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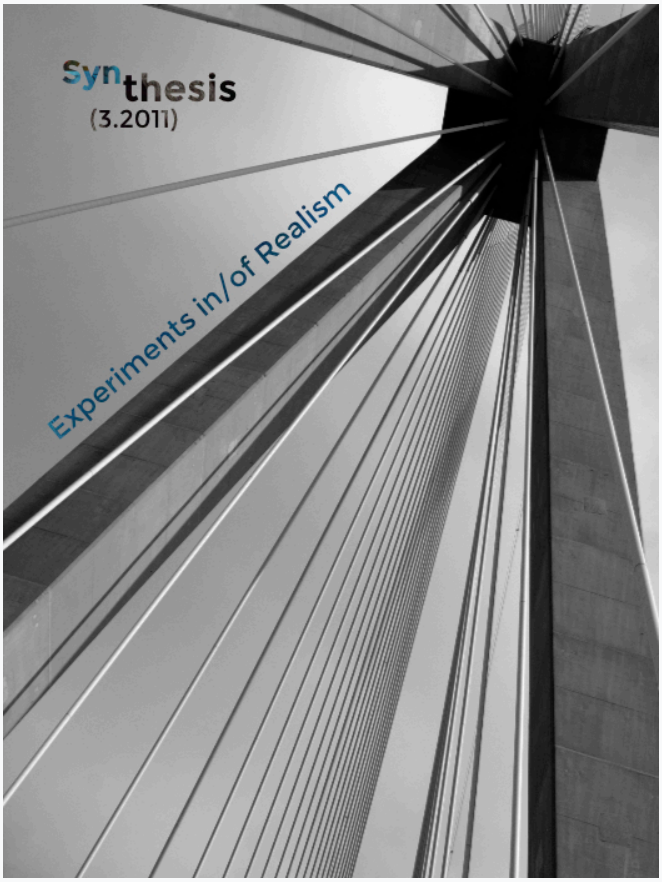

Capturing the 'Real' in British Television Fiction: Experiments in/of Realism— An Abiding and Evolving Notion

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Abstract

The realistic mode of depiction has been an abiding feature of British television fictions intended for British audiences ever since the rebirth of the medium after the Second World War. After briefly evoking the origins of realism in British audio-visual media and some of the reasons for its continued popularity with both viewers and broadcasters, this article examines how the constant challenge of "putting 'reality' together" (Schlesinger) has been met by innovation and experiment in differing social, political, and economic climates since the mid-1950s and how the perception of television realism itself has evolved. In the context of reality television and today's post-modern hybrids which blur the distinctions between fact and fiction, entertainment and information, this article concludes with a reflection on whether British television's (re)creation of reality is an end in itself or whether it is a means of achieving other objectives.

> [Realism] refers to television's representation of recognizable and often contemporary experience such as in the representation of characters the audience can believe in or apparently likely chains of events. This meaning of realism relies on the familiarity of the codes, which represent a reality. (Bignell 60)

During the nineteenth century in Great Britain, realism came to be the prominent mode of expression in a range of artistic and written media from painting and the popular press to photography, the embryonic cinema, and the serialised novel, all of which recognised the effectiveness of communication with ordinary people and interest in their everyday activities as a means of appealing to a wide audience. With the advances of the twentieth century, the same concerns came to the fore in radio, while technical developments in cinema allowed the production of plausibly realistic sound and moving images. It is no surprise that television, arguably the first universally popular audio-visual medium, should adopt the realistic mode of depiction which has been a constant feature of British-produced television fiction intended for British audiences at least since the relaunch of services after the Second World War. Individual programmes and series have been based more or less loosely on if not real then at least recognisable events or situations which are part of or close to the everyday experience of viewers.

Some of the reasons for this approach in broadcasting can be explained by the social and historical context. Familiarity and viewer identification with characters and situations was an effective technique for attracting, entertaining, and retaining a large popular audience and has taken on far greater significance in today's multi-channel environment, but in the years following the Second World War, other considerations were more important. Until the start of commercial (or independent) television (ITV) in 1956, the national broadcaster, the BBC, a public corporation independent of government but funded by a licence fee fixed by parliament, had a complete monopoly over television broadcasting. The BBC strove to create a specifically and identifiably British service in line with the mission given in its Royal Charter, first granted in 1926 (for radio only), namely to inform, to educate, and to entertain (in that order), and in pursuit of the principles established by its first Director General, the formidable John Reith, who distrusted foreign broadcasting, notably anything emanating from the overtly commercial system in the United States. The realistic representation of daily life was an obvious means of defending national broadcasting individuality but had the added advantage of giving a sense of a normalised national identity which could serve the aims of education and citizenship.

