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CONFERENCE REPORT

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Report on *The Singing Detective* 25th Anniversary Symposium, University of London, 10 December 2011

> [I]n keeping with the modernist sensibility and self-reflexivity of *Hide and Seek* and *Only Make Believe*, the decision to root a view of the past in the experiences and imagination of a writer protagonist, emphasises the fact that, far from being an objective assessment, any perspective on history can only ever be subjective.
>
> (Cook 1998: 217)

This one-day symposium, organized by the Department of Media Arts at Royal Holloway, University of London, celebrated the 25th anniversary of Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (tx. BBC1, 16 November 1986–21 December 1986). As the notes for the event explained, it sought to pay tribute to the BBC serial's 'narrative complexity, generic hybridity and formal experimentation' and to bring scholars and practitioners together 'to assess its subsequent influence upon television drama and the cinema'. This combination of academic and practitioner perspectives has been a welcome

feature of British television conferences in recent years, facilitating a rewarding exchange of ideas. This piece is, therefore, partly a report of the day's proceedings but also a response to some of the many ideas that were raised by the interviews and presentations.

The first main panel, 'The Creators: Innovation in production', began with a clip of the serial's ending (the first of a number of carefully programmed extracts), followed by the producer Kenith Trodd's opening address. This combined material from his earlier paper 'Whose Dennis is it anyway?' (Trodd 2000) with new reflections on the writer, including his verdict on the newly rediscovered *Emergency Ward 9* (1966), a *Thirty Minute Theatre* play written by Potter and story edited by Trodd, which would be screened the next day at the National Film Theatre. Trodd's introduction established some useful contexts, even if this inevitably meant covering some familiar ground for Potter scholars. He discussed his professional experience of Potter – that famously combustible writer–producer relationship – while also being critical of Potter's post-*Singing Detective* work on the grounds that the writer had become 'confused by the spell of his own eminence', resulting in such hollowed-out work as the problematic Potter-directed *Blackeyes* (1989). However, Trodd was not simply writing off Potter's later career – at other points during the day he was keen to advance the case for *Karaoke* (1996) and *Cold Lazarus* (1996) – but rather was seeking to attest to the artistic and emotional power of *The Singing Detective*. Trodd's amusing description of Potter's 'annoying' claim not to be writing autobiography but using the *form* of autobiography was also worth making, given how the interplay of memory and authorship, subjectivity and creation are so central to the serial. Potter himself described autobiography as 'the most boot-lickingly brutish of all the literary arts, especially when it purports to wrestle with personal motive […] an inherently dishonest category of mislabelled fiction' (1984: 12). However, he also knew, as he told Melvyn Bragg, that '[w]hen the novelist says "I" you know he doesn't mean "I", and yet you want him to mean "I'".[1]

Questions of writer-centred analysis have, of course, been problematized, particularly in relation to Potter's unprecedentedly close collaboration with the director of *The Singing Detective*, Jon Amiel (see Hunningher 1993). Appropriately following a screening of the famous 'Dem Dry Bones' sequence, the symposium's next guest was the choreographer Quinny Sacks, who added an intriguing extra dimension to questions of authorial voice. Interviewed by Trodd and Jonathan Powell, the BBC's Head of Drama at the time of the play's production (and now a member of Royal Holloway's Media Arts department), Sacks discussed the 'collaborative' role of choreographers and her preference for reading the whole script in order to try to capture the writer's and the director's vision rather than merely coming in to 'do steps'. With something as 'intangible' as dance, such routines would not be created by the writer and, as Potter's script indicates, considerable leeway remained for the execution of specifics (1986). For Sacks, choreography is itself a form of writing (graphy) that adds another layer to the use of music, costume, movement and dramatic space. Indeed, as the discussion revealed, Sacks, the production designer Jim Clay and director of photography Ken Westbury were left to their own devices for a few days during the production in order to develop their ideas.

