



Assessing Television's 'Political Dramas'

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Abstract

Because drama is so important to the television schedules, and because television remains a ubiquitous and pervasive medium, TV drama is a constant cultural presence. Some of its stories are about politics, featuring the work of government, the contestation of elections, party rivalry and negotiation, and so on, with a cast of characters including leaders, advisors, journalists, celebrities and citizens: they echo, refract, replay, model and feed into narratives about real-world politics in a variety of ways. Dramatic stories of this kind are important for the sake of their potential contribution to what citizens believe – and feel – about politics itself. Dramatised political stories and characters appear in a wide range of genres, from factually based docudramas to situation comedy and soap opera, and have become the focus of international academic attention for a number of scholars in politics departments as well as those working from within media and cultural studies. This article looks at a range of approaches to studying political drama on television, raising questions about generic variety, the ideas and the kinds of analysis that have been applied and the varying assessments that have been put forward.

Because drama is so important to the television schedules, and because television remains a ubiquitous and pervasive medium, TV drama is a constant cultural presence. From *EastEnders* to *The Killing*, via *Boardwalk Empire*, *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *The Inbetweeners*, it tells us stories about ourselves, and others, that nurture the public imagination and offer significant resources for making sense of the world and for organising our feelings in relation to it. Thanks largely to television, we live in a 'dramatised society' (Williams 1974), and the survival of TV drama still seems secure in spite of recurrent expressions of doubt about the specific terms of its viability in a nationally and internationally changing media ecology. Some of these stories are about politics, featuring the work of government, the contestation of elections, party rivalry and negotiation, and so on, with a cast of characters including leaders, advisors, journalists, celebrities and citizens: they echo, refract, replay, model and feed into narratives about real-world politics in a variety of ways. This review article thus starts from the premise that dramatic stories of this kind are important for the sake of their potential contribution to what citizens believe – and perhaps just as importantly, feel – about politics itself.

For the purposes of this survey, we have identified a core of scholarly work which takes a restricted definition of the 'political' (further explicated below) and has been published in English language journals and books for an international readership. The international published research in this area has a bias towards American and British productions, with an additional, strong strand of work on Brazilian telenovelas. Other countries mentioned here, notwithstanding the scarcity of the research, are Australia, (see Staley 2008) China (Bai 2012; Zhong 2010), Germany (Wodak 2010) and Denmark (Agger 2011). We also concentrate on the study of TV political drama as text – the

programmes themselves – though we should note here that there are a number of studies which (also) offer an audience research element (Hamburger 2000, Van Zoonen 2007); others which interview individuals involved with production (Fielding 2011b; Kaye 2007), and some which do both of these things (Coleman 2008).

To maximise the interest of this literature for a non-specialist readership we have elected to articulate it along thematic lines by reference to the content and form of programmes themselves, and critical judgment of them. It makes sense to do this, rather than foregrounding the disciplinary affiliations of scholars, and the methodologies which follow from these, because the work itself derives from disparate academic contexts, the variations across which we cannot do justice to here, and which are of less immediate significance for our primary theme. The majority of this work belongs to the field of media and cultural studies. This itself is diverse in approaches and methodologies, ranging from the strongly social-scientific and quantitative, to more arts-based modes of critique and commentary. We can single out from our own bibliography, Holbert et al. 2002 as a good example at the former end of this spectrum, with Van Zoonen 2003 at the other end. Some of the research affiliates with political studies, via the 'cultural turn' in political communication research (also mentioned below) – Coleman 2008 could be regarded as representative here. Some come to this topic through a background in language and discourse studies, as in Wodak 2010. Recent research has begun to transsect these diverse traditions, but without yet developing clear 'subfield' parameters of its own.