If the example of radio provides significant insight into the defensive attitude of broadcasters to the dangers of foreign influence, the case of the cinema is arguably even more pertinent as both film and television are audio-visual media. After the arrival of the first 'talkies,' the British film industry found itself increasingly unable to compete with the financial clout of the Hollywood studios and resorted to developing its own style for the national niche market. Producers in both the US and the UK adopted realism, but while Hollywood established its own lavish and instantly recognisable style marked more by technical cinematographic convention than by content, the particular contribution of British film-

makers in the 1930s was in the field of documentary, a realistic genre *par excellence*, inspired notably by the work of John Grierson and his collaborators whose Documentary Film Movement concentrated not on the exceptional but on the sympathetic depiction of the virtues of ordinariness.[1] The value of this type of production was consolidated during the physically and psychologically dark days of the Second World War, when the dissemination of positive images of the contemporary 'English way of life,' of ordinary people answering the call of duty on what was called the "home front" to help in the national effort against the enemy, played a major, and undeniably propagandist, role in the boosting of national morale. It was on these twin foundations, on the combination of the popular and the ordinary, that the realism of early television fiction was to be based. Nevertheless, "putting 'reality' together" (to use Philip Schlesinger's expression) has been a constant challenge for British television. Keeping abreast of the impact of changes in society and of new expectations on the part of increasingly diverse audiences is obviously essential, but the power of television as both a descriptive and prescriptive medium should not be overlooked, for it is capable not only of reflecting society and shedding light on its defects, but also of influencing the way in which that society perceives itself.

This article will initially attempt to examine how the early experiments in British television fictions, from the mid-1950s onwards, handled these challenges, by considering the examples of single plays (a wide category which included the first drama documentaries) and the most notably enduring genres of police series and soap operas. These early examples were typified by particular visions of realism, significantly shaped by pre-war and wartime cinema traditions as well as by contemporary literary trends, and cannot exhaust the range of possible interpretations of the term. Therefore, before considering later manifestations, it will be necessary to consider in some detail various conflicting definitions of and conceptions surrounding realism(s). I shall then move on to examine the ways in which fictions on British television since 1980, in a very different media, commercial, and ideological context, have experimented with new hybrid forms, in order to construct plausible and understandable versions of reality which sometimes exceed the limits of realism. In the light of these developments, we may wonder how far television's (re)creation of reality may be viewed as an end in itself, or a means of achieving other objectives.

The Age of 'British Realism'

The rapid rate of change in today's media environment should warn us that it is a hazardous undertaking to consider the realism of some twenty-five years of British post-war television fiction as a single homogenous concept. Nevertheless, the lasting impression which remains, notably from the 1960s, which were marked by unprecedented artistic innovation and experiment in broadcasting within the context of the liberalising of society as a whole, is that of a relatively uniform concentration on what Mal Young, controller of drama series for the BBC, referred to by the conveniently broad designation 'British realism.' This phenomenon should be seen in the light of the political, social, and viewing context (in such matters as audience, the number of channels, picture quality and colour transmission), which conditioned both the aspirations of broadcasters and the expectations of viewers, and did not, of course, preclude the coexistence of different manifestations of realism on BBC and ITV schedules, for certain programmes had a remarkable longevity and attracted devoted, if often distinct, followings.

As police series conforming to the vision of the detective story as 'moral fiction,' *Fabian of Scotland Yard* (1954-1956) and *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955-1976) inevitably presented an emotionally satisfying and socially useful manicheistic vision of a world where criminals were always apprehended and where social stability and law and order went side by side,[2] a message given greater resonance by a recognisably contemporary setting. If *Fabian*'s investigations were based on real-life cases solved by a Metropolitan Police Superintendent of the same name, *Dixon* treated context differently. It derived from a 1949 Ealing Studios film, *The Blue Lamp*, in which George Dixon, a constable on the beat in the working-class East End of London,[3] was murdered while on duty by a young criminal. His

resuscitation proved remarkably successful, for the series was a Saturday evening regular for over 20 years, by which time, as Alan Clarke has argued, "Dixon was a product of a world that was in the process of ceasing to exist. He personified the world which many people in the 1970s were complaining was being eroded by the tide of permissiveness which was sweeping the country" (241). With hindsight, it is clear that *Dixon* was faced with the problem familiar to all long-running realistic series of whether and how to adapt to changes in society, but it made no acknowledgement of the fact and offered few concessions to permissiveness. The eponymous hero's unchanging demeanour, language, and home life reinforced the programme's self-established realistic criteria, and each episode closed with a sequence in which Dixon himself presented a brief homily on the conclusions to be drawn from the events just depicted.

