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Article

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## **The Spaces of *The Wednesday Play* (BBC TV 1964-70): Production, Technology and Style**

**Jonathan Bignell**

### **Keywords**

Television; drama; film; location; studio; 1960s; BBC; *Wednesday Play*.

Writing in the trade magazine *Film and Television Technician* in 1967, the story editor of *The Wednesday Play*, Roger Smith, looked forward to a moment of decisive change.<sup>1</sup> British television production companies would need to re-equip themselves, ready for the coming of colour broadcasting. The choice for making drama was between multi-camera videotaped production in the electronic studio, where sequences were shot in long tranches as-if live, versus discontinuous single-camera filming on location with extensive post-production editing. Smith's preference was clear: 'The basic fault and failing of television production is that it is trying to reproduce on the cheap, quickly and instantaneously, what is the product of six weeks' editing in a film.' The point was that a new phase in television history seemed to be about to begin, and these new times would necessitate changes in the physical spaces of television production and how they were to be used.

This article historicizes Smith's argument, unpacking the significance at the time of several spatial distinctions. The primary one is between the production spaces of the television studio, characterised by technologies of video production, and the location spaces that are associated with television production on film. The article explores further distinctions that flow from the first, notably how the spaces used in production practice were institutionally resourced and controlled, and how the aesthetic modes associated with each kind of space negotiate relationships within television and with cinema and theatre.<sup>2</sup> The working definitions that are used here to distinguish place from space are that place is a space in which social activities are conducted, and a place is made out of both material signs of space and the discourses of culture. Representations of place thus connect indexically to the spaces where programmes were shot, and also connotatively to cultural and historical constructions of spatial meaning to which representations of place allude and on which they draw. Production technologies, aesthetic expectations and cultures of production and reception were undergoing significant change between 1964 and 1970 as the BBC television drama anthology series *The Wednesday Play* was being produced and screened.<sup>3</sup> This article is primarily an account of the multiple determinants that shaped *The Wednesday Play* in the cultures of television drama in the 1960s. Thus while many of the specific examples referred to here are from *The Wednesday Play*, the article looks outward to broader developments in technology, production practice and the theorization of television in relation to its comparator mediums.

For Carl Gardner and John Wyver, for example, British television drama began with a paternalistic, if well-intentioned, aim to bring the 'best' dramatic work of a British and European literary-theatrical tradition to the television audience, a mode succeeded in

the late 1950s by the anti-theatrical, consciously contemporary and socially more inclusive dramas of *Armchair Theatre* (1956-74) on ITV and its parallel in the 1960s on BBC1, *The Wednesday Play*. They argue that by the 1970s, however, a third phase was inaugurated in which television became organised increasingly managerially, as a business, and the vigour of its 'golden age' was being choked by concerns with ratings and regulation. The tripartite division of British television drama history into these successive phases can be complicated and reassessed by returning to *The Wednesday Play*, since there is evidence that each of these phases co-existed and were unevenly present at that time.<sup>4</sup> Rather than developing or contesting this history by challenging its linear chronology, this article instead considers the *Wednesday Play* synchronically in its mid-1960s moment. It views *The Wednesday Play* as a contested and hybrid space, rather than as a single entity that changes across time. As Stephen Lacey and Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh have argued, oppositions between studio and location, video and film, and live and pre-recorded production conceal an uneven and by no means teleological set of technical and aesthetic negotiations.<sup>5</sup> Television production was a space of discursive struggle, in which aesthetic and ideological positions were bound up with competition for resources and institutional power. The spaces of *The Wednesday Play* also comprise the different kinds of space in which production was carried out, using particular technologies, and the specific representations of spaces and places on-screen that these sites and technologies enable. This article examines how these different kinds of space, both material and discursive, intersect.

*The Wednesday Play* came about because of a complex set of pressures and tensions. The Pilkington Report of 1962<sup>6</sup> acknowledged television's rise to become the

predominant broadcast medium, while raising concerns over the cultural standards of some of the output of both the BBC and its commercial competitor ITV. The distinctiveness of British television drama was perceived to be threatened by the prevalence and popularity of American imports, and more so by the related expectation that chasing ratings would mean imitating American formats and genres. ITV's success at finding and holding mass audiences with original British-originated drama (as well as other drama forms and other genres) required the BBC to respond with programmes that could attract mass audiences if its privileged position as sole beneficiary of the licence fee was to continue. The drift of these pressures was to alert the BBC to a need to be 'modern' in its programme offerings, necessitating a change to the production culture and organizational structures in drama. As far as the single play was concerned, James MacTaggart was producing the anthology series *First Night* (1963-64) that occupied similar territory to ITV's original, contemporary and socially engaged dramas. The BBC was also making *Festival* (1963-64), produced by Peter Luke, that drew on West End theatre successes and adaptations of British and European literary sources. The cancellation of both anthology series in July 1964 derived from perceptions represented by Milton Shulman in the *Evening Standard* at the time: *Festival*:

catered for miniscule audiences. Some of the plays, like Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Max Frisch's *The Fire Raisers*, Cocteau's *The Human Voice*, would have found difficulty filling the smallest club theatre for a fortnight. ... *First Night*, showing plays written specially for TV, tended too often to mistake sleaziness for sensitivity. Whenever the blurb spoke of a 'bitter-sweet relationship between two confused people' the nation heaved a convulsive yawn and switched elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