As a consequence of our approach, this review can also stand as a preliminary guide to aspects of the programming itself, alongside other 'overview' accounts. Van Zoonen and Wring (2012) is the most recent of such overviews: empirically this focuses on British political drama but it makes reference to American examples and research in its contextualising sections. For expositional purposes we have found it useful to treat *The West Wing* (NBC 1999–2007) as a touchstone example, taking advantage of its iconic status. Because of the *West Wing's* critical success and its extensive international distribution, it is probably the most well known example of political drama, certainly within the series form, and has attracted the most academic attention by far (Books: Rollins and O'Connor 2003a; Crawley 2006; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006; journal articles and book chapters: Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2002; Quiring 2003, Holbert et al. 2002, Holbert et al. 2005; Hall 2005; Downing 2005; Paxton 2005; Garrett 2005; Clark 2005; Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005; Richardson 2006; Cass 2007; Hora 2008; Wodak 2010; Phalen et al. 2011). But this iconic status sets it apart in many ways from other representations of politics in TV drama. For scholarly research purposes, *The West Wing* is frequently bracketed with politically themed movies, especially American ones, like *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, (1939), *All the President's Men* (1976), *Wag the Dog* (1997) (see Rollins and O'Connor 2003b; Van Zoonen 2007), as well as, or instead of, a specific interest in 'The President' as a unique political identity, mediated sometimes around actual human beings, from George Washington to George W. Bush and sometimes around fictional surrogates (Crawley 2006).

Alternatively, in TV drama studies, *The West Wing* is bracketed with other kinds of drama, as in Cardwell (2007), Feuer (2007), where the interest is in the high-end production of American television drama which includes *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999–2007), *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001–2005), and *Lost* (ABC 2004–2010), amongst others. There has been occasional attention from scholars interested neither in the show's politics, nor in its place in the canon of 'quality' TV drama, but in something else entirely: Zoller and Worrell (2006) focus on audience responses to the way it depicts

the effects of the disease multiple sclerosis, which the fictional US president suffers from in this series.

Because *The West Wing* is such a special and prominent case, other writers besides ourselves, in both popular and academic writing, have found it a necessary point of reference in their more general commentaries. Yet it is certainly not typical of a genre – indeed, there is no 'TV political drama' genre, or subgenre. The category referenced here is a construct, for the purposes of research. For this review, we will define the construct initially by three primary criteria: (a) location in a political setting, with political characters, storylines and/or themes; (b) use of a dramatized rather than expositional mode of representation (thereby contrasting with most documentary productions); (c) being made for television (so excluding movies made for cinema but broadcast on TV). In contextualising the scholarly research, we begin by discussing more precisely the 'politicality' of such drama, before moving on to consider the terms of its construction within televisual discourse, by reference to ontology, medium, genre and aesthetics. We indicate throughout where the existing research has positioned itself in this landscape.

The scope of politics in television drama

The West Wing as political drama sits comfortably within the commonsense use of the term *politics* to refer to electioneering, party contest and government in democratic states, to a distinctive sphere of people, institutions and processes. There is an alternate and important sense of the term 'political' which, whilst bringing in a much wider range of examples, does not offer politics in such a direct or literal form but refers instead to the dimensions of everyday life in which people are variously caught up in power relations. In the gangster show *The Sopranos*, to see Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) manage his lieutenants, or to see how the bureaucrats of *Holby City's* (BBC 1999–present) medical world impinge on the conduct of hospital affairs, is to witness the play of power across conflicts of interest in contexts away from the governmental arena. There are good stories to be told about these dynamics, and drama, political or otherwise, is arguably as interested in the general themes of negotiation, conspiracy, bribery, treachery, victimisation and so on as it is in the circumstantial institutional arrangements that give rise to them. If this is politics with a small 'p', it is worthwhile also to remember that politics with a large 'P' can become implicated in any of the social milieu that TV drama may choose to dramatise – law, medicine, education, crime, policing, etc.. Thus, for instance, in the Danish murder mystery *The Killing*, (Season One, DR 2007) a politician running for office is a major character, and the drama's main subplot works through the interplay of the police enquiry with the conduct of the election and the politician's character (Agger 2011). *The Wire* (HBO 2002–2008) is likewise political in this sense, particularly in season 3. Politics can be important in science fiction series, playing out political relations within imaginary worlds – *Battlestar Galactica* (Sky TV 2004–2008; The Sci-Fi channel 2005–2009) is sometimes cited as a good example of this (Erikson 2007). There is also the sense in which 'political' is a synonym for 'ideological', the form of the relationship, both conscious and subconscious, with the broader contours of power at work in a society, so that any text that can be read for its ideological orientation, e.g., pro- or anti- feminist, can thereby be deemed political.

From the standpoint of an interest in the reciprocal relations between dramatised politics and actual political life, refracted through the ways that drama/fiction – especially in its popular forms – represents political identities, relationships, practices and values, it makes sense to begin with the more centrally political material of the *West Wing* kind,

and work outwards to that which is only tangentially, metaphorically or extensionally political. As indicated in the introduction, we have confined our survey to research with this kind of focus, albeit with varying emphases as the following quotations indicate:

... fictional representations of political life can offer an important source of information for political studies. They can tell us much about our attitudes – past and present – to real politics. Precisely because of its non factual form, political fiction possesses the ability to open up and display the world of politics and the motives of its protagonists. (Bailey 2011, 283).

