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The Popular on British Television: Global Perspectives, National Priorities, Local Preferences

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ABSTRACT: This article explores two related and highly significant aspects of British broadcasting: how the nature and identity of British television have been influenced by the potentially contradictory demands of high and low culture and associated popular and quality programming; and how (far) national broadcasting has been able to face the threat to its existence posed first by internationalisation and now by globalisation. After an initial discussion of the notions of the global and the popular, this study considers how past conceptions of the role of television affected attitudes to programming, before considering the difficulty of determining what is national, popular television in a world where domestic broadcasts and global pastiches are scheduled side by side. The conclusion examines how national and local characteristics have enabled British programmes to maintain popularity in the face of globalisation.

Keywords: Britishness, culture, identity, originality, quality, representation.

RESUMEN: El presente artículo explora dos aspectos relevantes de las retransmisiones británicas: cómo la identidad y naturaleza de la televisión británica se han visto influidas por las exigencias potencialmente contradictorias de la alta cultura, con su programación de calidad, y de la cultura popular, con su búsqueda de audiencia; y si la producción nacional ha resistido la amenaza, primero de la internacionalización y ahora, de la globalización. Tras una discusión inicial sobre las nociones del hecho popular y global, se aborda cómo ciertos conceptos pasados sobre el papel de la televisión han condicionado la programación de contenidos. Seguidamente, se exploran las dificultades para definir qué es una televisión nacional o popular en un mundo en el que productos locales y pastiches globales coexisten en la parrilla. La conclusión avanza que las características locales y nacionales han permitido a los programas británicos mantener su popularidad a pesar de la globalización.

Palabras clave: esencia británica, cultura, identidad, originalidad, calidad, representación.

> As an integral facet of the social fabric,
> broadcasting has provided access to events, ideas
> and experiences ranging widely across cultural
> and political life. (O'Malley, 1994: xi)

The case of British television is especially suitable for the exploration of the nuances of the popular and the global, for historical, linguistic and cultural reasons. The UK was the second country in the world to benefit from a television service and the first to establish a national broadcaster. As the United States was the dominant force behind the growth of radio in the 1920s and of television in the 1930s and has been the principal motor of globalisation in the media field, British broadcasting found itself, from the very start, obliged to define and maintain its own identity, for, despite linguistic differences sometimes unsuspected by non-English-speakers, American programmes are generally immediately understood and thus appreciated in Great Britain, not least because of their basis in a common cultural heritage. This study will examine the phenomenon of popular representation on the British screen from the advent of television in the 1950s to the turn of the 21st century. As by now there is no doubt that the audiovisual sphere has to evolve with global perspectives, one may wonder how far there is still the scope or even the need for a national or local cultural identity, and whether Britishness is necessary if television wants to remain popular, i.e. close to its public. After an initial discussion of the phenomena of the global and the popular, three points will be more particularly examined: the weight of past conceptions of television, the coexistence within British television of global pastiches and domestic broadcasts in different popular genres and a discussion of what could be seen as illustrations of pockets of resistance against a devouring global appetite.

1. The Global and the Popular

In these early years of the 21st century, we are constantly bombarded with the notion that globalisation is an irresistible force which is beyond the control of individual nation states and which subjects everyone to commercial decisions taken in distant boardrooms. Broadcasting cannot be immune to this trend, as Chris Barker explained ten years ago while discussing the ideas of Anthony Giddens (1990), for whom globalisation could be grasped not just in terms of the "world capitalist economy" and "the world military order", but also of the "global information system" (Barker, 1999: 34), the latter necessarily including

the media in general and television in particular. Such views of the effects, or more precisely the dangers, of globalisation are supported by a number of observations. Few would deny that the process is accelerating at a pace unknown in the past, even if some commentators find comfort in the belief that it began as long ago as the 16th century with the expansion of trade and subsequent colonisation. Media globalisation began in the 19th century with the laying of telegraphic cables and the growth of news agencies, and was reinforced by the birth of the Hollywood studios. Nowadays, media ownership worldwide is in the hands of a small number of very large players,[1] who not only produce and screen programmes, but influence attitudes and behaviour, as their domination is not limited to the transmission of news and factual information, but extends to the field of entertainment where the manipulation of opinion, although perhaps more subtle or insidious, is nevertheless omnipresent, for what programmes broadcast globally have in common is their popular appeal. Equally worrying for those who fear globalisation is that the explosion of new technologies will inevitably offer new ways for these companies to impose their shows and series on an even wider public.

