

# *Acting on television: analytical methods and approaches*

Article

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# **ACTING ON TELEVISION: ANALYTICAL METHODS AND APPROACHES**

## **EDITORIAL**

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It has become a commonplace of Television Studies to note that actors and acting have received relatively little sustained critical attention. It is not, in fact, the case that *no* attention has been paid – see Adams, 1990, for example, for a succinct and theoretically-informed account of what makes acting for the small screen distinctive, and Kim Durham’s 2002 insider account of acting on UK television – but that a consideration of acting and actors was often wrapped into other concerns, as an aspect of *mise-en-scène*, for example, the specificity of an actor’s performance dissolved into the elements filling the screen, or (pace Film Studies) through the prism of Star Studies. The main focus in each case has been the finished product, and the answer to John Caughie’s provocative and productive question, ‘What do actors do when they act?’ (2000, 2014), was mostly evident in the performance as it appeared on the screen.

Caughie was concerned with more than this, however, and his analysis began, suggestively, to answer his question by drawing attention to the importance of the working processes of actors themselves and the production contexts in which they were embedded. One dominant, and highly productive, strand in the scholarship about television acting that

has appeared in the last ten years has been a concern with the work that actors do to prepare and construct a character within the highly-pressured and distinctive working practices that constitute contemporary television drama production. This has been a rich seam of research, utilising a variety of methods, notably interviews with actors themselves. This surfaced, productively, in research that focused on actors playing ‘real’ people, largely within the genres of historical biopic and documentary drama: the ‘Acting with Facts’ project at the University of Reading, for example, led by Derek Paget and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. This project was based on largely on interviews with actors, as was the account by Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst (2010) of actors working primarily within documentary drama. There is now a rich seam of scholarship concerned with performers and their working practices, often drawing on their own words, but also detailing and theorising acting processes without, as it were, taking the experience away from the actors themselves (see, for example, Pearson, 2010 and Cantrell and Hogg, 2017).

The renewed interest in actors and acting, which is linked to a concern with aesthetics and style, along with a rising interest in the labour of screen professionals, has encompassed more than actors’ processes, however, and has been pursued via a range of research methods: interviews, ethnographies, production studies and textual analysis – this is not exhaustive. Christine Cornea’s (2010) edited collection looks at the way that performance is shaped by genre across both media, for example, and Richard Hewett, with a focus solely on television, has written persuasively in this journal about the interplay of scheduling and budgetary constraints, technology, actor training and changing production practices across time (2015). This themed issue of *Critical Studies in Television* has a context, therefore, and takes its place within an evolving scholarship of television acting that has several elements.

This collection came out of a one-day symposium in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading, sponsored by CST as part of its tenth anniversary.

Titled 'Acting on Television – Analytical Methods and Approaches: An International One-Day Symposium', the event attracted an international cast of participants and focused partly on taking stock of the current preoccupations of television acting scholarship, but mainly on mapping some of the challenges that remained. It concluded with an interview with the actor Phil Davis about his extensive career in UK television drama, an edited version of which is in this issue. The selection reflects both the range of research being conducted and the variety of methods employed. It does not aim to be comprehensive, rather indicative of the emphases and ambitions of some of the research currently being conducted. It is also worth noting that contributors are concerned less with the constraints that shape acting on television and more with the potential of television performance, embracing what is possible within current, and past, production practices and noting the ways in which actors' performances are framed by their social and cultural contexts. This indicates a new confidence in the study of acting on the small screen, which is often as much concerned with 'working' actors as it is with stars.

The first contribution in this issue comes from Jonathan Bignell, who takes a wide view of current approaches and considers how to write a history of the dominant forms and assumptions about performance in British and American television drama. This means thinking about how performance has worked in relation to the other meaning-making components of television, and how television performances have been situated in relation to broader cultural currents. The article identifies ways in which performance has been enabled and constrained in specific ways in the history of television, from its constitution in the 1930s up to the present, and how it has been deployed in discourses used by television professionals, critical commentators and audiences. The article has, therefore, a historical and theoretical remit, which is given a specific focus in a case of the CBS/NBC drama series *Lux Video Theatre* (1950-59) and its production of British dramatist Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* in 1955.

