

Programmes and canons

Article

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Programmes and Canons

Jonathan Bignell

The academic study of television has taken place in Britain predominantly around the analysis of programmes, as locations for the understanding and critique of television aesthetics, institutions and audiences. Whether considering concepts of genre, the politics of representations, the activity of audiences, or the diachronic changes in television culture, the force of critical argument rests to an important degree on the citation of programmes as the evidence on which conclusions are based. These citations of programme examples then come to form a canon of privileged material, especially when they are re-cited in subsequent work and disseminated in pedagogical contexts. Studying television relies on constructing canons of programmes that represent important historical processes and turning points, and this article considers that issue especially in relation to the history of British television drama (see Bignell¹). The methodological issue at stake here is how programme examples shape theorists' and students' understanding, but examples are necessarily both representative and also exceptional. Each is there to represent a larger context and history, and thus performs its function by being equivalent or exchangeable with other programmes that are similar to it. Yet each must also exceed the field it stands for, and be more than typical, just because it was chosen rather than an alternative. The selection of one example rather than another will always have a rationale, whether that is a pragmatic issue of its accessibility or familiarity, or a theoretical one relating to its formative role, subsequent influence, internal complexity or some other reason for privileging it. So there is a contradiction inherent in methodologies that work by selecting examples, since representativeness and selection lead in different directions while both are conducive to the construction of canons.

The duality in what a programme example is and does is not just an interesting theoretical crux that argues for reflexive and deconstructive attitudes to doing television studies. It is also a political and economic matter that affects how books get published, how research gets funded, and how university courses are designed. As far as educational courses are concerned, the predominant organisational principle still seems to be the model of one screening a week for a specific module, where a programme is shown and accompanying critical reading is set. While the first teaching session might provide an overview of a topic (such as genre or a historical

period) by showing a selection of extracts, the requirement for a common ‘set text’ each week leads to the necessity of selecting examples, and these tend to be complete programmes. What emerges from this is the assumption that there are key texts that learning about television draws on when methodologies of analysis, histories and topics are being instantiated, and that those critical insights into analytical procedures, histories and topics are tested and proven by application to programmes. A canon of programme examples and a repertoire of critical ideas operate together, and each conditions the sense that can be made of the other. Clearly, the formation of canons and the associated theorisation of exemplarity are important matters in television studies, as they would be in any textual discipline, and these issues take a particular form in television studies because of the dominance of the programme as the particular kind of textual unit most commonly addressed.

In relation to research and publication, a more complex version of the same dialogic process found in teaching is at work where critical insights and programme examples mutually shape and justify each other’s importance. The assumption that academic studies of television will contain substantial analyses of programmes is so established that it might sometimes be overlooked. It is hard to imagine a book called *Fifty Key Television Extracts* that might sensibly rival the useful discussions collected in Glen Creeber’s volume that addresses fifty programmes.² Books that have an overarching critical and historical thesis about television are in fact substantially based in arguments about programmes, and necessarily so inasmuch as they rely on robust evidence-based study. For example, Lez Cooke’s history of British television drama,³ the collection on popular television drama edited by Stephen Lacey and myself,⁴ and James Chapman’s work on adventure TV series name⁵ no programmes in their titles yet are based on programme analysis. But among recent publications that do aim to study television without a concentration on programmes as such, Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock’s collection on ITV history⁶ is an important milestone. Its sections on Histories and Institutions are not predominantly programme-centred because the book addresses the history of ITV as a culture of production and reception, an organisational principle that matches the productive blending of textual, cultural-historical and institutional work in recent television research.

The initial design of the research project ‘Cultures of British Television Drama, 1960–82’ that I worked on over the last three years avoided specifying any programmes at all, to sidestep issues of canonicity by addressing British television drama as a culture consisting of the

audiences and critical discourses constituting it, television institutions, and the people working in them.⁷ The project was designed in 2000, as a response to a previous programme of research undertaken from 1996–2000 on the BBC's *Wednesday Play* anthology series.⁸ That project was based on programmes and their authorship, and one of the aims of the subsequent 'Cultures' research was to move away from canonised programmes and the authored single play in order to question the canonisation that can result from text-based analysis, and from the study of programmes that had been critically addressed through methodologies deriving from literary and theatrical models of signification. Although a wide range of publications derived from the 'Cultures' project, almost all of them centre on the analysis of programmes, whether in terms of their textual, aesthetic qualities or as case studies of historical processes, critical issues or institutional structures.⁹ Despite the broad focus of the research on television drama as a culture, it is programmes that provide the locus for the new documentation of television history, new theoretical argument or new interpretive work that has emerged. It seems, in my own experience and I think more generally as I shall show briefly below, that canonisation and methodologies that focus on programme examples are hard to avoid.

