

# *Performing the identity of the medium: adaptation and television historiography*

Article

Published Version

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY)

Open Access

Bignell, J. (2019) Performing the identity of the medium: adaptation and television historiography. *Adaptation*, 12 (2). pp. 149-164. ISSN 1755-0645 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apz017> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/83766/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apz017>

Publisher: Oxford Academic

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

**CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

# Performing the Identity of the Medium: Adaptation and Television Historiography

JONATHAN BIGNELL <sup>\*</sup>

**Abstract** This article focuses on how histories of television construct narratives about what the medium is, how it changes, and how it works in relation to other media. The key examples discussed are dramatic adaptations made and screened in Britain. They include early forms of live transmission of performance shot with multiple cameras, usually in a TV studio, with the aim of bringing an intimate and immediate experience to the viewer. This form shares aspects of medial identity with broadcast radio and live television programmes, and with theatre. The article also analyses adaptations of a later period, mainly filmed dramas for television that were broadcast in weekly serialized episodes, and shot on location to offer viewers a rich engagement with a realized fictional world. Here, film production techniques and technologies are adapted for television, alongside the routines of daily and weekly scheduling that characterize television broadcasting. The article identifies and analyses the questions about what is proper to television that arise from the different forms that adaptations took. The analyses show that television has been a mixed form across its history, while often aiming to reject such intermediality and claim its own specificity as a medium. Television adaptation has, paradoxically, operated as the ground to assert and debate what television could and should be, through a process of transforming pre-existing material. The performance of television's role has taken place through the relay, repetition, and remediation that adaptation implies, and also through the repudiation of adaptation.

**Keywords:** *History, Performance, Medium, Drama, Television, Britain.*

This article discusses relationships between television, theatre, and cinema in specific contexts, but across many meanings of the concept of adaptation, to argue for the importance of conducting comparative analysis historically, rather than adopting it as a form of transhistorical essentialism. Adaptation is part of an insistent and changing process of identity formation in which television fits itself into a media ensemble, adjusting itself and affecting the media adjacent to it, and it often accomplishes this by co-opting and assimilating something from outside it that it makes its own. This process of jockeying for position, incorporation, or assimilation of elements from outside, and self-assertion in relation to comparators or rivals, is structurally very similar to the way adaptation works in its Darwinian, evolutionary context, where organisms claim a niche to which they are best fitted, and continually develop in a complex competitive environment. While this can only be a metaphor as far as media historiography is concerned, it is illuminating to think of television as a complex organic structure of

*\*Film, Theatre & Television, University of Reading. E-mail: [j.bignell@reading.ac.uk](mailto:j.bignell@reading.ac.uk).*

different human, technological, institutional and economic components that claims a place in, and changes in relation to, its environment.

This article examines some conceptual issues and works through some specific examples to suggest the parameters of the research problems at stake, with the aim of setting out an agenda for further work on the historical relationships between television's medial identity and adaptation. My account engages with important strands of work in adaptation studies, but steps back from the detail of current debates to address the problems in a new way. The historiography that I adduce and the examples I choose are from the development of television in Britain, and mainly in forms of scripted dramatic programming. As the first national regularly scheduled television service in the world, the British example was both formative for the medium's development elsewhere but also a point of comparison that could be repudiated and avoided. Other television services adapted the British model to different degrees and negotiated their identity in relation to it and other influential comparators, especially the commercial network organization adopted in the United States (Weissmann). Dramatic modes of programming have been selected because they have the clearest relationship with adaptation as traditionally conceived, namely television versions of literary classics (Giddings and Selby) and theatre dramas (Ridgman), whose history has been documented and can therefore be reflected on in a metacommentary such as this one. While these constraints on the topic impose some obvious limitations on the generalizability of the arguments, they also raise a useful methodological question of exemplarity and generalizability (Bignell).

My purpose in this article is to suggest that every movement back in order to revisit a source and adapt it is a kind of looping or spiralling which creates a temporal structure of then and now, and a spatial structure of positions that establishes how an adaptation recapitulates and displaces what is adapted. For example, the BBC TV adaptation *Count Dracula* (1977) drew from the incidents and characterizations in Stoker's 1895 novel. But its iconography remediated the caped aristocratic figure played by Bela Lugosi in Tod Browning's 1931 cinema film, which itself grew out of Hamilton Deane's (1924) British and John Balderston's (1927) American theatre adaptations (Skal). Lugosi had played Dracula on the Broadway stage, where *Dracula* conveniently took place in indoor settings, and the costuming of Dracula in evening dress and opera cloak aligned him with the sinister hypnotists, seducers, and evil aristocrats of Victorian melodramatic theatre. His high-collared cape had been adopted to hide the actor's head as he escaped through concealed panels to disappear from the stage, for stage machinery like trick coffins, trapdoors, and smoke effects were important attractions for the audience. Moreover, as well as going back to antecedents that were already remediations of the Dracula story, the 1977 BBC adaptation used state-of-the-art video effects to present the story as hallucinatory and nightmarish, updating the mode of address to the audience that the stage versions had adopted. It was an up-to-the minute production with digital manipulation of colours and pixellation of images, for example, as used in pop music performances on *Top of the Pops* (BBC 1964–2006) and in science fiction stories for *Doctor Who* (BBC 1963–89). The *Count Dracula* adaptation showcased what television could do that theatre and cinema could not, despite its links with them. Thinking of adaptation as repetition with difference emphasizes the turning-away or divergence

within the movement of return, and the creation of a new object. The dual temporality of the repetition involved in adaptation, and the ideas of progression, reworking, and return, are aspects of how adaptation is connected to historiography.