Due to traffic problems, the second 'Creators' panel, 'Innovation in performance', ended up as two separate interviews, conducted by Trodd, with the actors Bill Paterson and Patrick Malahide (who played 'Dr Gibbon' and 'Binney' respectively). Paterson proved an amusing and lively interviewee who

1. Although not discussed on the day, biographical-auteurist approaches reward but also imprison critics and viewers of *The Singing Detective*. As John R. Cook notes, Mary Whitehouse's assumption that Potter must be a dirty sex-obsessed writer because *he*, like Marlow, must have caught his mother up to no good, led to legal consequences (2000: 350).

described his first meeting with Potter – seemingly spiky but on Potter's terms friendly – as well as Potter's set visits, the detail of design in Gibbon's room, plus the omnipresence of disused hospitals for film-makers. Anecdotes about productions ranged from amusing read-through moments to specific examples of contemporary television's 'flakiness' and 'lack of preparation' even in the case of top-level drama. Malahide discussed the challenges of playing Binney/Finney which – as he put it – involved three manifestations of the same character, from the Third Man strand to Nicola's manipulative lover (agent/agent). Malahide made a thoughtful and precise contribution, offering an insight into how we 'peel away the layers' of the story. He gave examples of moments when the complexity of the narrative layers caught Amiel off-guard, such as a sudden switch between Binney and Finney which Malahide realized had not been shot, which left Amiel wondering if the script's use of names was just a case of Potter being 'careless'. Malahide graciously attributed the success of the production to the script, and noted that it hardly changed from read-through to finished product, although Trodd usefully problematized this by pointing out that Potter and Amiel's collaboration had led to it being reworked before the read-through stage. Malahide's enthusiasm for the show was clear – he explained that it was his experience as a writer that contributed to his hearty laughter during the clip that introduced him, in which a studio requested rewrites and shattered Nicola's dreams. However, given that this scene was itself a creation by Marlow, more time for questions might have led to probing on how an actor handles such a sequence: interviewees have in the past indicated how Potter unsettled Malahide's vision of one of the characters by pointing out that that character was not real.

The symposium's emphasis then shifted to the academic with two papers focused on the serial's subsequent influence. Although this theme did, to some extent, constrain what could be said about *The Singing Detective* itself it did, nevertheless, succeed in bringing some key issues into sharp focus. The first speaker, the noted film scholar Timothy Corrigan (University of Pennsylvania), opened his case for *The Singing Detective*'s influence on cinema by claiming it was an 'almost futuristic', prophetic piece. Corrigan focused on its narrative innovations, in particular those relating to convergence and adaptation. The ways in which the serial explores classical film narrative and overlapping narrative discourses were placed in the context of cinematic antecedents including film noir (Marlow versus Bogart's Marlowe), wherein the detective is normally outside events whereas in *The Singing Detective* the detective is inside them. For Corrigan, the dissipation and deconstruction of classical narrative – amidst the serial's 'disjunctive' qualities and 'contending discourses' – made this a timely pinpointing of the modern narrative crisis: 'all solutions and no clues'. Corrigan also related *The Singing Detective* – with its blurring of worlds, disruption of linear causality, querying of reality and demand for viewer interactivity – to developments in recent cinema and writing about it, that included the rise of 'video game logic', Jeffrey Sconce's concept of 'smart cinema' (2002) and Thomas Elsaesser's theorisation of 'mind game films' (2009).

Corrigan also identified the 'extraordinary meta-adaptation' at work in *The Singing Detective*. This series, with an 'afterlife' as a published script, both featuring a writer rewriting his own book 'into something else in my head', was usefully related to 'convergence cultures'. However, Corrigan's (openly acknowledged) lack of detailed Potter scholarship closed off some possible developments of these excellent ideas. Take the prose from the fictional book *The Singing Detective* that Gibbon reads back to its author, Marlow: our

assessment of the writer's sickness and subjectivity is complicated precisely by the evidence of convergence and multi-authorship, as this is actually a section from Potter's own book *Hide and Seek* (1973), which the serial revisits and reworks just as it reworks *Emergency Ward 9* for its hospital scenes, draws on *Stand Up, Nigel Barton* (1965) for the school scenes, and makes reference to other serials such as *Pennies from Heaven* (1978). There is a sense in which Potter is in conversation with himself, not simply on an autobiographical level but through a form of multi-authorship, multi-media convergence that takes place across his work. That is to say that – brace yourselves! – Potter's book is partly adapted as Marlow's book, which is adapted by Marlow in his head while a traitor tries to sell a film adaptation (though this too is Marlow adapting reality, complete with spoken punctuation), while Reginald reads his book in time to the television serial's adaptation of the script, which became a script book, and was adapted into a cinema screenplay (in which Potter 'totally re-thought' the serial), reworked other previous plays, and was made for the cinema after his death: and all these layers are grounded in Potter/Marlow/both/neither quote-unquote autobiography. Characters confront their own fictional status, though Potter's idea of making 'Noddy' the real author was among the ideas lost to Amiel's testing collaboration.

