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Chaos, Culture and Fantasy: The Television Plays of Howard Schuman

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Like the work of so many British ‘Golden Age’ television dramatists, the plays of American ex-pat screenwriter Howard Schuman have disappeared into the TV ether, and are hardly mentioned by television scholars.¹ Best-known for his hit 1976-77 TV pop musical serials, *Rock Follies/Rock Follies of '77*, and as the presenter of *Moving Pictures* (BBC2, 1991-1996) supposedly described by Quentin Tarantino as the best show about movies on television,² Schuman also wrote a significant number of television plays in the 1970s and early 1980s. Perhaps one reason why they are not better remembered is that they form something of an anomaly within British television drama; Written in a distinctly un-British, madcap, non-naturalistic and often pulpy ‘B movie’ style, they centre around caricatured, hysterical and/or camp characters and make frequent references to popular culture. In this article I try to redress the lack of awareness of Schuman’s authored plays while analyzing his sensibility as a screenwriter. In the process I draw extensively on Schuman’s own views of his writing and his experiences in television, information partly gathered during a recent interview with him. In particular, my focus is on how and why different cultural forms including music, film and theatre are used and referred to in the plays, and how this conditions their narrative content and visual and aural form. As well as considering the reception of Schuman’s plays’ and their status in British drama as non-naturalistic dramas that engage heavily with American pop culture, I explore the writer’s relationship to style and aesthetics, and consider how his written works have been enhanced through creative design decisions.

Although I have limited my discussion here to the plays televised in the first phase of Schuman's career from 1973 to 1983, he continued to have dramas produced into the 1990s. With the demise of the single play format, Schuman turned his hand mostly to serials in the last two decades of his career, penning a four part comedy thriller about alternative comedians *Up Line* (Bob Spiers, 1987), before completing television adaptations of David Lodge's academic rom-com *Small World* (Robert Chetwyn, 1988) and Robert Harris' satire *Selling Hitler* (Alastair Reid, 1991). His feature-length film *Nervous Energy* (Jean Stewart, 1995) about a young AIDS victim was highly acclaimed. However, it was through the form of the 1970s television studio play, in the context of the greater creative freedoms and risk-taking of that era, that Schuman's personal authorial vision was shaped and realized most effectively. The first five years of his career, from 1973 to 1977 was also the most prolific - he had eight television plays produced in this period, as well as the two six-part musical *Rock Follies* serials.

Embracing the studio

Schuman has declared his long love of the studio environment. Of the plays discussed here, only one half hour play, *A Helping Hand* (Brian Farnham, 1975) was filmed on 16mm on location due to an industrial dispute, although this was originally also intended to be a studio-based play. Schuman recalls seeing the studio-based BBC Play of the Month, *Uncle Vanya* (Christopher Morahan, 1970) and thinking it had 'more style, fluidity and confidence than anything [he][...] had seen on American television for years' (1982: 74). Describing his growing admiration for 'the British mastery of studio/video techniques' (ibid) upon moving to London in late 1968, he cites the work of Dennis Potter and David Mercer as influences, both notable for their use of non-

naturalistic devices, as well as Monty Python and *Coronation St*, respectively attesting as much to Schuman's love of the off-beat and the camp, as to any inherent studio qualities. Nevertheless, Schuman actively sought to use the studio in his own plays, considering it more appropriate for his own form of non-naturalism, as he has articulated:

Work that is slightly more theatrical and stylised (sic) seems to be more effective on video. [...] It creates your own universe, it seals your universe in. The video that doesn't work is frequently the video that is a second-rate substitute for film, whereby you wish you were on film but you're stuck in the studio. I believe you should go into the studio being alert to its possibilities, and using the studio in a quite different way. On my part this was a learning experience. (1981: 10)

So while many TV practitioners and critics regarded the studio as an aesthetically compromised environment, Schuman embraced the opportunities it offered for presenting a vision of the world that was clearly not real, as a space that would foreground his plays' status as inventions, interpretations of life.

Themes and form

Schuman (1982: 84) has acknowledged the 'very strong thematic and stylistic links' of his 1970s plays, and indeed Schuman's first televised play, *Vérité* (Piers Haggard, 1973) sets up various themes and formal devices that would be a recurrent feature of his work. In the play, Mik (Tim Curry), a young experimental film maker from New York, wreaks havoc when he stays with English couple Shirley (Annabel Leventon) and Clive (Richard Morant), at their house in London while working on his latest film, an ominous, dystopian vision of the city. Introducing an entourage of bohemian misfits into their cosy, middle class lives, Mik's chaos is embraced by Clive, while school teacher Shirley rejects the disorder. This dichotomy of order and chaos is a

pattern that recurs throughout all of Schuman's single plays, which centre on 'characters [...] in states of (to put it mildly) extreme mental stress' (1982: 84).