### TELEVISION AS RELAY

It is often claimed that early television was a medium of relay, in which pre-existing content was ‘televized’ rather than new forms being developed (Uricchio). There is some justification for this account, as I briefly outline below. But the notion of medium already implicates the concept of adaptation, because the transmission of something from one environment to another raises the question of whether the thing transferred is the same at the end of the process as it is was at the start. The question is a development of the problem of representation itself, since in representation the image or symbol representing the original is necessarily other to it, but that original cannot be conceived outside of representation. There is no pre-representational object to measure against, so there is difference and mediation inherent in the act of symbolization. Where adaptation is concerned, there is always an antecedent to which the adaptation harks back. In as much as it identifies what it is adapting, an adaptation is a form of subsequent representation, maintaining the distinctions between an original and the work that implicitly or explicitly acknowledges an antecedent source. This adaptive process is significant to the concept of relay in the development of television, inviting questions about the degree to which television foregrounds the fact that some programmes derive from an anterior source. At one level, any representation is already a form of adaptation, rather than a neutral relay, and the question is instead about what is at stake in framing something as an adaptation.

Historically, the invention of television is marked by a struggle for medial transparency, in which the difference between an original and its representation is minimized. In this sense, television adapted to expectations about the mediation of image and sound that were already in place. Television technologies and forms were drawn from media that already had strong conventions of representation; in its visual dimension this included renaissance perspective representation of three-dimensional subjects in two dimensions, and the convention of framing that produces the distinction between on-screen versus off-screen space (Heath). These conventions already existed in photography and cinema. Early television viewers were ‘lookers-in’, positioned in front of the framed, window-like image. Early television experiments adapted existing technologies from radio, telegraphy, and telephony too. These included the technologies of microphone and loudspeaker, aerial transmission and cable transmission, and the prioritization of voice over other kinds of sound in the design of reproduction equipment, for example. Early conceptualizations of television considered it as a potentially person-to-person medium, adapting the identity of the telephone as a networked form of personalized communication and the telegraph as a point-to-point system (Gripsrud 20–21). Television is an adaptation of the telegraph inasmuch as it relies on dissection of a picture and its transmission as electronic signals that enable the picture to be re-assembled at its destination. This technology had been invented for the transmission of still pictures, segmenting them into pixels that could be transformed into electric information by selenium cells, and was used to send news photographs by wire for

printing in newspapers, for example (Winston 91–93). Picture dissection and wireless broadcasting, and then the assimilation of the aim to transmit moving pictures as in cinema, were brought together as the technical components of television. Each of those components was an adaptation of a technology already in use for another medium. But in another sense these imaginings of the medium repudiated adaptation, in that they aimed to be technologies of relay that did not foreground the modification of the object represented.

Early television broadcasting entailed adaptation, in which the BBC's small and enterprising staff identified, claimed access to and modified material that they sent back out again on the airwaves to far beyond where it had come from. There was an important social dimension to this; television's ability to relay events live was a form of mediated participation in public life, connecting people to what happened beyond their immediate experience. The history of this formative period can also be told via an attention to spatiality, since early television is characterized by a geographical notion of radial extension, where a central source radiates mediated experiences to a heterogeneous and distant hinterland. At the centre of BBC's television operation were Alexandra Palace studios in north London, equipped for programme production and also dissemination of broadcast signals from the studios' huge rooftop aerial. Television radiated out in a circle about 80 miles wide. To televise events beyond the studio the BBC used two Outside Broadcast (OB) units. Within the city, a direct physical connection with the studio could be established by plugging the OB unit into a huge co-axial cable that had been laid in the ground, wiring up the West End district. This circuit of cable demonstrated physically how London-centric the television service was, and was a material expression of the BBC's pragmatic assumption that viewers would be most interested in the things that could be seen within that very restricted metropolitan space. The zone included the premier locations associated with government, royalty, religion, theatre, ballet, and opera, and of course the BBC's own headquarters. But the charmed circle at the centre of BBC television operations always had a dual character. While its metropolitan emphasis was exclusive, the events and experiences within that central zone were resources that were seized on for dissemination to a large and diverse public. Television was expected to cover, transform and send out a whole range of social and cultural events (like parades, West End plays, or Wimbledon tennis matches), and remediation would transform them because of their new accessibility. Television was always remediation, despite its assumption of liveness, relay, and transparency (Feuer).

Television inherited and adapted from radio the packaging of different types of content into individual programmes, and these were produced by the same institutions and often the same personnel as radio. There were scheduled radio broadcasts of fixed duration, produced, and advertised in categories that corresponded to existing genres or modes of address like news, drama, sport, or entertainment. In the first week of television in November 1936, BBC broadcast *Theatre Parade*, adapting scenes from a Royalty Theatre production of *Marigold*, a Scottish-set comedy. The programme was only 25 minutes long, so could barely be called an adaptation in the sense of a fully-realized transfer of a text from one medium to another. On subsequent Monday afternoons from 3.35 to 4.00 p.m. *Theatre Parade* offered extracts from further stage productions, and also plays specially mounted in Alexandra Palace studios including T. S. Eliot's

*Murder in the Cathedral* and an adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. Later in the year, longer dramas of an hour or more were broadcast, by writers including Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Wing Pinero, and W. B. Yeats. Each of these cultural ingredients had to be adapted for television, through editing and restaging for shooting within the television studio.