The use of a specific example from the history television drama to anchor a more general argument about acting is also the approach adopted by Douglas McNaughton, whose analysis of two BBC dramas, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1978) and *The Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982), explores the relationships between actor, filming technology and production practices. McNaughton adopts a distinction between ‘acting’ (how actors portray a character in a given dramatic context) and ‘performance’ (how the work of the actor interacts with, and is shaped, by other elements – costume, lighting and framing, for example) proposed by Cantrell and Hogg (2016). This is a starting point for discussing the way that the work of the actors in both series, and the performances they created, used Outside Broadcasting (OB) filming technology. Drawing on archival research, textual analysis and practitioner interviews, the article extends the analysis of television performance to consider the ‘invisible performance’ of camera operators, and in so doing makes a contribution to understandings of the interaction between acting, place, and the frame in screen drama.

Tom Cantrell continues the examination of how specific production practices effect both actors’ working practices and their embodiment onscreen. His article, however, concerns contemporary examples and formats, notably UK continuing drama, and focuses on the relationship between the actor and director. Like McNaughton, Cantrell’s analysis originates in interviews, in this case with three directors of the UK BBC soap, *EastEnders* (1985-present). The article explores each director’s specific approach to managing the time constraints of remorseless production schedules, which preclude rehearsal, and where actors and directors must work with great speed and precision. Cantrell draws on acting theory borrowed from the theatre and references the work of the director and acting theorist Constantin Stanislavski to explore the hidden processes of television direction. His main conclusion is that the directors’ approach to working with actors – the shorthand established,

the processes that each can take for granted – is a significant meaning-making component in the creation of onscreen performances in continuing drama.

As mentioned above, this themed issue contains extracts from the interview conducted at the Reading symposium with the actor Phil Davis, who has extensive experience of working in theatre, film and television. Davis is what the often crude, and too-rarely challenged, categorisation of actors into structural types terms a ‘character actor’, equally at home in a variety of genres and formats. The discussion is divided into four sections, simultaneously representing the breadth of Davis’ work and some of the dominant formats of popular drama: the feature film *Vera Drake* (2004), docudrama *The Curse of Steptoe* (2008), drama serial adaptation *Bleak House* (2005) and crime drama *Sherlock* (2010-present). The interview material is contextualised by Gary Cassidy and Simone Knox, who discuss Davis’ work in relation to notions of ‘invisible acting, drawing on Flaus’ (1992) discussion of the term lamprotes, which values the pleasures for viewers of engaging with an actors’ performances across time, appreciating a cumulative impression of a career more than a single dazzling role. Flaus’ use of lamprotes is a very useful addition to the critical terminology for discussing television performance.

An essential part of what shapes and determines a screen performance is casting, which is too often overlooked in the discussion of what actors bring to a role, and why. Anat Sella Inbar explores the significance, which is as much cultural and social as it is to do with the talent of the actor, of the decisions that underpinned the casting in the Israeli series *BeTipul* (2005-09). Sella Inbar argues that casting is an important mechanism for creating meaning around a text, and in the case of *Be Tipul*, the meanings actors bring are inseparable from the cultural and historical significance of the actors themselves, along with their previous performance histories, including the portrayal of key historical figures. The effect of

this is that, for Israeli viewers in particular, national myths are brought into the frame and are subject to scrutiny.

This special issue concludes with an article by Lucy Fife Donaldson and James Walters that, once more, opens up questions around the nature of the television actors' work through specific examples. In this case, the authors are concerned with actors' relationships with their immediate physical environment and are particularly interested in the ways in which character interiority is revealed. They argue that television actors must frequently manage a delicate balance between the functional requirements of an environment – the tasks that it might impose, the physical constraints that have to be managed – and the revelation of character and development of relationships within it. There is, they argue, a potential for both expressivity and significance, which they explore through detailed examples of scenes set in modes of transport. Their examples are from *24* (Fox 2001-2014), *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007), *Happy Valley* (BBC, 2014- present) and *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014- present). The article is further demonstration, if one were needed, of the value of textual analysis in revealing wider truths about television acting and performance.

We would like to thank all our contributors for their excellent contributions to this issue; also the peer reviewers, whose feedback was thorough and extremely helpful (reviewers do not always get the credit they deserve). As we stated near the beginning of this editorial, the aim of the special issue is not to provide a comprehensive account of current approaches to the study of television but to show different approaches, indicating the strength and depth of focus of scholarship in this developing area. There is, of course, more to do.



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