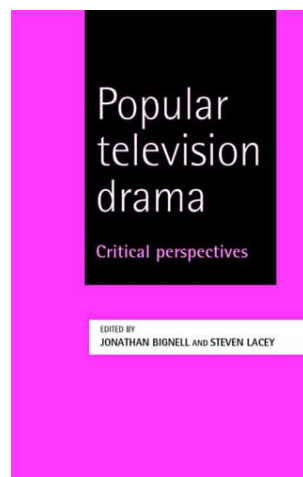


## ***Popular television drama: critical perspectives***

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What makes eleven essays by eleven different authors cohere in a way that makes sense to present them together as a book? Whatever that is, I do not quite find it in this collection. The editors assert that the various contributions function as an organic whole and indeed they strive arduously to make connections in a general introduction, section introductions and an afterword. Nevertheless, I am left with a sense of irreducible bitterness.

It is not that there are not such connections as they claim. They all deal with television drama and there are some common characteristics in how they do so. A common thread is a concern with the popular as counterposed to the canonical in television drama and television drama studies. They realise that there is only a weak and shifting canon, but characterise it in several different ways. Sometimes they locate the canonical in the form of the single play or high profile prime time serial, while other times it is in terms of drama of political engagement or formal experimentation. A number of these essays look to drama that falls outside these categories, but then again a number are inside.

There is a section on situation comedy, which includes Barry Langford on *The Office* and Robin Nelson on *Dad's Army*. There are several essays on children's programmes, such as Maire Messenger Davies on *The Demon Headmaster* and Jonathan Bignell on *Doctor Who*. Another section deals with programmes considered somehow 'other', for example, Mark Bould on *The Prisoner* and Peter Billingham on *Queer as Folk*.

To different degrees the various essays are intelligent and valuable. There is some new research on production contexts of various programmes, some insightful readings of texts, some interesting audience responses. Several pick up and play with the meandering discussion of 'quality' running through television studies these days. There is much attention to genre and to the formal dimension of television drama. There is some consideration of the ideological dimensions of television drama, but it is not sustained. Despite nuances of difference between authors, they seem to share a number of common assumptions and terms of reference. In terms of theoretical positioning, their declarations are somewhat elusive and the results are quite eclectic. There is a lack of focus in the collection as a whole as well as in a number of the particular contributions.

The editors put this book forward as a challenge to received wisdom on how to analyse television drama, but they neither clearly define nor effectively challenge whatever received wisdom there is. The authors refer to dominant paradigms, to orthodoxies, to opponents who are not named and to positions that are not elaborated. If only the authors took strong positions and pitted them against other strong positions, there would be more to stimulate and engage on this question. It is hard to pin down what their own positions are. They do not stake out positions on the wilder shores of theoreticist postmodernism or the tame banks of untheoretical populism, although there are hints of both here. Sometimes it seems as if the unseen other that they seem to want to define themselves against is marxism with its emphasis on ideological analysis and its drive to pull disparate elements together into an overarching narrative. Other times it seems not. One author declares his position to be marxist, although it is of the althusserian subvariant, while another characterises his analysis as post-marxist. The postmodernist influence is here, even if not in the most extreme form. That said, there is also a tendency to use the terms *postmodern* and *postmodernist* somewhat promiscuously. Fast cutting, montage, mobile camera, upbeat soundtrack do not necessarily add up to postmodernism.

A postmodernist version of feminism is brought to bear here in Julia Hallam's essay on *Butterflies* and Helen Wheatley's study of female gothic drama, such as *The Wyvern Mystery* and *The Woman in White*. The postmodernist-populist assertion that pleasure is somehow self-justifying combines with an overindulgence of the female domestic viewer as somehow engaging in subversion in the act of watching soap operas, sitcoms and texts foregrounding gothic or suburban female subjects. The soft focus treatment of women watching television, as opposed to going out, getting a job and changing the world, does not deserve to be couched in terms appropriate to the lives of those who have named the system and put their lives on the line to change it. Watching television is not resistance.

An interesting analysis of an interesting series is Lez Cooke's chapter on *Clocking Off*. He sees it as representing a renewal of the tradition of social realism in television drama by acknowledging social changes affecting the working class, extending representation of class and gender, showing diversity of lifestyles and experimenting with flexi-narrative form, faster tempo, vibrant colour and driving rhythm on the soundtrack. As other authors here, he tends to see form as bearer of ideology. While formal elements are by no means ideologically neutral and this approach does yield insight, it is sometimes made to bear more weight than it can carry.

Making an intriguing argument is Steve Blandford's piece on BBC drama at the regional margins. He brings postcolonial analysis to bear upon an investigation of the fortunes of BBC drama production in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the 1990s. He sees the BBC as still an instrument of enduring colonial power and wedded to an iconography that plays to traditional English attitudes to the Irish, Scottish and Welsh. He is particularly bitter about the marginalisation and repression of representation of contemporary Wales on BBC. I do not think that he is wrong, but he has not yet made the case for his conclusions. A more detailed analysis of whole corpus of BBC drama in these regions would be necessary to back up his thesis. With respect to Ireland, for example, he relies too heavily on *Ballykissangel* and does not deal with a number of other productions, such as *The Ambassador* or *Eureka Street*, which complicate the picture.

Stephen Lacey looks back at the relationship between television and theatre and briefly revisits the debate between social realist narrative versus a radical formalist aesthetic as the best basis for politically progressive practice. He argues, albeit opaquely, that it is possible to create drama that analyses society while engaging a large popular audience. I think that this is true, but I would like to have seen a better case constructed.

This book combines analysis of contemporary television drama with a look at a number of past productions. The aim of bringing a historical dimension to bear is most welcome, but the problem is that it is a fragmented and arbitrary picture of the past. The historical perspective of the book lacks organic flow or thick socio-historical context.

The editors' afterword looks at an emerging agenda for television drama studies in the future, but not in a well focused way. One promising part of their agenda, however, which they have implemented to some degree in this book, is to structure studies of television drama in a way that combines attention to production context, analysis of text and consideration of audience response. A number of essays in this collection combine all three dimensions in their treatment of a particular series, such as Maire Messenger Davies on *The Demon Headmaster* and Robin Nelson on *Dad's Army*.

For anyone committed to read absolutely all of the academic literature on television drama, or even of British television drama, this book is a must. However, if it is necessary to be more selective, then there are better books. Some of them are even written by these authors.

Much of this research is part of a Cultures of British Television Drama research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. I hope that future studies, however funded, produce more than pluralistic microanalyses. I would like to see a flowing comprehensive study of British television drama in rich socio-historical perspective coming out of British academic work in television drama. Lez Cooke's *British Television Drama: A History* (2003) is a considerable contribution to this.

While there is much of interest and value in this book, it does not succeed in its stated aims of functioning as an organic whole, challenging (or even defining) dominant paradigms or providing an alternative agenda for the study of television drama. The theoretical foundations of television studies are in the same state as the theoretical foundations of most other studies and reflect the epistemological crisis of our times.

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