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Challenging the “Neutrality” of Public Service in the 1960s: *The Wednesday Plays* of Tony Garnett and Ken Loach

Les Wednesday Plays de Tony Garnett et de Ken Loach : La “neutralité” du service public des années 1960 mise à l’épreuve

Susannah O’Carroll

- 1 In trying to understand an object, it is often useful to consider it from all angles. After spending years trying to analyse and understand Ken Loach’s work and its interaction with social transformations – through studying his motivation, his intentions and his technique – what if something was still missing from the picture? And what if it was this element, once identified and examined, helped bring the picture truly into focus?

Introduction

- 2 The power and influence of the BBC since its creation in 1922 is unquestionable. However, analyses of the founding ideas of its public service mission as set out by its founder John Reith, (managing director then Director General from 1927-38), to inform, to educate and to entertain, have frequently raised fundamental questions. Who were these objectives to serve? Were they intended to adapt or to resist key societal and political mutations or rather tend towards maintaining the status quo?¹ It has often been noted that periods of social and cultural transformation tend to come about through challenges to the institution, initiated by creative teams and talented individuals during periods of social change and upheaval. Tony Garnett, Ken Loach’s producer for *The Wednesday Play* series, gives an example of just such an oblique challenge to the founding ideas:

In fact, although I wouldn't have lasted five minutes in Reith's day, I admired much about him. He was principled, honest and had a noble vision of the BBC. He wanted to carry 'the best of everything into the greatest number of homes' and saw it as an equalising, democratic force. Good I thought. I will pursue Reith's ideals, but perhaps not in the way he would have tolerated.²

- 3 The 1960s was just such a period where political and social tensions were examined and existing televisual codes challenged within the BBC. *The Wednesday Play* series is a significant example of such departures from the established consensus notably in the case of the productions of Tony Garnett and Ken Loach (*Up the Junction* 1965, *Cathy Come Home* 1966, *In Two Minds* 1967 and *The Big Flame* 1969). This paper proposes to examine this period and these specific programmes in light of the Pilkington Report (presented to Parliament in 1962) and as examples of a reconfiguration of televisual codes (mixing documentary and fiction, challenging the dominant institutional point of view). More specifically, they addressed issues that were urgently contemporary and socially relevant such as, for example, abortion, mental health, homelessness, industrial conflict by blurring established codes and raising questions of social representation through pushing against the accepted boundaries of the creative process.
- 4 The role of producers in this creative process can easily be overlooked. In the credits their names are up there with the directors', the editors' and the cinematographers' but their role is far less clearly defined. Producers are sometimes instigators, finders of stories to tell, defenders of projects, but, in the context of the BBC and television broadcasting, they also have to be astute in corporate politics. Looking back on his career, Tony Garnett is careful to emphasise the collective nature of making television drama: "*I have never made a film. You could talk about my role in it, if I produced, or wrote or directed it. For me films are social activities, they're not like novels and I've always gathered people around me and we did the work together, very closely*".³ The mid to late sixties marked a period in the history of the BBC where the creative power of producers brought to the small screen some of the most innovative and socially challenging dramas in the history of television. In focusing on the role of Tony Garnett as the producer of many (if not most) of these important television events, rather than that of Ken Loach as their director, we can better understand the institutional context in the BBC of that time and the fight that went into taking these stories from a rough script to a finished product broadcast into the homes of millions of British people every week.
- 5 The aim of this series of stand-alone plays was to give a voice to a wider social range of British people, often working-class, and to tell their stories without trivialisation. Garnett and Loach believed that television was not a sub-medium and that by taking advantage of technological innovations which freed creative teams from the technical limitations of the studio, as well as from the various constraints of production (political, hierarchical and social), they could create serious drama which would be recognised by working-class people as giving life to their social experience, struggles and aspirations. The importance of these new representations has often been underlined by critics and more importantly, both Garnett and Loach recognised them as a driving force for their early collaborations: "*(w)e wanted to show people's lives back to them, their recognisable experience; working people's lives, in their dignity, without the condescension and the caricature they were used to*".⁴
- 6 Tony Garnett died in January 2020 aged 83. His obituaries, published in the British press, reflected the way in which his education and the start of his career were typical of someone who had benefitted from the new educational opportunities of the post-war

