way or another in the course of the narrative. This transformation is effected because of pressures and constraints which operate within the public and political sphere. It is also crucially bound up with the new *knowledge* the protagonists (and therefore the viewer) obtain about their world.

1980s thriller serials narrativise a moment of cultural change where the perceived relationship between the individual and the public realm is at best unstable, at worst intolerable. They have, built in to their very structure, a desire to understand, to *explain* such disturbance. Their patterns of fascination centre around the status of the individual subject in Britain in the 1980s, and the relationship of the individual to the state under Thatcherism. Let us look a little more closely at these fascinations.

Individualism became a contested site during the Thatcher era. Charlie Leadbetter summarises some of its impulses:

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<sup>26</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, 'The Constitution', in Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon (eds), *The Thatcher Effect: A Decade of Change* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 138.

Thatcherite individualism has sanctioned a gorging materialism among the well-off. But it would be wrong to dismiss it simply as hedonism. Conservative individualism is not just about consumer choice, about people buying and selling. It incorporates those everyday acts within a much wider social philosophy. It has asserted the possibility of individuals becoming agents to change their worlds through private initiatives. ...

Individual choice implies people have the rationality and discipline to interrogate their desires and aspirations, to determine what they really want. Not just what they want in the supermarket, but what they want for their lives, what kind of people they want to be, where they will live, how their children will be educated. The fulfilment of these choices implies that individuals have a measure of power over an external world.<sup>27</sup>

There is an irresolvable contradiction between the Thatcherite rhetoric of individual autonomy and the strengthening of government agency and forms of surveillance and social control. Thrillers have always depended upon a developed sense of what Palmer calls 'competitive' individualism in presenting the experiences of their protagonists.<sup>28</sup> The individual finds him/herself against someone or something. By its very nature this raises questions to do with the competency of individuals to deal with the threat, danger or quest with which they are engaged. 1980s thriller serials are no different from earlier thrillers in mediating individualism through their protagonists. There is a heightened focus on subjective experience, not least on account of the thriller's characteristic interest in psychological states and in the motif of the individual against powerful adversaries, perhaps even against 'the system'. It is clear in 1980s thriller serials, however, that the protagonists are precisely *not* autonomous; that they have *little or no* power over the external world, if the political forces which structure that world determine otherwise.

It is a complicated double-bind. In a period where individualism emerges as a renewed centre of political and ideological potency, it is hardly surprising to find the concomitant emergence of a dramatic and fictional form which is itself inherently

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<sup>27</sup> Charlie Leadbetter, 'Power to the Person', in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds), *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 142.

<sup>28</sup> Palmer, *Thrillers*, 82.

structured around the lone, single subject. Thrillers are appropriate to the Thatcher era because the thriller is by its very nature a form which prizes individualism. This is one sense in which I mean that thrillers are consonant with Thatcherism. By the same token, however, the thriller is especially able to offer a critique of contemporary constructions of the individual. In thrillers of the period, protagonists are thwarted, subjective experience is pained and anguished, and individuals palpably do not win out in the end. These representations indicate the extraordinary stresses to which the individual (and indeed the notion of individualism) was now subjected. The fact that the source of threat or disturbance is often so clearly identified – in the operations of the security services, the political mandarins or the new entrepreneurs – gives 1980s individualism an inescapably social and political context, and in this sense many thriller serials are dissonant with the dominant discourse. The implications are clear: in an age which cherishes individualism, absolute autonomy for the citizen-subject is impossible to achieve. Thriller serials dramatise an essential flaw in the logic and praxis of Thatcherism.

By an irony of cultural formation integrity is located, in these dramas, nowhere other than in the individual. Thrillers propose an exaggerated focus on individualism in any case, presenting and heightening the experiences of the protagonist. All that the individual is left with in 1980s thriller serials, however, is her own sense of worth or his own value-system, which by the end of the drama has been shown to be other than that of the dominant discourse. It is in this sense that these programmes are oppositional, even where they are not directly and explicitly critical of prevailing methods of government. They express an alternative sensibility. This is to propose a radically different kind of individualism to that which obtained under Thatcherism, although paradoxically it inhabits the same discourse. The individual is still the centre of social meaning, still a moral actant, an arbiter of right and proper action. In many cases, too, the individual is as inflexible and emphatic as the caricatured version of Mrs Thatcher herself. Consider Craven in *Edge of Darkness*, Perkins in *A Very British Coup*, Lithgow in *Traffik*, Nelson in *GBH*, Tennison in *Prime Suspect* and Marlow in *The Singing Detective*. None of them are malleable or vacillating characters. They are to varying extents the victims of social processes, but they do not succumb through

feebleness or sheer inability. They are determined and assertive.