Despite the close connections between some of these programmes and current or recent theatre productions, full-length performances were not relayed directly from London playhouses. The first such relay was Wednesday 16 November 1938, when J. B. Priestley's *When We Are Married* was transmitted live from St. Martin's Theatre, London. Not only did the cameras cover the stage, but they also panned across the audience in the stalls (who were in evening dress) to convey the atmosphere of the live performance ("Television Notes"). Relatively rare events like this, whose very exceptionalness was demonstrated by the pans around the theatre audience to show that the cameras were present in an actual auditorium, demonstrate that the normal run of dramatic programming did not try to mimic live theatre (Barr). Even in these early BBC dramas, directors had little interest in shooting action statically, from a distance, such as would be the case if cameras were positioned front-on to the performance and shot in long-shot compositions as if from the seats of a theatre auditorium. Instead, they used the cameras' ability to change between (usually three) different lenses to offer close-ups, medium shots, and long shots of the action (Jacobs). They also physically moved the cameras on wheeled dollies towards or away from the action, and introduced curving moves during shots to give dynamism and pace to the visual presentation. The formal features and aesthetic aims of television drama were connected with, but different to, those of live theatre as television negotiated its relationship with other media.

Both BBC and (later, after its start in 1955) commercial Independent Television (ITV) drama producers were ambivalent about the medium's relationships with adaptations of theatre material. Television producers and directors believed that television should seek out its own form and style of drama, as Barry's memoir of producing and directing pre- and post-War BBC drama describes. However, the resources of playwrights and scripts from theatre were readily available, and adapting drama reduced risk since the plays were already proven in theatre performance and their casts and settings could even be transposed into the television studio. Because of BBC's presence in London, metropolitan entertainment of all kinds was available to be televised relatively easily. Broadcasts could also be supported by arts programmes and discussions on radio or television, framing performances as, for example, well-loved classics or exciting experiments. Commissioning both original dramas and adaptations of theatre plays was in effect to advertize theatre as an important cultural form, and as part of cosmopolitan leisure activity beyond the home. Taylor ("History of the Stage Play" 33) documents which theatre writers' work was adapted for BBC television between 1936 and 1994. The three most broadcast twentieth-century playwrights were George Bernard Shaw, J. B. Priestley, and Noël Coward. When dramatic writers from the classical world to the present day are included, Shakespeare, Shaw, and Ibsen appear most frequently (Taylor, "History of the Stage Play" 34–35). The recognition of theatre's cultural significance for commentators and opinion-formers within and outside broadcasting legitimated continued investment in adapted stage work.

Occasionally, moreover, dramatists with much experience of theatre and interest in the relationship of its conventions to television, created dramas for television that thematized and deconstructed theatricality. Such is the case with Samuel Beckett, as I have argued elsewhere (Bignell). Beckett's dramas for television, made between the 1960s and 1980s, are static, the action takes place in non-representational sets constructed in television studios, and camera moves are few, simple, and self-effacing. In some ways, they look like relays of theatre performances. But at the same time, the plays use representational conventions that are specific to television rather than theatre, such as videographic effects, cutting between simultaneous locations and direct address to the viewer. 'Look', and 'Mine is a faint voice. ... Keep that sound down!', an off-screen female voice commands the viewer in Beckett's drama 'Ghost Trio' (1977), for example, written for television but resembling an avant-garde theatre piece. What looks like a throwback to a time when television might have seemed in thrall to theatre, can instead be understood as a wry meditation on how the two media are different as well as similar. The repudiation of theatricality that is entailed in the quest for medium specificity opens the way for work that self-consciously deconstructs the supposed links between media and performs them at the same time.

#### MEDIUM SPECIFICITY

The performance of television's identity, in a process of continual becoming and re-making, is an activity of taking up a position relative to comparators, rather than expressing an essence (Bignell). The methodology underlying the focus on performativity derives from several fields. Linguistic theory establishes how speech and action can be the same thing (Austin), and how an articulation sets up a source and destination, a speaker and a listener, and a world about which something can be said (Lyotard). Identities have been explained in the field of gender studies as roles performed in a social context, adducing the material properties of bodies but not determined by them, in a complex texture of identifications with others and differentiations from them (Butler). Performance studies emphasizes how textual, institutional, and generic conventions both constrain comprehensibility and enable it in a specific social context (Parker and Sedgwick). The claim for self-sufficient identity and the relational performance of identity are two aspects of the same process. Although television performed the role of a supplement to, or subsequent outlet for, pre-existing activities that it would adapt, there were consistent calls for a form of representation that would be specific to the medium. This was a form of repudiation, refusing the tie to the anterior original, usually from outside the medium, that adaptation entails. But in all cases repudiation carried with it the shadow of its other, incorporating the outside within its inside, at each attempt to break away into independence, as is shown by the persistence of adaptation across the whole of the medium's history. For example, one of the distinctive forms that might distinguish between television and either theatre or cinema is the live performance of an episodic serial drama created for television. But although original weekly serial drama became a staple of the schedules, the first such programme was actually an adaptation, a six-part version of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The children's novel was serialized across the Christmas period in 1950–51 by the BBC, performed live in the studio in the *For the Children* afternoon schedule, and was itself an adaptation of a



theatre version of the novel created at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in London.