Of course, Corrigan's lack of Potter scholarship does not detract from the value of locating his work in relation to these reference points, as we can see by briefly leaving the conference report to try think through some of the ideas that he raised. For instance, if we return to Elsaesser's discussion of 'the mind-game film', we find the identification of this with 'new forms of spectator engagement and new forms of audience address' which reveal a 'crisis in the spectator-film relation':

> … the traditional 'suspension of disbelief' or the classical spectator positions of 'voyeur,' 'witness', 'observer' and their related cinematic regimes or techniques (point-of-view shot, 'suture', restricted/omniscient narration, 'fly on the wall' transparency, mise-en-scène of the long take/depth of field) are no longer deemed appropriate, compelling, or challenging enough …
>
> (Elsaesser 2009: 18)

The rise of digital and DVD boxset culture, and its scope for multiple viewing, has encouraged greater complexity in certain areas of popular cinema, which Elsaesser identifies as a tendency rather than as a genre. The extent to which these are actually characteristics of art cinema – Elsaesser comments upon the 'irresolvable ambiguities and inconsistencies' in *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997) – could also be of interest, since Potter, in common with many television dramatists of the period, respected the mass audience's intelligence and receptiveness to techniques that would now be seen as avant-garde. The strategies associated with complex narrative are hardly novel for audiences of British television drama.

Academic debates on complex narratives throw up further useful points of reference for Potter's work. In a special double issue of *Film Criticism*, Charles Ramirez Berg provides a taxonomy of 'alternative plots': the polyphonic or ensemble plot, the parallel plot, the multiple personality (branched) plot, the Daisy Chain plot, the backwards plot, the repeated action plot (either one character repeating an action or one action being seen from different perspectives), the Hub and Spoke plot (intersecting storylines), the jumbled

plot, the subjective plot (a character's internal or 'filtered' perspective), the existential plot and the metanarrative plot (2006). Several of these sub-headings provide points of interest in relation to *The Singing Detective*, but it and, inevitably, British television drama are entirely absent even though *The Singing Detective* would have been an excellent reference point for Elliot Panek's piece in the same issue on poets, detectives and psychological puzzle films (2006). Corrigan, therefore, has provided a useful service in relating debates on narrative complexity to *The Singing Detective*, and we can hope that other dramas and dramatists are incorporated into such debates on complex narrative, which have up until now remained associated with American film and contemporary American television. The *Film Criticism* piece helpfully lists a variety of antecedents – from *Sherlock Jr* (1924) to *8½* (1963) – to add to its modern examples from *Fight Club* (1999) to Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003),which is itself, of course, an example of multi-authored convergence insofar as it is based on Alan Clarke's 1989 British television drama of the same name.

Whether claiming Potter as 'prophetic' or a direct influence, Corrigan's references to films such as *Adaptation* (2002), *Inception* (2010) and *Being John Malkovich* (1999) provide useful points of reference for Potter scholars and film scholars alike. Of course, identifying influence is a problematic approach for academics, too often leading to reductive work or ignoring the possibility of shared influences. For example, the sex-and-death cross-cutting scene in *The Singing Detective* has direct echoes of a scene from *Bad Timing* (1980) by Nicolas Roeg, whose work shares so many signatures with Potter that, when they finally worked together on *Track 29* (1988), critics noted the difficulties of disentangling their respective, shared signatures. (*Track 29* was also another Potter self-adaptation, this time revisiting *Schmoedipus* (1974)). If Corrigan preferred the invocation of prophecy to the mapping of influence, the next speaker, Glen Creeber (University of Aberystwyth), was careful to identify the direct, stated influence of Potter on high-profile American television dramas, with direct quotation and a welcome use of extracts.

Creeber began by relating *The Singing Detective* to Potter's response to Troy Kennedy Martin's often-cited 'Nats go home' call for non-naturalistic form, as well as seeking to relate Potter's representation of 'the inner flux of the mind' to the work of Virginia Woolf, Alain Resnais and others. Addressing the difficulty of gauging influence, Creeber quoted the likes of Mark Frost – co-visionary (with Lynch) of *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991) – and Tom Fontana who claimed *Oz* (HBO, 1997–2003) as Potter's 'illegitimate child' given the inspiration provided by a viewing of *Pennies from Heaven*. Creeber also used a clip from *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) with clear thematic parallels: Tony Soprano remembering his childhood witnessing of a crime (from behind a tree) that changed his outlook. The parallel here is thematic rather than formal, lacking the formal experimentation or non-naturalism with which the paper started. Tony looks into a mirror, signposting clearly that he is looking into himself – and we see what he remembers, using the conventional, classical form of a flashback. Earlier in the day, Kenith Trodd argued that more study should be made of how *The Singing Detective* enters and leaves flashbacks. This sort of analysis shows that, in *The Sopranos*, we do not enter Tony's subjectivity in any comparable way – the worlds remain clearly demarcated – but come to achieve greater understanding of character motivation through an observation of his origins, in a classical character-centred representation.