Schuman says that only years later did he notice this thematic coherence across his plays and make a connection with his earlier graduate days when he worked on a political science thesis at Brandeis University entitled 'Fucidites and Hobbes: A Study in Order', which was 'all about how to impose order upon chaos', noting how such things 'subconsciously filter into your work' (Schuman 12 November 2010 interview).

Order and chaos are always explored dialectically in Schuman's dramas: for example in *Vérité*, neither Mik's apocalyptic vision nor Shirley's view of London as a safe enclave ring true, and Mik's counter-cultural activities are parodied as much as Shirley's homeliness. Schuman (2010) describes this dialectic as 'an absolute, perfect reflection of my own psyche, which veers between wildness, internal and sometimes external, and the fact that I also adore my cosy ordered life'. The recurrence of break downs across his subsequent plays is striking, and is often filtered through couples' troubled relationships. To give but a few of many examples: In *Captain Video's Story* (Anthea Browne-Wilkinson, 1973), broadcast just one month after *Vérité*, Sybil and Brian Clamm (Barbara Ewing and Derek Fowlds) undergo 'video therapy' for 'NCCs' (Non Communicating Couples) to help their failing marriage, prompting both characters to have troubling revelations; In *A Helping Hand* (Brian Farnham, 1975) city broker Guy's encounter with a mentally ill woman, Pam, whom he befriends on a bus, acts as a catalyst for him secretly unleashing his own repressed anger against his uptight wife, Trisha by destroying their living room, blaming the innocent Pam. In *Amazing Stories* (Peter Plummer, 1976) middle-aged sci-fi fan, Stanley escapes from

his clinically depressed family to a sci-fi convention, where he meets his idol, the sci-fi writer E.B. Fern, whom he later learns is undergoing his own form of breakdown.

Characters' breakdowns and miscommunications are often played out through another 'Schumanesque' trope of cultural difference. This frequently happens through a clash of British and US sensibilities, as Schuman draws on his observations as an outsider of both cultures to contrast English reserve with American emotional over-exuberance. In *Vérité* Mik's voluptuous girlfriend Barbara (Beth Porter), a gushy, neurotic habitual tap dancer, is contrasted with the thin, measured and up-tight Shirley who cannot hide her irritation at their intrusion but who is nevertheless is a considerate hostess, cooking for and cleaning up after the unruly guests. In *Captain Video's Story* aspiring American artist Sybil, tries to persuade her passive aggressive British husband Brian to open up emotionally, but then gets upset by his criticisms of her dilettante dabbling in ceramics and song writing. Schuman satirizes both the openness of US 'confessional' culture and the self-control of British repression; For example in *Vérité* Barbara impulsively declares at the dinner table 'Mik, I wanna make love right now' and Mik semi-apologetically explains to Shirley and Clive 'She's really a passionate woman'. But Shirley is also made an object of ridicule when Barbara makes her dress in satin hot pants and stiffly tap dance in an attempt to loosen her up. Schuman's critique of the British middle class's repression and up-tightness is not just explored through these transatlantic comparisons; *Carbon Copy* (Piers Haggard, 1975) is about a young middle class black man, Albert, who, rediscovering his Jamaican roots, rejects the culture of his white friends and patrons, the Bott family. Again, Schuman treats the subject dialectically: the exclusiveness of

Albert's new-found black cultural solidarity is criticised by his black girlfriend Beryle who argues:

Here's the good thing about black consciousness – makes you throw away your hair straightening lotions and your skin lightening creams.[...] This only going to discos that play reggae, and you can't have white friends, and you gotta wear African clothes all the time. I don't want to know.

Schuman's plays have formal as well as thematic coherence as they all contain films, songs, theatrical performances or narration which parallel and/or interrupt the dramatic narrative. Schuman's use of music and cabaret, and his unusual level of engagement with pop culture has roots in his earlier experience in Manhattan in the 1960 where he was 'writing for theatres and cabarets: beyond the fringe and on the rocks' and collaborating with a friend on 'dreadful pop songs, pathetic imitations of chart hits, which we flogged to schlock music publishers for fifty dollars. We called them our hamburger songs' (1982: 74). The theatrical fringe and cheap pop music are still clear reference points in Schuman's work, exerting more obvious influences than other contemporary British television drama.

