A reader comments on the state of British television

6 January 1999

Dear David Walsh,

I am an avid reader of your articles on the arts. They are a pleasure to read and display an awesome breadth of knowledge. I am in full agreement with your position on the generally low cultural level pervading society today. I would like offer a few observations on the current state of British television where a "dumbing down" process is going on, similar to the one you have described in the film world.

British television, in recent years, has undergone increasing commercialisation with the advent of cable and satellite channels. The five terrestrial channels have lowered the quality of some of their programming in order to retain and attract audiences, in competition with these new channels and each other.

Of the five terrestrial channels, channels 1 and 3 are targeted towards a mass audience, channels 2 and 4, ostensibly, towards more discerning, high-brow viewers, and channel 5 is designed for the "youth". (In the past, these demarcations were far less rigid).

Now, the so-called drama programmes on channels 1 and 3, seem to continually plumb new depths. To say that the plots are predictable is an understatement; as for the characters, it's cardboard cut-outs only; as for realism, forget it! The drama you occasionally encounter in TV soap operas is far superior. Having cottoned on to this, I now give these "dramas" a wide-berth. They are usually extensively built up and trailered, and often shown in two parts, on consecutive nights, to give viewers a double dose of tedium to look forward to! They are presumably aimed at the "mass audience", the people who flocked to see *Titanic* and thought it was great.

In the past, in the 1960s and '70s for example, British television has been responsible for some truly memorable drama in series like *Armchair Theatre, Play for Today* and many others. These were watched and appreciated by millions, including the "masses". But, of course the programmers were not then completely under the thumb of the market.

Then there are the dramatisations of classical literature. They compress a whole novel into one or two programmes, in the process, totally destroy anything of artistic value in the original. We've had George Eliot's *Adam Bede* transmuted into a gushy love-story, with no attempt to convey rural life around 1800, just before it was transformed by the Industrial Revolution, which I thought was the author's main aim. In these dramatisations the sun always seems to be shining, a dark cloud is never to be seen, and in periods of history when filth and squalor abounded, everything is sparkling and squeaky clean. Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* was given this kind of antiseptic treatment; we saw Moll selling her wares in the bright, sunny streets of eighteenth century London with not a hair out of place or a speck of dirt about her person! Needless to say, I now avoid these productions like the plague!

However, earlier this year there was a serialisation of Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* which did succeed in capturing some of the author's creation. It stayed fairly close to the novel. Special sets were built to represent the dark, murky, Thames riverside which were very atmospheric.

As the amount of good drama on British television has fallen, so the number of fly-on-the-wall documentaries has multiplied. We are assailed with programmes about traffic wardens, shopping malls, airports, the cops, hotels, health clubs, restaurants, etc. They've even been given a new name: "docu-soaps". I suppose these documentaries are cheap to make, they don't require creative writing or the employment of professional actors. Of course, the people being observed by the so-called fly-on-the-wall tend to perform for the camera. A lot of these programmes

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seem to include a very extrovert, camp, openly gay man. For example, in *The Clampers* (a programme about London traffic wardens and wheel-clampers), the star of show is a Ray Brown who uses his sarcasm and wit as a defence against his victims. It seems as if the programmers think they have struck a good seam and are milking it for all its worth, or, more accurately, flogging it to death.

It was against this background and with some trepidation that, a couple of months ago, I sat down to watch a new series called *The Cops*. I had not read the previews so I didn't know what to expect. The conversation on a police radio was played over the opening titles. The first few minutes featured policemen on patrol engaged mundane talk. So I thought it's another "docu-soap". But it became increasingly clear that it was in fact a drama which was so realistic that it seemed liked a "fly-on-the-wall". I didn't know what to make of it to begin with but I became more and more enthralled, and amazed: I had landed upon something of artistic merit.

I later learnt that the executive producer was Tony Garnett who was behind some of the best TV drama of the '60s and '70s.

The characters actually seemed real; they couldn't be pigeon-holed straight away, they had some depth and complexity, your attitude to them changed as the series progressed.

The best characterisation, for me, was Roy. He was depicted as a big burly copper of the "old school" (sic) who used violence liberally, planted drugs on suspects, and believed what "delinquent" youth need is "a good hiding". However, he had other sides to him. He shows some humanity when he gives a homeless youth, who has been selling his body for sex to survive, the fare money to enable him to return home. He also develops some fatherly affection towards Mel, a new female recruit.

In turn Mel was quite an interesting character. She is portrayed as a young and naïve recruit. Her enthusiasm to "make a difference" are treated with ridicule by the experienced cops, including Roy, who have become cynical. Mel soon learns that now she is a copper her friends shun her, she can't even buy some ecstasy drugs in a night club because the dealer can tell from her body language that she's a cop. She tries to stop a young girl becoming a prostitute and fails. She and another cop fail to catch a burglar in the act because he tricks them into thinking he's the owner of the house he's just broken into. Mel thus becomes a hardened cynic too.

Other characters include: a young policeman who looks forward to "breaking a few heads"; an Asian copper who lives in hope of owning a big flashy car, yet at the same time has enough intelligence to see that he is being used as the token non-white cop at the station to "prove" the police aren't racist.

The series did not go down very well with the police, it obviously got a bit too close to reality for them. However, the programme did not really address in detail why youth are turning to drugs and "crime", or why society is breaking down. Possibly the compassion and fellow-feeling that came out of some of the cops was meant to offer some hope. Nevertheless, it was an absorbing piece of television, all too rare these days.

In the States I understand the situation is far worse with programmes interrupted by commercials every few minutes.

Yours fraternally ,

DB

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