Thus much would be claimed for thriller heroes in a range of texts from different periods. The difference here – and it is a crucial shift in the genre – is the disjunction that remains at the end of the narrative between the protagonist's assertion of basic values, and values espoused within the dominant discourse. The narrative process is not one which heals social divisions or expurgates deviance or criminality, as in earlier thriller narratives. Instead it drives a wedge between the protagonist and his or her society, leaving him/her often as alienated or at least as sceptical at the end of the drama as at any stage throughout. Again this reproduces, in fictional mode, the theme of 'the divided nation' which is such an intrinsic part of the Thatcherite project. Craven standing 'like an animal' on a Scottish hillside is the most extreme example, a man himself on the verge of extinction. But he is, too, the most potent symbol for the transformations which thriller serials dramatise. Their protagonists are confirmed as outsiders, radically divorced from the public realm. Even in more positive dramas there is a sense of the narrative confirming certain suspicions or fears. Nelson in *GBH* is 'healed', but the viewer recognises that members of the British security services (one source of the programme's network of threat) are still in ~~the~~ jobs. In *Prime Suspect* Tennison is victorious, but this is presented not as an absolute triumph over sexism and a sex-criminal, but a hard-fought struggle for one particular success.

I noted earlier the thriller's characteristic concern with violation. The narrative process of thriller serials is concerned not only with the erosion of individual liberty or well-being, but with the violation of the operations of 'good government', of public and civic responsibility. This representation has moral and ethical implications. Thatcherism always projected itself as an inherently 'moral' project. As Mrs Thatcher said in 1984, 'I am in politics because of the conflict between good and evil, and I believe that in the end good will triumph.'<sup>29</sup> The phrasing here depends as much upon Mrs Thatcher's tendency towards polarisation – 'us' and 'them', conservatives and socialists, entrepreneurs and wasters – as it does to any absolute metaphysical universe. Even so, in Thatcherite terms 'good' was situated in the responsible actions of the

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London, Sydney and Auckland: Pan Books, 1993), 352.

individual. Peter Jenkins expresses this as follows:

Mrs Thatcher's 'moral agenda could have been written on a sampler. The individual owed responsibility to self, family, firm, community, country, God. She would put it in that order of ascent, for self-regard was the fount of all virtue.<sup>30</sup>

Thus there was a moral aspect to entrepreneurial activity, to self-betterment and to the accumulation of property and capital, some of the most central projections of Thatcherism. Through these activities the individual expressed a proper contract with society, one founded on enterprise and individual responsibility, where the individual was then able to sustain his (usually) own family and maintain a respectable relationship to the community at large. Stuart Hall observes that 'in the discourse of "social market values", Thatcherism discovered a powerful means of translating economic doctrine into the language of experience, moral imperative and common sense, thus providing ... an alternative *ethic* to that of the "caring society".'<sup>31</sup> Hall suggests that one of Thatcherism's signal achievements was its 'conversion of hard-faced economics into the language of compulsive *moralism*'.<sup>32</sup> Indeed this expression was given a spiritual dimension in Mrs Thatcher's controversial address in May 1988 to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in which she grounded the politics of self-promotion in scriptural foundations.<sup>33</sup>

Writing from the Right, Shirley Robin Letwin attempts to theorise this pervasive ethical dimension. She describes the particularity of Thatcherism as lying, in part, in its espousal of 'the vigorous virtues':

The individual preferred by Thatcherism is, to begin with a simple list: upright, self-sufficient, energetic, adventurous, independent-minded, loyal to friends, and robust against enemies. ... The

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Jenkins, *Mrs Thatcher's Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 66-7.

<sup>31</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', in Hall and Jacques (eds), *The Politics of Thatcherism*, 28 [Hall's emphasis].

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-9 [Hall's emphasis].