Nevertheless, Dixon's world was indeed shaken if not swept away by a different realism inspired by the (re)discovery of the life of the working class of the industrial north of England which was a dominant feature of film and literature with the writings of the Angry Young Men, often adapted for the screen by members of the Free Cinema movement. By the early 1960s, television fictions were dealing with the lives and discontents of ordinary people by producing programmes which were examples of what Mal Young may have called British realism but which others, with varying degrees of sympathy for the classes represented and the mode of depiction, were inclined to dub kitchen sink or social realism. Under the direction of Canadian Sydney Newman, ITV's *Armchair Theatre* (1956-68) moved away from productions of established classic plays towards contemporary and socially relevant works written specially for television, even though, ironically, in the absence of a home-grown school of television dramatists "much of the vitality of the new 'slice of life' drama in England was inspired by American films and television" (Shubik 24). British television companies were quick to spot the attraction of live drama for "a lower-middle- and working-class audience," with the added advantage that it could be seen as an attempt at quality programming and therefore as "some evidence of civic responsibility" (Caughie 73). Newman's "theatre of ordinary people" (Caughie 76) made him no stranger to controversy. When he was appointed to the BBC in 1963, the *Daily Mail* heralded his transfer with the headline "BBC signs ITV's 'dustbin man'" while affirming that "to some he was the great impresario of commercial television, to others the purveyor of pretentious pigswill" (Shubik 31). As the producer of the BBC's *Wednesday Play* (1964-1970) and of its successor *Play For Today* (1970-1984), Newman was unquestionably committed to "critically engaged, realist drama" and to "contemporary social realism" (Bignell et al 34). Towards the end of his life, he retrospectively defined his criteria for the link between realism and drama in the *Wednesday Plays* as follows:

> The plays must vary in mood (comedy, heavy drama), place (the home, prison, office), be fast-moving with a gripping start, and all dramatising the moment of change, the turning point in contemporary society…The main concept I hoped to infuse…was awareness of the times and its interpretation in the plays. The object was the truth and not the oily evasions of reality. (Bignell et al 34)

To this end, the very varied *Wednesday Plays / Plays for Today* offered fictions which could be, and frequently were, controversial, shocking,[4] socially aware, realistic in decor, behaviour, and language, and experimental in content and techniques, notably in the mixing of fact and fiction. The most famous of these first drama documentaries, *Cathy Come Home*,[5] showed how bureaucratic failures might result in any unlucky couple losing their home and having their children taken into care. Directed by a young Ken Loach, *Cathy* used filmed, recognisably authentic outdoor settings along with documentary features such as hand-held camera, a voice-over commentary by the eponymous heroine, and end credits displaying official statistics to give general validity to the particular fictional example.

In other genres, the same trend towards a new perception of life in England (if not Britain) could equally be discerned, corresponding to the ethos of the time with its concentration on ordinariness and glorification of the popular. *Z Cars* (1962-1978) offered a very different vision from the comforting security of *Dixon of Dock Green,* producing a gritty realism based on something close to

life in industrial Lancashire,[6] using the methods of the time (live transmission from studio sets with inserted outdoor filmed sequences). The four ordinary policemen in their squad cars (the Z cars of the title), which had replaced foot patrols, spoke in the working-class accents of the north of England (and of Northern Ireland and Scotland), and clothes and behaviour were plausibly authentic, in an environment where the solid community spirit still present in *Dixon* had been destroyed by the displacement of population to tower blocks whose impersonality was within a few years to become an incitement to crime and disorder. The Chief Constable of Lancashire acted as technical adviser to the nascent series, only to resign when he observed that the television policemen were shown 'warts and all,' arguing with their wives, gambling, and smoking on duty. Without casting doubt on the need to catch offenders, who, true to the conventions of the genre, were almost invariably brought to book, the series depicted violence and aggressiveness as normal amongst senior officers as well as ordinary policemen and dispensed with the need for explicit moral lessons. The popularity of the series, which attracted 14 million viewers in its heyday, may suggest that this version of realism struck a chord with the audience, and/or that *Dixon* and *Z Cars*, which ran simultaneously, attracted different sections of the public, each with their own preferred cosy or controversial vision of reality.