period. Like for Loach, a grammar school education led to an elite university degree, which his Midlands working-class background would have precluded him from a generation before. Just like Ken Loach, Garnett discovered acting while at university and was initially under contract at the BBC in the early 1960s as an actor. He was persuaded by BBC writer and script editor Roger Smith to take a job as a story editor for the new stand-alone drama series *The Wednesday Play* in 1963⁵ and it was in this role that Garnett found scripts and writers to work with Loach, on several occasions using obfuscation and underhand tactics to get controversial projects off the ground. This determination led to the making of some of the most "memorable, brilliant and shocking T.V. ever made".⁶ It is tempting to look back at this so-called "Golden Age"⁷ as a time of institutional enlightenment at the BBC although this view is not consensual, as the following comment illustrates:

There is a danger, [...] of attributing its success to an act of conscious policy-making on the part of the BBC. In fact, the anthology was established in the context of particular struggles within the institution over the future of the single play (and of the power of the Drama Department in relation to other departments in the Corporation) and was treated warily by management, who were sometimes uneasy about its controversial output, even when they defended it.⁸

- 7 Garnett's motivations, his political and social beliefs and his dealings with the BBC hierarchy in the newly created Drama Department have been far less scrutinised than Ken Loach's creative beginnings and relationships with writers. Both men were political – Garnett more so than Loach at that time – and shared the idea of a new, socially relevant direction for television drama. However, at the time of broadcast of *Up the Junction*, *Cathy Come Home*, *In Two Minds* and *The Big Flame*, Tony Garnett shied away from the media controversy and gave no real explanation as to why he was willing to go to these extreme lengths to put stories examining illegal abortion, unmarried sex, homelessness, mental health treatment and the judicial consequences of Trade Union activism onto the small screen. Examining these motivations, opportunities and obstacles that Garnett met at the BBC during the 1960s allows viewers and critics to reconsider these documents and their institutional context in a new light.

Reconsidering television drama at the BBC in the 1960s

Question to Tony Garnett: "Is radical, boundary-pushing stuff still being made (for television)?"

Garnett: "You won't see it on television – it wouldn't be allowed. Let's talk about the BBC. The BBC lives in a cultural and political environment. It affects that environment and it is affected by it". (Interviewed in HARDtalk, BBC, 2016)

- 8 Two major events contributed to a loosening of the strict moral codes regulating the content of television drama in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The first was the appointment of Hugh Carlton-Greene as new Director General at the head of the BBC in 1960 ushering in an era for the institution where television could dare to be more experimental and audacious. The second event was the presentation of the findings of the Pilkington Report (*Report of the Committee on Broadcasting*, 1962) which criticised the BBC for sticking to safe material and ITV for the "dumbing-down" of many of the programmes proposed by the new commercial channel.⁹ If the BBC was to survive and continue to justify its public funding through a license fee, paid directly by households,

then it would need to open up to a new, more socially and geographically diverse generation of recruits. The findings of the *Pilkington Report* eventually led to the creation of a second public service channel, BBC Two, which was to encourage experimentation and challenging content at a time when the Labour government of Harold Wilson was bringing forward legislation challenging the illegality of homosexuality and abortion, and the death penalty, to give but a few of the most controversial examples. These changes in style, tone and subject matter of television drama at the BBC were not without their challengers, most notably Mary Whitehouse and her infamous 1964 "Clean up TV" campaign which led to a manifesto being presented to Parliament in 1965 objecting to "*the propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt that the B.B.C. pours into millions of homes through the television screen*",¹⁰ specifically in the form of "*a stream of suggestive and erotic plays which present promiscuity, infidelity and drinking as normal and inevitable*".¹¹ The battle over both form and content had only just begun.

- 9 The advent of BBC Two created a need for new and more diverse content. The BBC hierarchy was astute enough to realise that this social and political diversity was not going to come from within its own walls, due to the historical legacy of recruitment from a narrow social base, which led to the predominance of "the right sort of chaps". It is generally accepted that the new graduate schemes created at this point, recruiting directly from universities for accelerated in-house training courses in directing, editing, camera work and script writing, opened up the creative possibilities of television to a talented generation of new, more socially and geographically diverse types of recruits. In the early sixties, the BBC provided an outlet to creative talents such as Dennis Potter, Stephen Frears, Mike Leigh and Peter Watkins, for example, all of whom would go on to produce major work for cinema and television over the next five decades and beyond. Tony Garnett underlines the uniqueness of this particular moment in the history of the BBC in his autobiography, published in 2016:¹²