<sup>33</sup> See Young, *One of Us*, 425.

qualities described in the list are of a very marked stamp. Broadly, they can be described as the *vigorous* virtues. They are to be contrasted with the 'softer' virtues such as kindness, humility, gentleness, sympathy, cheerfulness. ... Thatcherism has always been a 'vigorous' creed in the sense not that it wishes to abolish the softer virtues but that it emphasizes the vigorous virtues, and if necessary, where conflicts arise, at the expense of the softer virtues.<sup>34</sup>

These virtues find expression in individuals' allegiance to themselves, their families and the nation, and fall within a supremely legitimating parabola: the 'dominance of a moral vision'.<sup>35</sup> The stated objectivity of Letwin's analysis crumbles in places; not least, for instance, when she explains the apparently beneficent impulsion behind Norman Tebbit's notorious advice to the unemployed to 'get on your bike'<sup>36</sup>. It is worth quoting her formulations, however, as they catch the blithe resonances of Thatcherite rhetoric and indicate the ways in which 'tough' social policies were accorded 'humanist' and even spiritual legitimation. Letwin goes on to note that Thatcherism was rooted in 'a distinctive but unidentified British morality',<sup>37</sup> a kind of inherited idea of decency and right-behaviour. This can be gleaned, she suggests, from acquaintance with the appropriate canonical authors:

Readers of English literature discovered in writers from Chaucer to Trollope a moral attitude which they considered to be quintessentially English. And that notorious English oddity, the gentleman, understood as a kind of character rather than as a member of a social class, was universally acknowledged to be a moral phenomenon unknown elsewhere.<sup>38</sup>

The eyebrow leaps. Is the 'moral attitude' in Chaucer that of the Reeve, or the Pardoner or the Miller's wife? Or is it rather a sublime Chaucerian world-view, permeating these stories of greed and debauchery? 'Name that mythic gentleman!' one

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<sup>34</sup> Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London: Fontana, 1992), 33 [Letwin's emphasis].

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

would like to demand, for surely in various texts his social class might actually be of some moment. And in 'universally acknowledged' the argument finally collapses under the weight of its own idealism.

Letwin's observations, however, accurately describe the nuances of Thatcherism's moral frame of reference: value is accorded to firmness of purpose and to acts of individual enterprise. Only a churl would deny that, in the appropriate context, self-sufficiency, independence of mind and robustness against one's enemies are all admirable qualities. In asserting that thriller serials are themselves constructed around certain moral principles, I do not mean to say that they replicate the 'vigorous virtues' of a Thatcherite value-system, *nor* that they directly oppose them. Instead the television serials construct an opposition between their protagonists, who act according to moral principles, and the dominant social structures which deny the pursuance of those principles. This conflict is intrinsic to the very narrative patterning of the thrillers, for it explains why in so many cases the protagonists become outsiders or outcasts in the first place. Their values, quite simply, are too different to be tolerated. The drama often endorses the protagonist's moral outlook, as is the case with Crocker in *The Detective*, Craven in *Edge of Darkness*, Tennison in *Prime Suspect*, Nelson in *GBH*, Eddy in *The Real Eddy English* and Perkins in *A Very British Coup*, to take only a few examples. When this happens we are in the realms of dramatic expression whose movements are all away from the dominant discourse, in search of alternative and more 'adequate' articulations.

This brings us to the crucial question of plausibility in these dramas. I have noted in preceding pages that thriller serials, for all their heightening of suspense and present-experience, depend in large part on realist strategies. On the other hand, in an important sense it does not matter if the events which they narrate are accurately depicted. It would not diminish the effectiveness of *Edge of Darkness* to discover that there is in fact no underground nuclear reprocessing plant in Britain sanctioned by the Government. It may well not be the case that important members of the press, the BBC and MI5 would collude against a radical Labour government in the 1990s, as suggested by *A Very British Coup*. Perhaps the implication in *Children of the North* that the British Army would sanction the murder of their own men for reasons of political

expedience is entirely wide of the mark. The important thing – and the aspect on which the thrillers absolutely depend – is that these narrative situations are *plausible*.

Plausibility, then, is not quite the same thing as accuracy, just as realism does not quite have the same connotations as naturalism. British thriller serials of the 1980s might not be accurate in their implications or details with regard to the activities of state agencies and commercial operators, but they present a political world of which the viewer can conceive. These dramas are not always scrupulously naturalistic in their observation of the finer details of civic life in Britain. They are nonetheless realist in their depiction of particular environments and appropriate characters and in the ways in which they narrate events. One is reminded of Victor Shklovsky's observation that the 'purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known.'<sup>39</sup> To state that a number of thrillers of the period are 'paranoia' dramas, for instance, is thus not to diminish them by implying that they hysterically overreact to political trends. The paranoia which these thrillers dramatise bespeaks an extended concern with the relationship between the individual and the state, and with a set of ethical parameters which ought to regulate that relationship. The accuracy of the information presented in such dramas is not of prime importance. What is, however, is that their paranoia – their anxiety at miscarriages of justice or routine abuses of power – is shown to be plausible. Judith Williamson makes this point in an article on the film *Defence of the Realm*:

The nuclear state had become a bogey, a focus of half-formed fears and paranoias; and its representation as a sort of secret ministry keeps it conveniently vague, closer to psychical than political reality. *Defence of the Realm* employs the state as a force of evil, and nuclear weapons as a source of danger; they are drained of reality as they function to provide the necessary evil and danger for the plot. In this way we can experience the thrill of our fears within the safety of a familiar genre; and enjoy a vicarious sense of achievement as the film arrives at The Truth.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 120.