When *The Wednesday Play* was inaugurated to replace *Festival* and *First Night*, its title announced a fixed schedule position and combined single plays into an anthology format that made them appear to have a consistent address and identity. The grouping of single plays together made them resemble the serial and series formats that were coming to dominate production organization and scheduling, and which were associated with ITV and the more ‘popular’ forms of series and serial drama on both channels. Economically it is most cost-effective for television to be produced in long serial forms within repeating narrative structures, where sets can be reused, as can props, key members of the cast and established styles of shooting, lighting and editing. Seriality invites standardization of production and promises a consistent audience. While *The Wednesday Play* might seem now to belong to a ‘golden age’ of one-off dramas unconstrained by enforced continuities of genre or brand, the anthology was a negotiation with format, seriality and commercial (transatlantic) influences rather than a repudiation of them.<sup>8</sup>

The BBC’s response to the perceived crisis of the early 1960s was to appoint a new head of its drama department. Sydney Newman, the Canadian producer of the ABC drama anthology *Armchair Theatre* for ITV was invited to join BBC drama in 1962, taking up his contract in April 1963; he was a concrete example of the transatlantic relationships between television institutions and personnel that have often been underestimated.<sup>9</sup> He had worked in Canada on documentary projects and on the *General Motors Theatre* (1953-56) anthology that looked to and competed with the live drama anthology tradition established in the United States. He knew about the perceived ‘golden age’ of US drama, based on a production culture in New York influenced by and drawing on theatre writers and performers rather than, as subsequently, the film production culture

of Los Angeles. But while Newman believed wholeheartedly in the single play, he was also an admirer of American television's use of the episodic series, in generic forms like the police series, to secure audiences week-to-week and to grab the viewer's attention quickly with action not prefaced by lengthy establishing sequences.<sup>10</sup> He divided Drama Group into sections responsible for Plays, Serials and Series, and appointed new staff. The complex institutional politics of Canadian broadcasting equipped Newman with a professional nous and go-getting attitude that both validated his value to a BBC keen to compete with the big ITV contractors' success in drama, and that he also cultivated within the BBC and in public discourses as a sign that vigorous change was afoot.

Planning for *The Wednesday Play* took place in 1964, for an expected autumn start. Donald Baverstock, Controller of Programmes for BBC1 and an advocate of series and serial drama like the popular *Z Cars* (1962-78) and *Doctor Finlay's Casebook* (1962-71), attempted to delay transmissions of single plays because of anxiety that they would attract low ratings. But Baverstock resigned when Michael Peacock was appointed to replace him at BBC1 and the season went ahead. The producers of the first season of *Wednesday Plays* were alternately James MacTaggart and Peter Luke, with Roger Smith as story editor. Across the series' seasons the marketing of the anthology was repeatedly reinflected by producers' pre-publicity. Despite the consistent use of the anthology's title, its component dramas and the annual seasons in which they were broadcast were significantly different from each other. *The Wednesday Play's* first productions in Autumn 1964 comprised plays stockpiled from its predecessor anthologies, so that the debut production, Ronald Eyre's adaptation of Nikolei Leskov's *A Crack in the Ice*, directed by Luke, and an adaptation of Sartre's *In Camera*, already mark *The Wednesday*



*Play* as a hybrid entity. When Peter Luke succeeded James MacTaggart as producer at the start of 1966, for example, he said publicly that he would offer viewers ‘humour, wit, sophistication, and the use of the English language’, distinguishing his approach from MacTaggart’s ‘class conscious’ and confrontational commissions.<sup>11</sup> The temporal dimension is significant because as one producer succeeded another the character of the anthology changed, because of the producers’ commissioning, production and scheduling decisions about the dramas under their control. But historiographically, this means we can also understand *The Wednesday Play* spatially as a discursive terrain whose contours and boundaries were changed by the imprint of diverse component texts and personnel.

A spatial approach is also useful in understanding the dynamics of the power hierarchy that affected *The Wednesday Play*, since that hierarchy was conceived as a vertical structure in which issues were fed upwards for decision and policies were disseminated downwards. The culture of producer power that Newman presided over gave the producers licence to innovate and experiment, while imposing a requirement to refer up to broadcasting executives if controversial material was planned. It thus placed responsibility on producers to identify what might be controversial, so that referral could take place, or indeed to knowingly take the risk of not referring controversial decisions in the hope that they would evade executive intervention. The most canny staff, such as Tony Garnett, followed institutional process most of the time but deliberately courted controversy on the projects to which they were most committed. *Up the Junction* (1965), for example, was commissioned by Garnett as story editor while the *Wednesday Play* producer MacTaggart was on holiday, because Garnett correctly anticipated that MacTaggart would be concerned by its lack of storyline and unconventional use of voice-

over; statistics about deaths from back-street abortion were read by Garnett's doctor over a notorious abortion scene. Garnett in particular gained a reputation for being troublesome to his superiors, leaving referral too late to make all the changes that could be institutionally required and often pleading bafflement at the furore that subsequently greeted his productions once broadcast.<sup>12</sup> According to Garnett the controversial live BBC satire programme *That Was the Week That Was (TW3)* (1962-63) shielded *The Wednesday Play* inasmuch as 'the BBC could only really deal with one crisis a week so I used to watch TW3 every Saturday praying that Ned [Sherrin] was going to get into trouble again. I knew that if Ned caused a problem on Saturday I was going to be alright the following Wednesday!'<sup>13</sup> He chose to work on renewed short-term contracts, making four plays per year for *The Wednesday Play*, so that he could occupy a position to one side of the discursive space controlled by the established Drama Group hierarchy.