As I looked around I saw a few people with similar backgrounds to [...] me. This was 1963, BBC Two was being planned and it was a moment of opportunity, just as the start of ITV had been a few years before and Channel 4 would be in the 1980s. Hugh Carlton Greene, the Director General with the help of [...] others, had clearly noticed social trends and was busy trying to get Aunty to get rid of her corset and try a mini-skirt. He was opening recruitment to a wider background.¹³

- 10 It was a time when the received social and aesthetic codes were questioned, when writers, producers, directors and editors began to re-evaluate the existing boundaries between distinct televisual categories, between "quality" and "entertainment" and between fact and fiction. It is rare for television programmes to live on in the collective memory, years let alone decades after their broadcast but it is true that this so-called "Golden Age" of television drama produced, with the Wednesday Play series in particular, some of the most distinctive and socially challenging work in the history of television.¹⁴
- 11 It is interesting to note that the single play produced and filmed for television, came not, initially, from the BBC, and its public service brief, but from the first private television station ITV, created in 1955. It was the highly successful series entitled *Armchair Theatre* that first introduced the "angry young men" of *Look Back in Anger* to the small screen. The ambition of this series was to produce popular, innovative drama which would entertain a broad audience at home, through a contemporary approach which would not shy away from tackling sensitive issues. This new gritty and

uncompromising form of "kitchen sink" drama proved surprisingly popular with the British audience and it is an approach which has had a lasting influence on how issues relating to poverty and inequalities are portrayed in documentary and drama on television in Britain, to this day.

- 12 With the advent of ITV, which provided both entertainment and socially challenging drama, the BBC had increasingly taken on a stuffy image. It seemed as if the standards dictated by its public service remit had led to it being seen as out of touch with many viewers in terms of implicit point of view, tone and content. ITV, on the contrary, was often criticised for its "populism" and the mediocre quality of many of its programmes. *Armchair Theatre*, run by the Canadian Sydney Newman, was one notable exception to ITV's generally unambitious level of programming, and Newman was poached by the BBC in 1964 to run the BBC's Drama Department which needed new creative talents to produce for both BBC One and BBC Two.

***The Wednesday Play*: challenging the status quo with a new broadcasting strategy for fiction**

In the middle-1960s television was watched avidly by almost everyone. Millions like my family wouldn't ever think of going to the theatre. That was for other people. But week after week we had the opportunity to speak to millions. I saw it as almost a sacred responsibility.¹⁵

- 13 Before considering several of Garnett and Loach's most significant collaborations for *The Wednesday Play* in some detail, it is important to touch on how the vast majority of television drama would have been produced just previous to this period, and to briefly consider questions of representation and form. The technology available at the time meant that drama was necessarily studio-based. It was filmed on heavy cameras, artificially lit, and actors were constrained by pre-established markers on the ground giving them their cues for different shots, all of which led to an artificiality in the acting and staging which has not dated well.¹⁶ It took just under twenty years for the social evolutions and challenges instigated during and after World War 2 (the end of service, the founding of the Welfare State, etc.), as well as the questioning of an accepted moral code (condemning sex before marriage, adultery, abortion, homosexuality, swearing and drinking), to become accessible to television viewers. Even then, these evolutions and challenges were far from present in most productions:

The common feature was the depiction of social problems through a mixture of film and story documentary styles, with an underlying orientation which implicitly said to the audience: "look how these people are not sharing in the comfortable, satisfied, affluent society of contemporary mythology".¹⁷

- 14 The new, young radicals were allowed to establish their principles and break out of the studio, but only as an experiment. Tony Garnett revisited these founding principles of his fledgling collaboration with Ken Loach, which was to last for seventeen years, in the following terms:

We rejected TV drama made with electronic cameras in studios. We loved TV as a way of reaching millions on the same occasion, creating an event. We wanted to make film on location, with a 16-mm, handheld, blimped camera. We both hated writing writing, acting acting and directing directing. We had a vision of a completely different approach.

These were the principles which have governed both our professional lives ever since.¹⁸

15 How these principles were brought to life in some of their earliest controversial collaborations will be examined in the next section of this paper. This artistic freedom and the independence of producers within the structure of *The Wednesday Play* was protected within the BBC by Sydney Newman against those figures in management who felt that the single-play format was too costly to produce and predicted that it would not prove to be popular with their audience. The series was organized into seasons with producers given almost absolute autonomy. There was a balance in scheduling where more risky or "difficult" plays were inserted between productions with more obvious common appeal. The emphasis was on original scripts from young writers, and producers were entrusted to deliver a finished product with only minimal supervision and intervention from further up the line.