<sup>40</sup> Judith Williamson, 'The lust for truth and the secret state', *New Socialist*, February 1986, 41.



The 'Truth' which 1980s thrillers invite the audience to recognise is that individuals are now in thrall to the coercive operations of the public sphere in contemporary Britain. The functional elements of the thriller genre operate to confirm this proposition. Their structure of feeling is all to do with the shaping in dramatic form of these powerful anxieties.

I would like to conclude by summarising some of the central points made within this study. In the 1980s the series and the serial became the predominant forms for the dramatic exploration of contemporary social issues in British television. The serial is perhaps the most powerful, for its form allows the development of a complex narrative which is nonetheless finite. The stories of serials do not stretch for weeks or disperse into new plotlines as with soap operas and other ongoing series. Nor are they confined by the time limits of a television or cinema film. They offer instead the opportunity to develop character and storyline in some depth, to draw upon the structural opportunities offered by episodic breaks to the narrative, but to tell a (more or less) complete story. To that extent their consolidation in this period betokens a cultural need to narrate complicated stories.

Thriller serials mark an extension of narrational method in television drama. They are often formed of multiple narrative strands, following different characters, featuring different places of narration or occasionally different time-frames. Whilst the programmes I have centrally addressed in these pages all have a thriller inflection, they are not rigidly bound according to narrow generic definitions. Instead they blur the boundaries between genres, drawing on different generic models and developing new modes of expression which might compound, say, the comic, the epic and the melodramatic. By the same token certain of these dramas extend the dramatic treatment of time, place and character. The drama of the period, then, in general terms refines and evolves conventions of television realism.

These dramas all project a crucial relationship between the private and the public. The former embraces subjective states, often with clear psychological and even

existential dimensions. The latter makes manifest the effect of developments in the social and political realm. The two spheres come together through the experience of the protagonist, which is, one might say, an individual experience of the cultural moment. The thriller in any case emphasises the present-experience of the protagonist, especially with regard to his/her trauma as the narrative develops. Thrillers are also, by nature, emphatically hermeneutic, structuring their narratives according to a process of explication and cognition. 1980s thrillers dramatise the tension, perhaps the point of fracture, between the protagonist and the public realm. The latter is usually composed of Government agencies, the state security services or commercial entrepreneurs. The epistemological drive, then, provides an answer to the cause of the protagonist's trauma: the source of threat and danger is located in the operations of these public organisations which, paradoxically, operate in secret, hidden, covert ways. There is clearly an ideological dimension to these representations.

1980s thriller serials resonate with the timbres of Thatcherism. They project clear oppositions and confrontations; they examine the status of the individual in modern Britain; and they engage in questions <sup>about</sup> of moral absolutism. Thrillers in different manifestations, in different periods, have varying ideological constructions – but they are always ideological. 1980s thriller serials reveal <sup>we can do it</sup> irrevocable tensions in contemporary culture; furthermore they 'speak' against the dominant discourse. Their bleak and ambivalent endings refuse to endorse the patterns of action which their narratives present. Instead they leave a lingering sense of violation – the cause of which has been traced to the public realm – or they build in mitigating strands of optimism which are distinct from anything the public realm has to offer. In 1993 Dennis Potter observed, with regard to a more general effect of contemporary culture, that

we are left emptied of almost everything except a numbing bewilderment, a paralysis of the spirit, and that long, aching, nearly inexpressible sense of *loss* which is, I feel – what's the current phrase? – the 'hidden agenda' lurking behind so much of our public discourse.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Dennis Potter, 'The James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, Edinburgh Film Festival, 1993', *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews and a Lecture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 40.

This well describes the prevailing effect of thriller serials in the 1980s.