...print and broadcast journalists inevitably mediate many political events and processes for us. But they nonetheless struggle to provide the public with a complete account. Secrecy is a cardinal virtue in central government, and journalists are forced to rely upon partial and self-interested sources when filing their stories. As a result, many of the key processes of political life are ultimately left to our imaginations, which are themselves open to the influence of political fictions in print, theatre, television and cinema. (Randall 2011, 263).

From the talk shows on twenty-four-hour news networks to the Sunday morning news programmes, from C-Span to prime time serial drama, Americans learn about politics and understand their political culture via television. (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006, 5).

[in Chinese TV drama] problems and issues are constantly politicised under the guise of entertainment and [...] different ideological positions and cultural legacies coexist and are contested. (Zhong 2010, 18).

[political film and television fiction] enables audiences to learn about politics, reflect on it and judge it, and to imagine ideal political situations and practices. (Van Zoonen and Wring 2012).

If culture is defined as a particular structure of feeling generated by groups of people, then part of the work of television audiences [...] is to construct an affective response from their viewing experience. A viewing experience of the president, then, would provide an occasion for this work to be carried out, whether the source was the reality of the news or the fiction of situation of situation comedy or drama. (Crawley 2006, 13).

More needs to be discovered about quite how – and how far – fiction constructs how citizens see politics. A wide-ranging research agenda remains to be mapped out, one that taps into work from the USA and disciplines beyond politics. Even so it cannot be doubted that fiction contributes *something* to what we might call citizens' 'imagined political capital', that is the repertoire of ideas they hold about politicians and politics. It is moreover clear that this capital is in a pretty poor state at the moment given the extent to which British politicians are viewed in hostile terms – even though most observers agree that MPs are working harder on their constituents' behalf than they have ever done. (Fielding 2011a).

Thus, according to emphasis (and national context), political drama can reflect a culture's attitudes to politics (Bailey 2011), or its 'vernacular theories' of politics (Randall 2011). It can also potentially influence those understandings (Randall 2011; Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006; Van Zoonen and Wring 2012 – for empirical research in support of this proposition see Holbert et al. 2002, Holbert et al. 2005), and can offer a site for working through political and social tensions in the wider society (Zhong 2010). Along with other sources, it can contribute to the sustenance of political culture (Fielding 2011a) which may include fostering particular emotional responses (Crawley 2006) – positive ones about the US Presidency for Crawley, negative ones about the British political class for Fielding. Across all of these possibilities, we can note the emphasis which is placed on the work of the imagination both in the creativity of the productions themselves and in the interpretations of viewers. We now turn our attention to the question of *how* forms of drama might do any or all of these things, a question that researchers have variously posed and tried to answer.

Dramatising political stories on television: ontology, medium, genre and style.

The criteria we offered above for TV political drama did not specify that the dramas in question needed to be based on *fictional* narratives. We recognise that, in any kind of storytelling, the various lines separating that which is imagined from that which is copied or reported from reality cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of fact versus fiction: 'factual' dramatisations may include invented scenes, 'fictional' ones make all sorts of assumptions about real places like London or Washington D.C. and location shooting often shows the real thing; real politicians (and others) may make cameo appearances as themselves. Both fictional and factual dramatisations may be held to varying criteria of 'realism', according to context. Where the political issues and themes they engage are real (that is to say, identifiable as those which occur in the political world beyond television narratives) they may be handled at various levels of remove from circumstantial detail, and with a creative transformation of this detail as required. The *West Wing* made use of many different contemporary issues in its storytelling – illegal immigration, the death penalty, state-sponsored terrorism, to name only a few. It got into hot water when, needing a foreign country for the purposes of a storyline about the limits of military response to terrorist attacks, it specified Syria as the rogue state responsible for a fictional atrocity (in the 1999 episode *A Proportional Response*). It was often safer to create imaginary states in analogous relations to ones familiar from the news, and fictional 'Qumar' served this purpose in Season Three. Some of the academic literature on *West Wing* has engaged with it in relation to specific aspects of American politics (e.g. Cass 2007 in respect of the Palestine/Israel conflict).