Theatrical performance, music and film are not just included in Schuman's plays to provide an additional level of narrative commentary or express thoughts and feelings which cannot be communicated through dialogue; Schuman fuses form and content, making his characters' *uses* of culture a subject of all his plays. Performance and cultural creativity is often presented as a vital outlet for his characters' self-expression, that risks being stultified by their partners, in unhealthy relationships: In *Captain Video's Story* Sybil performs a song on her piano which Brian criticizes as 'unstructured'; In *A Helping Hand*, stock broker Guy reveals his secret ambition to be a trumpeter, and flies into a rage when he discovers wife Trisha was secretly planning

to give his instrument to Oxfam. In these examples Schuman incorporates musical performance as one way in which individual characters reveal and realize their inner selves. In *Rock Follies* the musical numbers performed by the female group The Little Ladies are also often expressions of their own fantasies and/or concerns. However the musical numbers in *Censored Scenes From King Kong* serve a more satirical function: Performed by a cabaret act, The Duck Sisters (Julie Covington and Beth Porter), their songs such as 'Bare Market Blues' represent the values of their manager, businessman Benchgelter (Michael Angelis), a character later reincarnated as Stavros Kuklas in *Rock Follies*, who has decided that the 1970s 'are going to be about nostalgia, style, elegance and extreme poverty'. The Duck Sisters' camp mode is presented as a cynical reaction to the failure of the 1960s' cultural revolution to effect real social change, and is contrasted with the idealism and sincerity of investigative journalist Stephen, who has awoken from a coma induced in 1971. Through these characters Schuman thematizes both the potential for theatricalism and camp to refuse serious meaning, and the assimilation of the counter-culture by capitalist entrepreneurs. Thus, songs function here as capitalist cultural products, and are reflexively satirized as such, rather than expressions of individual desire.

Some of Schuman's plays include musical performances and films as embedded parallel texts: *Carbon Copy* includes a Rastafarian pantomime production of Aladdin, reinterpreted as a parable of black pride and anti-Imperialism. The foolish Aladdin uses his three wishes to transform himself into a ludicrous emulation of a white man, with a long blonde wig, ill-fitting pin-striped suit and tiny bowler hat, and blotchy white skin. In return for restoring him to his former black self the genie demands that he rescues the beautiful Princess Bauxite from an evil ogre who has stolen her. The

pantomime, which includes four songs, features at various moments during the play to illustrate Albert's unfolding crisis of racial identity and anger at Western nations' exploitation of Jamaica's only precious mineral, bauxite. To make the personal connection explicit, the first transition between his story and the pantomime is achieved using a slow visual mix, so that for several seconds the face of the white Aladdin is superimposed over Albert's face, as he drinks wine at a classical music reception surrounded by his white friends, and the lyrics of Aladdin's song parallel his predicament:

Am I fish, am I fowl?
 Am I rat or an owl?
 I'm betwixt and between,
 Know what I mean?
 Know what I mean?

Am I dark, am I light?
 Am I day, am I night?
 I'm not fit to be seen.
 Know what I mean?
 Know what I mean?

The pantomime, which we later learn is the work of Albert's Jamaican cousin 'Sam Daddy Sharpe', provides another context for drawing out the racial themes of the play, using a Brechtian form of political musical commentary. Similarly, in *Amazing Stories* a brilliantly realized spoof in the style of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and shot on 16mm black and white film, is intercut with the studio-based video play. The film provides a humorous parallel narrative in which Stanley discovers that his family, who in the main drama are morbidly depressed and lethargic, have actually been turned into vegetables by alien life-forms. As well as illustrating Stanley's own vision and the way his active imagination is used as a survival mechanism, it adds an additional layer of sci-fi intertextuality. Schuman's references to popular culture and

use of the text within the text demonstrate his own keen interest in theatre, music and film (as a true cinephile with an extensive knowledge of the medium) and the reflexive attitude he took towards the television play as a constructed cultural product. But they also show his acute understanding of how his characters and the audience of viewers are shaped within, and interpret the world through popular culture.

A further strand of Schuman's drama deals with the more insidious and intrusive possibilities of the media in our lives, and anticipates future trends in reality television formats. In *Captain Video's Story*, the Ballardian-sounding 'Cool Tubes Institute' provides video therapy for couples, encouraging them to film each other and play back scenes of their interaction in order to analyse their behaviour. Ten years later, the institute features again in Schuman's play *Bouncing Back* (Colin Bucksey, 1983), in which the slightly sinister Billy Bliss – fresh from his US studies in Anxiety, Depression and Light Entertainment Techniques attempts to cure several clinically depressed volunteers through chat-show therapy, in which the hype of the studio event and the audience's applause will supposedly boost their self-regard. Reflecting retrospectively on the play, Schuman (2010) says: 'it was already clear that celebrities and talk shows were becoming goals in people's lives [...]. It did seem to me that video, media was imposing on people's lives, and that the goal, to be a celebrity, and to be in a talk show, had become accelerated'. Reviewing the play for *The Guardian* at the time, Peter Fiddick (1983: 11) agreed about its contemporary relevance, writing: 'Shakespeare might have reckoned all the world's a stage, but Schuman has spotted how much times have changed: in the end all the world's a game show. Who performs wins.'