The spaces of production and the technologies used in them affected the level of institutional control exercised over the dramas. Studio-shot material on videotape was made in BBC buildings, under the eyes of executive staff, whereas filmed location material was necessarily made away from base and before studio shooting took place. This gave a degree of freedom to the producers of plays with a high proportion of location filming, enabling them to shoot material and adopt a visual style that pre-empted subsequent decisions. For instance, 25 minutes out of the 75 minutes duration of David Halliwell's *Wednesday Play, Cock, Hen and Courting Pit* (1966) was shot on film, in countryside landscapes and an old mill. The play was produced by Luke and directed by Charles Jarrott, and portrayed an erotic but increasingly violent relationship between two

young lovers who then part and meet again much later in life. Newman wrote to warn the Controller of BBC1 of possible viewer complaints:

Unfortunately it was not possible to see the cutting copy until yesterday and despite the cuts that will be made as instructed by H[ead of]. Plays and myself, I'm still worried. Regrettably, while the blurb in the Radio Times takes into account the fact that the play is very adult, I was unable to have any further changes made.<sup>14</sup>

After transmission, press reaction to the play commended the use of film specifically for the lovers' romantic idyll, for example Philip Purser remarked in *The Sunday Telegraph*: 'Only by shooting on location could its quality be caught. Only by shooting on film and shaping the result and seeding it into the narrative and referring back to it, could it exercise its spell.'<sup>15</sup> BBC Audience Research staff recorded viewing ratings and qualitative reactions to BBC programmes based on an audience sample, and this play had a Reaction Index of 65, significantly more positive than *The Wednesday Play*'s average of 55 for its previous two seasons.<sup>16</sup> BBC audience researchers recorded much praise for the aesthetic achievement of Halliwell's play; viewers thought its style was 'uncommonly clear-cut and smooth on the matter of sequence-matching (including the flash-backs and slow-motion passages) and timing of shots. Moreover, the precise or fluid (as the case may be) camerawork was used to show some very effective sets and scenery'.<sup>17</sup> Location filming, integrated in post-production with studio-shot videotape often close to the date of transmission, could be both arresting for viewers and critics but also hard to control. Making a drama in an outside space away from BBC premises offered aesthetic opportunities as well as opportunities to evade institutional oversight.

However the use of post-production editing of videotaped and filmed material, and their combination, permitted the practice of stockpiling about six completed plays and enabled BBC management to avoid the public embarrassment of leaving the Wednesday schedule empty of a play if a controversial drama were to be withdrawn at the last minute. For example, when John Hopkins' *Fable* and Dennis Potter's *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* were withdrawn because of their potential political impact, other plays could be substituted, though both plays were subsequently rescheduled and screened in 1965. Producers who were keen to provoke were inclined to keep broadcasting executives away from the final stages of production, even though in 1965 the BBC's Controller of Programmes for television, Huw Wheldon, decreed that all plays must be approved before transmission. For example, Michael Bakewell, Head of Plays, wrote in November 1965 to a prospective parliamentary candidate for the Clapham area who was worried about *Up the Junction's* representation of his potential constituents. Bakewell reassured him by saying that he had viewed the play twice and ordered cuts prior to transmission.<sup>18</sup> Although senior staff viewed completed (or near-completed) programmes, the expense or practical impossibility of re-shooting meant that the later this approval process took place the less intervention was possible.

When we consider the story of *The Wednesday Play* anthology's beginnings spatially, apparently distinct features can be seen to share similar structural patterns. The features discussed so far could be described as inoculation or incorporation, for example. BBC drama incorporated personnel, aesthetic aims and genre categories that enabled it to adapt and compete in the contested space of the 1960s broadcasting environment. While supporting the single play as a form, the use of an anthology format managed the

perceived risk of each individual play by protecting it within the umbrella series. The plays were original BBC productions and were intended to reinforce BBC distinctiveness, but the management of Drama Group by Newman drew on the perceived strengths of commercial British and North American television culture. Lines of management and supervision mechanisms were put in place to control potentially unruly staff, but left them (especially *The Wednesday Play*'s producers) relatively autonomous. The spatial tropes of boundary and territory are helpful in connecting matters of form, format, institutional structure and production system that characterize *The Wednesday Play*.

### **Production technologies and practices**

Roger Smith's account of *The Wednesday Play*'s history, like many others, presented it as 'a new style of drama ..., a style that was often documentary, a style that with the impact of authenticity made the usual studio production hopelessly inadequate.'<sup>19</sup> This is again a much simplified and unified account; *Wednesday Play* dramas were made using both inherited and newly emerging kinds of production spaces. Drama on television began primarily as the live broadcast from the multi-camera studio of adaptations of theatre plays, as BBC television's first Head of Drama, Michael Barry described.<sup>20</sup> Live transmission with occasional filmed inserts continued years after the availability of videotape recording in 1958, well into the early 1960s.<sup>21</sup> Television drama was initially approached by BBC staff from a literary and textual standpoint, as analogous with theatre drama. This brought with it an emphasis on authorship, and affected judgments of which plays 'worked' aesthetically when adapted for the multi-camera television studio. The Alexandra Palace studios in London were used from November 1936, making live

monochrome 405 line pictures for the audience in the London area. There were two studios, each equipped with two cameras, and the actors moved back and forth from one set to another under the control of a producer in a control room separated from the studio floor. From 1949, BBC converted film studios at Lime Grove in Shepherd's Bush, where there were five studios, and at Riverside in Hammersmith where there were two studios in use from 1954. In 1960, Television Centre was completed at White City in London, as a purpose-built facility for making programmes as much as possible from start to finish on one site. There was continuity in the kinds of space provided for production, leading both to inertia that perpetuated ways of making drama in the studio, and also innovation building on expertise acquired over time.