Brazil's *Cattle King* (Rede Globo 1996–1997) is a rather more extraordinary case of interaction between politics in drama and politics in reality. It dealt with the real topic of agrarian reform (whether and how to promote politically the release of unproductive land from farmers to landless peasants); like *West Wing* it featured a fictional leader, Senator Caxias, who came symbolically to stand in public imagination for key political values more than any actual politician was able to do, and whose 'realism' was strengthened by the fact that real senators participated onscreen at his funeral. More than this, he was given lines in which he paid tribute to a real senator who was promoting agrarian reform, and the real one repaid the compliment in a press column. Hamburger (2000) elaborates on yet further dimensions of this complex 'multilogue' traversing fact/fiction boundaries. See also Van Zoonen and Wring (2012), who have discussed contextual interactions between reality and fiction in relation to British political TV drama.

Nevertheless, despite these blurrings of boundaries, in the context of a review article, a broad initial distinction between fact and fiction is a necessary starting point, for two reasons. It is necessary in the first place as an acknowledgement of a particular kind of dramatisation on TV, the political docudrama, i.e., that strand of programming which offers representations of the lives of indubitably real people – real politicians, like Margaret Thatcher, John F. Kennedy or Tony Blair. In Britain, this strand of production has given us *The Deal* (Granada 2003), showing episodes in the changing relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, amongst many others: in the USA *The Kennedys* (Reelz-channel 2011) is a recent, controversial example. Corner et al. (2011) features a discussion of *On Expenses* (BBC 2010), a recent docudrama, portraying aspects of the scandal about British MPs misusing their expense allowances. The terms *drama-documentary* and *docu-drama* can be used as effectively synonymous, but it is important, though often difficult, to retain the distinction between productions which emphasise their documentary status, using drama as a means, and productions which essentially offer themselves as dramas,

using documentary reference points as a means. In the UK, many television productions concerning political life have taken this second line of emphasis. Padgett (2011) offers a full discussion of intra-generic variations.

Secondly, the distinction is necessary because, for some of the researchers interested in TV political drama, 'political fiction' is a unifying category, aligning television not only with movies and the theatre, but also with prose fiction (Fielding 2011a). Fielding makes these connections introducing a special issue of the journal *Parliamentary Affairs* on the subject of political fiction, yet it is of interest that, whilst one contribution focuses on a Shakespeare play (Finlayson and Frazer 2011) and another on the novels of former Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson (Beers 2011), the majority of the contributions to the special issue concern themselves with 20th and 21st century film and TV, and not with the older dramatic canon nor, much, with novels or short stories (Randall 2011; Bailey 2011; Nikoliaidis 2011; Cardo 2011). It is political fiction in the era's most *popular* media which is of most relevance for the project as Fielding construes it, drawing inspiration from theorists Edelman 1995 and Saward 2010 to foreground the cultural construction of political understanding through narrative, metaphor, ritual and symbol (see also Fielding 2008). Yet, narrative, metaphor, ritual and symbol may also be tracked through their manifestations in non-fictional non-drama (as well as non-televisual) media sources, so that talk shows on radio and TV may be as relevant as fictional drama, and press cartoons, parliamentary sketches and editorials may be as relevant as anything in the broadcast media. Given this, a broader canvas of political mediation than that addressed by Fielding may be necessary to further the project he outlines. The study of mediated political culture (Street 1997; Corner and Pels 2003; van Zoonen 2005; Jones 2005/2010; Corner et al. 2011) is a research paradigm which seeks to traverse medium and genre, fact and fiction, whilst trying to honour formal specificities. The analysis of political drama on TV fits comfortably within its expanded perspectives.

Questions of medium and genre are important because they are consequential for the *kinds* of stories which can be told, as well as the satisfactions they offer to their audiences. Television dramatisation shares with prose fiction the capacity to particularise from the general, to present imagined narrative specificity out of a framework of ideas, aspirations, fears, etc.. *Dramatic* fiction is distinctive because in drama the particular becomes *embodied* and *enacted*. Witnessing dramatic performances, on stage, screen or over the airwaves, offers an emotional and cognitive experience of a distinctive kind. Television's inflections of this 'witnessing' draw upon the medium's domestic character (favouring 'private', informal and colloquial expression over grander public display), as well as often reaching out to extremely large audiences and attempting, even in today's complex multi-channel era, to engage them across the differences of age, gender, class and region.