16 Loach and Garnett's collaborations were consistently broadcast to an audience of between ten and thirteen million viewers, the controversy surrounding their diffusion often leading to increased audiences for subsequent broadcasts. Garnett's biography also provides some detailed insight into the central and ground-breaking role of BBC television drama at the time:

My task was to find and work with the writers, develop the material, deciding what we were going to make and then to organize it all and guide it through the BBC on to the screen without compromise, protecting everyone and giving them room to work; to deliver each day to our camera what was needed to accomplish this vision.

19

17 In subverting the codes and taking advantage of (relative) new artistic freedom, Garnett was keen to experiment with new dramatic forms in collaboration with a small team of young radicals recruited by the BBC during an unprecedented period of doubt and upheaval. There was a conscious blurring of the lines between objective "fact" and subjective and artistic "truth" as they saw it. Garnett and Loach rapidly moved away from the Brechtian artifice of montage which was being experimented with at the time, and embraced the use of voice-overs from experts, statistics and shooting on location with natural light and minimal direction of actors. Their style evolved during this period from a form of experimental drama to that of the "documentary drama" which attempts to convey a more complex truth than that of "factual" news – with its underlying but unstated bias:

A clear fact about drama on television is that it exists as part of a flow of material, unlike a cinema film, which is a separate event that creates its own world. *The Wednesday Play* succeeded the *Nine O'Clock News*. We wanted a style that would be seamless with the news, so that the audience would take what we were offering seriously. We didn't want it to seem like a conventional drama. We wanted an audience to think our drama was actually happening. This would lead me into endless difficulties and an attempt to get us off the screen.²⁰

18 The aim was to find a new audience, and address new issues, to be ambitious, urgently contemporary and socially relevant, author-ed and issue-based. While the BBC had given an opening to a new generation of radicals, either political or, in the case of Dennis Potter, artistic, intent on challenging the constraints of BBC drama in the post-war period, the experiment was to be relatively short-lived, and censorship and obstacles increasingly became an issue. Tony Garnett has often reflected on this period as one of opportunity but ultimately deception for the young radical that he had been:

Those were the days of such revolutionary optimism that I thought we could make a film and change the world. Events rather dashed this youthful arrogance. There was no revolution, either in form or content. The status quo prevailed.²¹

Mixing fact and fiction, examples of three Wednesday Plays

My work has always been about secrets. [...] I want to expose the secrets, [...] the truth and the abuses.²²

- 19 What motivated Tony Garnett to push the boundaries of the relative artistic freedom allowed to producers at *The Wednesday Play*? He and Ken Loach have often referred to this question in interview, to the need to highlight burning social issues fed by post-war inequalities and ongoing social injustices. A more personal explanation was finally given by Tony Garnett in his 2016 autobiography, *The Day the Music Died*, where he revealed for the first time (at the age of eighty) the reason why he was so driven by these controversial issues to the point that (in his own words) he would have "*given his right arm to get these plays made*" as he later said in interview.²³ Tony Garnett's mother died in 1941, when he was five years-old, after having an illegal backstreet abortion. His father was then persecuted by the police as they tried to pressure him into giving revealing the contact and he killed himself two weeks later. Garnett lost both his parents and his home and was taken in by family members who never spoke about the shame of these events. Garnett went on to succeed, through the recent opportunities of education, and took up acting where he met his wife, fellow actor Topsy Jane who underwent experimental electric shock therapy after being diagnosed with schizophrenia in the early 1960s. She never recovered her mental health after this traumatic treatment (denounced by Garnett, Loach and writer David Mercer in both *In Two Minds* for *The Wednesday Play* in 1967 and in the film *Family Life* in 1971).
- 20 More than just the recounting of tragic personal events, Garnett revisits his motivation for pursuing the issues of illegal abortion, homelessness, police corruption, mental-health treatment and the personal consequences of political militancy (*The Big Flame*) in this new light. In pushing for the production of certain scripts and in dissimulating their true subject matter, he forced the hand of BBC executives who were then faced with the choice of censoring or replacing content at the last minute. He was driven to produce *Up the Junction* for personal reasons but, more generally, the experience of working on these plays at the BBC and the public's reaction to them lastingly affected the direction and focus of Garnett and Loach's careers. These plays were fictions inspired by the contemporary social issues mentioned above and the personal experiences of the director, producer and writers, which raised relevant questions, and as such these plays sparked public debate but did not lead to direct political change. The meeting of minds in Garnett and Loach's collaboration, which started with a common vision for a new kind of radical television drama, was initially driven by Garnett's need to push and highlight issues to influence the public and political debate.
24
- 21 Television's growing popularity and influence throughout the 1950s was confirmed during this period and *The Wednesday Play* concentrated the contradictions and possibilities of this domestic popularity more than any other programme of the period. The debate surrounding the series was much more to do with whether these were appropriate subjects for television and moreover, whether the viewing public would lose "trust" in broadcasters at the BBC due to an experimental blending of drama, documentary style objectivity and a "factual" background to these stories (often given