I would not like my own study to end on quite so pessimistic a note, however, and wish to offer my own strand of optimism. Thriller serials like *Edge of Darkness*, *A Very British Coup* and *GBH* were produced. They were transmitted. Even where they did not reach mass audiences by television's standards they still played to millions of people. They were made at a time when British television was undergoing major shifts in terms of its institutional organisation and in terms of notions regarding commercial and mainstream drama. They testify to a muscular extension of serial narrative fiction and to a perhaps old-fashioned idea of 'responsive' television drama, engaging with its society. They were contemporary in their settings, often bleakly so. They raised uncomfortable social issues, were at times explicitly political in their subject-matter and frequently refused the viewer the comfort of a cathartic ending. Their themes centre around the increasingly autocratic power of the state and the constraints imposed upon individual experience. They dramatise the faultlines of Thatcherism – but they do not endorse its dominant discourse. They certainly stand as documents of their period, ringing with conflict and crisis, but they are also in many cases witty, tender, warm and subtle. Perhaps these are not Mrs Thatcher's thrillers at all. They manifestly demonstrate that, throughout the imperial sway of Thatcherism, there were other visions, other values and many other voices.

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## Select Programme List

The following programmes and films are listed according to their respective year of transmission or cinema release. In the case of series and serials, the date given is that of the transmission of the first episode. Repeat transmissions have generally not been indicated except where these are directly relevant to the current study. Where a programme has various producers/writers/directors, as is the case with a number of ongoing series, these have not been named. What follows is by no means a comprehensive account of drama made during the period but a brief list of British programmes mentioned in the current study and transmitted during or in the wake of the Thatcher era.

Serials are denoted with the symbol ‘•’. I have used the following abbreviations: ep – executive producer; p – producer, d – director; w – writer; ed – editor; ph – photography. In general, however, I have named only the production company, producer, director and writer.

### 1979

#### *Minder*

29 October 1979, ITV

Euston Films

*Shoestring*

30 September 1979, BBC1

BBC Television

**1980**

*The Black Stuff*

2 January 1980, BBC2

BBC Television, p David Rose, d Jim Goddard, w Alan Bleasdale

*Death of a Princess*

9 April 1980, ITV

ATV Network Production, ep David Fanning, p Martin McKeand, Anthony Thomas, w and d Anthony Thomas

**1982**

• *Bird of Prey*

13 May 1982, BBC1

BBC TV Birmingham, p Michael Wearing, d Michael Rolfe, w Ron Hutchinson

*Boys From the Blackstuff*

10 October 1982, BBC2; 7 November 1982, BBC1; 13 January 1983, BBC1.

BBC Television, p Michael Wearing, d Philip Saville, w Alan Bleasdale

*Brookside*

2 November 1982, C4

Brookside Productions, devised by Phil Redmond

*A Guide to Armageddon*

26 July 1982, BBC1

BBC Television, p Mich Rhodes, Mich Jackson

## 1984

- *Bird of Prey 2*

27 September 1984, BBC1

BBC TV Pebble Mill, p Bernard Kricheski, d Don Leaver, w Ron Hutchinson

- *Scully*

14 May 1984, C4

Granada Television, p Steven Morrison, d Les Chatfield, w Alan Bleasdale

### *Threads*

23 September 1984, BBC2

BBC Television, Network 9, Western world TV, ep John Purdie, Graham Massey, p and d Mick Jackson, w Barry Hines

## 1985

- *The Beiderbecke Affair*

6 January 1985, ITV

Yorkshire Television, ep David Cunliffe, p Anne W. Gibbons, d David Reynolds, Frank W. Smith, w Alan Plater

- *Blott on the Landscape*

6 February 1985, BBC2; 19 July 1993, BBC1

Picture Partnership Productions, ep Brian Eastman, p Evgeny Gridneff, d Roger Bamford, w Malcolm Bradbury, from the book by Tom Sharpe

### *Defence of the Realm*

Cinema release: GB, 1985

Enigma Films, Rank Film Productions, National Film Finance Corporation, ep David Puttnam, p Robin Douet, Lynda Myles, d David Drury, w Martin Stellman, ph Roger Deakins

- *The Detective*

10 May 1985, BBC1

BBC Television, p Sally Head, d Don Leaver, w Ted Whitehead, from the novel by Paul Ferris

*EastEnders*

3 September 1985, BBC1

BBC Television

- *Edge of Darkness*

4 November 1985, BBC2; 19 December 1985, BBC1; 10 May 1992, BBC2

BBC Television, Lionheart Television International, p Michael Wearing, d Martin Campbell, w Troy Kennedy Martin, ph Andrew Dunn

*In the Secret State*

10 March 1985, BBC2

Greenpoint Films, p Ann Scott, d Christopher Morahan, w Brian Phelan, from the novel by Robert McCrum