Corner and Richardson (2009) offer a discussion of these points concerning the medium of television in relation to a variety of case studies, including *Bill Brand* (Thames Television 1976) and *The Thick Of It* (BBC 2005–present) Other researchers have drilled further down, attempting to identify the profile of mediated politicality at the level of generic templates. We have already commented on one relevant generic area: that of the docudrama and drama-documentary. What are the other genres which have contributed to the range? What genre might *The West Wing* itself belong to?

Prima facie, *The West Wing* seems to fit best into a 'workplace' genre, along with police procedurals (*The Bill*, Thames Television 1984–2010) or hospital dramas (*House*, Fox 2004–2012). Given the extent of its critical acclaim, it can also be assimilated to 'Quality' drama, a television category whose rise owes much to the growth of 'premium' subscription channels and the availability of DVD box sets, both creating new cultures or

subcultures of viewing. This category arguably transcends established generic limitations, even carrying the suggestion that 'genre' drama signifies an inferior, more industrial mode of cultural production (see McCabe and Akass 2007; Nelson 2007 for discussion of quality/'high end' drama production and Feuer 2007 for analysis of *West Wing's* equivocal place in the canon). However, according to van Zoonen (2003, 2005); (see also Crawley (200), Feuer (2007), Wodak (2010)). *The West Wing* has a marked soap-like character, deriving from its narrative structure, with interlocking storylines, an ensemble cast and an emphasis on the personal relationships amongst that cast. These features are significant for its particular kind of politicality. They provide the basis for *sympathetic* and possibly affectionate alignments between viewers and characters, so that the former may come to better appreciate the hazards of political life from an insider's perspective:

Soap conventions enable this political drama to produce a hybrid understanding of politics, in which the different logics of rational policy development, ideological struggle, personal convictions and preferences, public relations requirements, incompetence and bureaucracy unite into a coherent and persuasive picture of 'best possible' political practice. (van Zoonen 2005: 112).

Yet this is *soap-like*, rather than the real thing: whether the keyword 'soap' makes us think about the American prime-time productions (*Dallas*, CBS 1978–1991), its daytime soaps, (*All My Children*, ABC 1970–present) or the British variants (*Coronation Street*, Granada/ITV 1960–present), they focus on domestic relationships, are strongly melodramatic and do not have any episode-specific stories to tell, only the longer overlapping story arcs. *West Wing* focuses on work relationships (though ones which become family-like in the representation), is less melodramatic, has episode-specific stories as well as story arcs, and a very much greater interest in the pleasures of language use (Quiring 2003; Richardson 2006; Thompson 2007), in addition to its political and interpersonal subject matter. In the British variety of soap opera, the politics is more likely to come about when a character who is already familiar as part of the soap community takes on a responsibility, or takes up a cause, which augments their identity by adding 'councillor' or 'activist' or 'chair' to their existing roles, providing opportunity for displays of political disagreement with other characters (Coleman 2008).

Comedy, of course, fosters humour at the expense of politicians, whether they are being outmanoeuvred by the permanent civil service, as in *Yes (Prime) Minister*, BBC 1980–1988 – see Oakley 1982; Adams 1993; Granville 2009; Crowder 2010) or allowing themselves to be managed by their manipulative spin-doctors as in *The Thick Of It* (see Corner and Richardson 2009) or policy advisors, as in Australia's *The Hollowmen*, ABC 2008–present. Gray et al. (2009) incorporate discussion of *That's My Bush* (Comedy Central, 2001) and *Li'l Bush* (Comedy Central, 2007–2008), as satires at either end of one particular American presidency: the series made at the beginning of this presidency features satire addressing personal characteristics, whilst that made at the end (in the generic form of animation, rather than live action) is able to focus also on policy and its execution, including the Iraq war.

Other genres which have ventured into political territory include thrillers, in miniseries or long-running form, with a single story arc over several episodes (*State of Play*, BBC 2003, 24, Fox 2001–2010); single plays (*Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton*, BBC 1965) and multi-episode dramas that resist further subcategorisation (*House of Cards*, BBC 1990). For Britain, Van Zoonen and Wring (2012) offer an overview of the range, covering the period 1965–2009, using just three generic categories: drama, thriller, comedy: these are cross-referenced against four different narrative types: bureaucracy, conspiracy, melodrama

and quest. They deliberately exclude the docudrama and drama-documentary examples, preferring to focus on fictional texts. Less systematic overviews are offered by Bailey (2011) and Randall (2011). Their accounts agree that a generally negative view of politicians emerges across the decades. Bailey's summary is the most succinct:

Yet the fact remains that if we search for heroes of the Jed Bartlet kind in British depictions of politicians we will be hard pressed to find them – particularly if we seek heroes who are effective too (2011, 285).