On the other hand, not all critics specialising in television and popular culture are prepared to accept Giddens' vision of globalisation as a modernist *juggernaut*, not least because television should be seen not as modernist (i.e. with a single dominating, homogenising impact) but as fragmentary and post-modernist, which allows for active interpretations by the audience which may counter the intentions of broadcasters. Reactions of women viewers in the Netherlands, as recorded by Ien Ang (1985), to the soap opera *Dallas*, widely vilified as an American mass culture vehicle for the glorification of American consumer capitalism, are a case in point. While some disliked and even hated the programme or watched it with what they considered a carefully calculated ironic distance, the many who liked it were somewhat defensive about enjoying something that others regarded as "trash". Their justifications for doing so included the view that the series could be construed as transmitting serious moral messages, such as that money cannot buy happiness, and the populist opinion that they had the right to watch whatever they wanted (see Barker, 1997: 119, 1999: 113; Strinati, 1995: 47). The fact that the *Dallas* model of international domination by a single series has not been enduring may itself be significant for the question of globalisation, for, as Peter Goodwin argued in 1998, there has been no talk of "wall-to-wall Baywatch or wall-to-wall X Files"[2] and "all

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1. i.e. the three original American networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) plus Turner and the Murdoch's News Corporation, along with Sony and the European giant Bertelsmann.
2. A comment derived from French Culture Minister Jack Lang's famous reference to the dangers of "wall-to-wall Dallas".

the evidence of the last two decades [the 1980s and 1990s] shows that, at least in Europe, domestic television audiences have retained a stubborn preference for domestically produced programmes" (Goodwin, 1998: 5). This observation still holds good, although it might be prudent to extend it to locally as well as nationally-produced programmes and to emphasise that such programmes display or reflect national cultural preferences or characteristics.

Thus, the globalising of world media sparks different reactions from critics and audiences alike, and the meaning of the term as an economic or institutional phenomenon is generally understood, although within the programming context the designation "international" is often more accurate. The significance of the "popular" is more problematic. Tony Bennett's (1981: 81-83) broad definition of "popular culture" is a good starting point for any discussion. He sees four possible interpretations: the popular is what many like and do; the popular is that which is outside the sphere of high culture; popular equates with mass, implying manipulation and passive consumption; and the popular might be that which is done by and for those who do it, rooted in the creative impulses of the people. Although Bennett's remarks cover a broader field than television, they raise many of the key points relevant to British broadcasting. That watching television is a major leisure activity, practised by the majority of the world's populations, is no longer in doubt, even in the age of the internet and video games. In the British context, viewing became, in the 1950s and 1960s, a new form of consumption of the mass media, replacing older types of activity such as the reading of comics (Hall & Whannel, 1969: 33) or cinema-going. Moreover, the small number of channels available to the British public until the 1980s meant that individual programmes were viewed, simultaneously, by a large slice of the population, although the exact numbers are open to doubt. [3]

Bennett's second definition, implicitly contrasting high and popular (or low) culture, takes us into a more contentious field. It can be argued both generally that television is not an elitist but a mass medium in which "high" culture cannot have a regular place, and that in any case the distinction between high and low culture is at best a subjective value judgement, at worst an artificial separation which, in post-modern times, no longer exists. Nevertheless, underlying Bennett's observation there is one notion which is essential to the debate about globalisation and British television, namely the question of quality, which first surfaced in the mid-1950s with the advent of commercial competition and continued in the arguments surrounding the reforms foreseen by the 1990 Broadcasting Act. Equally significant in the same context is Bennett's

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3. Before the creation of an independent body, the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB), in 1981 the competing channels, BBC and ITV, collected and published their own separate and often contradictory data, which took no account of differences between various age and socio-economic groups.

third category. As with the question of quality, there was much debate in the 1950s over the distinctions to be drawn between a native popular culture and a threatening alien mass culture, while the linking of the popular with passivity and manipulation brings us back to the current debates about the dangers of globalisation. With its populist overtones, Bennett's final point takes us to the realm of popular history and traditions, which is easy to understand in the context of a whole culture, but which is mediated by television in quite particular ways. The participation of ordinary people in game shows and the like, as competitors or as members of a live audience, suggests a degree of active participation in the creation of a spectacle. It could moreover be argued that long-running television programmes attract viewers of different generations over substantial periods of time and thus become integrated into popular memory and folk culture.