- *Inside Out*

12 February 1985, BBC2

BBC Television, p Sally Head, d Tony Smith, Pedr James, w Simon Moore

- *The Price*

10 January 1985, C4

Astramead, Radio Telefis Eireann, ep Brian MacLochlainn, p Mark Shivas, d Peter Smith, w Peter Ransley

## **1986**

### *Casualty*

18 October 1986, BBC1

BBC Television

- *Dead Head*

15 January 1986, BBC2

BBC TV Pebble Mill, p Robin Midgley, d Rob Walker, w Howard Brenton

### *Frankie and Johnnie*

2 February 1986, BBC2

BBC Television, p Graham Benson, d Martin Campbell, w Paula Milne

- *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*

8 October 1986, BBC2

BBC Television, p Sally Head, d Philip Saville, w Ted Whitehead, from the novel by Fay Weldon

- *The Monocled Mutineer*

31 August 1986, BBC1

BBC Television, p Richard Broke, d Jim O'Brien, w Alan Bleasdale, from the book by John Fairley and William Allison

- *The Singing Detective*

16 November 1986, BBC1; 1 June 1988, BBC2, 11 July 1994, BBC1

BBC Television in association with Australian Broadcasting Corporation, p Kenith Trodd, John Harris, d Jon Amiel, w Dennis Potter, ph Ken Westbury, ed Sue Wyatt, Bill Wright

### *The Whistleblower*

Cinema release: GB, 1986

Portreeve Productions, ep Philip Nugus, John Kelleher, James Reeve, p Geoffrey Reeve, d Simon Langton, w Julian Bond, from the novel by John Hale, ph Fred Tammes, ed Robert Morgan

## **1987**

- *The Beiderbecke Tapes*

13 December 1987, ITV

Yorkshire Television, ep David Cunliffe, p Michael Glynn, d Brian Parker, w Alan Plater

- *Brond*

13 May 1987, C4

Jam Jar Films, Channel Four, ep Gareth Wardell, p Patrick Higson, d, Michael Caton-Jones, w Frederic Lindsay, ph Richard Greatrex, ed Joke van Wijk

### *Inspector Morse*

6 January 1987, ITV

Zenith Productions for Central Independent Television, ep Ted Childs

### *Life Story*

27 April 1987, BBC2; 22 January 1988, BBC1; 22 August 1993, BBC2

BBC Television, Arts and Entertainment Network, p and d Mick Jackson, w William Nicholson

- *Porterhouse Blue*

3 June 1987, C4

Picture Partnership Productions for Channel Four, p Brian Eastman, d Robert Knights, w Malcolm Bradbury, from the novel by Tom Sharpe

### *Secret Society*

22 April 1987, BBC2

BBC Scotland, p Brian Barr, d Dennis Cosgrove, presenter Duncan Campbell. Only four out of the original six episodes were transmitted at this point. The episode *Cabinet* was never subsequently transmitted. *The Zircon Affair* was transmitted as *The Zircon Secret* in 1988.

### *Stormy Monday*

Cinema release: GB, 1987

Channel Four International, Atlantic Moving Picture Company, British Screen, d and w Mike Figgis

## **1988**

- *A Very British Coup*

19 June 1988, C4

Skreba Films, Parallax Pictures, p Sally Hibbin, Ann Skinner, d Mick Jackson, w Alan Plater, from the novel by Chris Mullin, ph Ernie Vincze, ed Donald Fairservice

- *The Beiderbecke Connection*

27 November 1988, ITV

Yorkshire Television, ep Keith Richardson, p Michael Glynn, d Alan Bell, w Alan Plater

### *Blind Justice*

19 October 1988, BBC2

BBC Television, p Michael Wearing, d Michael Whyte, Robert Walker, w Helena Kennedy, Peter Flannery

### *Death on the Rock*

28 April 1988, ITV

Thames Television, p Chris Oxley, ed Roger Bolton, reporter Julian Manyon

- *The Fear*

17 February 1988, ITV

Euston Films, p Jacky Stoller, d Stuart Orme, w Paul Hines

• *Final Run*

10 July 1988, BBC2

BBC Television, p Brenda Reid, d Tim King, w Carol Bunyan, Ron Hutchinson

*London's Burning*

27 February 1988, ITV

LWT

• *The One Game*

18 June 1988, ITV

Central, ep Ted Childs, p Deirdre Keir, d Mike Vardy, w John Brownjohn

• *Thin Air*

8 April 1988, BBC1

BBC Television, p Caroline Oulton, d Antonia Bird, w Sarah Dunant, Peter Busby

*Tumbledown*

30 May 1988, BBC1; 8 June 1992, BBC1

BBC Television, p Richard Broke, d Richard Eyre, w Charles Wood, ph Andrew Dunn

*The Zircon Secret*

30 September 1988, BBC2

BBC Scotland, ed Andrew Forrester, studio d Kathy Gee, presenter Ludovic Kennedy. See also *Secret Society*, 1987



