Cars, places and spaces in police drama

Cars, Places and Spaces in British Police Drama

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This chapter outlines the significance of cars in British and American police dramas, using brief examples from the 1960s to the present, to show how attention to this topic can link and reconfigure critical approaches to stylistic, formal and institutional aspects of the genre. The chapter cuts into familiar debates in new ways, and is a call for further, more detailed analysis to follow up this provocation. Cars offer a way into the stylistic and generic specificity of police dramas, because in different ways the protagonists' surveillance and investigation of the fictional world, and their ability to enforce the law, depend on being able to move in and between places and spaces. These abilities have been increasingly dependent on the use of the car rather than patrolling on foot. Thus, the space of policing is connected with modernity and its associations with mobility and the technologies, like the car and television, which extend mobility in real or virtual space (Morse, 1990). Moreover, television representations of policing adopt a scopic regime to apprehend and control the real. In order to identify crime and to impose justice, television police officers and detectives observe and interpret, attempting (usually successfully) to unveil a truth and put things right (Bignell, 2009). This takes place against an historical background of changing production circumstances for television, which can be summarised as a shift from studio-based programmes to location-based shooting. There are also important distinctions in dramatic tone and emphasis across the genre, such as between character-focused dramas and action-focused ones. These, and other aspects of genre, narrative form, style and historical significance, affect choices of cars in police drama and are expressed in part by them. Cars do some of the work of storytelling, and they are objects whose properties are often deployed very

distinctively and effectively.

Aesthetically and industrially, cars in television police series are an aspect of production design, which deals with how a visual style can be created by the ensemble effect of sets and locations, props and costumes, lighting and shot selection.[1] Design falls under the control of the director for aesthetic matters, and the producer for the provision of the production's art department that procures and constructs props and sets. Some cars are specified by the creators of programmes in the production 'Bible' that lays out the format, settings and stylistic approach, and then need to be sourced by production staff for shooting. The use of cars depends on the ancillary industry of suppliers of vehicles. The British company Action Vehicles,[2] for example, has been the exclusive supplier of cars to the police dramas *The Bill* (Thames/Talkback for ITV, 1984-2010), *Midsomer Murders* (Bentley Productions for ITV1, 1997-), *Inspector Morse* (Zenith/Carlton for ITV, 1987-2000), *Maisie Raine* (BBC 1998-99) and *Hamish Macbeth* (BBC 1995-97). The majority of the cars that feature in police series are the 'ordinary' vehicles used by secondary characters and in background action with, of course, specialist police vehicles and often a distinctive car driven by the protagonist. Car suppliers maintain a register of privately owned vehicles available for hire to productions, and a limited stock of specialist vehicles of earlier periods or with particular liveries (such as police patrol cars). Unusual cars may also be sourced from published directories of privately owned vintage or prestige cars whose owners lease or occasionally sell them to productions. So the procurement and deployment of cars is one of the industrial processes of television production, and although I return to that issue below I next consider the textual and aesthetic role of

[1] The topic is little studied academically, though Britton and Barker's (2003) study of 1960s British television fantasy series has begun to chart its significance.
[2] See the Action Vehicles company website at: <http://actionvehicles.com>.

cars in police drama.

Condensation of time and extension in space

The car has a functional significance in police narratives as a means to move between places, whether to attend a crime scene, meet a witness or locate a perpetrator. In this role, travel by car is often a brief ellipse between two connected narrative sequences such as a precinct scene when a new crime is reported to the protagonist, followed by the detective's arrival at a crime scene. So, car sequences articulate or hinge segments together. Cars offer spatial and temporal extension and condensation. In the story-world they minimise temporal and spatial delays or intervals, by providing a means for characters to travel from one significant place to another by a mode of transport that is unremarkable and can therefore be largely passed-over in the narrative. Journeys by car do not take place in real time, but are indicated by moments of departure and arrival, sometimes with short in-car sequences between them. Cars are associated with temporal ellipsis, and paradoxically, their presence signifies an interval, a pause in the action and a shift to a different focus of narrative interest. In the narration they are a connective tissue or articulating joint between sequences set in different times and places.