Between 1960s and 1980s, the television studio was increasingly and pejoratively associated with the verbal emphasis of scripted drama rather than with physical dynamism, action, and movement (Macmurrough-Kavanagh and Lacey). The use of studio space and its technologies had impacts on specific aspects of dramas' aesthetics, including performance style, the degree of emphasis on close-up, and on sets and lighting. Plays used the intimacy of the studio and exploited the primacy of acted performance. The room as a setting, and home in general, have connotations of privacy, family, and the reproduction of social relations that are associated with theatre naturalism. Williams described television drama as 'the ultimate realisation of the original naturalist convention: the drama of the small enclosed room, in which a few characters lived out their private experience of an unseen public world' (Williams 56). The champion of the script-focussed, studio-bound technique in Britain was the director Taylor ("Pure Imagination" 38), who sought to characterize it as the essence of drama for television, whereas shooting on film on location seemed to him like making low-budget cinema; an inevitably inferior achievement: 'True television drama has a quite different aesthetic from film-making. It tolerates, in fact it relishes imaginative, argumentative and even poetic writing in a way the film camera does not'. Taylor's reference to 'writing' is to script-writing, and especially dialogue. Television drama offered the chance to craft language that would be spoken by highly trained performers, acting in specially designed settings built in the studio, thus creating an imaginative fictional world in which all elements of the drama could be aesthetically harmonious and controlled. The result would be 'long, developing scenes, where the actors can work without interference from the director's camera', and television drama would be what Taylor ("Pure Imagination" 38) described as 'a writers' and actors' medium'. Speech, not action, is a key component of this ensemble of creative means, and Taylor argues for the affective charge generated thereby, emerging as 'passion that comes from deep wells of feeling plumbed by good words'. This, he thought, was what television drama should be.

But a different, hybrid format emerged in the early 1970s that promised to combine the flexibility and immediacy of multi-camera video shooting with the location realism of film. Outside Broadcast (OB) technology for shooting drama combined aspects of inexpensive video shooting with the location realism of film. Colour broadcasting had arrived in Britain at the end of the 1960s, but significantly raised the cost of production for programme makers. OB was a cheaper technology than using either film or the elaborately equipped and staffed television studio, and had been proven in the non-fiction production environment of sports coverage and public ceremonial. An OB unit comprised two electronic cameras producing output recorded on videotape, with simultaneous sound recorded by radio microphones, and thus a smaller and cheaper crew than a film unit or a fully equipped television studio. The video technology required less elaborate lighting than film, produced high-definition images capable of representing the detail of props, costumes, and locations, and could withstand the rigours of shooting outdoors. Sound quality was somewhat inferior, however, its video pictures looked somewhat flatter, and despite the flexibility of the equipment its operators were trained in shooting horseracing, football and Royal occasions, for example, and



thus tended to revert to coverage of action in lengthy, unexciting long-shots. Television drama on OB could look too everyday, too aesthetically uninteresting.

The problem with OB could be phrased as a complaint that as a technology it is too televisual, being most suited to live multi-camera coverage of unscripted events in exterior locations, which was what early television did. However, as Smart (“Producing Classics”) has detailed, the producer Cedric Messina used OB for series of full-length BBC productions of adapted drama in 1970s, ranging from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1971) to the near-contemporary *The Love-Girl and the Innocent* (1973) by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. As Smart (“BBC Television” 457) shows by analysing the production techniques and records of audience reaction to them, OB plays created ‘an aesthetic of decorative visual pleasure through recording in castles, stately homes, gardens and forests’, but also ‘murkiness in terms of sound and lighting with looming clouds and echoing floors’. Despite the drawbacks of the technology, the elaborate OB location shooting of Messina’s dramas satisfied audience expectations for costume adaptations of classic plays in what would later be termed a ‘heritage’ aesthetic (Higson). Smart (“BBC Television” 459) encapsulates these values as ‘elegance of language and décor, the opportunity to experience a particularly rich form of character acting; an immersive experience of life in a different era; a sense of charm’. Viewers’ feedback showed that the plays were enjoyed partly because they were not like (other) television, and audiences viewed them with a sense of relief, in contrast to what they saw in news, documentary, and original drama of the time. Again, adaptation was a site for negotiating what television could or should be.

Commercial and technological factors led to British television converging more towards cinema, and adapting to an international television market dominated by the United States. By 1970s, it had become commonplace for dramatic programmes to be made on celluloid film, and increasingly by teams of professionals brought together for short-term project-based film shoots, rather than as an established repertory of permanent employees. The increasing importance of export revenue to the financing of domestic television, and the deregulation of the media industries in the Conservative ideological climate of 1980s onwards, made this shift towards globalization and casualization take root. It was conducive to filmmaking for television, rather than shooting on video in permanently maintained television production facilities. As far as export was concerned, the major market was (and still is) the United States, but British and American television had different and incompatible technologies of broadcasting. British viewers watched television sets whose electronic pictures were made using the PAL format to produce an image comprising 405 lines and then (to prepare for the introduction of colour in 1967) of 625 lines of visual information, while American television transmission was in the NTSC format with images of 525 lines. So live television, and productions recorded onto videotape, had to be put onto celluloid film for television screening if programmes were exported across the Atlantic. Cinema film was already an international technology, and the need to make television on film to move it easily from one country to another brought the industries of cinema and television production together. Television production formats adapted to the problems caused for international programme exchange by the techno-nationalism (Hickethier) that had led to different countries

adopting rival technical standards for television broadcast within their own and affiliated territories.