## **1989**

*1996*

17 September 1989, BBC1

BBC Television, p Ruth Calch, d Karl Francis, w G.F. Newman

*Agatha Christie's Poirot*

8 January 1989, ITV

LWT, ep Linda Agran, Nick Elliott, p Brian Eastman

• *Bellman and True*

5 July 1989, ITV

Handmade Films, Euston Films; ep George Harrison, Denis O'Brien, John Hambley, Johnny Goodman, p Michael Wearing, Christopher Neune, d Richard Loncraine, w Desmond Lowden, Richard Loncraine, Michael Wearing, from the novel by Desmond Lowden, ph Ken Westbury, ed Paul Green

• *Blackeyes*

19 November 1989, BBC2

BBC Television in association with Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Television New Zealand, p Rick McCallum, d and w Dennis Potter, ph Andrew Dunn

*Capital City*

26 September 1989, ITV

Euston Films, Thames Television, p Irving Teitelbaum

• *Confessional*

4 October 1989, ITV

Granada Television, Harmony Gold, Rete Europe, p Richard Everitt, d Gordon Flemyng, w James Mitchell, from the novel by Jack Higgins

*Frederick Forsyth Presents*

9 December 1989, ITV

Blair Entertainment, Taurus Films, LWT, FFS, ep Murray Smith, Frederick Forsyth, Nick Elliot, p Frederick Muller

• *The Manageress*

11 June 1989, C4

Zed Productions for Channel Four, p Sophie Balhetchet, Glenn Wilhide, d Christopher King, w Stan Hey, Neville Smith

• *Mother Love*

20 October 1989, BBC1

BBC Television, BBC Enterprises, WGBH, p Ken Riddington, d Simon Langton, w Andrew Davies

• *The Real Eddy English*

11 April 1989, C4

North South Partnership, p Colin McKeown, Martin Tempia, d David Attwood, w Frank Cottrell Boyce

• *Traffik*

22 June 1989, C4; 4 January 1990, C4; 26 June 1993, C4.

Picture Partnership Productions for Channel Four, p Brian Eastman, d Alastair Reid, w Simon Moore

## 1990

• *Blood Rights*

24 October 1990, BBC2

BBC Television, p Caroline Oulton, d Lesley Manning, w Mike Phillips

- *Centrepoint*

8 October 1990, C4

Rosso Productions, p Franco Rosso, Joanna Smith, d Piers Haggard, w Nigel Williams

- *Chain*

29 May 1990, BBC1

BBC TV Pebble Mill, p Carol Parks, d Don Leaver, w Desmond Lowden

*Dear Sarah*

2 July 1990, ITV

Radio Telefis Eireann, Bondway, p Peter Jacques, d Frank Cvitanovich, w Tom McGurk

*Hidden Agenda*

Cinema release: GB, 1990

Initial Film and Television Production, Hemdale Holdings, p Eric Fellner, Rebecca O'Brien, d Ken Loach, w Jim Allen, ph Clive Tickner

- *House of Cards*

18 November 1990, BBC1

BBC, p Ken Riddington, d Paul Seed, w Andrew Davies from the book by Michael Dobbs

*Jeeves and Wooster*

22 April 1990, ITV

Picture Partnership Productions, Granada Television, ep Sally Head, p Brian Eastman

- *Die Kinder*

14 November 1990, BBC2

BBC Television, WGBII, p Michael Wearing, d Rob Walker, w Paula Milne

- *Never Come Back*

21 March 1990, BBC2; edited version 17 December 1990, BBC1

BBC Television, p Joe Walters, d Ben Bolt, w David Pirie, from the novel by John Mair, ph John McGlashan, ed Frances Parker

- *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

10 January 1990, BBC1

BBC Television, p Phillippa Giles, d Beeban Kidron, w Jeanette Winterson

- *Shoot to Kill*

3 June 1990, ITV

Zenith Productions, p Nigel Stafford-Clark, d Peter Kosminsky, w Mick Eaton

*Who Bombed Birmingham?*

28 March 1990, ITV

Granada Television, p and d Michael Beckham, w Rob Ritchie

## 1991

- *Children of the North*

30 October 1991, BBC2

BBC TV, p Chris Parr, d David Drury, w John Hale, from the novels by M.S. Power

- *GBH*

6 June 1991, C4; 20 June 1992, C4

GBH Films for Channel Four, ep Verity Lambert, p Alan Bleasdale, David Jones, d Robert Young, w Alan Bleasdale

