

BRITISH TELEVISION DRAMAS

Editor: George G Brandt
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This collection of nine essays consists of an excellent introduction by George Brandt to the general critical and ideological problems associated with television drama, and a further eight papers on individual television playwrights like David Mercer, Jeremy Sandford and Peter Watkins.

The critical consensus that emerges from the analysis of the work of the eight playwrights by different critics goes a long way to explaining the pre-eminence of British television drama worldwide. This consensus not only illuminates the work of the individuals, but also casts light on the status of television as a communication medium.

The virtual neglect of television drama studies (not to mention television itself) at university level, either in language departments or in communication departments, shows how the academic Establishment still refuses to acknowledge the presence, influence and status of this form of communication. This is in spite of the fact that, for example, 6 380 000 viewers saw Harold Pinter's *A Night Out* when it was broadcast, and one million viewers saw Athol Fugard's *People are Living There* when it was broadcast locally. Remarkable audiences for respectable playwrights! People who might previously have gone to the theatre once or twice a year, now regularly view television drama once or twice a week. The even bigger and more dedicated audiences that watch the prestige Shakespeare productions, serials like *The Forsythe Saga* and *The Pallisers*, and single plays by playwrights of the stature of Pinter and Beckett have ensured television drama a place in university studies. Any cultural event so popular deserves attention.

I need not add that this argument is even more valid for studies that would enable a child to acquire a critical vocabulary to deal with television while still at school.

It is the merit of a collection like this that it not only points out the poverty of television criticism at present, but it demonstrates implicitly what the state of television criticism is dealing with an *ex post facto* judgement and that television studies are only now beginning to acquire the same status as say, the writings of Eisenstein or Bazin on film. More importantly,

as his book shows, the non-aesthetic, social and psychological functions of television add a dimension to television dramatic criticism that appeals to the literary dramatic critic who is already prepared to work within the critical attitudes derived from the sociology of art, semiotics or communication models.

Let us assume, ideally, that a course in television drama criticism is taught in a department of Film and Television Studies at a university (as it is at Bristol University from which these essays originate). Let us assume further that it is possible to construct a code of television dramatic criticism, derived from film studies, the sociology of communication and the sociology of drama (as this collection has done). It would then follow that a new, insightful and illuminating discourse had been generated in the Anglo-Saxon academic world throwing light on television drama specifically, and on popular culture, visual communication, and the relationship between society and mass media generally.

Brandt's essay emphasises the need for television critics to be aware of the rapidly evolving nature of television drama. From its inception as *live* broadcasting in England in 1946 (with its attendant limitations of costume change and sets) to the present predominant use of film to create greater flexibility and added realism, television drama has been changing its nature fundamentally. New sets of critical criteria have had to be devised to keep pace with its development.

This debate started in 1965 after the establishment of Independent Television, when the influence of transAtlantic attitudes to television drama became apparent. This was seen particularly in the production of scripts dealing with the issues of contemporary life, on the model of work of Paddy Chayefsky, whose play *Marty* did for television what *Rome Open City* did for Italian neorealism. It isolated an approach to contemporary problems that was to have an effect far beyond the immediate success of the work. The concept of location shooting, the use of non-actors (or a breed of actors that look like non-actors), screenplays that dramatised immediate social and political problems, and all the elements of documentary film were common to Italian neorealism and the plays of writers like Ted Willis and directors like Tony Garnett. This tended to ally television drama with documentary and give it a sort of surface realism. The serials of the 1960s *Z-Cars*, *Coronation Street*, and *Till Death Do Us Part* all depicted working class environments with great accuracy and insight, and shared an anti-establishment view of society. Individual plays like *Cathy Come Home* by Jeremy Sandford provided that while most other art forms were trying to move away from naturalism and felt it to be a constraint, television remained faithful to it. Naturalism became the style of television.

This has given rise to a critical/ideological debate on the merits of this surface realism and the formalism that television technology can generate. On the one hand are the propagandistic *Cathy Come Home* with its overt social message and condemnation of class-based injustice. On the other is Alun Owen's *The Rose Affair* with its deliberately stylised structure, which even included the wearing of masks.

Naturalism was challenged (as the realist film theoreticians Sieg-

fried Kracauer and Andre Bazin had been) on the grounds that television was a technically and socially manipulated medium. The "naturalistic fallacy" was therefore a dangerous deception. Any portrayal of reality is mediated, constructed and, in the case of film and television, subjected to either chemical, or electronic distortion. It followed that the style of seamless editing and the careful reconstruction of the appearance of everyday reality tended to be an endorsement of the status quo.

On the other hand, the formalist approach was held to deconstruct and defamiliarise social reality to such an extent that it lent itself to political drama much more effectively. The Brechtian terminology used in conjunction with this formalist argument underlies its political attitudes. The more alienation, it argues, the greater the chance to criticise the accepted notions of reality.

The argument remains unresolved as the ideologies behind the two attitudes are, of course, irreconcilable, particularly when expressed in stylistic terms such as these. To isolate a particular style as being more political than another, or more aesthetic than another, is a critical *coul de sac*. It is only when a communication mode, in this case television, is looked at in terms which take into account the nature of the sender and the receiver, the context of the message being sent, and the structure of the message itself that sense can be made of the transaction taking place. Naturally, the Jakobson model springs to mind as a useful tool for defining the nature of the communication taking place. All the essays on specific playwrights fulfil the Jakobson criteria to a lesser or greater extent, and the work of the television dramatists is set in the full social, political and aesthetic context.

I personally remain convinced that the reception situation of television -- privatised in the domestic livingroom as Raymond Williams has pointed out -- is better suited to the social documentary style of drama. Television drama has a hunger for 'reality', especially that created by television news and investigative television documentary: the on-location investigation of human and social relations, between individuals and between individuals and bureaucracies.

The essays would seem to support my position, but that might be because they cast a backward look to the Fifties and Sixties.

Anyone not familiar with the work of Alan Plater, Dennis Potter and Peter Watkins will find much to think about, and, in particular, the collection should be compulsory reading for all South African Television Drama Departments. *Even if the attitudes expressed in the essays are shown to be more relevant to the England of the Fifties and Sixties than the England of the Eighties, they are very relevant to the South Africa of the Eighties.*

There is a similar shift in attitudes and regrouping of political positions as occurred in England twenty years ago, in South Africa today. If the formalism of multi-screen, electronically created images is to be the mode of the Eighties and Nineties, then SABC-TV must first learn to look at social realities as England and Italy did in the Fifties.