Television directors generally valued the greater control over the aesthetics of an adaptation (or any other kind of scripted drama) that using film cameras on location brought with it. For example, Simon Langton, director of BBC's adaptation of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* commented:

We used to work this ridiculous system in the Seventies when you had eight days' rehearsal and then you had two hours in which to record the entire thing. The result of this studio-based filming was everything I didn't like about classic drama. It always looked slightly forced. And there's a whole new generation of young people who have been brought up watching drama on film, which is structured and shot in such a different way. I think film is more authentic and adds up to the kind of production Andrew [Davies] had in mind; the scripts are written with a filmic sense of rhythm. (Birtwhistle and Conklin 16)

Langton's remarks appeared in a 'making-of' book, published by BBC to accompany the serial. The very fact that this publication was produced, in a glossy format with many colour production stills featuring the costumes, décor, and locations, gives prominence to the visual spectacle that shooting on film made possible. While the screenwriter Andrew Davies is given a privileged status in this paratextual material, the look of the production is focussed on, at least as much as, and perhaps more than, the actors or any other contributors to the finished work. Langton continued by emphasizing the comparison with videotape, refusing the conventional assumption that as-if live, sequential shooting gave prominence to performance: 'The literalness of videotape looks right for news programmes, but it impoverishes drama. Because actors are covered by several cameras at the same time, the lighting has to be so general that the atmosphere and mood are diminished. Movement is restricted, and this can result in a very stiff feel to the acting' (Birtwhistle and Conklin 79). The BBC adaptation's Production Designer, Gerry Scott, was responsible for the look of the adaptation as a whole, and she made a point of the opportunities for integration of performance with place, space, and setting that location shooting offered: 'Our aim was to film as much as possible on location because we wanted to use the English landscape as a player in the film. It makes a great difference if you can see real exteriors outside the windows of the rooms; it gives a true sense of the geography of the places' (Birtwhistle and Conklin 37). Nevertheless, the sheer cost of making *Pride and Prejudice* on cinema film stock (35 mm celluloid) would have been prohibitive, and it was shot on the cheaper Super 16 mm film format. BBC made the adaptation with co-production investment from the Arts & Entertainment (A&E) network in the USA, which provided upfront investment in return for first-run rights to screen the series on their channel. In Britain, the production had a very high profile, being screened weekly on the BBC1 channel with repeats of each episode in the same week on the minority channel BBC2. Film production for television had become assimilated into certain genres, notably into literary adaptation, becoming 'proper' television.

#### ADAPTING PEOPLE TO TELEVISION

As well as adapting events to suit the dispositive of broadcasting, radio, and then television required its audiences to adapt themselves to the role hollowed out for them by

the medium. As Scannell (16) has written in relation to the concept of Public Service Broadcasting, British policy for radio and television

brought into being a radically new kind of public—one commensurate with the whole of society. On behalf of this public the broadcasters asserted a right of access to a wide range of political, cultural, sporting, religious, ceremonial and entertainment resources which, perforce, had hitherto been accessible only to small, self-selecting, and more or less privileged publics.

As far as adaptation was concerned, this assumption that broadcasting entailed a right of access to cultural goods that could then be disseminated to the broadcast audience meant exercising judgements of taste and quality in decisions about what to adapt. Of course, there were also economic factors, especially copyright, that affected which works could be licensed for television adaptation, and considerations of cost in relation to the numbers of performers, sets or locations that a specific script would require. But fundamentally, adaptation was assumed to be within the purview of television and something that the audience needed or deserved. Indeed, following Scannell's logic, adaptation took part in creating the broadcast audience as equivalent to the general public. 'Particular publics were replaced by the *general* public constituted in and by the general nature of the mixed programme service and its general, unrestricted availability'. Television adaptation took for granted that there were works that ought to be made available by being televised.

Val Gielgud was Head of Drama at the BBC from 1934 to 1963, and pursued a policy that broadcasting should adapt the classics, with limited scope for new, experimental or foreign drama offered on radio, rather than television, by the minority Third Programme channel. However, his conservatism was increasingly evident and in order to refresh BBC's radio and then television output, when Gielgud stepped down he was replaced by Martin Esslin, who had just published a study of the Absurd praising the contemporary playwrights Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. BBC staff were increasingly supporters of the new drama of the period, with interests in original drama and experimental uses of both radio and television. A significantly different attitude began to prevail in programmes for the general audience, though the conservative, conservationist approach embodied by Gielgud persisted for much longer in educational programmes, for example, designed specifically for use in school and college classrooms (Wrigley). Each of these historical shifts was determined by changing attitudes to a shared ethos; the responsibility of television to give access to literary and theatrical classics. As late as the BBC's adaptation of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, its producer Sue Birtwhistle had begun the project with the same aim of accessibility that had been part of Public Service Broadcasting since the early twentieth century. She pitched the idea for the serialization to BBC to attract the widest audience: 'We felt that, if it were shown on ITV, the BBC audience might not even give it a chance. Whereas we know that a BBC audience would probably at least try a Jane Austen serial wherever it was scheduled' (Birtwhistle and Conklin v).

As a broadcast medium, television produces an assumption of its collective simultaneous presence for each of a programme's viewers, but what television shows is necessarily something that is elsewhere, and which has already taken place. Its metaphysics

of presence and apparent liveness is predicated on absence, and requires its audience to allow television to be a delegate for the viewer, looking on his or her behalf. Viewers are invited to fit themselves to the point of view that the television image requires, and the narrative perspective that dramatic fiction adopts, so that they can benefit from taking part as members of its audience. Whereas television was established as a private, commercial entertainment medium for the home in the United States from the start of regular broadcasting there in 1939, in Britain and Europe television was initially imagined as a public experience that would be engaged in communally (West 127–68). In 1930s, both domestic television receiver equipment and theatrical television apparatus were developed with similar effort and investment, and audiences could have adapted to public viewing of television along the lines of the cinema experience just as easily as they adapted to home viewing on the model of domestic wireless reception. In 1937, Britain had more than 100 public television venues, and audiences of as many as 100 people watched together at railway stations, restaurants, and department stores, for example (Corrigan). The experience of being part of a television audience had to be learned, and could have taken very different forms.