- *Prime Suspect*

7 April 1991, ITV; 2 December 1991, C4; 26 July 1992, ITV

Granada Television, ep Sally Head, p Don Leaver, d Chris Menaul, w Lynda La Plante

## **1992**

### ***Between the Lines***

**4 September 1992, BBC1**

**Island World Productions, BBC Television, ep Tony Garnett**

### **• *The Camomile Lawn***

**5 March 1992, C4**

**Zed Productions, p Sophie Balhetchet, Glenn Wilhide, d Peter Hall, w Ken Taylor, from the novel by Mary Wesley**

### **• *Civvies***

**22 September 1992, BBC1**

**BBC Wales, p Ruth Caleb, Ruth Kenley-Letts, d Karl Francis, w Lynda La Plante**

### **• *A Fatal Inversion***

**10 May 1992, BBC1**

**BBC Television, p Phillippa Giles, d Tim Fywell, w Sandy Welch, from the novel by Barbara Vine**

### **• *Natural Lies***

**31 May 1992, BBC2; 20 February 1995, BBC1**

**Lawson Productions, London Film Productions, BBC Television, ep Michael Wearing, p Sarah Lawson, d Ben Bolt, w David Pirie**

### **• *Prime Suspect II***

**15 December 1992, ITV; 27 June 1993, ITV**

**Granada Television, ep Sally Head, p Paul Marcus, d John Strickland, w Allan Cubitt, from a storyline by Lynda La Plante**

- *Tell Tale Hearts*

1 November 1992, BBC1

BBC Television, p David Blair, Norman McCandish, d Thaddeus O'Sullivan, w Stephen Lowe

*Under Suspicion*

19 December 1992, ITV

Columbia Pictures Corporation, Rank Film Distributors, LWT, Carnival, ep Nick Elliott, p Brian Eastman, w and d Simon Moore

## 1993

- *Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City*

28 September 1993, C4

Working Title Films, Propaganda Films, p Antony Root, Alan Poul, d Alastair Reid, w Richard Kramer, from the book by Armistead Maupin

- *Comics*

6 June 1993, C4

Cinema Verity, Channel Four, p Verity Lambert, Selwyn Roberts, d Diarmuid Lawrence, w Lynda La Plante

*Cracker*

27 September 1993, ITV

Granada Television, ep Sally Head, w Jimmy McGovern

- *Gallowglass*

10 January 1993, BBC1

BBC Television, p Phillippa Giles, d Tim Fywell, w Jacqueline Holborough, from the novel by Ruth Rendell

- *Lipstick On Your Collar*

21 February 1993, C4

Whistling Gypsy Productions, Channel Four, ep and w Dennis Potter, p, Rosemarie Whitman, d  
Renny Rye, ph Sean Van Hales, ed Clare Douglas

- *Prime Suspect III*

19 December 1993, ITV

Granada Television, ep Sally Head, p Paul Marcus, d David Drury, w Lynda La Plante

- *To Play the King*

21 November 1993, BBC1

BBC Television, WGBH, p Ken Riddington, d Paul Seed, w Andrew Davies, from the novel by  
Michael Dobbs

## 1994

*Anna Lee*

27 February 1994, ITV

Carnival for LWT, ep Sarah Wilson, p Brian Eastman

- *The Lifeboat*

27 April 1994, BBC1

Bloom Street Productions, ep Ruth Caleb, Lynda La Plante, Karl Francis, p Ruth Kenley-Letts, d Karl  
Francis, w Lynda La Plante

## 1995

- *The Governor*

14 May 1995, ITV

La Plante Productions, p Steve Lanning, d Alan Dossor, w Lynda La Plante

*Prime Suspect: The Lost Child*

30 April 1995, ITV

Granada Television, ep Sally Head, p Paul Marcus, d John Madden, w Paul Billing

*Prime Suspect: Inner Circles*

7 May 1995, ITV

Granada Television, ep Sally Head, p Paul Marcus, d Sarah Pia Anderson, w Eric Deacon

*Prime Suspect: The Scent of Darkness*

15 May 1995, ITV

Granada Television, ep Sally Head, p Brian Park, d Paul Marcus, w Guy Hibbert

- *She's Out*

6 March 1995, ITV

Cinema Verity, La Plante Productions, p Verity Lambert, d Ian Toynton, w Lynda La Plante