The necessity to travel in order to solve crimes has the corollary that the possibility of travel demonstrates the capability of the police as a state institution to put into practice the ideologies of law and order by traversing space to deal with social disequilibrium (Clarke, 1992). The structural conventions of police series narrative include the introduction of an enigma (a crime) at the beginning of a storyline, and then a focus on process and progression during an investigation stage that ends in resolution. In relation to narrative temporality, travelling represents the

ordered progression of detection as the basis of the dramatic structure of storytelling in the television police series. Journeys by car are steps in the larger narrative journey towards order and the end of the narrative. Crime stimulates action, requiring the protagonist to leave his or her base and begin a new narrative segment that both advances the main story, but also represents a deferral or detour of the progress towards resolution. Car journeys seem at one level like the effective minimisation of intervals, so that cars permit the protagonists to get on more quickly with their detective work. As John Fiske and John Hartley (1978, p. 29) have argued, efficiency is a means of demonstrating dramatically that ideologies of law and order are superior to criminality and disorder:

> What the police versus criminal conflict may enact symbolically, then, is the everyday conflict of a competitive society in which efficiency is crucial … The common concern that television police are becoming more and more like the criminals in their methods and morals, means that the few factors that distinguish them take on crucial significance. Of these distinctive features, efficiency is the most marked.

At another level, however, car journeys have the opposite structural role. Delay and spacing-out in police narrative are indications of the narrative's teasing control over the viewer, making him or her anticipate and wait.

The presence of several sequences of car travel facilitates the division of an episode of a police series narrative into groups of storyline segments, or 'acts', with the beginning or end of each one marked by a journey by car (and potentially including further journeys too in some cases). In the US television context (Bignell 2009, pp. 5-6), this suits the division of an hour of television into several segments

separated by commercials. In Britain, something similar happens in series made for the commercial networks and indeed, because of the potential export of BBC programmes to commercial overseas channels, even programmes intended for first-run screening on BBC adopt the same convention. New segments following a commercial break commonly begin with a shot that establishes location. The arrival of the protagonist's car at a location where the subsequent action will take place can bind a conventional establishing long-shot of a building to the specificity of the series and its characters by particularising it, via the inclusion of the detective's car in the frame.

The segmentation of narrative, and the emphasis on process in the progression from enigma to resolution, thus have a direct relationship with spatiality in the police series. But these structural principles, while fundamental, do not account for the differences in how space relates to action and character. There is frequently a moment of departure, in which the protagonist leaves a room and gets into a car, marking the boundary between a home base and a diffuse surrounding space in which events occur. One space is known and repeatedly represented in the series, while the place visited as part of the investigation may not be known to the protagonist or the viewer. The taken for granted, realist conventions of almost all police narratives will lead the viewer to assume that the space already existed as a location, within an unseen fictional world that extends almost infinitely beyond the borders of the screen frame. For example, in Morse's Oxford, some settings in the city recur, while others (like individual houses) are only called into existence once as a scene of crime. But in each case, the integration of a setting into an episode narrative always has the potential to change the meaning of the place. A public space like a riverbank, or a private space like a house, changes its significance when it becomes the object of the detective's

(and the programme's) attention.

Space is energised, charged with significance by its expected integration into a narrative of detection, problem solving and resolution. The forensic series is a recent development of this trope, epitomised by *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Jerry Bruckheimer/Alliance Atlantis/CBS, 2000-15) in which investigators traverse space so they can arrive at another place that they minutely interrogate. Both on location and back at their laboratory, the use of rapid camera zooms towards and inside body parts or items of evidence (often at extreme magnification), often created using computer generated imagery, develops the common theme in police series that seeing in a special way is the key investigative activity in the genre (Lury, 2005, pp. 44-56). But, whereas the conventional police series develops this by exploring spatial extension, when police extend their spatial purview outwardly, the forensic series works on internal, inward kinds of seeing (Bignell, 2007). One of the pleasures of the police series is for the viewer to anticipate and discover which settings remain neutral locations and which will become crime scenes loaded with important story information, and this pleasure is activated by the arrival of the protagonist, the narrating agency and the camera. Most often, this arrival depends on the use of a car.