The key role of the programme as object and example in television scholarship and pedagogy parallels the status of the programme as an organisational principle in television production. For the institutions making television, the programme is an organisational unit towards which the activities of the production team are directed. Producers, directors, performers, writers and technicians work on programmes, though they may work on more than one simultaneously. The effects of this can be seen in the organisation of the records that are often of interest to researchers. In the BBC's Written Archives Centre, for example, a significant proportion of paper records are organised under programme titles, so that their inception, making and reception can be understood as a temporal sequence and so that future programme makers can refer back to information about contributors, legal rights and budgets. Information is collected in this way for the benefit of BBC staff, not for researchers, but the gathering together of information by programme supports an academic focus on them. Television schedules are devised as a sequence of programmes within the temporal boundaries of a day-part, week, month or year, and the attraction of audiences, charges to advertisers, and the measurement of ratings are normally expressed in relation to the schedule's programmes. Despite important work (see John Ellis¹⁰) on the functions of schedules and the possibilities opened up by their analysis in

academic studies, programmes comprise schedules and their role in the television industry and in academic work is to make the relative value of programmes and their audiences tractable and comprehensible. The television industry and its archives' conventions of institutional organisation, political economy and information management do not in themselves produce a canon, since their purpose is to operate as a system to facilitate work and the production of television output rather than to divide that output evaluatively or analytically. But the position of the programme as the basic entity in production and information management does support and facilitate the research activity based around programmes outlined above. The methodologies of production organisation and systematisation of data in the television industry fit closely with the academic methodologies of television historiography.

The academic study of British television drama's formal and aesthetic qualities has been based around authorship and the textual analysis of programmes as discrete entities. Each methodological concept assures the potential stability of the other, for authors are producers and what they produce are programmes, and programmes as entities are products that imply an attribution to their creating author(s). So inasmuch as the study of television is the study of texts, those texts are programmes that have been authored. The changing but persistent form of this methodological assumption can be seen in the two often-cited collections of essays on British television drama edited by George Brandt.¹¹ In the first, chapters were about the work of authors, and this was discussed as a group of individual programmes (often single plays). In the later book, chapters were about programmes, but each chapter title included the name of its author. In the British context with our heritage of drama production headed by writers, and the respect given to authorial figures, the status of the programme as a form promises to remain in the ascendant for some time. Debates over the quality of television drama tend to be constructed around the citation of lists of programmes (and not memorable segments, trans-programme themes or other principles of selection). This is still the case in recent times, as far as non-academic writing about television drama is concerned, even if some academic research seeks to question the role of the programme as way of re-conceptualising canonicity and exemplarity. In a newspaper article defending the importance of authored drama, the television screenwriter Tony Marchant¹² disputed the MacTaggart Lecture by the former BBC Director General John Birt at the Edinburgh Television Festival in 2005 where Birt described British films as 'fresh, captivating and unстереotypical' by contrast with British television drama. Marchant countered

Birt in an extended argument about the value of series drama as well as the conventionally respected single play and authored serial, presenting a series of lists of programme titles as he discussed the innovation that he found in *Shameless* (Company Productions/Channel 4, 2004–), *Bodies* (Hat Trick Productions/BBC, 2004–), *Conviction* (Red Production Company/BBC, 2004–), *Outlaws* (World Productions/BBC, 2004–) and *Buried* (World Productions/Channel 4, 2003). At the same time, Owen Gibson¹³ set up the opening of the fourth series of the spy adventure *Spooks* (2002–) on BBC1, quoting its executive producer Jane Featherstone describing the attraction of the series for its team of writers: ‘You can come in and write a play for us that reaches millions. . . . we need to shift the balance towards authored series.’ If *Spooks* is being offered as a series of plays, the residual power of the programme in its most unified form as the product of an author is clearly still evident. That conjunction between authorship and programme text in television drama provides the basis for canonisation, even if the shape and content of the canon is disputed.

If the status of the programme as this basic unit changes for television production, or for its academic analysis, the methodologies for studying television will also change. But the recognition of units other than programmes is far from new in academic studies of the medium. Some years ago in a discussion of the concept of ‘flow,’ Ellis argued that the basic unit of television is not the programme but the segment: ‘small sequential unities of images and sounds whose maximum duration seems to be about five minutes.’¹⁴ This insight has been recognised as an important one, and matches the shifts in technology and viewer behaviour that include channel surfing from segment to segment in a potentially resistant dialogue with the proprieties of the programme form, and increased detail in ratings measurement that can offer minute-by-minute, segment-by-segment audience figures. But for the study of television drama especially, this shared concern within television culture and the academy with activities focusing on the segment has not been taken up to any great extent.