Creeber's most compelling comparison with Potter – the 'messy' and 'complex' *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–2005) – was illustrated by a moment in which musical elements serve as a disruptive interruption. Critics often risk minimizing Potter's achievement by claiming as Potteresque dramas with musical elements – quick reference is made to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s musical episode – without mapping them onto formal experimentation or modernist non-naturalism. Indeed, in comments on the series *Cop Rock* (ABC, 1990) Potter articulated his own distinction between different uses of music:

> [It] was a long way from what I was trying to do, because first of all the music was new music, and secondly it seemed to be a comment upon the scenes. In *Pennies* the music didn't come out of a character situation as instinctively as a speech would have done, and it wasn't a comment upon the speech. It shifted the scene […] it wasn't an interlude, it wasn't added on, it was part of the drama. […] it's that very subtle distinction between using the music in one particular and fertile way with all its resonances, and using it as something added on. That's what the MGM *Pennies* became – a series of production numbers that made little connection with the characters.
>
> (Fuller: 85, 111–112)

However, I would not extend this criticism to Creeber, whose earlier work on Potter (1998) and *The Singing Detective* itself (2007) is alive to the ways in which 'the serial is defined by its ability to harness the apparently "empty" and "depthless" signs of postmodern culture and breathe true meaning and significance back onto them […] all the reflections lead back to one authentic self' (2007: 129). Claiming Potter as a figure nearer to Romanticism than postmodernism and poststructuralism (2007: 130) licences the emphasis on content, but Creeber – here and elsewhere – remains conscious of the formal questions raised by Potter's work.

Creeber's paper focused on American television, following the dominant broadsheet/academic position that British television has lost its capacity for experimentation and entered a 'conservative phase in terms of form'. Creeber didn't argue that British television is incapable of radical drama, indicating that there would be exceptions. Creeber suggested *Bleak House* (BBC, 2005) as an exception, but we might add others: for instance, *Random* (Channel 4, 2011), written and directed by Debbie Tucker Green, was both socially conscious *and* subjective in the way in which interiority broke into externally observed drama. Creeber's argument that Potter would now be working for HBO is unobjectionable: his reputation remains high amongst noted practitioners (and perhaps he might have benefited from HBO's willingness to collaborate with the BBC on creatively ambitious projects, such as *God on Trial* in 2008). However, HBO's position as a subscription channel for those with 'taste' and money jars with Potter's belief in television as a democratic medium with the potential to overturn established status boundaries. Creeber clearly acknowledged this potential objection by making reference to the use of complex narrative in network drama. Similarly, Peter Bowker later described *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006) as a better comparison with Potter than more frequently-compared texts, due to its capacity to attract wider audiences on a major channel.

Where British television drama has failed is in eroding the space for the kind of authored, modernist, non-naturalistic dramas that Potter made. The

shortage of bold drama of this type is undeniable and damaging – but then we could debate the extent to which American television drama possesses this sort of drama either. American television does indeed boast many complex *series* including 'showrunner'-led forms of 'authored' drama, which make it the centre of interest for many scholars. However condemning British drama for its lack of comparable varieties of series would be as dangerous as condemning American drama for its relative lack of emphasis on politically radical single plays, authored serials or, indeed, Potteresque modernist subjectivity. If we can celebrate *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004–2006) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) without being concerned that they aren't in the Potter tradition, we might cut British television drama similar slack in fairly acknowledging what it *does* do. If we use *The Sopranos* as an example of quality American television *of a different type*, we can celebrate British television drama's compelling work *of a different type*, from *Random* to the campaigning one-offs and serials by people like Peter Kosminsky. This is not a criticism of Creeber's paper, but of the broadsheet critics used during the paper (entirely reasonably) as evidence of a prevailing critical tendency. Despite contributing a lot to Television Studies, 'Quality TV' debates have had the unfortunate effect of factoring-out forms of ideologically, politically and formally radical and/or oppositional forms of drama. Amusingly, as if to spell this out, Creeber's mention of some of the inspirations of Potter's generation, including Brecht, was answered by a fire alarm that left delegates standing in the car park, admiring the Orwellian surroundings of Senate House.