Once again reflecting current media trends, Schuman's other play of the same year *Videostars* (Colin Bucksey, 1983), transmitted on Channel 4, is about an off beat cable TV station, 'Channel D' offering 'ten hours a night of kinetic energy', which faces the threat of closure after coming under pressure from local reactionaries who object to its content. With a range of wacky fringe, cabaret and performance art acts, and a strong representation of gay and black performers, who, in Schuman's words are 'mostly just awful, because of course creativity is developed sparingly' (2010), this fictional channel echoed the early ethos of the recently established Channel 4, and hopes at that time for the democratization of culture that it, and the possible arrival of cable TV, would enable.

Schuman, Potter and pop-culture

Interesting comparisons can be made between Schuman's treatment of popular culture and that of fellow non-naturalistic TV playwright Dennis Potter. The only two writers to have musical serials televised in the 1970s, both used songs with lyrics of narrative relevance to express their characters' feelings or aspirations (Potter in *Moonlight on the Highway* (James MacTaggart, 1969), *Pennies from Heaven* (Piers Haggard, 1978) *The Singing Detective* (Jon Amiel, 1986) and *Lipstick on Your Collar* (Renny Rye, 1993). Both also had a preference for 'low-brow' forms of songs, using them to say something about popular culture and acknowledge its creative compromises as well as its deeper resonance. Potter chose to use existing 'cheap songs' (1993: 25) from the 1930s to the 1950s, which his characters would mime to, and Schuman's characters would sing his own original numbers, often in a cabaret style. Potter (Fuller 1993: 86) semi-ironically described his cheap songs as modern-day psalms, suggesting:

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’. It is this that makes karaoke, in an odd sense, popular too. It offers instant gratification, and instant stardom for those few minutes, but it’s also about the world being other than it is.

A similar ambiguity of critiquing popular culture while also recognising the possibility of escape that it offers is manifest in Schuman’s work, although as their lyricist he also demonstrates a more personal connection to his musical numbers. Moreover, Schuman’s extensive use of film and performance within his plays could be compared to Potter’s ‘ambitious stratification of filmic styles’ (Fuller 1993: 81) in *The Singing Detective*, ranging from film noir to cabaret and soap opera; Both writers have used popular genres to represent different aspects of their protagonists’ psyches, and to suggest that they have been shaped within, and can be understood via the language of popular culture. The use of popular songs and film genres to access another level of experience is connected to both writers’ firm belief in the need to include characters’ fantasies and subjective consciousness within the ‘reality’ they construct on screen. Potter’s articulation of the appeal of non-naturalism at the level of feeling seems equally to describe the effect of Schuman’s drama:

Non-naturalism can subvert. It doesn’t necessarily show, or tell, even, but it pulls you in and then turns you inside-out. It’s not exactly making you think, but it’s making you feel. It is *around* you, it’s sensory, it’s virtual reality, it’s having a helmet on your head, it’s cybernetic space – that’s non-naturalism! (Fuller 1993: 30-31)

This emphasis on the ability to generate feelings rather than thoughts is something that distinguishes both Potter’s and Schuman’s disruptive dramatic devices from stricter Brechtian instances of non-naturalism during the 1970s. Both writers advocated a less didactic mode of political engagement than, for

example, a non-naturalistic dramatist such as John McGrath, as they mostly used non-naturalism as a way of expressing feelings, fantasies and desires rather than to shatter realist psychological empathy by disrupting naturalist illusions.

Americanisms

There are also obvious huge differences between Potter's and Schuman's dramatic modes, such as Schuman's distinctively American tone of writing. As well as forming a contrast between British reserve and American openness, the inclusion of American characters and Americanisms of dialogue in Schuman's plays are linked to his representation of the growth of mass culture. For decades this process had been described in terms of the 'Americanization' of British life, as C.B.W. Bigsby (1975: 6) has pointed out:

Opposition to popular culture and complaints about Americanization (sic) have often amounted to little more than laments over a changing world – sparked by the distresses of living in a new era dominated by the realities of city life and a technologically-defined environment. [...] [H]ence the new modes are afforded the usual respect paid to novelty; they are characterized as brash, crude, unsubtle, mindless and, as Matthew Arnold insisted, destructive of taste and tradition.