Although reality is undoubtedly a relative concept, the vision in the early 1960s tended to be quite specific, as Stuart Laing has pointed out: "[T]o speak of reality and realism in English culture and society at the beginnings of the 1960s was most often to refer to a particular way of life; reality resided more than anywhere else in a Northern working-class town" (127). The classic example, for as a pure fiction series it eschewed both an implicit political or social agenda and any moral imperative, was Granada Television's soap opera, *Coronation Street*, first produced in Manchester in 1960 and still a prime-time viewing favourite today. Set in a fictional Weatherfield, based on the city of Salford, the series established standards of realism in such matters as accent, clothes, behaviour, social aspiration, and class depiction, which were to remain the norm until the 1980s and were soon to be copied, in a rural environment, by Yorkshire Television's *Emmerdale Farm* (1972, renamed simply *Emmerdale* in 1985). As much as anything else, the initial filmed title sequence of *Coronation Street*, showing the roofs of innumerable rows of similar small houses, all with chimneys belching out smoke from individual coal fires, typified the realism which viewers were to expect. The characters were unashamedly working-class, or "of the classes immediately visible to the working class" (Jordan 28), and their world was limited to Coronation Street, a terrace built at the turn of the twentieth century like so many others, and named to celebrate the accession to the throne of Edward VII in 1901. For reasons of verisimilitude as much as for convenience,[7] much of the action took place in the public domain, in the street itself, the scene of chance meetings or public arguments, or in the corner shop, the church mission hall and, most importantly, the pub, the Rovers Return, which had separate bars frequented respectively by the local men and women. The technical limitations of the set meant that the 'houses' were initially only painted wooden fronts and that external shots only ever revealed one side of the street, but this did nothing to detract from the viewers' acceptance of the comforting credibility of what was shown, for interest lay in the plausible portrayal and interactivity of recognisable characters and in self-established narrative conventions, which is a key aspect in the discussion of television realism.

Realism…realisms

The examples which we have seen so far confirm both that television realism had no specific technical definition in the 1960s and 1970s and that it is a flexible and subjective concept, for audience or conventional perception of what is real is at least as significant as content and material details. Moreover, as society and social attitudes change, so do opinions about what is real and what may be viewed as realistic. The term British realism has been a useful guide in the period so far discussed, but has been deliberately taken out of its context, for Mal Young used it in his article to refer to what he called the "ages" of soap opera and was thus talking about only one of the three genres which concern us. Moreover, the word "ages" is itself potentially misleading, for, as we have seen, different versions of realism complement one another and there is some reason to believe that followers of a given genre

may find all of its manifestations if not equally valuable then at least equally justifiable. Critical terminology favours more precise definitions, from a generally applicable concept of "surface realism" to more specific terms such as "social realism," "narrative realism," and "emotional realism." To a greater or lesser extent, all realistic fiction contains examples of surface realism, which implies attention to such details as locations, settings and decor, costumes and props, but may also include clothes, speech patterns (including accent), and sound effects. Social realism has already been mentioned with reference to single plays, and within the British television context it has usually been associated with the evocation of the working class, in the 1960s in particular, but it can have implications beyond merely accurate depiction. Marxist commentator Raymond Williams insisted on the importance of the experience of ordinary people, while adding the gloss that social realism should interpret their experience from a particular political point of view, which for him meant from the left (Fiske 22). Discussing the question more extensively in 1981, Marion Jordan offered the following definition, free from ideological colouring:

> Briefly, the genre of Social Realism demands that life should be presented in the form of a narrative of personal events, each with a beginning, a middle and an end, important to the central characters concerned, but affecting others in only minor ways; that though these events are ostensibly about social problems they should have as one of their central concerns the settling of people in life; ...that characters...should be credibly accounted for in terms of the "ordinariness" of their homes, families, friends; that the locale should be urban and provincial; that the settings should be commonplace and recognisable (the pub, the street, the factory, the home and more particularly the kitchen); that the time should be "the present"; that the style should be such as to suggest an unmediated, unprejudiced and complete view of reality; to give, in summary, the impression that the...viewer has spent some time at the expense of the characters depicted. (28)

Some of these points obviously include surface realism; but Jordan's definition, although much of it seems tailored to *Coronation Street*,[8] also evokes narrative conventions and audience perception which have wider implications of the kind that were first mooted by Ien Ang to explain the paradox that international audiences identified with the world of the American soap opera *Dallas* even though its opulent settings and life-styles and sensational action were remote from their own experience. Ang explains the phenomenon by what she calls "emotional realism" and observes that "what is recognised as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world, a structure of feeling" or again that "what is experienced as real indicates above all else a certain structure of feeling which is aroused by the programme" (47, 45). This definition, and its associated narrative conventions, has become widely accepted as applicable not only to imported but also to home-produced programmes, as Jonathan Bignell's comments at the start of this article illustrate. In *Television Culture*, John Fiske argues that "realism is not a matter of fidelity to an empirical reality, but of discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed" (2), stressing that reality is not objective but a "construction" which is achieved by the manner in which the stories are related and which, to extend the argument, depends on the conditioning of the spectator by respecting certain established norms. Later in the same critical work, Fiske stresses once more the importance of structure. He widens the argument thus:

> Realism can be defined by its form as by its content. This relates to what it does or what it shows (its content). Realism does not reproduce reality, it makes sense of it—the essence of realism is that it reproduces reality in such a form as to make it easily understandable. It does this primarily by ensuring that all links and relationships between its elements are clear and logical, that the narrative follows the basic laws of cause and effect and that every element is there for the purpose of helping to make sense: nothing is extraneous or accidental. (24)

Much of this discussion is familiar to students of, for instance, nineteenth-century realistic novels, but the key point undoubtedly lies in the affirmation that realism and reality are different and that the former is necessary for the understanding of the latter.

These various definitions suggest a number of significant points for the programmes discussed in this article. They reinforce the idea of the subjectivity of realism, of its relationship with the encoding and decoding of messages, and suggest that the realism of series and of individual programmes such as single plays may be conditioned by different criteria. For one-off dramas, surface reality is arguably more important since an impression of familiarity and plausibility needs to be established rapidly and cannot be subsequently modified. Series have the advantage of being able both to develop more gradually and to create an atmosphere of complicity between producer and receiver, and have the opportunity, through dialogue and reminiscence, to remind viewers of past characters and events, in the manner of a serialised novel. On occasions, the story can be rewritten by adding details and/or correcting or modifying others. On the other hand, long-running series are faced with the dilemma of how to manage change caused by external events such as the disappearance of favourite actors/actresses, modifications in urban landscapes, and, more generally and more profoundly, mutations within society.

Experimental transformations

By the 1980s, realism in British fictional television programmes was faced with just such dilemmas originating in the ideological and audio-visual context, but also in changes in public taste and expectation. Of the genres which we are examining, police series were the least affected, as the essential message that crime does not pay remained unchanged. The desire to maintain surface realism meant that women police officers and detectives, along with those from the ethnic minorities, began to take on much greater prominence, while the value of recognisable (and sometimes photogenic) external settings served to give added attraction to the series for the domestic audience and also for the increasingly lucrative international market. Serious questions within society about the changing function and status of policing made only rare appearances, and almost never in purely fictional forms, for interest has been focused much more firmly on the sometimes idiosyncratic personalities of the investigators than on their role in society or indeed on the authenticity of their methods of detection.

Soap operas, on the other hand, were transformed in the 1980s, as other forms came to compete with regionally-based soaps with their "slow-paced story-telling" (Barker 55). The increasingly fragmented audience gave rise to soaps aimed at different sections of the population, such as *Grange Hill* (1978-) for younger teenagers, *Byker Grove* (1990-) for the 11 to 16 age group, and *Hollyoaks* (1995-) for the 18 to 30s. Most importantly, the 1980s saw the birth of two national soap operas, *EastEnders* (1985-), the BBC's first venture into the genre for twenty years, and Channel 4's *Brookside* (1982-2003), Phil Redmond's major contribution to changing popular taste. Both sought surface realism by paying attention to the usual details of which the sets and decor were an integral part. *EastEnders* had a new, purpose-built facility at Elstree Studios while the makers of *Brookside* acquired a whole cul-de-sac of new houses near Liverpool which served for both outdoor and indoor scenes and which was not just realistic but genuine. Redmond emphasised the "authenticity" of *Brookside*, a term which escapes exact definition, but seems to be closer to 'reality' than to 'realism'; his comments on the subject are particularly revealing:

> I well remember that people used to say to me: "It's different from other soaps—It's more real, it's like the news or a football match." ...That was exactly the sort of reactions I wanted to hear. I wanted *Brookside* to be different—to break the mould if you like—and as a contemporary dramatist I have always wanted to show life as it is. I see *Brookside* as being about modern Britain, about real people. (qtd. in Tibballs 6)