Specific examples are helpful in showing how these boundary spaces associated with cars function in different programmes. In the early series of *Midsomer Murders*, Inspector Barnaby (John Nettles) arrived at each week's scene of crime driving a black Rover. The villages of Midsomer are represented as picturesque, conservative and atavistic, and Barnaby's appearance in dark suit and tie, in a well-maintained recent model of rather anonymous fleet car marks a very significant change of tone. There is less distinction between the spaces associated with Inspector Morse (John Thaw) and the spaces to which he arrives in his Jaguar to solve cases in

the eponymous ITV series. The conceit of *Life On Mars* (Kudos for BBC, 2006-07) is, in part, that Sam Tyler (John Simm) departs from the space of the contemporary city and arrives in a parallel space that exists in a different time. The coincidence of space and separation in time is represented very concretely by the fact that Tyler drives a Rover in each of them, as I discuss further below.

Exterior/interior space: the car as studio

The fact that cars can be the vehicles for expression in spatial and temporal terms in such varied and interesting ways, rests ultimately on their function within the fictional world. Cars signify both the reach of policing and the police series as a genre. At any time between the early twentieth century and today, representations of policing in Britain and the USA (and elsewhere in the developed word) will establish a relationship with cars. In a few unusual cases space and time are expressed by walking, as in *Dixon of Dock Green* (BBC 1955-76) or occasionally *The Bill*, but in fact the sheer size of the area policed by the protagonists effectively disallows drama on foot. Just as Western films take the horse for granted, so police dramas rely on the car. Indeed, in that sense, police cars are almost always 'unmarked' in that their necessity is assumed. The failure of a car to transport the characters in a police drama, or the unavailability of car transport in a specific location, becomes a foregrounded storyline point precisely because the routine presence of journeys by car is not remarked on most of the time. For example, the premise of the US police series *McCloud* (Universal for NBC, 1970-77), in which the eponymous rural police detective from New Mexico (Dennis Weaver) goes to work in New York, is signified rapidly and in a visually striking way in the credit sequence of each episode, where McCloud is represented riding his horse down an urban street. The key elements of

format and tone are announced by a recognition and simultaneous repudiation of the car as an icon of the police series.

The great majority of American police drama is set and shot in Los Angeles where, as Rayner Banham's (1971, p. 23) ground-breaking study of the ecology of its built environment argued, 'the language of design, architecture and urbanism … is the language of movement … I learnt to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original.' So police series have routinely included numerous scenes set in cars because this recognises the quotidian necessity of travel within many US cities, of which Los Angeles is a paradigmatic example. It is very notable, for example, how many scenes in the realist police procedural series *Dragnet* (Mark VII for NBC, 1951-59, Universal for NBC, 1967-70), which is set in Los Angeles, begin and end with journeys taken by the detective protagonists to relatively anonymous locations in the city. Moreover, this consideration of format and storyline leads to the opening up of stylistic choices about where character interactions can be set. The car can function as a place for drama as much as a functional object within the fictional world. A journey by car can form a narrative segment in itself, and here the car functions as a kind of mobile TV studio, in which conversations and character-based action is constrained spatially and thus can gain dramatic intensity.

In Britain, the conception of the uniformed police as a motorised force was introduced prominently in *Z Cars* (BBC, 1962-78), and some subsequent dramas have used the car as a performance space in ways that recall US examples because of the duration of their in-car sequences and the aesthetic of urban space that they assume. Police patrol cars in *Z Cars* were designated by their call signs, Z-Victor 1 and Z-Victor 2, referring to the alphabetic call-signs of the real Lancashire police and not to the Ford Z series cars (the Zephyr and Zodiac) that featured in it. These cars,

equipped with radios, were designed to police conurbations much larger than the beat of a police officer on foot. In television drama, they designated the modernity of post-imperial Britain and introduced the problem of how to understand and control extensive spaces by technological means, as well as by local interpersonal knowledge. The spatial identity of the conurbation of Newtown in *Z Cars*, as a dispersed collection of former villages connected by belts of housing and industrial districts, represented a departure from the traditional urban geography of British police series towards one that referenced the USA, and especially Los Angeles. The Zephyr, and especially the Zodiac, referenced American Ford designs (in their wide bench seats, rear fins and extensive use of chrome, for example). The series is often cited for its relationship with the gritty, Northern, working class realism of British cinema of the period (Laing, 1991). But spatially it recalls Banham's (1971, p. 36) claim that the distinctive thing about Los Angeles,