However, Bigsby admits that the considerable global influence of American culture in Britain is also undeniable, as he states:

With a home market in excess of two hundred million, and with financial resources greater than those of any individual European country, the United States is bound to produce most of the world's films [...] much of the world's popular literature and a large percentage of its popular television programmes – US producers now export more than 100,000 programme hours a year, while nearly twenty per cent of total television transmission time in Western Europe consists of American-made programmes. (1975: 26)

By the 1970s this transatlantic cultural traffic had become more established and accepted and hence the Americanisms of Schuman's dramas seem to also tap into a zeitgeist sense of British familiarity with American culture, coupled with a residual sense of its difference. This is dramatized in the plays where transatlantic cultural interaction is a common trope: For example, even before meeting Mik, Clive in *Vérité* is obsessed with New York, and what it represents, the walls of his study filled with postcards of its landmarks, a sign of his slightly naïve awe. (Critic Peter Fiddick's description (1973: 12) of Mik's girlfriend Barbara as 'straight out of Whicker land', is a further reminder of the way in which eccentric Americans were featuring on British screens in prime time programming.) In *Amazing Stories* Stanley idolizes the American sci-fi writer E. B. Fern ; In *Anxious Anne*, English character Buzz (Julie Covington) has just returned from training as a puppeteer in New York. British journalist Stephen tracks down 'Kongomania, a Kong memorabilia museum run by an aging Californian in Brixton in *Censored Scenes From King Kong*.

'Americanness' is also a central part of Schuman's satirical comedy. Praising Tim Currie's 'star-quality' in his performance as Mik, Peter Fiddick (1973: 12) acknowledges that the success of his comic performance was partly because 'the American vernacular is both more vivid and riper for send up these days'. Miscast actors have sometimes missed the mark in Schuman's plays, notably New Zealander Barbara Ewing as Sybil in *Captain Video's Story*, whose New York accent never quite convinces, and who is never quite bubbly enough. Seeing a failed caricature draws attention to how important this mode of performance is to the success of Schuman's larger-than-life comedic world.

Some actors such as Tim Currie and Beth Porter who became Schuman regulars, seem practically synonymous with his sensibility, as they could pull-off the exaggerated Americanized personae they were playing to perfection. Schuman (2010) maintains the importance of adhering to the distinction between ‘stereotype versus caricatures’, explaining that whereas ‘stereotype means you’re just using clichés, caricature should mean, at its best, something original, you’re just etching it in two dimensions; You’re being Hogarth as opposed to being just lazy’. Against his vivid caricatures there is always also some restrained, naturalistic acting in Schuman’s plays, necessary for the comedy to work (you need a straight man) but also to maintain the dialectic of chaos and order, fantasy and reality. These contrasting styles of performance are representative of the wider tension within Schuman’s work between his B-movie, ‘cult’ sub-cultural sensibility and the controlled, literate theatrical crafting of the British single play form.

The writer and visual style

Schuman developed his writing style in relation to his growing awareness of the kind of aesthetic that it was possible to achieve when recording in the studio on video, and he describes having gone through a continual learning process on his first few productions. On *Vérité*, he liked the effective juxtaposition of black and white 16mm film, for Mik’s movies, with the colour studio scenes. This technique of contrasting black and white and colour, and video and film media would be repeated via the Clamm’s monochrome home video recordings in *Captain Video’s Story*, and in *Amazing Stories*’ embedded sci-fi pastiche.

But more important to Schuman was the direction of the sequence in *Vérité* in which Shirley, Clive and various other characters watch Mik's film in a viewing room. In the scene, we see the reactions on the characters' faces as they watch the film and hear the soundtrack, but we do not see the film itself until the end of the play. Schuman (1982: 82) describes what a 'revelation' it was for him: 'The room was created mainly out of space and light, it wasn't so much "real" as an atmosphere. When I watched the completed *Vérité* it was the scene which stayed most lingeringly in my mind.' Schuman's decision to 'avoid too much detail and go for space and light' (1982: 83) was reinforced further when, on *Captain Video's Story*, he was disappointed with how 'wonderfully witty details of the set didn't register on the black and white crudely shot tape [...] a fault in my conception' (ibid).