There were good reasons for the BBC to resist the use of film for single plays, and on *The Wednesday Play* it was initially reserved for an elite of drama producer-director-writer teams. Going outside the studio was expensive, and poor value in cost-benefit terms. Peacock, when Controller of BBC1, argued that in the three weeks of location shooting that would be needed to produce a 75 minute drama, with a tight budget for each play, the results would be 'B' movies rather than 'A' quality plays.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the immediacy of multi-camera shooting made better use of time and resources. While the director and producer were the figures of primary responsibility, multi-camera, as-if live recording meant that camera operators, lighting technicians and sound recordists could collaborate creatively in the same space and at the same time. Although some editing was possible after the availability of videotape, editing two-inch magnetic tape was time-consuming and difficult, so it was not used to create edits within scenes but instead to join blocks of continuously recorded as-if live material together.<sup>23</sup> The video recording

day ran until 10.00 pm, but demand for studio space meant that allocations of time were strictly rationed, and another production would be coming into the studio space the following day. In the studio, sets for one programme's shooting would be struck (disassembled or destroyed) overnight so that the sets for the new programme could be made ready for the following day. Pressure of time and pressure on space were interrelated, and put a premium on effective team-work.

Film was used as a transcription medium, to telerecord the electronic studio output for subsequent editing, if the complexity of a specific studio production exceeded the capability of the team in the studio space (because of many short scenes, a large cast or complex relationships of vision to sound). This was the case when James Ferman directed Robert Muller's adaptation of Georg Buchner's *Woyzeck* under the title *Death of a Private* (1967) for *The Wednesday Play*. Escalating use of telerecording during production, and an exceptionally long period for editing the resulting film, caused complaints not only from Irene Shubik, producer of *The Wednesday Play*, but even from Paul Fox, then Controller of BBC1, about budget overruns and late completion of the finished programme.<sup>24</sup> John Hopkins' quartet of plays, *Talking to a Stranger* (1966), was predominantly shot in the studio with some filmed inserts, but so that its director Christopher Morahan could achieve shot-reverse shots without revealing the studio cameras, and to permit post-production editing of a complex soundtrack involving mixing voice over with studio-recorded dialogue, studio video sequences were telerecorded onto 35 mm film and subsequently edited in the manner of cinema production.<sup>25</sup> The same technique was used in *The Wednesday Play* for the scene in *Cathy Come Home* (1966) when the eponymous Cathy marries her boyfriend Reg. Although predominantly shot on

film on location, the drama contains sequences shot in the studio that were edited by transferring them to film. The reason for this was not aesthetic but regulatory: an agreement with the actors' union Equity specified that at least 10 per cent of any play must be shot in the studio.<sup>26</sup> Overall, this history is characterized by what I have called elsewhere 'the maximization of spatial resources'; questions of aesthetics and production technologies were intertwined.<sup>27</sup>

There was a political economy of space. The huge investment that had been made in studio facilities, notably in TV Centre, was expected to be amortised over time by the production of a large proportion of broadcast output in the studios, and the less the studios were used the less their cost would be justified. Occasionally BBC series were made on film, beginning with *Fabian of Scotland Yard* in 1954, but the capital investment devoted to multi-camera studio video meant that the BBC could never exploit this technology in the way that ITV companies, notably ITC with its access to soundstages designed for cinema production using film technologies, did when making programmes intended for overseas sales. Moreover, the BBC already had a film unit at Ealing Studios; filmed drama was customarily shot using 35 mm cameras, as was the ITC output made for ITV broadcast and for export. Shooting on 16 mm was acceptable for newsgathering and documentary but not for prime-time drama. The press reception of the first predominantly filmed drama *Up the Junction* for *The Wednesday Play* in 1965, using 16 mm film, drew attention to its production technology, for example Philip Purser's *Sunday Telegraph* review argued that: 'Inside every television play is a frustrated movie wanting to get out and take wing. ... It was the less expensive kind of filming, shot off the cuff against actual backgrounds ... - a Denis Mitchell documentary, only with actors



instead of raw people.<sup>28</sup> Persistent pressure from Garnett, Loach and others within the BBC drew on this kind of praise to persuade Peacock and the Ealing management to allow initial experimentation with 16 mm on location before film could become a routine production method.<sup>29</sup> The metaphor of the birdcage used in Purser's review contributed to a persistent discourse about studio production that emphasised spatial constraint and containment.

Audiences valued film representations of contemporary urban reality characterized aesthetically by shooting on location with natural light, wildtrack sound, and dialogue aiming to be as demotic and apparently unscripted as possible. One member of the BBC Audience Research viewing panel described *Up the Junction* as 'the nearest thing to real life I have ever seen on television', though concomitantly this raised a question of genre that dogged critical realist productions thereafter: 'had it been offered as a "dramatized documentary" rather than a play, the response might well have been more favourable.' The montage style of the play made viewers comment that 'this was hardly "acting" in the conventional sense, and was therefore difficult to assess, one or two reporting listeners adding that, with the exception of one of the three girls in the leading roles, not one of the cast was on long enough to "get going".'<sup>30</sup> The London *Evening News*' television critic James Green commented that the play captured life 'on the very wing', seemingly as unstructured and vital as immediate experience.<sup>31</sup> The editing of the soundtrack is as important to this effect as Loach's use of 16 mm film, since sequences of conversation are juxtaposed with each other without apparent storyline connections between them, and speakers interrupt and talk over each other in ways that seem very different to the delivery of scripted dialogue. The BBC Audience

Research Report on the drama noted viewers' praise for the play's 'camera work, particularly in the "excellent outdoor sequences", which were thought to have been "smoothly combined with the studio scenes"'.<sup>32</sup>

The relatively inexpensive 16 mm film format became standard for *Wednesday Play* productions that used a high proportion of film, despite its comparative low image quality as compared to 35 mm monochrome. The format was already commonly used in documentary film-making for television, and in news and current affairs. Occasionally personnel from documentary production were employed as freelance directors, such as Jack Gold. Gold had been an editor on the BBC's current affairs series *Tonight* and made the anti-foxhunting documentary *Death in the Morning* for BBC in 1964. He directed Jim Allen's *The Lump* in *The Wednesday Play* (1967), produced by Garnett and shot on location in Manchester.