> this giant city, which has grown almost simultaneously all over, is that all its parts are equal and equally accessible from all other parts at once. Everyday commuting tends less and less to move by the classic systole and diastole in and out of downtown, more and more to move by an almost random or Brownian motion over the whole area.

To know Newtown, the police of *Z Cars* need to spend much of their time travelling, with and against flows of movement undertaken by the city's population. The corollary of this aesthetic and representational form is that the protagonists spend a lot of screen time in patrol cars.

The great majority of each *Z Cars* episode was shot live in its early years, including the sequences set in patrol cars. Although exterior filming was important to

the series' realist tone, film cameras and sound recording equipment were too cumbersome to use for dialogue scenes in cars, and in-car scenes were shot on live video in the studio with back-projected street scenes running behind them. Extended dialogue scenes, where the officers were driving, could explore their relationships with each other and also signify the mobility and scope of the narrative action made possible by in-car radio. Spatial extension was matched dramatically by spatial restriction. This motif persists in contemporary police dramas centred on character interaction, or which feature an ensemble of protagonists rather than one or two central characters. In the US series *Hill Street Blues* (MTM for NBC, 1981-87), the relationship between the uniformed patrolmen Bobby Hill and Andy Renko (Michael Warren and Charles Haid) was developed in lengthy in-car sequences, and long takes in cars explored the interactions between the detectives of *Homicide: Life on the Street* (Baltimore Pictures for NBC, 1993-99). Location shooting, with film cameras attached to cars, made a focus on action and spatial extension routine in US police series, as discussed below. But the variations on the two-shot possible in in-car sequences, especially frontal shots and alternating three-quarter shots, exploit the centripetal characteristics of the car as a symmetrical, windowed enclosure. The camera can look into it, while the characters look out.

Cars on film: action vehicles

In the broad historical movement from studio-based shooting to location shooting, developing in the 1960s and 1970s, cars gradually took on a changed narrative role in British police series. They became the focus of action sequences in real space, taking place within the iconography and functional possibilities afforded by specific choices of setting. There are very few cars in the studio-shot video interiors of *Dixon of Dock*

Green (BBC, 1955-76) in which epistemological problems of how knowledge of spaces could be acquired were solved narratively by the local knowledge of the foot patrol officer. By the 1970s, 16 mm cameras were light and robust enough to fit onto rigs on car doors, as in *The Sweeney* (Euston Films for ITV, 1975-8), where all-film production integrates the car's interior space with the ways that its exterior can be deployed within a contiguous and continuous exterior space. Shooting on film in soundstages, in exterior locations and for in-car sequences made on location blurred the boundaries between physical action and character dialogue, and reduced distinctions between public and private space. The Flying Squad officers of *The Sweeney* struggled to assert the law's mobility, over and against the mobility of organised and violent crime, and their ability to know and control different kinds of space was expressed by the use of film to shoot each of them.

In the USA, police series have been made on film since the 1950s, when television drama production shifted from New York to Hollywood. Because of its Hollywood base, the cinema industry's techniques for filming cars, and filming in and from them, had already been developing since the 1920s. In the Keystone Cops films, for example, the city of Los Angeles, still partly under construction at the time, works as a setting and production base for numerous films featuring car chases. There is, of course, a long lineage of action cinema, often in the detective and thriller genres, in which car chases in urban settings exploit cinema's association with mobility, speed and the mobile point of view created by tracking within the shot and rapid cutting between shots (Tasker, 2015, p. 25). Technologies for stabilising cameras, recording sound on location, and staging stunts, for example, were developed initially for cinema and consequently have been available for filmed television police series. In major television production centres of the developed world there are established