Certain key conclusions can be drawn from this admittedly retrospective observation, not only for the programme itself but for the other experiments in fiction which were to follow. For Redmond, *Brookside* was to be contemporary, depicting a 'modern' Britain, which suggests a deliberate break with the outdated social realism of *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*. To this end, it moved away from fixed notions of class identity by portraying a mix of social groups in the class-neutral setting of a

suburban residential area. Secondly, there is a conscious association of the soap opera with programmes such as the news or sports, which marks a stage in the move towards the hybridisation of television programmes with the blurring of distinctions between fact and fiction. Most importantly, Redmond classes himself as a dramatist, which explains the use of more dynamic, some were soon to say more shocking, storylines which retained echoes of the socially committed aspects of the *Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today*. Like, and even more notably than, *Brookside*, *EastEnders* was not primarily character-based but plot-driven, featuring strongly sensational elements which, taken quantitatively, were closer to the vision of reality evoked in the columns of the tabloid press than to the everyday experience of most viewers. (The success of this approach soon obliged *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale* to follow suit.) The revolutionary nature of *Brookside* can also be illustrated by its concern with "issues," an idea rapidly taken up by *EastEnders*. The creators of both series saw fictional soap opera as a vehicle for providing information and provoking discussion about such subjects affecting contemporary society as mental and physical handicap, AIDS, genetic defects, learning difficulties, physical and sexual violence in its various forms, and the problems of drugs and crime, while maintaining that "issues arose 'naturally' out of the storylines and characters" (Buckingham 83).

With the demise of *Play for Today*, the single play, a victim of budget restraints, uncertain audience response, and the preference of writers for the greater liberty of short (four or six episode) serial forms, largely disappeared from the screen. This has not stopped drama documentary from continuing to tackle crucial or controversial matters, often of a political or current affairs nature based on recent events rather than the introspective reflection on social issues which dominated the 1960s and 1970s. One such theme was the nation's (un)preparedness for a nuclear attack which was the subject of *Threads* (1984) and *The War Game* (1985), the latter having been originally produced for screening as a *Wednesday Play* in 1966 and apparently judged too potentially traumatic at the time. More recent topics have included other matters relating to threats to national security, *The Hamburg Cell* (2004) and notably the *Government Inspector* (2005), which examined the life and death of David Kelly, the government scientific adviser who committed suicide after his opinion that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction became public knowledge and attracted the massive condemnation of the government information machine. The genre retains the advantage over other documentary forms of being able to treat serious current affairs subjects by means of a fictional narrative, but, in an increasingly competitive and cost-conscious television marketplace, it has not been able to resist the trend towards the sensational and sometimes trivial ratings-conscious material already observed in soap opera.[9]

By the 1990s, the attraction of inexpensive, popular, 'factual entertainment' programming for both broadcasters and audiences proved the catalyst for the growth of new genres and sometimes confusing developments in and around realism. The 1970s had seen experiments with so-called 'fly-on-the-wall' documentaries, a genre which had originated in the United States and whose 'observational realism' resides in the impression that unfolding events are filmed as they occur, without editorial control. As with drama documentaries, the subject matter can sometimes be sensitive. The first British example, *The Family* (1974), a twelve-part series, broke new ground by presenting a very ordinary family, with their manifest faults and uncomfortable prejudices, who had been recorded 18 hours a day over a three-month period. Later programmes took a look inside British institutions such as hospitals and prisons, but controversy returned with critical audience reaction directed to the behaviour shown in *Police* (1982), shot in Reading with the approval of senior officers of the Thames Valley Constabulary. The programme revealed failings in investigations and very unsympathetic conduct by male officers towards a rape victim, at a time when the riots in Brixton, Toxteth, and elsewhere, the previous summer, had already indicated that trust in the police was very limited among the ethnic minorities in major cities. The genre has continued with investigations of attitudes towards national identity (*Think of England*, 1999) and racism (*100% White*, 2000), while recalling the origins of realism in British cinema.

Realism remains fictional and potentially subjective in as much as the editorial process determines the nature of the final product, but factual in that it shows real people in real-life situations and settings,[10] a paradox much more evident in the obviously post-modern docusoap. As the name suggests, this hybrid, which came to prominence in the late 1990s, combines the factual content of documentary with the greater concentration on character, dramatic conflict, and sensation typical of the soap opera. The genre can cover a wide range of familiar human experience and activity, but, unlike the fly-on-the-wall documentaries from which it developed (*The Family*, mentioned above, is sometimes quoted as an example of both forms), the programmes tend to be proactive rather than reactive and offer a carefully crafted representation, with prospective participants being selected for their photogenic or combative qualities which make good viewing, rather than for their actual roles or competence. The docusoap can thus be firmly situated within the domain of factual entertainment, for its basic appeal is "that it offers the prospect of a voyeuristic encounter with 'real life' (often larger-than-life) individuals" (Kilborn 112).