Bailey judges this, overall, as healthy disrespect, though he points to *A Very Social Secretary* (More 4 2005) and *Confessions of A Diary Secretary* (ITV 2007) as worrying signs that the disrespect may be mutating to contempt (2011, 288). Both of these are examples of the docudrama mode (shadowing episodes in the lives of senior politicians David Blunkett and John Prescott respectively) and both are focused on personal moral failings in respect of sexual constancy rather than on the political conduct of the ministers represented.

In a very different political context, Bai (2012) discusses the 'anticorruption' TV mini-series in China, so as to explain the existence of this non-didactic genre, designed to include display of extensive misuse of power in Party governance. The explanation offered by Bai draws attention to the subtly crafted texts which satisfy popular tastes by showing the corruption, and satisfy the censors through the mode of narrative resolution (often involving the eventual upholding of 'justice' through the party machinery).

Soap operas, like *Coronation Street*, are not discussed by either van Zoonen and Wring, Bailey or Randall. They do not, *prima facie*, fit the criteria because they are not *about* politics. Yet Coleman (2008) makes a strong argument that, for researchers interested in TV drama because of its contribution to mediated political culture, it is all the more important to focus on those occasional moments of politicality which do make an appearance in soaps, because soaps are about 'everyday life' and politics needs to be witnessed *there*. His questions are:

Why are politicians and political issues so rarely depicted at the most pivotal intersection between popular culture and media-constructed reality, the soap opera? What happens when they are depicted? How might a mature democracy integrate a recognition of politics into its most popular dramatic genre? (Coleman 2008, 3).

Coleman's research on the small contribution that politics has made in British soap operas introduces not only another genre into the mix, but also another medium, since he aligns this kind of TV drama not with movies, or even with other TV drama, but with radio, where *The Archers* (BBC 1950-present) and *Silver Street* (BBC 2004–2009) compare with *Coronation Street* (Granada/ITV 1, 1960-present) and *EastEnders* (BBC 1985-present) in bringing politics into everyday life (or failing to do so, or doing so in unsatisfactory ways). In Britain, radio is also a source of drama that is more centrally political, such as *Number 10* (BBC 2007-present) – though such production has not yet attracted any academic attention.

The relationship between popular drama and politics is tighter for Brazilian telenovelas than it is for the British soaps (see, e.g., Hamburger 2000; Porto 2005; la Pastina 2004) though here too the political content is only a small part of these primarily personal melodramas (only 3 percent, according to Porto 2005, 345). Furthermore, this same article shows that the contemporary political relevance of the telenovelas sometimes requires audiences to extrapolate this from stories of Brazilian history, finding for themselves points of continuity and of change between 'then' and 'now'.

Forms of hybridity in the dramatic modes employed are also of interest as ways of expanding the rhetorical and ideological possibilities. Corner and Richardson (2008), in writing about *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard* (BBC 2006), pay particular attention to its combination of realism and fantasy. Fantasy is strongly evident in the first episode, which creates a Prime Minister out of an apolitical supermarket manageress in just two weeks, but a stronger vein of realism takes over in the trials she faces once she is actually in office – authorising military action, liaising with the other national leaders, keeping political scandal out of the newspapers.

Another recent hybrid, this time across rather than within the generic frame, is *Miliband of Brothers* (More4 2010), a 'comedy docudrama' (Corner et al. 2012). This one-off production was a programme exploring the relationship between two brothers who competed for the leadership of the British Labour Party in 2010. In conventional documentary fashion, it used a lot of interviews with other politicians, family and friends. Much less conventionally, it intercut these extracts with dramatised scenes between the two men, played by actors. These sketches had an intentionally farcical character, with some of them using younger actors to portray rivalry between the Milibands as boys.