relationships between car makers and film and television production companies, so that multiple action vehicles can be supplied. For example, in *Starsky and Hutch* (Spelling-Goldberg for ABC, 1975-79), the Ford Motor Company's Studio-TV Car Loan Program was the contracted supplier of vehicles to the series' production company, providing two red Gran Torino cars that were modified for their role as David Starsky's (Paul Michael Glaser) own car.[3] In series that have extended car chase sequences, like *Starsky and Hutch*, the choice of a distinctive vehicle for the protagonists, or means of making vehicles distinctive by the choice of colour or customised features, facilitate storytelling by clarifying the identities of the regular characters' cars versus those of the non-recurring characters by whom they are chased, or who they chase. Indeed, towards the end of the second season, the episode 'Starsky and Hutch are Guilty' (1977) exploited this trope by reversing it. Two criminals masquerade as the two detectives, in a lookalike Gran Torino, to blacken Starsky's and Hutch's reputations so that their evidence in a forthcoming trial will be discredited.

Action sequences involving police in cars are much more common in the open urban settings of US series, almost all of which are shot in Los Angeles, than in British police drama. The chase normally occurs in the third quarter of the drama as a prelude to the capture of the criminal. The series that adopted the trope most self-consciously, however, was *Miami Vice* (Michael Mann/Universal for NBC, 1984-89) representing the city as a place associated with mobility and conspicuous consumption. Because of the illegal cash economy of the drug trade, the mobile and anonymous suspects pursued by the protagonists were very often in luxury cars, yachts and speedboats used for smuggling and other kinds of crime. Plain-clothes

[3] For full details of the modifications and eventual replacement of the original cars by later models, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starsky_%26_Hutch>.

police and detectives of television fiction need to merge with the locality where their missions are conducted, and work semi-independently of the hierarchy of the police institution. In *Miami Vice*, the plain-clothes detectives Sonny Crockett and Rico Tubbs (Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas) go undercover and simulate the behaviour of the criminals they are seeking. Appearances are deceptive in a similar way to the aesthetic and narrative premises of the *films noir* of classical Hollywood (Butler, 1985). Sonny Crockett drove Ferrari Daytona and Testarossa sports cars, leading to frequent and lengthy car chase sequences shot on Miami's freeways, cut to rhythmic and exciting pop music, in which one exotic supercar pursued another.[4] Episode narratives had to work to establish that despite the apparent indistinguishability of the detectives and the criminals, each of whom drove luxury sports cars, the police are fundamentally supporters of normality and justice, whereas the criminals are forces of violence, disorder and destruction.

There are examples of police drama that barely use cars. Scenes in the British precinct drama *The Cops* (World Productions for BBC, 1998-2001) were shot with a single camera, always following the uniformed police characters into action on foot. A single camera was used, often hand-held, moving with the police as they moved through the corridors of the police station, through the streets and into houses, rather than establishing an outside location before their arrival. The effect was to embed the characters more fully into the settings of the police station culture and also into the wider community who they policed. This also minimised the senses of temporal interval and spatial separation discussed above. *The Cops* aimed to give the impression of unrehearsed action occurring in real time, adopting conventions used in

[4] These frequent chase and stunt sequences meant that lookalike vehicles substituted for the Ferraris, ironically repeating the programme's tropes of simulation and deceptive appearance (see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cars_in_Miami_Vice>).

television documentary to appear to follow action as it occurred. At the time, television police drama conventions were being reassessed just as the legal and political role of policing was being debated in the public sphere (Brunsdon, 1998). The structural and formal qualities of *The Cops* work together to both signal genre conventions but also to blur them, and the avoidance of sequences of car travel and the focus on uniformed officers walking, rather than detectives driving, was a key part of this.