On the other hand, reality television clearly belongs to the realm of "infotainment," for this "spectacle of actuality," defined as "a genre description of any factual programme based on an aesthetic style of apparent zero-degree realism" (Creeber 135), would seem to lie beyond or outside the confines of realism, as we have previously observed it. This genre involving the showing of real people in ordinary or extraordinary situations is, however, notoriously hybrid. It can be so broadly labelled as to include programmes with an observable, if limited, public service purpose,[11] life-style programmes, which have a recognisable structure and use authentic environments and settings to add to the credibility of practical suggestions on such matters of everyday interest as gardening, cooking/entertaining and home decoration, and those without obvious social value such as *Big Brother* and confessional reality shows. *Big Brother,* the classic example of zero-degree realism, was widely criticised for the obvious artificiality of the cooperation/competition between housemates which was all that relieved the unrelenting boredom of watching nothing memorable for hours on end and for appealing to nothing more than salacious voyeurism. Confessional reality shows, with their contrived conflictual situations, public display of the less edifying sides of human behaviour, and instant live *vox pop* audience condemnation of moral failings may seem to appeal to similar negative emotions, but this judgement may be precipitate. Critics such as Anita Biressi, Annette Hill, and Heather Nunn have offered more subtle interpretations centring around the therapeutic or cathartic value of the public expression of private trauma or the anthropologically fascinating *mise en abîme* of real people at home watching real people in the audience watching real people facing up to their own failings and responsibilities. Reality television may thus be a more complex concept than first appeared to be the case: it is perhaps less of a negation of the potentially positive effects of realism than a logical extension of it within the context of a highly competitive media environment.

The End(s) of Realism

Realism therefore remains an abiding, if paradoxical, feature of the British television scene, retaining its popularity for both viewers and broadcasters, for reasons which can be discussed both within the narrower context of the medium itself and with regard to society as a whole. Within British television, realism has been, in some ways, an objective in itself, an admittedly variable aesthetic convention which requires specific attention to particular technical details equated with a certain conception of quality and which imposes on programme makers the task of correctly encoding messages that the audience then needs to decode with equal skill. Realism therefore establishes norms which are part of an active process involving both transmitter and receiver. This is evident in the way in which realistic programmes have been parodied for comic effect through an implied complicity on the part of viewers who are fully aware both that and how a known programme or genre is being recycled and manipulated.[12]

Beyond these confines, realism can be seen as a means of attaining a number of other, more or less explicit goals. We have already seen its role in establishing a feeling of national or local identity which attracts audience or in indicating social norms, but popular and familiar or recognisably life-like characters and situations can also serve various, direct and indirect educative purposes, especially in a context when old-fashioned top-down authority has lost its impact. The comforting Manicheism of police series and the uncompromising criticisms mediated by drama documentary are obvious examples, but the ancillary functions of soap opera are more subtly effective. The "issues" raised in such fictional dramas gain in effectiveness by being exemplified by the fates suffered by familiar characters whose positive and negative qualities are well-known to the audience or whose experiences may indicate ways of reacting in similar situations, while, more generally, the spectacle of others wrestling with suffering may itself be therapeutic, as Phil Redmond has observed:

> It is…often reassuring to turn on a drama and see characters, although fictional, going through the same situation. Despite the fact that it is clearly fiction, the audience can accept that behind these fictional characters there are writers, producers, directors, actors, some of whom have obviously experienced the situation for it to reach the screen. Somebody else understands. (qtd. in Tibballs 5)

It is however equally possible to exaggerate the social benefits of realism, for it should always be remembered that all realistic genres are not a portrayal of reality, but a specific representation of it. While it is evident that the more sensational fictional events undoubtedly stretch the limits of credibility—whether it be the gratuitous physical or verbal violence of some scenes in *EastEnders*, the outrageous behaviour of some real-life drivers arrested by *Traffic Cops*, the paroxysm of blood lust shown by murderers in Chief Inspector Barnaby's Midsomer, or the plane crash which wiped out much of the population of *Emmerdale*—the vision of British society which long obtained in *Coronation Street* (and *Emmerdale*) was equally, and arguably more insidiously, fake. The *Coronation Street* of the first twenty-five years can now be clearly seen as a product of its time, anti-élitist, anti-intellectual, strongly influenced by the nostalgic view of the working-class propounded in Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957) (Dyer 4; Caughie 84) and deliberately non-metropolitan and non-patrician (Caughie 75). Indeed, as long ago as 1973, Raymond Williams formulated the criticism that *Coronation Street* was outdated, "a distanced and simplified evocation and prolongation of a disappearing culture: the northern urban backstreets of the depression and its immediate aftermath" (Williams 61). The argument that its realism was highly selective gains extra force when we consider that the initial vision of society and social class remained essentially unchanged until long after Williams made his comments, most notably perhaps in the virtual absence of characters from the ethnic minority population, the first of whom settled permanently in Weatherfield only in 1990.