Alternatively, television could also have developed as something akin to our contemporary Skype experience, in which individuals send and receive independently created messages using small-scale personalized equipment. By contrast, however, commercial interests determined that television would develop as a centre-periphery broadcast technology. Large corporations established and maintained technical facilities for programme production, requiring significant capital investment, and were organized as major public institutions with the legal status of corporate, commercial entities (Hilmes 22–30). The development of television as a domestic medium to be consumed within the home environment opened up the mass market for television receivers. The BBC, when first formed as a national television institution in Britain in 1922, began as a conglomerate formed from individual manufacturers of receiving equipment, and radio and television programme making activities were intended to supply content that would encourage consumers to purchase receivers. At the same time, national governments sought to regulate the potential chaos of the airwaves by licensing broadcasters and imposing technical standards. In these ways, the medial identity of television closely mirrored that of radio, and its social, economic, and cultural form was adapted to the centre-periphery model of broadcasting, with a division between the technical and professional elites creating and managing the service versus the dispersed and privatized audience of consumers receiving it. Television adapted to the techno-nationalism and regulated consumerism of twentieth-century modernity. More recently, moves to make the domestic television receiver suit the aspect ratio of cinema films (a width to height ratio of 16:9) were driven by the economics of paid cable and streaming services that televize cinema films made for that screen ratio, materially affecting viewers' expectations of the visual aesthetics of television (Cardwell, "Sense of Proportion"). People adapt to widescreen images that do not privilege the central framing of the human face, as former 4:3 and 14:9 ratios had done, questioning a medium-essentialist view of television drama as character-based and psychologically-focussed, for example. Technologies, regulatory regimes and commerce affect conceptions of the television medium's identity.

In the making of actual programmes, there was necessarily a process of mutual adaptation of people with machines (Hall and Ellis). In the corporate, industrial production of television programmes in the physical facilities of the major institutions, working practices had to be developed to facilitate the operation of television equipment, adapting technologies to the needs of creative practice and, conversely, accommodating people to the interfaces of machines. The planning of the programme schedule and the integration of the complex operations of different departments and specialists required the management of time and the deployment of complex human skills. Making television drama was a process of mutual adaptation, but with its roots in theatre. It was always the case, however, that when the cameras were operating the focus of television production would be on the logistics of camera placement and movement, rather than the aesthetics of acted performances. In the studio, with three or more electronic cameras operating at the same time, with their electrical cables snaking across the studio floor and numerous changes of camera position and shot type to organize, actors had to adapt themselves to the production process just as much as production staff sought to privilege and relay the professional work of the actors.

Working practices for performers in television drama were adapted from those of theatre. There were rehearsal spaces located next to the BBC's studios at Alexandra Palace, and the refinement of performance led up to camera rehearsals and technical rehearsals immediately preceding the live transmission of drama, normally in the evening (Hewett). BBC and ITV drew most of their performers from the professional theatre, or from the variety circuit, in which ensemble working, repetition of performance and liveness were expected. In London's West End, drama and variety shows might run for weeks or months, since the venues were run by large production companies (notably H. M. Tennent Ltd) which sought to maximize the profitability of each show by defraying the major investment in new productions across as long a time as possible. In the provinces, repertory companies drew on a relatively stable canon of texts and a fixed group of performers to produce seasons of shows that might change each week, but comprised the same kind of light comedy, upper-middle class domestic drama and classical revivals as in the West End (Shellard). In variety and musical, performers toured around regional venues in a planned sequence, repeating the same act in one town after another throughout the year. In contrast, television drama and entertainment used up material very quickly, because live programmes would occur only once, with one possible repeat performance (also live) a few days later. There was less repetition of performance itself than in theatre, but the same structure of repeated rehearsal leading to live performance, and some sense of ensemble created by the collaborative process of programme development and shooting, especially for serial or series drama. In these ways, television performance as a professional practice was similar to and different from theatre.

Connections with theatre became less marked, however, as production methods changed. With the routine use of videotape for prerecording from the late 1950s onwards, and the insertion of location material shot on film into live or videotaped studio performance, the linear and uninterrupted temporality of production reduced because sequences could be repeated, the order of scenes changed, and material shot at different times could be integrated. This meant setting up each camera shot separately,

planning the performance, lighting, sound, props and other elements of each shot in advance, and after completing that shot moving onto another, perhaps from a different scene or part of the story. The integration of one shot with another, development of consistency of performance style, aesthetic tone and the pacing of narrative became the province of the director and were almost exclusively under his or her control, since other members of the production contributed piecemeal to the final product. Shooting on location meant a reduction in rehearsal and ensemble working, so that as in cinema, performers were expected to arrive on set having already developed a performance in their own time elsewhere (Hewett). More and more programmes were produced in the same way as cinema, and performers had to adapt themselves to this way of working that television had adapted from the film industry.

For performers and the production team in the contemporary television drama production environment, the working methods of shooting in sound-stages and on location, with film or High Definition video cameras, shooting out of story order and with extensive post-production editing to build narrative structure, are near identical to projects made for cinema exhibition. Adaptation still differentiates television from cinema, however. Aside from a quantitative difference of budget, the significant difference is that television drama is almost always in serial or series formats, to build viewer loyalty, promote channel identity, amortise set-up costs across a relatively large number of broadcast hours and generate opportunities for programme sales in international markets. Classic novel adaptations in long-form episodic serials have returned to prominence as ways of offering viewer engagement that suit relatively new ways of enjoying television. For example, BBC's expensively mounted adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (2018–19), co-produced with international partners and running over six episodes, was scheduled and trailed to encourage a conventional appointment to view experience (where waiting for the broadcast of the next week's episode is expected and even enjoyed), and also binge watching where multiple episodes could be consumed at one sitting, delivered as a virtual box-set by iPlayer, BBC's online service. The temporality of television has changed but the medium continues to exploit features that were established very early in its history and were linked strongly to the serial formats in which literary adaptations have been broadcast.