The final panel – and one of the day's highlights – was an interview between contemporary British television writer Peter Bowker and the excellent Potter scholar John R. Cook. A lively, analytical and often very funny interviewee, Bowker addressed not only Potter's influence on his work but also his own career as a contemporary British television writer. Following an extract of the opening sequence of *Blackpool* (BBC, 2006), Bowker described the differences between his and Potter's use of songs in both their conception and application (for instance, being able to hear the singers'/mimers' voices), his use of music 'to represent a heightened form of dialogue', and creation of a space for different voices (identifying *Pennies from Heaven* as a bigger influence than *The Singing Detective*). Whereas Arthur in *Pennies from Heaven* had no other way to express himself than in song, characters in *Blackpool* (and in Blackpool) were in a world in which people broke into song/karaoke. Bowker amusingly described the budgetary restrictions on choices of songs – occasionally making 'virtues' out of 'tacky' songs. Songs had to fit characters' likely musical awareness – Bowker dropped a Nick Cave song – and in some cases (The Smiths' 'The Boy With The Thorn In His Side') he avoided giving a song to the character who would get that song in a conventional musical. Pressed by Cook on the 'internalizing' function of songs in *The Singing Detective*, Bowker also discussed whether characters know that other characters are singing.

Employing the analogy of people still wishing to play football despite having seen George Best play, Bowker indicated his willingness to 'have a go' with devices that others may have been frightened to use given their associations with Potter ('Peter Bowker's doing a Dennis Potter'). Such tools, he suggested, were things no longer exploited in British television, which even for Bowker, a successful writer in modern British television drama, was less 'audacious' and 'adventurous' than American television drama. Bowker partly attributed to this to critical tendencies in Britain (working in parallel with Cook's observation of the lack of unanimity in praise of Potter's serial), citing an astonishing claim

in the *Radio Times* that *Blackpool* was a great show ruined by the song and dance elements that were central to it and the dismay of some critics regarding his switch from the seemingly naturalistic *Occupation* (2009) to a supposedly more frivolous approach in his next work. Bowker, however, convincingly challenged this view by identifying the more multi-layered thematic and intertextual underpinning of *Occupation*. For Bowker, the dominant journalistic question 'Is this *true*?' neglected the idea that work can be 'true' in a deeper sense. Although the same question has led to the neglect of other forms, such as even the most journalistic of drama documentary work, this sense of deeper truth compromised by obsession with the literal 'truth' of its surface elements is the sort of issue with which Potter was also often forced to deal.

Responding to earlier comments about the failings of British television drama, Cook and Bowker's conversation took in a wide range of television, from scripted reality shows to *Clocking Off* (BBC, 2000–2003), from Jimmy McGovern to *The Promise* (C4, 2011) and *The Shadow Line* (BBC, 2011), an apprenticeship on *Casualty* to script-doctoring *Rome*. Bowker insisted that 'there *are* ways of punching through' (his emphasis), with examples that included the genesis of his *Flesh and Blood* (2002). The 'fundamentals of story remain the same', he argued, although he did acknowledge issues relating to institutional infrastructure. Bowker's admiration for *The Singing Detective*, and Potter's work more generally, shone through, with references to magical moments (such as Michael Gambon's performance in the closing scenes). If anything, he thought that his own career was closer to that of Alan Plater or Jack Rosenthal than of Potter – however, as he memorably commented, *nobody's* career is like Potter's.

As my response to the ideas presented during the day would suggest, the symposium was a stimulating and enjoyable event, with lots of chatty tea breaks with friends and colleagues old and new, and an interesting mixed approach that made for a fitting tribute to a drama (and a mode of drama) that was both popular and serious without any question of these being divided into separate categories.

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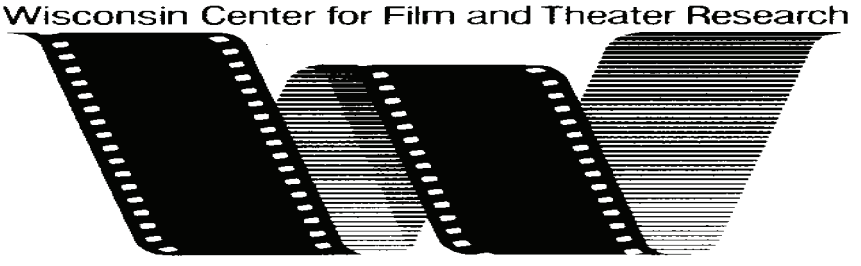

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