in voice-over). This charge of manipulation of the viewers through the blending of fiction and documentary styles was virulently rejected by Garnett and Loach:

Our own anger is reserved for the phoney objectivity, the tone of balance and fairness, affected by so many programmes. We deal in fiction and tell the truth as we see it. So many self-styled "factual" programmes are full of unacknowledged bias. I suggest that you are in danger from them and not from us.²⁵

- 22 These fictional situations and characters were operating in a recognisable social and political context and created a feeling of credibility and truthfulness as the situations seemed highly plausible, even if they were not in themselves real.

In the late sixties and early seventies, the BBC was secure enough not to be threatened by its support for left-wing drama. It is also an institution which has always claimed that it is independent of government, and that it reflects a broad base of political opinion, which means it attempts to balance its establishment-orientated treatment of the news with some left-wing drama [...] It's an institution which is independent, as long as it doesn't really use its independence – liberal as long as its class interests aren't at stake.²⁶

- 23 Considered in this light, the possibility of producing such innovative and challenging drama is doubly revealing, in that producers, directors and writers exposed both an under-reported social and political reality as well as the non-reporting of this reality in authorised 'factual' programmes. In doing so, they highlighted the underlying question faced by the BBC at that time: whose interest was the BBC to serve, "public" or "national"?

Up the Junction

- 24 The most controversial and critically best-received play from *The Wednesday Play*'s second season in 1965 was undoubtedly *Up the Junction*, scripted by Nell Dunn from her book of the same title. It marked a departure for both *The Wednesday Play* and the Loach and Garnett team in that it was mostly shot on film and on location, in and around Battersea. It also marked their first official collaboration. *Up the Junction* evolved in form from a series of articles, to a book and finally as a script. Tony Garnett was determined that the play should be shot on the new lightweight 16mm cameras, used at the time only for news footage and current affairs programmes, to give the final result a gritty feel, which would be both familiar and evocative to the viewing public. They then further bent the rules by cutting directly from this footage, essentially making a film which was broadcast on television which had very much the look and feel of a documentary montage, over-dubbed with dialogue and popular music. Dunn's script was rawly sexual and Garnett organised shooting over a few days while the series producer, who was responsible for the overall production of the run of plays, was absent so that there would be no chance of their being asked for re-writes or modifications. Lacey quotes the official BBC synopsis which makes the controversial nature of the material clear:

The play is based on the raw side of life in Battersea and Clapham Junction (and) follows the everyday life of three girls in this area and includes their relationships with their boyfriends, an abortion and the death of one of the boys in a motorbike crash.²⁷

- 25 The play was screened on the 3rd of November 1965 to an audience of almost ten million viewers and the BBC framed this television event, including an extreme close-up of the face of Ruby as she undergoes an illegal abortion without anaesthetic, with more

traditional "factual" programmes on the same theme. Lacey underlines the way in which *Up the Junction* was integrated into the wider debate on abortion reform:

Garnett and MacTaggart managed to persuade the BBC to run a discussion of the issues raised in the film (especially illegal abortions) on BBC's *Late Night Line Up* and, on radio, the Home Service's *The Critics*, later the same evening. And when the BBC, in a spasm of anxiety, withdrew a planned repeat screening, it was replaced with an edition of the current affairs programme *24 Hours* devoted to the issue of abortion law reform. This ensured that the film would become a television event, existing as a statement in a dialogue carried across a range of television programmes, and with a life beyond the moment of the initial screening.²⁸

- 26 In this respect, *Up the Junction* was typical of the kind of attention and lasting influence that Loach and Garnett's collaborations garnered. However, aesthetically speaking, the play can be considered as both a beginning and an end since Loach and Garnett subsequently moved away from such heavy reliance on a mixed visual aesthetic.