While film technology seemed to surpass the capability of the studio in spatial extension, location shooting on video was potentially more efficient in time (and thus cost) than film. Outside Broadcast (OB) video, in which electronic cameras in outside locations were attached by cables to a mobile control vehicle, was used by the ITV companies during the 1960s for drama, notably at Granada and ABC. It was more usually used to shoot sporting events or important national ceremonies, and the BBC did not make much use of outside broadcast video shooting for drama until the 1970s in programmes such as *Survivors* (1975-77) and the *Doctor Who* serial 'Robot' (1974-75). However, director Philip Saville employed two six-camera crews using Outside Broadcast video equipment for a bravura 'theatrical' BBC television production of *Hamlet at Elsinore* (1964), shooting Shakespeare's play as-if live, without post-

production editing, on location in Denmark.<sup>33</sup> While Saville did not use OB when he directed William Trevor's play *The Mark Two Wife* for *The Wednesday Play* in 1969, its complex party scenes led Shubik, producer of *The Wednesday Play* at that time, to plead twice with Gerald Savory (Head of Plays) for telerecording facilities so that it could be edited more easily. Savory refused for budgetary reasons, noting in his response that Saville was expert at directing as-if live performance; again, questions of value linked aesthetics, technologies and production practices.<sup>34</sup>

Telerecording was primarily used to transfer programmes to film so that the reels could be transported overseas to other broadcasters for international sales; film was a transnational technology whereas videotape was not. Broadcasting systems in other countries used different line standards for their pictures, so that British videotape was incompatible with their transmission technologies. When national television systems were being established in Europe, Britain had adopted a 405 line transmission standard, while France had an 819 line standard and Germany and Scandinavian countries a 625 line standard.<sup>35</sup> This meant that transcription from tape to film was needed since film was a common format that could be used by any broadcaster. As Douglas McNaughton has pointed out, in 1955 the actors' union Equity agreed with the Television Film Producers Association that independent production companies could make television films for British and overseas customers, thus opening the way to an international television trade not dependent on video standards conversion.<sup>36</sup> The BBC attempted to conclude similar agreements but was prevented from doing so because Equity made it a requirement that such television films would only employ Equity members as performers. While BBC plays were occasionally telerecorded, the technique was not intended to allow multiple

repeat broadcasts in Britain; contracts employing performers and production staff normally permitted only two showings of any particular play.<sup>37</sup> While film might be used to make television drama, BBC television dramas were not and could not be considered as 'films'. If dramas were telerecorded, it was either because their production went beyond the capacity of the studio in time or space (as discussed above), or because the drama was to be transported internationally, across geographical space.

Film inserts were normally recorded on 35 mm film during the rise of film as a production technique in the *Wednesday Play*. Research by McNaughton has shown how an agreement between the BBC and Equity in 1948 limited the use of filmed inserts in programmes because Equity wanted to protect actors' professional and economic interests in continuous performance. Filmed inserts were by definition brief and shot out of sequence at a different time and in a different space from the rest of the production. Equity also vigorously resisted the rehearsal of specific scenes followed by the video recording of that scene for subsequent editing.<sup>38</sup> The scene-by-scene rehearse-record method was reserved for particular moments in productions where exceptional dramatic effects or complicated technical procedures required it. In 1957, Equity agreed that sequences from programmes could be recorded out of transmission order and then subsequently assembled, but only if the scenes were recorded one after another on the same recording day. The 1957 agreement referred to the telerecording of studio video shooting onto film stock, rather than the use of film cameras to make wholly filmed productions. Only in 1972 was a Television Agreement reached with Equity that allowed rehearse-record to be routinely used for discontinuous recording. Within the studio space, constraints on the order and duration of the recording of performances meant that

programme makers had some justification for preferring to shoot outside on film. Union agreements determined matters of the timing and repetition of performance, and the spatial location of production as well as the possibility of transporting the finished programme from one television territory to another.

The film camera had the advantage of the flexibility that its different lenses gave for changing depth of field in a shot, and thus drawing attention to specific spatial planes. Film camera lenses allow choices between deep focus where the foreground, middle ground and background are in focus, versus shallow focus where one of the levels of depth is more in focus than the others. Television studio cameras, mounted on heavy wheeled pedestals, could only change lenses by rotating the front-mounted turret on which three or four lenses were fixed. Since turret rotation would disrupt the picture from the camera, lenses could only be changed during a cut to another camera. While zoom lenses began to be used in the 1950s in drama, initially in the USA,<sup>39</sup> they were uncommon in British television studio production until reliable zoom capability was introduced in the later 1960s. For technical reasons, the British television studio could feel aesthetically constrained, and moreover the introduction of higher definition 625 line television from 1964<sup>40</sup> potentially drew attention to the artifice of studio sets at the same time as the increased use of film on location also reinforced a desire among programme-makers and some viewers for convincing realistic settings.

Film pictures were not straightforwardly 'better' than studio video, since studio video cameras had higher definition pictures than 16 mm film cameras. While film appeared to connote realism when used in exterior locations, it had a softer picture quality. However, high definition video cameras could pick up details of a constructed

set, or a costume, that directors might want to hide because they revealed the artifice of studio production.<sup>41</sup> The electronic cameras used in the multi-camera studio also required high intensity of light in order to register satisfactory pictures, so a director's choice of *chiascuro* effects and high-contrast lighting in television visual design was, although possible, both time-consuming and risky. Lighting effects to produce texture and depth require lighting to be organised around a single light source, whereas television studio lighting is multisource, with lights predominantly hung on lighting grids suspended above the studio floor. This technique, known as 'notan' lighting, facilitates multi-camera shooting in continuous tranches as-if live but reduces opportunities for dramatic effects in individual shots. *The Wednesday Play*'s story editor Roger Smith refers to this range of practical, technical and logistical reasons in his case that in multi-camera studio production on video, 'the television camera is a quick, cheap, mass-production substitute for the film camera'.<sup>42</sup> The maligned video camera is simply a synecdoche here for the studio space, whose very adaptability and flexibility condemns it.