Sign vehicles: car iconography

A car is an iconographic resource, whether static or moving, and its role is carved out in relationships with characters and settings. An iconographic role is, by definition, important for any car on screen, since the distinctiveness of a car may be significant but so too might a car's self-effacement as part of a group of signifiers of ordinariness. For instance, in 1997 when *Midsomer Murders* began, its protagonist Inspector Barnaby drove a Rover Sterling, but following Rover's takeover by BMW he acquired a Rover 75. The car was chosen to indicate his managerial status in the police and his solid, dependable character. The specific model (the Connoisseur) had Rover's 'Xenon Pack' optional fittings, which included alloy wheels, headlamp washers, cruise control, rain-sensing windscreen wipers, rear parking sensors, climate control, electric windows and electrically adjustable side mirrors.[5] However, the administrators appointed to deal with Rover's debts reclaimed the Rovers loaned to ITV for the series. John Nettles requested an older Rover to replace it, the CoupA of 1970, but that model was associated with organised crime, so instead Barnaby was

[5] Advertisement for sale posted on 3 August 2012 by 'Rabett Rover' on the Rover 75 and Rover ZT owners' club webpage, available at: <http://www.the75andztclub.co.uk/forum/showthread.php?t=121141>.

given a Jaguar X-Type in order to retain the British flavour in a luxury saloon (Laws, 2005). What mattered was not so much the specific cars chosen for the character, but the continuity of their iconographic meaning when the cars had to be changed.

Inspector Morse's Jaguar Mark II matched the character's upper-middle class tastes for opera, real ale and cryptic crosswords, and contrasted with the Ford Sierra driven by his working class subordinate Lewis (Kevin Whately). The Jaguar Mark II was launched in 1959 with the advertising strapline 'Space, Grace and Pace.' Compared to the previous model it had larger glass area, giving a feeling of openness and space to the interior, and was equipped with a 3.8 litre engine that could take it from rest to 60 mph in less than nine seconds. This made the Mark II the fastest saloon car in the world, yet also a luxurious status symbol, with a real wood and leather interior. In Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse novels, on which much of the television series was based, Morse drove a Lancia. But his Britishness, and links with Oxford as an historic location with aspirational class associations, were expressed in the Regency Red 1960 version of the Mark II, retained throughout the series' seven seasons.

Similarly, the Channel Island tax haven settings of *Bergerac* (BBC, 1981-91) made the classic Triumph Roadster (featuring in the series from 1985 onwards) seem less quirky when driven by John Nettles as the lead character. The car was a distinctive product of the British company in the early years following the Second World War, and was, in its time, a fashionable and aspirational vehicle similar to the Jaguars of the period. But the 1948 model driven by Bergerac would have had only a three-speed gearbox and a top speed of 77 mph (though the actual car used had been

slightly upgraded before being sold to the BBC).[6] To signal a more powerful and sophisticated vehicle, the sound of a Jaguar was substituted for the Triumph's engine in post-production. As with all the cars in police series, the automotive history of the marque may be relevant to some viewers but the semiotic significance of a car within a paradigm of types and styles of car is much more important to producers and probably to most viewers. Brenda Blethyn as the eponymous *Vera* (ITV/Company Pictures for ITV1, 2011-), daughter of a farmer, drives a shabby Land Rover that matches her own dishevelled appearance and the series' setting in a bleak, mainly rural Northumbria.

Choices of vehicle are especially interesting in drama set in the past, where cars function as indices of class, taste and gender identity but also to indicate period. In *Inspector George Gently* (Company for BBC, 2007-), Gently (Martin Shaw) drives a Rover P5, a solid, white-collar vehicle that signifies the 1960s setting carefully recreated in the series. But it belies Gently's progressive outlook, one that is contrasted with his sidekick John Bacchus's (Lee Ingleby) lack of the expected youthful liberalism that appeared to be signified by his MG sports car in the first series. The tweed-suited ex-soldier Gently is in many ways more au fait with the 'Swinging Sixties' than Bacchus, despite the latter's Beatle haircut and fashionable suits. The cars are a ruse that viewers learn to see through.

Sam Tyler arrives at a crime scene in the first episode of *Life On Mars* in a modern Rover. When Tyler wakes up in 1973, the first thing he sees is another Rover, a 2000TC, and the substituted car links and separates the chronological periods. The car marks the change of epoch as much as Tyler's clothes. His 1973 boss Gene Hunt (Philip Glenister) demonstrates his machoism through his top of the range Ford

[6] This information derives from a description of the car when auctioned by Bonhams in 2013, available at: <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20933/lot/425>.