Schuman's strong interest in the aesthetic of his realized plays, and his sense of responsibility for the failure of certain 'witty details of the set' raises intriguing issues surrounding the parameters of authorship in television, and the writer's relationship to style and mise-en-scene. While writer would be concerned that their script is well-realized but achieving an appropriate visual style is perhaps even more important to a non-naturalist writer writing with a particular studio aesthetic in mind. However, the extent of the writer's influence in production is extremely variable and dependent on the approach taken by other members of the production, most crucially the director and designers. Although Schuman's plays do not always follow the minimalist aesthetic using 'space and light' outlined by him above, the organization of dramatic space often resembles fringe theatre, with a rather stylized arrangement of props, the exaggeration of

certain details of the set, more frequent use of blank white or black back cloths and the use of posters and images as signifiers. Of course, even without specific instructions from Schuman, his scripts non-naturalism influence their stylized treatment. For example, in *Amazing Stories*, Stanley chats with sci-fi writer E. B. Fern in his conservatory, the space made surreal as the glass panes are lit up with glowing red light, the plants surrounding the characters serving as a reminder of the theme of his family as alien vegetable forms. In the opposite end of the conservatory, yellow light is used, and the walls are covered in sci-fi posters, Stanley's shrine to the genre.

Interestingly, Schuman sometimes used pop cultural references not just in his plays' narrative content, but also in his script directions to dictate their style and form. In the script for *Censored Scenes From King Kong* these range from a description of the Duck Sisters' wigs as 'long Rita-Hayworth-in-Gilda hair styles' to the suggestion that a camera move at the end of a number should 'swoop in on them, in MGM fashion', both specifications honoured in the final production.

The visual aesthetic of *Amazing Stories* has been described by Schuman as a 'classic case of collaboration', with both Schuman and production staff contributing interesting stylistic devices. Schuman specified specific film references –that the pastiche science fiction film must look like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (a favourite film of his from the 1950s) and that a poster of King Kong (a theme running through some of his work) would be hanging over the entrance of the sci-fi convention, but he maintains that his description of the

convention itself was ‘pretty broad and allowed set designers and director quite a lot of freedom’ (2010). This resulted in them using an interesting combination of built sets and electronic image layering technique Colour Separation Overlay (CSO) (discussed below) and self-consciously cheaply built sets that reinforce its ‘B movie’ ethos.

The design of Stanley’s house was important to Schuman who considered it to be ‘another character in the play’ signifying the deep depression and hopelessness of Stanley’s ailing family. However, although he ‘described its atmosphere pretty precisely’ (2010) he credits many of the strong visual motifs such as the peeling wallpaper on the walls and use of deep shadows to the design team who ‘really got with it – they really understood it’. Moreover, according to Schuman one of the most striking non-naturalistic devices in the play was also the director’s idea: Stanley’s dysfunctional family sit, disconsolately at the breakfast table taking their various daily medications, accompanied by Baroque song, with lyrics by Schuman describing their actions:

Lily takes a migraine tablet
 Winston takes a blue pill
 Lily’s father stirs his salts
 Lily sprays her nostril [...]

During the sequence, a black oval mask is used around the edge of the screen, framing the three characters as if within a portrait. However when Stanley enters the room to serve them breakfast, the camera pulls quickly upwards, so that the whole picture frame through which the previous shot was recorded becomes visible, appearing within the image rather than around its edges. The device is entirely appropriate as a comment upon this moment, playfully

revealing the method by which this family is being presented to us as a construction, while ironically highlighting their dysfunctionality by subverting the traditional family portrait.

One visual technique that supports the fantastic sub-cultural aspects of Schuman's writing is Colour Separation Overlay (CSO), used briefly in *Amazing Stories* and more extensively in *Censored Scenes From King Kong*. This technique, now better known as 'blue screen' or 'green screen' enabled composite images to be created by mixing two or more separate electronic camera feeds together into one picture. If an actor performed against a plain bright blue or green backdrop, the background could be replaced by a different camera feed, and several cameras could be used in this process to incorporate various, separately filmed elements within a single composite frame. The method is used to create the exhibition hall where Stanley and his friend enter the sci-fi convention, and the steel and glass interior of its main foyer in which various exhibits - gadgets, space craft, robots and monsters are arranged. As well as offering a cheap, practical solution for the recreation of this large, hectic space, the slightly graphic effect of the CSO also feels appropriate as a Schumanesque non-naturalistic visual aesthetic, presenting a slightly unreal space which reinforces the sense of Stanley's escape from his home life into fantasy.

CSO had previously been used in *Censored Scenes From King Kong*, about a young journalist, Stephen, who, after waking from a three year coma, investigates the supposed suppression of a scene in which the gorilla has sex

with Fay Wray. Schuman knew nothing of the CSO technique until *Censored Scenes*' designer Mike Porter introduced him to it, but his original script offers insights into how his writing was interpreted in the play's final visual realization. By the end of the play it is clear that Stephen's journey has in fact taken place within his own mind, and is a manifestation of his insanity.