It is true that filming on location was relatively expensive and posed practical problems as well offering aesthetic advantages and disadvantages. Locations had to be selected to match both the requirements of the script in terms of specificity of place and dramatic atmosphere, and also to suit the economics of *The Wednesday Play*'s production budget. For Tony Parker's *Mrs Lawrence Will Look After It* (1968), exploring the social problems raised by unregistered child-minders, the BBC hired a house for three weeks of filming, both to facilitate working with 14 babies, and also to create a documentary 'look'. The production was rewarded with a very high Reaction Index of 77.<sup>43</sup> But film crews on location for a television drama had to be paid not only for shooting time but

also for travel time to and from the location, and in many cases, permission and facilities fees had to be paid to the owners of buildings or land used in the shoot. The specificity of place offered by location filming also increased the likelihood of protest from local residents about the place's representation. This was a serious problem for Charles Wood's *Drums Along the Avon* (1967), a well-intentioned but drastically misunderstood farce about racial prejudice in Bristol produced by Garnett, directed by McTaggart and containing extended location film sequences.<sup>44</sup> Local government buildings and other recognizable sites were used, alongside satirical and surreal elements such as a town mayor who 'blacked up' in an effort to empathise with immigrants.

There were numerous practical problems posed by going to a location rather than staying in the institutionally resourced space of the studio. On any shoot away from base, arrangements had to be made for overnight accommodation, the transportation of bulky equipment, the provision of portable toilets, and food and drink for contractually necessary breaks in shooting at mealtimes. Weather in exterior locations could also be unpredictable and sometimes made filming impossible. Performers and crews had to be available and under contract for a filming period that might sometimes have to be extended due to technical or weather problems. Since filming was conducted before studio recording, the specific architectural and spatial details of elements of the location site required the designers of interior settings to construct sets for the studio that would match the already shot filmed sequences. For some productions, especially those set in the past, modification of location settings might also be needed. For example, Dennis Potter's *A Beast with Two Backs* (1968) was set in the 1890s, and was filmed largely in the village of Lower Lydbrook. On site a pub frontage was built and house-fronts were

dressed, and the film shoot for this one *Wednesday Play* production took three weeks.<sup>45</sup> Garnett's location-shot *Wednesday Plays* had higher budget allocations than his fellow producer Lionel Harris's predominantly studio-shot projects, a ten-week rather than seven-week production schedule and necessarily a larger and thus more costly allocation of film stock.<sup>46</sup> Choices of production site and technology balanced the competing and interrelated factors of cost and time, aesthetic opportunity and technical capability.

### **Television, theatre and cinema**

The creation of *The Wednesday Play* took place alongside the debates at the time about television in comparison and contrast to both theatre and cinema. Developing the approach adopted so far, this final section of the article historicizes aspects of these debates by considering them as a discursive field. Addressed in this spatial way, television, theatre and cinema can be seen as jostling and shifting discursive entities. The mediums are referred to relationally, in comparative and contrastive rhetorical arguments. There was overlap between discourses about each medium; for example the theatre magazine *Plays and Players* had a regular feature by Michael Wade on broadcasting, titled 'Look and Listen'. In its January 1963 issue, the feature comprised a lengthy interview with Newman, awaiting the start of his BBC Drama role. Debates about style, technology and their significance within television referred to traditions of theatre staging and spatial realization in order to pursue the distinctions on which the arguments rested. In a 1965 interview, MacTaggart explained, 'I'm in full flight from French windows', caricaturing British theatre's inherited and traditional spatial conventions to convey his distaste for its reassurance of its audiences.<sup>47</sup> The tradition of the well-made play was



being countered at the Royal Court Theatre and elsewhere, where new writing prioritised contemporaneity, class tensions and political engagement. Theatrical naturalism represented place as an environment that prescribes how characters may act within space. Thus the shift in represented space from the drawing room of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into the kitchen and working class parlour of the post-1956 period in the theatre was a means to represent the constraints on character and freedom of action determined by place.

The expression of character in and through the created studio space was evaluated by audience members, in terms of performers' effectiveness. Thomas Clarke's *Wednesday Play, A Little Temptation* (1965) about a bohemian Hampstead ménage, set in a single living room, was criticized as 'a meaningless and static affair, with no particular shape, no climax to speak of', and a waste of performances by the experienced actors Barbara Jefford and Denholm Elliott.<sup>48</sup> Later, responses to John Mortimer's *Infidelity Took Place* (1968)<sup>49</sup> or David Mercer's *Let's Murder Vivaldi* (1968) showed that for the anthology's viewers these plays had begun to seem outdated in form and tone. Members of the audience panel called Mortimer's play a 'refreshing change from the sex and sadism' expected in television drama, but also 'silly, boring rubbish'. Newspaper reviewers of *Let's Murder Vivaldi* showed enthusiasm for Mercer's writing, and for performances by Glenda Jackson (a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company) and Denholm Elliott (familiar from West End theatre hits), but each was criticized by viewers for 'artificiality'.<sup>50</sup>

It was not only domestic, naturalistic drama that was poorly received. Jack Russell's *The Interior Decorator* (1965) in which a fashionable male designer conducts a

wealthy female client around a house that he has decorated to match her own fantasies, used film for exterior dream sequences in a garden, and interiors featured extraordinary furnishings and décor. Audience response was almost uniformly critical, and the Reaction Index for the programme was 26 as compared to *The Wednesday Play* average of 57.<sup>51</sup> There was an implicit differential value given to different dramatic forms, and also to different genres, as during the latter half of the 1960s the filmed social realist drama became the expected focus of *The Wednesday Play*.<sup>52</sup> Comedies, although in a minority among *Wednesday Play* broadcasts, retained the power to attract audience numbers and a duo of mime-based plays by Frank O'Connor drew widespread praise.<sup>53</sup> *Silent Song* and *The Retreat* (both 1966), produced by Luke, foregrounded performance by their extensive use of mime (motivated by the plays' setting in a monastery and a Catholic meditation retreat respectively), and their shooting in the studio conducted to extensive use of close-up on performers' faces and the exaggerated gesture necessary to communicate in enforced silence.