Series with female politicians cut across genre lines, as well as across national media-scapes. Women politicians have been central characters (often, their country's supreme leaders) in docudrama mode ('Margaret Thatcher' in *The Long Road to Finchley*, BBC 2008), in realist mode ('McKenzie Allen' in *Commander in Chief*, ABC 2005–2006; 'Brigitte Nyborg' in *Borgen*, DR1 2010–present), in fantastic/realist mode ('Roz Pritchard' in *The Amazing Mrs Pritchard*, BBC 2006), in comic mode ('Jean Price' in *No Job for a Lady*, Thames Television 1990–1992), in soaps ('Audrey Roberts' as an elected local councillor in *Coronation Street*, ITV 1960–present) and as less central characters in science fiction ('Harriet Jones' in various episodes of *Doctor Who*, BBC 1963–present). To the extent that these are stories about the politically *untypical*, the character's gender may provide a dramatically valuable point of tension for storytelling purposes, as well as one that is susceptible to analysis from broadly feminist perspectives (Cardo 2011 on *Pritchard*, Adams 2011 on *Commander in Chief*).

One kind of approach to the analysis of politicality within TV drama tends mainly to focus on who the characters are, what they say, what they do, and what happens to them in the story. Writing in just this kind of way, Randall (2011) is able to offer a generalisation about politicians in British political drama:

Politicians of the character of [...] Jed Bartlett in *The West Wing* (1999–2006) are [...] rare in the last three decades of British television and film. Supporting characters such as Claire Ballantine and Dan Miller in *The Thick Of It* (2005–2009) and Eddie Wells in *Our Friends In The North* are positively depicted but decent and principled politicians such as George Jones in *The Absence of War* (1995) Harry Perkins in *A Very British Coup* (1988) and in the final instance Jack Lithgow in *Traffik* (1989) are noticeable by their scarcity. Moreover, their fictional careers end in failure. Randall 2011: 264.

What this story/character focus leaves out, is attention to matters of audiovisual style/aesthetics – aspects of textual form which render such characters televisual (or cinematic) – mise-en-scene, cinematography, performance, lighting, music, etc. Any contribution that these elements may have made to the political interpretation tends to be subsumed within generalising summaries about character and plot, especially in the more synoptic accounts (Bailey 2011; Randall 2011; Van Zoonen and Wring 2012). Formal analysis usually becomes more prominent in articles and books which focus on just one or two case studies. Striking or unusual formal devices ('foregrounded', in the idiom of linguistic literary

criticism) certainly attract comment, for there is generally a communicative significance to such usages relevant to the programme's rhetorical project. The *West Wing*'s 'walk and talk' cinematography, using Steadicam tracking shots, as part of its signature style, is interpreted rhetorically to the credit of the characters as perceived by the viewer:

The tracking shot in *The West Wing* often begins by focusing on a small action, often by a bit player (e.g., carrying a gift basket) or on an object (a wall decoration). The camera almost immediately picks up one or two of the central characters moving through the White House office space. The camera follows as a couple of principal players march quickly through the hallways, discussing one or more topics. Then one of the characters forks off and is almost immediately replaced by another principal, who initiates another discussion [... This steadicam of interchanging couples is the defining visual trademark of *The West Wing* and wordlessly communicates the dynamism of the dedicated people who work there. (Smith 2003, 131).

A comparable example of attention to form is offered in Corner and Richardson (2009), and Bailey (2011), both of which draw attention to the use of direct address to camera by the cynical political agent in *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton*. The agent's cynicism is ultimately about the insincerity of voters, in verbalising a preference for one kind of politician but voting for a different kind:

Agent: It's polling day tomorrow and we'll be humiliated. Nigel can shrug and pack it in but I can't – I'm lumbered. He can only see the dirt and the decay and the doubletalk; that's my language: that's the grease that makes the clanking old machine work. You may despise me but don't blame me 'cause it is all your fault! There's a lot of good in him, a lot of good, but you'd never vote for a Nigel Barton in a million years (Bailey 2011, 289).

The direction of the critique is underlined by making these insincere voters a 'you' rather than a 'they' linguistically, and mapping this into the programme's visual idiom.