2. Past and Present Conceptions of Television

Current British attitudes to the nature and role of television, amongst critics, social historians, politicians and the general public, can be traced back to the views which prevailed when radio programmes began after the First World War, and to the creation, in 1927, of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which is still the most significant broadcaster within the UK. The BBC's first Royal Charter gave it the triple mission of informing, educating and entertaining the public and this duty still survives.[4] It is particularly relevant to any discussion of the popular that entertainment was the third and least important of the terms, for, unlike American radio which had been commercial from the start and had channels competing for audience, the BBC was a monopoly broadcaster, exclusively financed by the licence fee, which was under no obligation to please listeners, even less to pander to popular taste. The first Director-General of the BBC, John Reith, the dour son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister, was keen both to preserve the national character of broadcasting in the face of potential American invasion and to use the precious resource of the airwaves as a means of educating listeners both by improving their minds and by encouraging standards of behaviour, for example by broadcasting serious talks and classical music, or religious services. Such a diet was not to everyone's liking and before Reith left the BBC in 1938, radio companies based outside the UK[5] had begun to give those in the south of England lucky enough to be within range of their transmitters a

4. These obligations apply to all five of the existing Public Service Broadcasting channels (BBC 1, BBC 2, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5).
5. The best known were Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandie (or Normandy) which transmitted respectively from the Grand Duchy and the French coast near Fécamp.

taste of what other nations could hear by playing popular (dance) music, often by American artists. Regular television broadcasting began in 1936, showing two daily Mickey Mouse cartoons,[6] "comedy series, thriller serials, costume drama, quiz games and sporting events" (Currie, 2000: 17), but only to a fortunate elite,[7] a state of affairs which continued until well into the 1950s.

Post-war television continued in the same vein, as the management of the BBC clung to the view that radio should remain pre-eminent and limited the resources given to the audiovisual medium. The first post-war programmes in June 1946 had a certain international flavour,[8] symbolically emphasising that Britain still had a role in the world, but there was little of popular appeal beyond cartoons and children's programmes. Viewing remained a minority pursuit until the televised Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in June 1953, which was both an occasion for popular national celebration within the UK, where it was seen as marking the end of post-war austerity and heralding a new "Elizabethan Age", and an international or even global event which gave BBC television the opportunity to shine on the world stage, broadcasting live to France, Holland and West Germany and making recordings rapidly available in Canada, the United States and Japan.[9] Domestically, the Coronation was a triumph, bringing the first mass audience. Some 20 million people watched the religious ceremony, most of them in the homes of friends or family, for still little more than 2 million television licences had been issued.[10]

The growth in audience inevitably led to the expansion of television, and with it to the creation (in September 1955) of a commercial competitor for the BBC in the form of ITV (Independent Television), funded by advertising revenues. It was also to launch the first real debate about the nature and purpose of television. Public opinion generally welcomed the possibility of more lively broadcasting than the BBC offered, and, as the ITV companies soon realised, the viewing public had changed, to include a much wider spectrum of the population whose expectations were different. After an initial and financially disastrous period in which ITV modelled its programming on the BBC and failed to attract the audience required by advertisers, the decision was made to provide what viewers

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6. Such cartoons were already familiar fare in British cinemas.
7. Television sets were expensive and broadcasts could only be received in the London area.
8. Monday 10th June featured Sylvie Saint-Clair, the French singing star and *Transatlantic Quiz*, and Tuesday 11th June screened an adaptation of Vercors' *Le Silence de la Mer*.
9. The British press was horrified by the breaks made in the transmission of the most solemn moments in the Coronation ceremony and was quick to make unflattering comparisons between British and American broadcasting. An advertisement for a deodorant and an interview with J. Fred Muggs, "the charismatic chimpanzee", were thought particularly tasteless.
10. By 1955, the number of television licences had more than doubled to 4.5 million. Details of audience figures and Coronation coverage are from Briggs (1979: 241, 460-472).

wanted. Roland Gillett, Controller of Programmes at Associated Rediffusion (the contractor for weekday programmes in the London area) explained the move to popular television[11] as follows: "Let's face it once and for all. The public likes girls, wrestling, quiz shows and real-life drama. We gave them the Halle orchestra, Foreign Press Club, floodlit football and visits to the local fire station. Well, we've learned. From now on, what the public wants, it's going to get" (Sendall, 1982: 328).