Schuman opens the play with the following scene directions:

1. EXT. BEACH. DAY

CAPTION
(CENSORED SCENE FROM KING KONG)

BLANK SCREEN

(FIVE SECONDS OF WHITE. CAPTION APPEARS: SCENE MISSING)

BEACH
(STEPHEN IN DENIM SITS AGAINST A WHITE SKY. LOTUS POSITION.
HEAD BANDAGED. REPOSE.

SOUND OF WAVES, WIND).

CAPTION: I SAW THE BEST MINDS OF MY GENERATION
DESTROYED BY MADNESS (ALAN GINSBERG)

The initial blank screen and five seconds of white specified by Schuman remain in the opening moments of the production, as do the captions; Schuman wittily inserts a 'Scene missing' caption at various points during the play to reflexively incorporate the play's theme of censorship, and his Ginsberg quote establishes the theme of the 1960s, drugs and madness. The 'white sky' described by Schuman behind Stephen on the beach is replaced with a CSO inserted 1960s style graphic image of a beach with pink sky and orange clouds, the use of colour suggesting a 60s psychedelic experience. However, in the *subsequent* brief exterior scenes featuring Stephen in transit between various destinations

the background, behind close ups and medium shots of Stephen's face, remains entirely white, although Schuman has not suggested such an approach at these points, describing, for example, the setting of the next exterior scene simply as 'EXT. STREET. DAY'. So, although paradoxically not retained in the opening scene where he mentions it, Schuman's reference to white is nevertheless taken up and becomes a successful visual motif throughout the play, an easily and cheaply achieved backdrop that provides a clue as to the unreality of Stephen's journey. Indeed white is even more appropriate in this scene than the earlier one as Stephen, trying to block out the chaos of the street (conveyed only through sound) at one point delivers the line 'Empty your mind. Spacious. White'. Thus, it seems that the designer has responded to the clues in Schuman's script when deciding how to realize it visually, but has transferred the atmosphere of Schuman's earlier description into a pattern recurring across the play

The interior settings in which Stephen encounters various characters while pursuing his investigation into the missing Kong scene are achieved using CSO, with pop art style collages representing the different spaces. Rather surprisingly given the memorably striking way they are realized, Schuman's script gives no instructions on the style or atmosphere of two of the rooms – the office of film professor, S.L. Vogel and the hotel room of the film's Assistant Special Effects man, Vincenzo Chiarugi, and for the third room (the second to appear in Stephen's quest), a private museum of film memorabilia 'Kongomania' Schuman's only description is 'Suggestion Of A Vast Room. Voices Reverberate.' The same predominantly monochrome collaged aesthetic is used in the depiction of all three spaces: The walls of Vogel's office are covered with

photographs of classical Hollywood stars, including Dietrich, Garbo, Gable, and the window is represented with a photograph of tower blocks with a painted window frame and white cloud. The texture of the collage, including its brushstrokes and water marks is visible on the walls of the room, its status as artwork clearly foregrounded.

Using CSO the large scale of Kongomania could also be achieved, again using mostly monochrome photographs and with the opening image of the room includes a large dinosaur and a bi-plane hanging from the ceiling. A subsequent collage caption depicts a shelved corridor full of models and a giant Kong image at the end of the room. Finally, Chiarugi's hotel room uses the most abstract image of all as a backdrop, with areas of the room suggested through small, irregularly shaped painted sections, such as a parquet floor pattern and a splodge of white paint (perhaps representing an area of sunlight?), situated obliquely within the image. Stephen finds Chiarugi dying on the floor after an attempt by someone to silence him about Kong, and his blood splattered bed (in colour rather than monochrome) is a real prop, creating an interesting contrast between the two and three dimensional areas of the frame.

It is likely that the decision to use CSO was influenced by the production's budget, which Schuman recalls as particularly small, as it would have been much cheaper to commission these collages than to create and dress three sets, even given the modest requirements of two of the rooms. However, the pop art images are also stylistically highly appropriate and, with the revelation that these scenes are all a figment of Stephen's insane mind, it becomes clear that

the artifice of the multi media collages represents the unreality of his journey. The 1960s pop art style, reminiscent of the work of British artist Richard Hamilton and the American painter Robert Rauschenberg, also connects with the play's theme of cultural disorientation after the end of that decade and, as an evocation of Stephen's mind, suggests that he is still stuck in that era. So, these and earlier examples of non-naturalistic visual strategies employed in Schuman's plays indicate some of the ways in which the creative collaboration between the writer and those producing the play can work, and suggest how the writer's sensibility can be enhanced through intelligent design decisions.