Coming to judgment

To a greater or lesser extent, academic research on TV political drama has complemented its academic analyses with evaluative commentary on particular programmes or series. The broader framing of this commentary, made variously explicit, has mostly been about how such drama might or might not be 'good' *for politics* – for political awareness, engagement and development. Any aesthetic or entertainment values noted in the analysis (visual styling, narrative design, quality of acting, the generation of suspense, shock and pathos.) have been at best secondary considerations for the assessment, as possibly supportive but also possibly detracting elements. Yet people often report that they find (real) politics boring, and politically-themed drama on television, depending on channel and schedule, may need to reach out to them with what is primarily an entertainment offer, just as much as it need to engage those who come to it with established citizenly interests in political affairs. Clearly, too, the overlap between those seeking entertainment and those seeking further civic enlightenment is likely to be considerable. The genres we have reviewed enter the entertainment arena on different terms from each other. Docudrama productions are building on established public interest in familiar characters and events, like the MPs expenses scandal. Fictions can focus on plausible storylines with intrinsic dramatic potential. In Britain, internal plotting and factionalism has recently been more appealing to storytellers than anything grounded in the clash of ideological perspectives – stories like that of *Bill Brand* seem to belong firmly to the past. Alternatively, fictions can create less credible but more exciting narratives. The tipping point between 'credible'

and 'incredible' will be different for different parts of the audience, as will their taste for one or the other, so the popularity (for instance) of 'secret state' narratives involving conspiracies that go to the heart of government (like *State of Play*, BBC 2003) may be because or in spite of perceived plausibility, because or in spite of perceived elements of fantasy, in ways that only audience research could determine. Any of these dramatic modes, as well as comic ones, can enhance their entertainment offer through appropriate rhetorical and aesthetic devices.

Although it is risky to separate entertainment value from political value too firmly, we can conclude this article with one final contrast under the 'political' subheading. This is a contrast between critique which focuses more narrowly on ideological bias, mostly in relation to the portrayal of political figures and parties, and critique which focuses on the level of drama's broader contribution, through its portrayal of social settings and interactions, to the terms of national democratic debate. *The West Wing's* liberal bias, picked up in early journalistic commentary on the series (Lehman 2003; Podhoretz 2003; Waxman 2003) was not necessarily judged to be a good thing for actual political liberalism in the USA (or necessarily judged as bad by right-wing critics): its gift to liberals was seen by some as one of distraction, a consolation prize when election victories in the real world were going in the opposite direction. Coleman (2008), writing about politics in British soaps, is not concerned about bias. His recommendations as to how soaps might be improved in their depictions of political life are indicative of a more fundamental concern about the health of British democracy, and the contribution that soap operas (generic limitations duly acknowledged) might make in its improvement. For example, in the interests of democracy, he urges more dramatisation of encounters between strangers:

Soap characters tend to relate to one another on three levels: as members of a family; as inhabitants of a defined community; or as employers and employees. They rarely interact as citizens, sharing common interests in a wider world that cannot be avoided. The challenge for soaps is to depict citizens [...] Contemporary democracies suffer from major problems caused by the inability of strangers to meet one another, rehearse their disagreements in civilized ways, and respect that which they cannot necessarily understand. Exploring such miscommunications within the context of soap drama could provide an ideal space for such protocols of cultural and political interaction to be thought through in public (Coleman 2008, 217).

For ideological critics the perceived danger is of a television that propagandizes for a particular kind of political project, the wrong kind. For Coleman, it is the risk of a politically disengaged citizenry, with inadequate understanding of why politics matters, that is the real risk. For both strands of critique the bottom line is that the dramas' national audiences are also the national voters.

Short Biographies

Kay Richardson's research is located at the intersection of media studies, sociolinguistics and politics. She has authored or co-authored papers in these areas for *Media Culture and Society*, *Multilingua*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *Journal of Language and Politics*, *Language and Literature*, *British Journal of Press and International Relations*, *Interactions* and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Her book *Television Dramatic Dialogue: A Sociolinguistic Study* (Oxford 2010) brought approaches from sociolinguistics to the study of performed, crafted speech in TV drama. Her current research, with John Corner and Katy Parry, both at the University of Leeds, is on media and political culture in Britain. Professor Richardson is based at the University of Liverpool, where

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John Corner is Visiting Professor in Communications at the University of Leeds and Emeritus Professor of the University of Liverpool. He has written widely on media history, theory and forms in books and journals, including *Television Form and Public Address* (Arnold 1995), *The Art of Record* (Manchester 1996) and *Critical Ideas in Television Studies* (Oxford 1989). With Dick Pels, he co-edited the collection *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (Sage, 2003). His most recent book is *Theorising Media: Power, Form and Subjectivity* (Manchester 2011) and he is working with Kay Richardson and Katy Parry on a study of media and political culture in Britain.

Note

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