Cathy Come Home

[...] Television organisers are not allowed, under the terms of the various charters which have been issued to the BBC and Acts of Parliaments which govern ITV, to use their privileged position to advocate, in areas of controversy, particular policies or courses of action.²⁹

- 27 *Cathy Come Home* is a remarkable and important document which no-doubt deserves a more in-depth analysis than any of the other *Wednesday Plays*, which have not had such a cinematographic and social impact over the long term. The play marked a pivotal moment for both Loach and Garnett as the public furore caused by the first broadcast of *Cathy Come Home* in 1967, and the subsequent media attention given to Loach and writer Jeremy Sandford (Nell Dunn's husband), led them to rethink their strategy for future collaborations. It also operated as an intellectual, political, technical and aesthetical catalyser in Loach and Garnett's theory and practice of cinema, and brought about a new approach in film-making evident in *The Big Flame* (1969), written by Jim Allen. Certain traits common to previous collaborations are still visible in *Cathy Come Home* (music, statistics, voice-over), but this drama also clearly announces the future evolution of Ken Loach's style, with a quieter observational approach visible from *Kes* (1969) onwards.
- 28 *Cathy Come Home* is best remembered for having crystallised several of the most important social issues of the 1960s: unemployment, poverty, housing, the role of the Welfare State, as well as questions about the family and social reproduction. In pre-production, it had been disguised as "a love story" and then a "knock-about comedy", as Tony Garnett feared that its critical tone and difficult subject matter might be deemed too risky. Garnett revealed his tactics for getting this type of project off the ground: "I only let them [the executives] see it after the *Radio Times* deadline. If it was going to be banned, I wanted it to be banned publicly".³⁰ Its initial audience was thirteen million viewers and it caused an immediate reaction from viewers, in the media and in Parliament, as the public was both shocked and concerned by the story of an ordinary family on an unstoppable downward spiral due to a lack of available and affordable social housing:

Cathy Come Home is a rare creature, a television programme that is not ephemeral: it registered with audiences at the time and continues to do so on both the documentary and the dramatic scales. Modern students are ready enough to

transpose the supposedly dated material into their own times and they still respond to Cathy's human dilemma [...]. *Cathy Come Home* must surely be the most repeated drama on British television.³¹

29 *Cathy Come Home* became synonymous with the debate surrounding the "rediscovery" of poverty in Britain in the 1960s, the so-called "residual" poverty that had not been eradicated by the post-war Welfare State. The play showed that at each step the couple are further hampered in their search for stability and a home by the rigidity and bureaucracy of social welfare institutions. The film depicts the trajectory of Cathy and her husband Reg who lose everything after Reg is injured in a work-related accident and the shocking discovery that Reg's employer had not been paying social insurance contributions. After starting their married life in a modern flat (with fitted carpets, indoor plumbing and central heating), Cathy and Reg are reduced to overpriced slum housing, and have to move to a more affordable caravan, then a squat, from which they are finally evicted by the police. After attempting to camp, they finally accept the inevitable and separate as Cathy moves into a women's hostel (the infamous "Part III Accommodation") with her three children. Their attempts to find affordable, secure private or Council housing fail one after the other: because either flats are too expensive, or not open to families or through losing their place on the social housing list after repeatedly changing addresses. After Cathy and the children leave the hostel, the film ends with a sequence depicting a distraught Cathy at the train station at night, as social services forcibly remove her three children (played by the actress Carol White's own children) as she was judged to be an "unfit mother", not having been able to provide a stable environment for her family, due to her having left the hostel. Cathy's leaving is a consequence of her rebellion against the terrible living conditions in the hostel and thereby she has technically made herself homeless, leading to the loss of her children. The separation from her children was not a moral issue, it resulted from the strict application of the law, but the viewing public was struck by the relentless institutional mechanism which led to her demise. The film shows Cathy as helpless in the face of forces that left her both homeless and childless.