The politics of aesthetics and culture

Censored Scenes From King Kong was never televised, its unfortunate fate indicating how Schuman's offbeat sensibility did not always sit easily within the landscape of British television drama. When the 'Eleventh Hour' strand of single plays was scrapped due to the 10:30 pm closedown imposed on television broadcasting during the fuel crisis of 1974, Schuman's was the only one of three productions that was never given another slot in the schedules. Schuman (1982: 85) claims this was because the BBC Head of Plays at this time, Christopher Morahan 'disliked it intensely ("Camp rubbish like *The Rocky Horror Show*")'. But while Morahan (1977: 10) publicly admitted his 'lack of admiration' for the play, arguing that it 'lacked energy and was specialist in appeal' (the former claim seems especially unfounded for a play with huge verve and imagination), he denies having blocked the play, only accepting that 'faced with the Controller's wishes not to broadcast I did not press the merits of the play with any commitment' (ibid). Rather than the play having been 'banned' then, in the

sense of being actively pulled from the schedules due to unacceptably violent, disturbing or political content, it was the BBC's (and especially Morahan's) distaste for its aesthetic that prevented it from being aired. The whole affair seems to confirm Schuman's status as 'the joker of the pack' (Smart 2011) of television playwrights, and suggests how far his brand of non-naturalist drama tested the parameters of what was expected of drama. Indeed, speaking about his subsequent play *Amazing Stories* Schuman (2010) says that it was only the intervention of the Controller of Granada, Peter Eckersley, and general Script Editor for the 'Red Letter Day' anthology, Jack Rosenthal, that prevented it from being dropped, as the series producer was 'pole-axed' when he saw it. Schuman was aware that some viewers also objected to his sensibility, as he recalls one audience-member's response after *Vérité* (which was generally well-received by critics) went out:

a letter sent to Thames Television said that the author of this play should be decapitated and his head displayed on a pike outside Buckingham Palace, which was when I began to realize that what I thought was normal, was perhaps not normal, but it certainly didn't stop me.

This incident indicates how, in spite of its humour, Schuman's drama has the power unsettle, and its more unusual, bohemian characters threaten the status quo through the kind of alternative culture they represent.

Schuman (2010) maintains that 'most of the work has a political underline, but that was very infrequently picked up. Almost never. Because even if people liked my work, they liked it because it was wacky, funny, it had music.' Indeed, most of his plays do not have overtly political themes: Only *Carbon Copy*,

which concerns racial identity and cultural imperialism, and *The Liberty Tree* (Alvin Rakoff, 1975) about the American revolution, produced for the series ‘Churchill’s People’, deal directly with socio-political issues. However, there is undoubtedly a strong left wing political subtext to Schuman’s work carried through his recurrent theme of characters seeking imaginative and creative fulfilment. He says:

I really wanted to write about energy vs depression [in *Amazing Stories*] and to me that was political, because really what I was saying was that the government should be empowering people so that they reach their full potential. And my larger vision of a utopian society is the goal of Marxism, the fulfilled person, the self-actualized. (2010)

In almost all of his plays, his characters strive for self-actualization through creative acts and/or imaginative fantasies rather than engaging in conventional political activities. This emphasis on the spiritual well-being of the individual qualifies Schuman’s use of Brechtian stagecraft and musical technique, as his non-naturalist devices often serve the purpose of the Broadway musical, to articulate desire, instead of (or as well as) functioning to disrupt the text with an additional commentary. Schuman’s exaggerated and stylized mode, so disliked by Morahan, is also potentially subversive, presenting the world as artifice, while remaining sensitive to the limits of theatricality, which is almost always balanced with emotional poignancy.

Lamenting the already apparent decline of the authored single play, W. Stephen Gilbert (1977: 29) suggested that Schuman was ‘almost unique as a writer who has emerged and developed in television in the seventies’ and noted that ‘meanwhile the initiative has been annexed by the drama-documentarists [...]

from features and current affairs'. Given both the institutional shift away from cultivating new writing talent, and the 1970s vogue for docu-realism, it is remarkable that Schuman managed to enter, and make an impact on television during this period. His mode of culturally-saturated, stylized semi-fantasy and what could be referred to as the 'pop art meets broadway on the fringe' aesthetic of his plays was nurtured within a climate of relative freedom and experimentation in television production, but Schuman would nevertheless suffer set-backs and criticism for his dramas' stylized form and tone. More than three decades on, his distinctive body of plays deserves to be remembered as the rich anomaly that it was.

¹ Cooke (2003: 121) briefly discusses Schuman's untransmitted play *Censored Scenes From King Kong* (Brian Farnham, 1974) and in an article for an edited collection Schuman (1982: 74-100) discusses all of his work up to that date.

² This claim is made on [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moving_Pictures_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moving_Pictures_(TV_series)) but I have been unable to corroborate it, or to find the interview with Tarantino on the set of *Pulp Fiction* that it refers to.