The most recent research project I am involved in, ‘British TV Drama and Acquired US Programmes 1970–2000,’ combines the conventional use of case study examples with the emphasis on broader cultural and institutional factors that I allude to above, since a basis of research on programmes seems inescapable.¹⁵ Its aim is to analyse specific intertextual relationships between US television aesthetics as represented by acquired drama and television aesthetics in British television dramas, in form, genre, format and audience address. This will

include looking at the institutional and practical constraints involved in the acquisition and broadcast processes (such as regulation, package deals, scheduling and cost), and their aesthetic consequences. Among the issues that this project expects to address is the relationship between programmes and segments, notably, for example, in the different kinds of boundary and internal break-point that arise when US programmes made for commercial networks are screened in the UK where there are either no internal breaks at all (on terrestrial BBC channels, for instance) or where breaks are selectively included or repositioned (as in British commercial channels). One aspect of this project is the desire to explore the boundaries of the programme as a normative unit and how they are fractured, redrawn or reconsidered in relation to segmentation. In relation to the dominant forms of academic publication, in research-based and also pedagogical publication, working in tension with the concept of the programme as a discrete entity is a significant challenge. But it will perhaps bring a new kind of unease and productive tension to the issues of canonicity and exemplarity, because the programmes being studied change their geographical and cultural location (from Britain to the USA and vice versa) and often also change their textual form in terms of the relationships between segment and programme. The entity being addressed by the research becomes no longer stable, and thus its exemplarity and canonicity can be destabilised. So far, television drama and its history have overwhelmingly meant programmes, selected as examples, representing and forming canons. But critical work on the segmentation that comprises programmes, on the schedules that discipline their meanings in temporal structures while producing significances among programmes and between them, and the re-signification of programmes across spatial territories, offer promising opportunities to reconsider the methodological centrality of programmes and the canons built from them.

Notes

¹ Jonathan Bignell, 'Exemplarity, Pedagogy and Television History,' *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2005, 15–32; and Jonathan Bignell, 'Citing the Classics: Constructing British Television History in Publishing and Pedagogy,' in Helen Wheatley, ed, *Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, I. B. Tauris, forthcoming.

² Glen Creeber, ed, *Fifty Key Television Programmes*, Arnold, 2004.

³ Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama: A History*, bfi Publishing, 2003.

⁴ Jonathan Bignell and Stephen Lacey, eds, *Popular Television Drama: Critical Perspectives*, Manchester University Press, 2005.

⁵ James Chapman, *Saints & Avengers: British Adventure Series of the 1960s*, I.B. Tauris, 2002.

⁶ Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock, eds, *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years*, Open University Press, 2005.

⁷ The research project 'Cultures of British Television Drama, 1960–82' was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council between 2002–2005. Lez Cooke, Karen McNally and Helen Wheatley undertook the research, and me, John Ellis and Stephen Lacey, at the University of Reading, Royal Holloway University of London, and Manchester Metropolitan University respectively, managed the project.

⁸ 'The BBC *Wednesday Play* and Post-War British Drama' project was funded by the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Board. Stephen Lacey and me led it, and Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh conducted the research, at the University of Reading from 1996–2000. Project outlined at: www.reading.ac.uk/english/researchcentreoftvanddrama.htm

⁹ Publications arising from the project are listed among those of the Centre for Television Drama Studies at the University of Reading: www.rdg.ac.uk/fd/Research/TVCentre.htm

¹⁰ John Ellis, 'Scheduling: the Last Creative Act in Television,' *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2000, 25–38.

¹¹ George Brandt, ed, *British Television Drama*, Cambridge University Press, 1981; and George Brandt, ed, *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

¹² Tony Marchant, 'Small Screen Talent is Shouting to be Heard', *The Guardian*: Media section, 12 September 2005, 3.

¹³ Owen Gibson, 'Spooky Coincidences,' *The Guardian*: Media section, 12 September 2005, 3.

¹⁴ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p. 112.

¹⁵ The project 'British TV Drama and Acquired US Programmes, 1970–2000' is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and led by me at the University of Reading. Simone Knox is the Postdoctoral Researcher. Project outlined at: www.rdg.ac.uk/fd/Research/BritishandUSdrama.htm