## CONCLUSIONS

Writing a history of television inevitably involves an engagement with questions of identity, asking what defines or characterizes television as a medium. These debates not only concern the essence of television, but also lead to expectations and judgements about what the medium should do. In as much as these assertions about television are debated and fought over, and change over time, there is a history of how television has been shaped through discursive contestation. Television unconsciously thematizes its own structural problems of inclusion and exclusion, sending and receiving, repeating and remediating. As a medium it has been shaped by its closeness both to the quotidian reality in which it is embedded and its domestic situation within the daily lives of its viewers. Television has been a window on the world, and a mirror that reflects its audiences to themselves (Gripsrud). The window function is clearest in the genres of news, current affairs and documentary, while its role as a mirror is obvious in its dramatization



of representations of the domestic, of family interactions and character relationships in dramas, from soap opera to science fiction and fantasy but also in forms of literary and dramatic adaptation. Television has also claimed immediacy, beginning as a live medium for both factual and scripted, fictional programmes and still privileging liveness in high-profile live ‘specials’ (at anniversaries or national festival times, for example), live game-shows and talent contests. As John Caughie (32) has argued, television as a medium has been associated with relay, an ‘effect of immediacy, of a directness and spontaneity which comes to signify authenticity’ and which then becomes ‘one of the characteristics of the specific forms of realism in television drama’. Alongside this, television has privileged relationships, emotion and intimacy. It is broadcast into the viewer’s private space, makes much use of close up and interpersonal relationships between human characters. The expression of emotion and revelation of motivation are facilitated by the alternation of conversation and focus on reaction to events as much as to characters’ initiation of action. In each of these forms and aspects, different kinds of adaptation are present and actively operative to take part in the contestation of what the medium is, has been or should be.

Alongside the arguments about medium specificity, television has been thought about through processes of comparison with, and differentiation from, other media seen as related to it. These comparisons affect which adaptations are made and how they sit in their television contexts. Such comparisons operate in relation to features of television technologies, aesthetic and formal practices in programmes, institutional and industrial organization, and cultures of reception. Each of these features also changes as television and its potential comparators jostle and shift in relation to each other. This intersectional, intermedial approach corresponds to work on the aesthetics of television (especially by Cardwell, “Television”) that considers the medium as an art form that borrows from other arts at the same time as it establishes its own properties and what is proper to it. Television invents itself by breaking away from something established as its anterior, but also its comparator or rival. Breaking away often happens by taking up and modifying a source, in other words through a process of adaptation, and the resulting text, technology or practice thus exhibits both connection to its source as well as separation from it. No identity is self-sufficient, but is performed relationally by asserting similarity to, and difference from, one or more others set up as points of comparison and contrast.

## REFERENCES

- “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” *Play of the Month*. BBC1. Writ. William Shakespeare. Prod. Cedric Messina. Dir. James Cellan Jones. 26 Sept. 1971.
- Austin, John L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971.
- Barr, Charles. “‘They Think It’s All Over’: The Dramatic Legacy of Live Television.” *Big Picture, Small Screen: Relations between Film and Television*. Eds. John Hill and Martin McLoone. Luton: John Libbey, 1997: 47–55.
- Barry, Michael. *From the Palace to the Grove*. London: Royal Television Society, 1992.
- Bignell, Jonathan. *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009.
- Bignell, Jonathan. “Citing the Classics: Constructing British Television Drama History in Publishing and Pedagogy.” *Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*. Ed. Helen Wheatley. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007: 27–39.
- Bignell, Jonathan. “Performing Television History.” *Critical Studies in Television* 13 (2018): 262–79.