Alternative theatre traditions such as the experiments of the European avant-garde impacted on thinking about television, and vice-versa, so that, for example, the dramatist Troy Kennedy Martin's polemical essay 'Nats Go Home' in which he argued for non-naturalistic modes of storytelling in television drama and the use of visual montage, music and voice-over was published in the theatre journal *Encore*.<sup>54</sup> Kennedy Martin made his argument by drawing on his experience of writing for the studio-produced BBC anthology *Storyboard* (1961) and his single play *The Middle Men* (1961), but also praised Brechtian theatre and contemporary *nouvelle vague* cinema. Thus while Kennedy Martin's collaborative drama with John McGrath for BBC, *Diary of a Young Man* (1964)

used location filming it combined this with performance in the studio to experiment with montage, music, still images and voice over, and did not simply aim to adapt ‘cinematic’ techniques for television drama.<sup>55</sup> As John Hill has argued,<sup>56</sup> Kennedy Martin’s manifesto ‘Nats Go Home’ in any case takes insufficient account of how naturalism as a dramatic form aimed for social extension and contemporary observation, and thus created innovative work whether or not its formal practices might seem conservative. As far as form is concerned, Hill shows that studio television attempted by the Langham Group used expressive camera movement that privileged the visual, implying ‘cinematic’ aims, so that aesthetic focus was displaced from actors onto the visual design of programmes. ‘Film’ and ‘theatre’ were discursive markers in debates about what television drama should be, rather than referring to stable referents.

Garnett and his frequent collaborator on *The Wednesday Play* the director Ken Loach regularly went to see the plays performed by Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop company at Theatre Royal Stratford East in London, who were finding ways of representing working class experience by adopting Brechtian techniques.<sup>57</sup> Some of the stage actors from Stratford were cast in *Wednesday Play* productions, and the use of such performers without formal actor training also paralleled the casting of Italian neo-realist cinema. While Smith emphasized the realist documentarism of *Wednesday Play* productions, even Garnett, the producer most associated with realist docudrama, made dramas that were quite different in tone. *An Officer of the Court* (1967) by former barrister Nemone Lethbridge was the third in a trilogy of *Wednesday Plays* about the judicial system.<sup>58</sup> The use of extensive 16 mm filmed sequences of outside locations might seem to suggest documentary style. But the rapid pace of the play, shifting between

office, pig farm and car dealership, and the casting of former music hall performer Tommy Godfrey alongside Theatre Workshop's Yootha Joyce signalled a self-conscious engagement with form that embedded comedy in the realist *mise-en-scène* associated with Garnett's projects.

Garnett saw his work as in opposition to the West End theatrical tradition, carried on in television by his colleagues at BBC Drama Group, saying during an interview for *Theatre Quarterly*:

if somebody had pointed out that what they were doing was not remotely like the real world or anybody's real experience, they would say 'We're doing art.' We were very firmly not doing art, right? We were just trying to make sense of the world.<sup>59</sup>

In film productions like those of Garnett and Loach, authorship was displaced as the director became the authorial centre of power when shooting in exterior locations, but the producer power that Newman's reconfiguration of BBC drama had instituted meant that producers and script editors, most notoriously Garnett, were more consistently significant. In 1966, Newman described Garnett's contribution to Michael Peacock, Controller of BBC1, as 'the extra flash of orange every three weeks or so', for example, arguing that the public impact of his work was worth its extra financial and reputational risk.<sup>60</sup> Defending Garnett's *Up the Junction* later in the same year to Huw Wheldon, Newman wrote that it was 'messy, too long and looked down on the working class, but it was also revolutionary in drama technique'.<sup>61</sup>

In adducing reference points from contemporary theatre and cinema, Kennedy Martin and his colleagues were acting not as an isolated elite, but as part of a much more

extended social group with interests in British, continental European and American cultural developments. Moreover, after decades of resistance to the showing of cinema films on television, primarily from film distribution companies, in the late 1950s the television schedule began to include a significant quantity of cinema films. This meant that audiences became accustomed to both the assimilation of television drama with film drama as part of their viewing diet, but also with the ability at least potentially to discriminate between the different visual qualities, generic expectations and production technologies of the two media.

There was a prohibition, however, on cinematic screening of drama made for television. When the distributor Contemporary Films invited BBC to enter into an agreement granting cinema rights to *The Lump* in 1967 after its broadcast on *The Wednesday Play*, BBC agreements not to compete against the commercial cinema film production sector and the different union agreements applicable to production staff in the television and cinema film businesses made this impossible, much to the producer Garnett's annoyance.<sup>62</sup> Garnett's response was to make plans for separate cinema projects that would later emerge as the cinema films directed by Loach, *Poor Cow* (1967, starring Carol White who had played Cathy in the pair's *Wednesday Play* production *Cathy Come Home* of 1966) and *Family Life* (1971, a reworking of the *Wednesday Play*, *In Two Minds* of 1967), for example. The use of film technology and location shooting had some affinity with cinema *mise-en-scene*, and Loach's work with Garnett for television became significant to a British new wave in film.<sup>63</sup> But cinema benefitted from achievements in television (and not the other way round) and the Garnett and Loach collaborations were in part a response to developments in contemporary British theatre.