Cortina Mark III GXL, and the comparison between the cars works as a complementary mechanism to other systems of comparison in the mise en scène of the series, such as costume and the actors' use of expressive physical gesture and posture. In the 1980s-set sequel to *Life on Mars*, *Ashes to Ashes* (Kudos for BBC, 2008-10), Hunt's character reappears and, befitting the later date, he drives an Audi Quattro. Again the car is highly significant as an indicator of period and also a specific form of masculine identity. The Quattro is identified with the brash Tory 1980s, when its extraordinary engine power made it a very difficult and dangerous 'hot hatch' to control despite its four-wheel drive.

It was advertised to, and appealed to, the socially ascendant 'yuppies' of the period, and did this so effectively that it appeared, in April 2010, on election posters for both the Conservative and Labour parties (Nikhah, 2010). These posters debated the legacy of the 1980s, contesting the decade's meanings via Hunt's character as signified by his totemic car. Labour's poster showed the Conservative opposition leader David Cameron posing on the bonnet of a red Audi Quattro, with the caption 'Don't let him take Britain back to the 1980s.' In response, Conservative campaigners produced an online poster with the same image of Cameron beneath a new slogan: 'PM Dave Cameron. He's gonna sort Britain out. Conservatives, fixing broken Britain.' In association with the Quattro, each advertisement represents the 1980s as a time of capitalist excess and portrays Cameron as a leader with laddish bravado. But, of course, the value of the sign is reversed from one poster to the other, demonstrating the instability of its component meanings. While not such a direct allusion to police drama, the Conservative Home organisation's blog ran another poster alluding to *Life on Mars*, captioned 'Back to debt, decline and the 1970s with Gordon Brown.' The central image for signifying the era was another car, whose connotations are more or

less opposite to those of the Audi Quattro. It was a mustard-coloured Austin Maxi, with Prime Minister Gordon Brown perched on its bonnet, dressed in a 1970s beige safari suit with a pile of uncollected rubbish and strikers' placards behind him.

Cars in police drama are much more significant than they might initially seem, and in this chapter I have suggested some routes for further work that can use cars as a way to reconsider the genre from several points of view at the same time. Cars signify performatively, and I have argued that they do important work to contribute to programmes' form, meaning and distinctive identity.[7] They are things that come to have a life of their own within the fictional world of a television police series. This point alludes to Marx's (1867) explanation of the commodity in capitalist society, where he argued that the effect of industrial capitalism on people was to turn them into objects deployed to service a profit-driven economic system. Conversely, objects (like cars) are endowed with apparent agency, character and personality that conceal their nature as products of human labour. In this chapter I have suggested that the significance of cars in television police drama is also dependent on an industrial history in which changing production circumstances affect how cars can appear on screen. Studio-based programmes, programmes using filmed inserts of car action in combination with studio drama, then filmed or digitally recorded programmes, deploy cars differently because of what can be achieved with available cameras and technologies of sound recording. Within the police genre, there are differences between character-focused dramas versus action-focused ones that affect how often, and in what ways, cars appear in programmes. But in each case, cars are narrative vehicles and drive the narrative, at the same time as they are relatively passive

[7] I have made a related argument about the 'performances' by puppets and models in children's science fiction series including *Stingray*, *Thunderbirds* and *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (Bignell, 2014).

components of setting. Cars are an aspect of aesthetic style, and contribute to its rapid definition early in a programme as a marker of the programme's distinctive identity. In association with the protagonists, and as a result of the car's continuity through an episode across sequences and across commercial breaks, cars specific to a series are important to its brand identity. Structurally, car sequences work as a kind of glue, linking places in the fictional world and linking segments of storyline. In as much as they are a tool for, and extension of, the police protagonist, the police's cars signify the ideological function of law enforcement and its ability to control physical space. Tracing the different roles of cars in police series is a way into the textual, historical and cultural work of television as well as the police genre specifically.

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