Even allowing for the premise that programme makers are providing entertainment rather than seeking to impose a prescriptive vision, public perception should also be borne in mind, for viewers may sometimes see only what they want to see. In this respect, tastes may be highly variable, between those who wish to be helped to reflect on the nature of society by being given a convincing representation of some of its defects, and those who prefer "happy endings" appropriate to a "perception of a caring society…which does not exist in real life" but which is deliberately cultivated by programme makers and viewers (Hill, "Fearful and Safe" 138, 141). Another difficulty to which realism is prone is the dangerous blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction arising from audience identification with real characters in the ostensibly real but actually contrived situations of docusoaps or, more commonly, with fictional characters in television drama. The storylines of soap operas in particular supply ample copy for the popular print media, which sometimes invite readers to live vicariously by giving their opinions about fictional events, or even about the desirability of characters acting in a certain way. The confusion is heightened by ancillary marketing which has made books and other memorabilia available to a wide section of the public, on their pilgrimages to the studios and sets used for soap operas like *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* or through orders via the virtual medium of the internet.

Viewed in this light, the influence of television realism may not be as benign as most commentators and practitioners have been inclined to believe and affirm, and with the no doubt inevitable application of virtual reality to the medium it may be harder than ever in the future to detect the boundaries between truth, representation, and deliberate fake. For the moment it would seem, however, that the nature of television (with its mixed programming), the viewing context (a real, concrete home environment), and the accumulated experience of generations of viewers familiar with television realism and unwilling completely to suspend their disbelief still allow the majority of the audience to distinguish fiction from reality.

Notes

[1] Particularly quotable examples include Cavalcanti's *Coal Face* (1935) and Watt and Wright's *Night Mail* (1936).

[2] *Dixon* can be seen as epitomising the mood of the early- to mid-1950s which were marked both by the continuance of wartime austerity and by reassuringly consensual policies adopted by both Labour and Conservative governments, most notably with regard to social and economic questions and the Welfare State.

[3] The practice of neighbourhood policing by officers familiar with and close to their communities was common enough in the 1940s but was being progressively phased out by the 1960s. It is notable that *Dixon*, like the first documentary-style films produced by members of the Free Cinema movement, exhibited the metropolitan bias which automatically equated the working class exclusively with certain areas of the capital.

4 For example *Up the Junction* and *The Naked Civil Servant,* which dealt respectively with back-street abortion and homophobia, and the self-explicit *Edna the Inebriate Woman*.

[5] *Cathy* was screened in 1966 and repeated in 1967; it was credited with contributing to the creation of Shelter, the first major national charity for the homeless.

[6] The fictional Newtown and Seaport of the series were in reality Kirkby New Town and Liverpool in what is now the Metropolitan County of Merseyside.

[7] Terraced houses of this kind offered limited accommodation which included only two bedrooms, a front room used only on very special occasions, a kitchen, and a middle room where most of the time was spent. There was no bathroom or indoor toilet. Lack of inside, private, space explains the habit, first established during the rapid unplanned growth of towns and cities in the later 19th century, of using public areas as meeting places.

[8] Jordan refers to *Coronation Street* as an example of "a specific television form that one may think of as Soap-Opera Realism," combining social realism with structural features such as multiple plots, lack of dramatic resolution, and a prominence of stereotyped women (Jordan 28).

[9] Directed by Peter Kosminsky, one in a long line of socially-committed dramatists, the *Government Inspector* was highly topical, being broadcast shortly before the General Election won by Tony Blair's New Labour for the third time. The BBC's *If...* series initially included themes like dysfunctional elements in society (e.g. the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor) or nightmare scenarios like a massive smallpox attack on the country, but later programmes have concerned themselves with more tabloid-style topics: *If...Cloning Could Cure Us*, *If...Drugs Were Legal*, and *If...The Toxic Timebomb Goes Off*.

[10] This is no new dilemma. It was John Grierson himself who called documentary "the creative treatment of actuality" (qtd. in Willis 98).

[11] Showing police, firemen, ambulance crews, and the like in action, indicating the dangers of certain kinds of conduct or how to act in an emergency. In a similar vein, *Crime Watch*, which reconstructs crimes and appeals for witnesses, has made notable contributions to the fight against crime or anti-social behaviour. Such programmes make use of the techniques of dramatic reconstruction found in drama documentary.

[12] Classic examples are *The Royle Family,* a *Coronation Street* without the drama, and *The Office,* a parody of fly-on-the-wall documentary.

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