The move to widescreen frames rather than academy ratio in 1950s Hollywood cinema differentiated cinema from the television image and also encouraged depiction of landscape and the attractions of spectacle. Television makers' interest in cinema is importantly distinct from this, since the examples they referred to were primarily work by filmmakers whose interest was elsewhere, for example in formal experimentation and disruption of narrative convention. Even the director most associated with television studio naturalism and theatricality, Don Taylor, emphasized in his memoir of this period not simply the photographing of dialogue but recommended innovative visual design in a way similar to Kennedy Martin.<sup>64</sup> Indeed Taylor's arguments for the primacy of studio drama over location shooting in television valued the form over both cinema's and theatre's signifying regimes. Studio drama surpassed cinema, he argued, because cinema cannot offer continuous live performance. For Taylor, studio drama also scored over theatre because in theatre the audience is at a fixed distance from the performers and is denied the television camera's facility for analytical and psychological insight deriving from the close-up.

The discourses of film appreciation and study were changing as *The Wednesday Play* was being constituted, and 'cinema' began to mean different things. In the late 1950s in Britain, the available critical writing about film came from three perspectives. First, there was dogmatic writing about technique by Ernest Lindgren and Roger Manvell, for instance, promoting the value of film montage.<sup>65</sup> Second, 'committed' humanist criticism evaluated the political value of specific films, and was exemplified by the journals *Sight & Sound* (published from 1932) and *Universities and Left Review* (1957-60, then becoming *New Left Review*) in which work by John Ford, Max Ophuls

and Orson Welles was discussed. Third, the culture of reviewing in broadsheet newspapers, though based in personal taste, was also informed by the former two critical discourses. In each of the three discursive modes addressing cinema in the early 1960s, 'personal', 'art' filmmaking was prioritised over 'commercial' work. Enthusiasts, who included television professionals looking for stimuli and contexts for their work, saw film society and National Film Theatre (founded in 1952) screenings of European and Soviet art cinema, plus films by a few 'maverick' Hollywood directors like Frank Capra and Orson Welles. There were also films on social themes like *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) alongside well-wrought and 'intelligent' comedies like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938).

The application of serious criticism to Hollywood cinema had been pioneered by *Cahiers du Cinema* (founded in 1951), but in the British context recent university graduates and grammar-school alumni supported by scholarships, many of them from the new generation of professionals rising from the working class, were guided by intellectual frameworks from the literary-critical writings of F. R. Leavis and New Criticism. Their criteria were organicism, the valuation of 'showing' over 'telling', and a robustness of style and subject exemplified by the novels of D. H. Lawrence, whose work had been popularised in paperback form. For example, the television critic Maurice Wiggin described David Mercer's *Wednesday Play, In Two Minds* about the family pressures leading a young woman to become schizophrenic, produced by Garnett and directed by Loach using documentary film techniques, as 'an utterly convincing and engrossing picture, as good as D. H. Lawrence.'<sup>66</sup>

The other assumption among critics of the early 1960s was that it should be possible to discriminate a canon of great work, and when the critical journal *Movie* appeared in 1962, deriving from the undergraduate magazine *Oxford Opinion*, this great tradition was argued to include popular, Hollywood cinema as well as European (notably French) ‘art’ films.<sup>67</sup> *Movie* writers were moving towards an appreciation of film as a spatial and compositional visual medium, in which point of view and the creation of mise-en-scene by means of camerawork, lighting, editing and the development of nuanced performance were valued over ‘message’ and could be analysed with precision. In this emergent tradition, critical practices were to arise from detailed observation (rather than abstract prescriptions), and judgments of taste were recognized as class-based and too often the property of an elite. Commenting in 1996 on his aesthetic ambitions for *The Wednesday Play* and working with the director Loach, Garnett recalled, ‘I’d seen *Breathless*, really admired Coutard’s camera work on that and had a vision of the sort of drama I wanted to do.’<sup>68</sup> Adducing the spatial practices of contemporary theatre and cinema (though sometimes reductively caricaturing them for rhetorical effect), the makers of *The Wednesday Play* debated the position of television drama at the intersection of theatre and film.

The physical spaces in which television production was carried out, in studios and on location, offered opportunities and constraints in the making of BBC drama. These spaces changed their significance in the 1964-70 period in relation to changes in the institutional resourcing of different modes of production, the technologies used in the spaces, and the aesthetic and cultural significance of interior, exterior or simulated spaces. The aesthetics of fictional spaces drew on conventions developing in television



representation, and in comparison and contrast to cinema and theatre. By focusing on production spaces and representations of spaces, historiography can take account of these overlapping and competing forces. *The Wednesday Play*'s audio-visual texts, personnel, organisation and reception can be understood in their complexity and diversity by linking production processes with technology and aesthetic style.

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1969. Even with the advent of colour, programmes were still viewed in monochrome by many viewers because of the cost of colour TV sets and colour licences.

<sup>41</sup> Similar problems have occurred more recently with the introduction of High Definition (HD) transmission, which was initially used for test broadcasts in 2006, before BBC and ITV began regular HD broadcasting in 2010.

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<sup>44</sup> *Drums Along the Avon*, tx. 24 May 1967. BBC WAC T5/1300/1.

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<sup>67</sup> See Gibbs, J., *The Life of Mise-en-Scene: Visual Style and British Film Criticism, 1946-1978* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> Macmurrough-Kavanagh, M. K., Kicking Over the Traces, p.27. Garnett refers to Raoul Coutard, the cinematographer on Jean-Luc Godard's *A bout de souffle* (*Breathless*), 1960.