- Birtwhistle, Sue and Susie Conklin. *The Making of Pride and Prejudice*. London: BBC/Penguin, 1995.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Cardwell, Sarah. "A Sense of Proportion: Aspect Ratio and the Framing of Television Space." *Critical Studies in Television* 10 (2015): 83–100.
- Cardwell, Sarah. "Television amongst Friends: Medium, Art, Media." *Critical Studies in Television* 9 (2014): 6–21.
- Caughie, John. *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Corrigan, Phillip. "On the Difficulty of Being Sociological (Historical Materialist) in the Study of Television: the 'Moment' of English Television, 1936–1939." *1992 and After: Nordic Television in Transition*. Ed. Trine Syvertsen. Bergen: Bergen UP, 1990: 130–60.
- "Doctor Who." BBC1, 1963–89.
- "Count Dracula." BBC2. Writ. Gerald Savory, based on the novel by Bram Stoker. Prod. Morris Barry. Dir. Philip Saville. 22 Dec. 1977.
- Dracula*. Dir. Tod Browning. Perf. Bela Logosi. Universal, 1931.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961.
- Feuer, Jane. "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology." *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*. Ed. E. Ann Kaplan. Los Angeles: University Publications of America, 1983: 12–22.
- "Ghost Trio", broadcast as part of 'Shades: Three Plays by Samuel Beckett'. *The Lively Arts*. BBC2. Writ. Samuel Beckett. Prod. Tristram Powell. Dir. Donald McWhinnie. 17 Apr. 1977.
- Giddings, Robert, and Keith Selby. *The Classic Serial on Television and Radio*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- Gripsrud, Jostein. "Television, Broadcasting, Flow: Key Metaphors in TV Theory." *The Television Studies Book*. Eds. Christine Geraghty and David Lusted. London: Arnold, 1998: 17–32.
- Hall, Nicholas, and John Ellis, eds. *Hands-on Media History: A New Methodological Approach in the Humanities and Social Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Heath, Stephen. "On Screen, In Frame: Film and Ideology." *Quarterly Review of Screen Studies* 1 (1976): 251–65.
- Hewett, Richard. "Spaces of Preparation: The 'Acton Hilton' and Changing Patterns of Television Drama Rehearsal." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 34 (2014): 331–44.
- Hickethier, Knut. "Early TV: Imagining and Realizing Television." *A European Television History*. Eds. Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers. New York: Blackwell, 2007: 55–78.
- Higson, Andrew. "Re-Presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film." *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*. Ed. Lester Friedman. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1993: 109–29.
- Hilmes, Michele, ed. *The Television History Book*. London: British Film Institute, 2003.
- Jacobs, Jason. *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- "Jane Eyre." *Theatre Parade*. BBC. Dir. George More O'Farrell, extracts from The Aldwych Theatre production. 8 Mar. 1937.
- "Les Misérables." BBC1. Writ. Andrew Davies, based on the novel by Victor Hugo. 30 Dec. 2018–3 Feb. 2019.
- "Little Women." *For the Children*. BBC. Writ. Winifred Oughton and Brenda R. Thompson, based on the novel by Louisa M. Alcott. 12 Dec. 1950–23 Jan. 1951.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988.
- Macmurrough-Kavanagh, Madeleine, and Stephen Lacey. "Who Framed Theatre?: The 'Moment of Change' in British Television Drama." *New Theatre Quarterly* 15 (1999): 58–74.
- "Marigold." *Theatre Parade*. BBC. Writ. L. Allen Harker and F. R. Pryor, extracts from The Royalty Theatre production. Dir. George More O'Farrell. 30 Nov. 1936.
- "Murder in the Cathedral." *Theatre Parade*. BBC. Writ. T. S. Eliot, extracts based on the Duchess Theatre production. Prod. E. Martin Browne. 7 Dec. 1936. Television.
- Parker, Andrew, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. *Performativity and Performance*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Pride and Prejudice*. BBC1. Writ. Andrew Davies, based on the novel by Jane Austen. Prod. Sue Birtwhistle. Dir. Simon Langton. 24 Sept. 1995–29 Oct. 1995.
- Ridgman, Jeremy, ed. *Boxed Sets: Television Representations of Theatre*. Luton: Luton UP, 1998.

- Scannell, Paddy. "Public Service Broadcasting: The History of a Concept." *Understanding Television*. Eds. Andrew Goodwin and Gary Whannel. London: Routledge, 1990: 11–29.
- Shellard, Dominic. *The Golden Generation: New Light on Post-war British Theatre*. London: British Library, 2008.
- Skal, David. *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen*. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Smart, Billy. "Producing Classics on Outside Broadcast in the 1970s: *The Little Minister* (1975), *As You Like It* (1978) and *Henry VIII* (1979)." *Critical Studies in Television* 10 (2015): 67–82.
- Smart, Billy. "The BBC Television Audience Research Reports, 1957–1979: Recorded Opinions and Invisible Expectations." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 34 (2014): 452–62.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Eds. Nina Auerbach and David Skal. New York: Norton, 1997.
- Taylor, Neil. "A History of the Stage Play on BBC Television." *Boxed Sets: Television Representations of Theatre*. Ed. Jeremy Ridgman. Luton: John Libbey, 1998: 23–37.
- Taylor, Don. "Pure Imagination, Poetry's Lyricism, Titian's Colours: Whatever Happened to the Single Play on British TV?" *New Statesman*. 6 Mar. 1998: 38–39.
- "Television Notes." *Radio Times*. 11–18 Nov. 1938. 18.
- "The Love-Girl and the Innocent." *Play of the Month*. BBC2. Writ. Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Prod. Cedric Messina. Dir. Alan Clarke. 11 Aug. 1973.
- "The Mayor of Casterbridge." *The Classic Serial*. BBC2. Writ. Dennis Potter, based on the novel by Thomas Hardy. Prod. Jonathan Powell. Dir. David Giles. 22 Jan.–10 Mar. 1978.
- Top of the Pops*. BBC1. 1964–2006.
- Uricchio, William. "Television's First Seventy-five Years: The Interpretive Flexibility of a Medium in Transition." *The Oxford Handbook of Film and Media Studies*. Ed. Robert Kolker. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008: 286–305.
- Weissmann, Elke. *Transnational Television Drama: Special Relations and Mutual Influence between the US and UK*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- West, A. G. D. "Development of Theater Television in England." *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 51 (1948): 12768.
- When We Are Married*. BBC. Writ. J. B. Priestley. Prod. and Dir. Basil Dean, transmitted from St Martin's Theatre, London. 16 Nov. 1938.
- Williams, Raymond. *Television, Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Fontana, 1990.
- Winston, Brian. *Media Technology and Society, A History: from the Telegraph to the Internet*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Wrigley, Amanda. "Tragedy for Teens: Ancient Greek Tragedy on BBC and ITV Schools Television in the 1960s." *Ancient Greece on British Television*. Eds. Fiona Hobden and Amanda Wrigley. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2018: 84–108.