30 At the time, *Cathy Come Home* was criticised not for questions relating to the veracity (or lack thereof) of either the situation of the characters or the statistics used by Loach and Sandford to support the narrative. The criticisms were once again mainly focused on the moral obligation of creative teams not to influence public opinion on sensitive social issues through a mixture of documentary codes, dramatic form and academic style research:

Too often the drama spots are being used by writers and producers to air opinions so way out that they should not be shown to massive lay audience without balance.

32

31 It may seem paradoxical but both Garnett and Loach were disappointed with the public and political reaction to *Cathy Come Home*. People were shocked, people reacted, questions were asked in Parliament, the broadcast contributed to the publicity surrounding the setting up of the housing and homeless charity Shelter but few really went beyond this wave of superficial outrage and sympathy for the character and her plight, to analyse the conditions of possibility of this situation in the supposedly affluent and "swinging" sixties. Garnett and Loach felt that everyone had been let off the hook and this was partly due to the liberal social critique which was at the core of Jeremy Sandford's script. Tony Garnett felt obliged to justify the motives for making *Cathy Come Home* in the following terms:

Our purpose in making the film was based on the principle that the artist should be concerned with the problems of the world and that it is one of the duties of Television to show society to itself, without glossing over the reality of the situation, however awful that reality may be. Our purpose, therefore, was not a political one, in the narrow sense of the word. As artists working within a public Corporation, it is not our function to be political in a party sense. The film was, however, political in the sense that it was about the fabric of people's lives and the responsibility all of us have for each other. We did not put forward political solutions but with much anger and compassion we did our best to expose the problem.³³

- 32 It was this disillusion and frustration which led to a first collaboration with Jim Allen with a script that was deemed too politically risky by the Corporation to programme in 1968, in view of the situation in France, and was only screened the next year in February 1969 once it was clear that there would be no similar popular uprising against the status quo in Britain.

The Big Flame

- 33 In the wake of the 1966 Devlin Report³⁴ and political upheaval in Europe, for both the BBC and *The Wednesday Play*, *The Big Flame* was a controversial proposition. The BBC sat on the play until Tony Garnett forced their hand by a public denunciation of the covert censorship.³⁵ The apparent advocacy of revolutionary self-determination did not sit well with the Corporation's executives' loyalty to the institution and public service mentality.
- 34 The narrative took the form of a revolutionary or anarchist dream (or fantasy?) where a six-week dock strike in the Liverpool docks ends with the occupation and take-over of the docks by the dockers themselves. The flame in question, despite the certain failure and inevitable police repression of the take-over, is the hope that other workers would follow this example as torches are lit all over Britain by other workers taking over their collective means of production. The film marks a further step away from montage and the use of statistics in voice-over towards an economy of means and a sobriety in filming industrial conflict and class struggle that have been the hallmarks of Ken Loach's work to this day.
- 35 Two dialogue extracts from *The Big Flame* clearly demonstrate the political point of view adopted in this radical rejection of liberal political criticism. The main character, Jack Regan, is asked by the dockers for his advice as to how they should manage the conflict. His role is to set this struggle in its wider historical context. As the fictitious mouthpiece for the views of Garnett, Allen and Loach as expressed in *The Big Flame*, Regan advises the dockers to take control of their means of production with the hope of inspiring other workers:

Regan: I woke up late in the day as far as politics was concerned. When them early morning risers were spouting Socialism, I was down on the ship fighting for peanuts. But now I want to see one big solid mass of us [...]. Things are not only ripe for change, they're rotten ripe.

[...] No matter what happens, even if we succeed and we get hold of the dock, there's going to be no revolution. That's not going to happen because employers are going to throw everything at us, the government, police, troops, everything. But if we can hold out for a few days that'll be fine, because the Merseyside docker will have lit a bonfire that will be seen for miles.

- 36 This idea of disseminating revolutionary ideas to a viewing audience was certainly one step further than the implied and direct criticism of the hidden problems of poverty and inequality in Britain in the sixties and the lack of adequate response from the government. This was a direct call to workers to apply these revolutionary principles to their own circumstances and directly in their workplace. Rather than revealing, they were inciting, as the next extract clearly demonstrates:

Judge: Neither I nor the court are concerned with your personal political beliefs. The doctrine of Marxism is not on trial here. Indeed, I know very well that this philosophy is favourably received in a number of our better universities. And in so far as it helps to sharpen the wit and intellect of students, and helps rid them of this sort of distemper that seems to affect the impressionable young, well it seems to have some advantages.

But when placed in the hands of determined working men, this theory of social revolution becomes as dangerous as a loaded pistol in the hands of a criminal. It is the use, the practice, rather than the theoretical speculation, that we are concerned with. Now do any of the prisoners have anything to say before I pass sentence?

Regan: [...] Folk singing, Church socialists who carry swords too heavy for themselves and let off pistols loaded with blanks [...]. We embrace them as allies because they've got the education and talent that we need; but they nearly always betray us with half-truths, which is worse than lies. So, I'm thankful that you saw fit to separate us from them.

[...] I'm a Marxist but I'm also a wrecker, and that makes a difference. So, you'd better put that down in your book: Jack Regan, wrecker and revolutionist.

- 37 Contrary to *Cathy Come Home*, and its rather limited "societal" approach, *The Big Flame* analyses the workers' situation in specifically political and class terms, while at the same time pointing the finger at the liberal, left-wing progressists who cautioned the existence of *The Wednesday Play* at the BBC in principle, but did not support a more radical agenda of social change, an attitude indirectly (but clearly) illustrated in the previous quote.

Conclusion

- 38 Most of *The Wednesday Plays* were in their own time important television events with a lasting impact and sparked public debate, because they were fictions inspired by current situations and real social problems. The original idea was not to give the viewing public what they supposedly wanted (as in the "focus-group" approach) but rather to provoke a response and a reassessment of the social potential of television drama as a force of change.
- 39 The lasting impact of the plays examined in this paper was mainly due to the adoption by Garnett and Loach of a specific point of view. Rather than exploiting individual situations for television consumption, their aim was to show working-class experience without the usual bias of sensationalism or condescension, in order to reveal systemic obstacles to change. In this respect, *The Wednesday Plays* of Loach and Garnett have unfortunately remained a relatively unique case at the BBC within the genre. The fact that their attitude challenged the "neutrality myth" on which the very existence of the BBC was premised since its inception is part of the reason for this uniqueness. The BBC as an institution has never again allowed writers, film-makers and producers to enjoy so much freedom of expression in social and political terms.

- 40 This paper has reassessed the importance of the role of Tony Garnett in this process, and in doing so has also underlined the central value of talented and driven individuals working together to seize opportunities, taking the necessary risks to turn these opportunities into actions, whether artistic or political. Not only has the institutional context changed considerably within the BBC, but also the existence and the combination of talented individuals is never guaranteed, and to this day the example of *The Wednesday Plays* series remains unreplicated, and seems unlikely to be surpassed in the present conditions.
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ABSTRACTS

Starting from the question of the BBC's supposed social and political neutrality, the article examines a specific moment in the history of the Corporation, the 1960s, by focusing on an innovation in television production: a series of single plays (television dramas) called The Wednesday Play. The article examines the institutional origins of the series in relation to a critical assessment of the BBC in the Pilkington Report of 1962 and the subsequent broadening of the social origins of recruits in anticipation of the second public-service channel, BBC2. The article goes on to consider three emblematic plays, in order to illustrate both the potentialities and the problematic issues arising from mixing fictionality and veracity. Finally, the lasting

social and political significance of these plays is assessed as a unique moment in the history of the BBC.

A partir de l'idée de la neutralité supposée de la British Broadcasting Corporation, en termes sociaux et politiques, l'article s'intéresse à un moment singulier de l'histoire de la Corporation, les années 60, à travers un regard sur une innovation de la production télévisuelle : une série de pièces filmées uniques intitulée *The Wednesday Play*. L'article examine les origines institutionnelles de la série à la lumière de l'évaluation critique formulée par le rapport Pilkington sur la BBC, et de l'élargissement de la base sociale de recrutement de la BBC qui en résulta dans la perspective de la création de la seconde chaîne du service public, BBC2.

Trois pièces emblématiques de la série sont analysées afin d'illustrer les potentialités et les problèmes résultant du mélange entre fictionnalité et véracité. En conclusion, l'importance sociale et politique de ces pièces dans le long terme est évaluée en tant que moment unique de l'histoire de la BBC.

INDEX

Mots-clés: BBC, Wednesday plays, théâtre pour télévision, Tony Garnett, Ken Loach

Keywords: BBC, The Wednesday Play, Tony Garnett, Ken Loach, documentary drama, Cathy Come Home

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