The implications of this change were considerable and particularly relevant to the subject of this article. Many of the new programmes shown by ITV, notably the quiz shows mentioned by Gillett, were criticised for their alleged mediocrity or appeal to the basic human instinct of greed. Moreover, as many of them were modified versions of American models, the link between international programmes, popular appeal, alien mass culture and poor quality was easily made. ITV was duly castigated in the report of the Pilkington Committee into broadcasting, published in 1962, both for the lack of quality and variety in its programming, and for its failure to recognise the influence television might have on behaviour; but these judgements did not have the desired effect. It was the elitism of the Committee which was questioned by commentators, who, in keeping with the liberal ethos of the 1960s, emphasised the importance of individual choice and the equal value of different tastes. Furthermore, the BBC itself was faced, for the first time, with the need to take more heed of popular demand in its own programming if it wished to retain the public confidence which justified the continuance of the licence fee. What followed, and has been considered a "Golden Age" of British television, was a period of some twenty years of duopoly during which ITV and the BBC had separate and reliable sources of finance, introduced colour broadcasting and produced programmes which attained high levels of popularity or quality and sometimes both.[12] At the same time, both channels made full prime-time use of American drama series (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Peyton Place* and *The Waltons*, for example), boosting their own viewing figures and contributing to the programmes' global impact.

Since the 1980s, the pace of change has accelerated. The introduction of 24-hour broadcasting brought the need for new programmes, a demand that was best met by inexpensive direct (usually American) imports or local variations

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11. ITV preferred the less pejorative "people's television". The name Independent Television itself had been chosen to avoid the negative connotations of "commercial" broadcasting.

12. ITV's soap operas were unrivalled by the BBC: while it was the Corporation which produced the most enduring of situation comedies, ITV's costume drama *Upstairs Downstairs* surpassed the BBC's (black and white) *Forsyte Saga*, both nationally and internationally. The 68 episodes of *Upstairs, Downstairs* attracted total viewing figures of over 300 million against 150 million for the 28 of the *Forsyte Saga*, although the latter did have the unlikely distinction of being sold to the Soviet Union.

of internationally formatted broadcasts.[13] The fourth British television channel, Channel 4, was intended to break the mould of established broadcasting for it was to recognise the diverse aspirations within British society by providing for minorities and was enabled to do so by being subsidised by the rest of the ITV network. It was also to be a publisher broadcaster, whose output was to be purchased, mostly from independent companies, rather than produced in house, thus starting the trend towards Britain's adoption of a worldwide market for programmes. By the end of the decade, technological advances had made global cable and satellite broadcasting a reality, encouraged the activities of commercial giants able to exploit the new possibilities and led Margaret Thatcher's market-oriented government to plan the deregulation of the audiovisual landscape. The 1990 Broadcasting Act aimed to achieve the difficult, and ultimately impossible, balancing trick of creating competition between ITV broadcasters while improving choice and quality.[14] The success of BSkyB satellite television in the UK, followed by the arrival of other international broadcasters with huge financial clout, along with further technological advances, has brought about an explosion in the number of channels available and consequent fragmentation, with niche broadcasting being available for every taste or special interest group, thus calling into question the notion of national television. Nevertheless, the latest statistics from Ofcom, the government-appointed regulator, remain ambiguous. Almost 90% of homes have multi-channel viewing, and, in 2008, the five public service providers attracted 68% of the audience at peak time, and 61 % overall, figures which have been steadily declining for ten years, but have added audience thanks to their extra free-to-air digital channels (e.g. BBC 3, ITV 2, More 4). The conclusion thus seems to be that domestic broadcasters have managed to survive in the multi-channel world, even though they have lost ground, and that British broadcasting for a British audience still has sufficient popular appeal to ensure its continued existence. In the light of what follows, it is interesting that the most watched programme, at the time of writing (September 2009), was ITV's talent show *The X Factor* with 11.8 million viewers.

3. Popular Genres: Global Pastiches and Domestic Originality

The high ratings enjoyed by *The X Factor* are not conclusive for defining what is, and what is not, national popular television, because of the nature of the

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13. A format is a licence to produce a national version of a copyrighted foreign television programme and to use (the whole or part of) its name.
14. Traditionalists condemned the government's ideologically dogmatic approach, claiming, not without reason, that the quality of programmes would suffer and that "dumbing down" would become the order of the day.

programme, as we shall see below, and because BARB's data do not include details of the origins of broadcasts. It is nevertheless clear that, if directly retransmitted global series and British-made programmes which retain or recreate a certain national cultural identity are high on the list of viewers' preferences, so too are pastiches[15] of international programmes more or less visibly adapted to national sensitivities. In fact, all three can be "popular", either in so far as they attract large audiences or are in some way close to viewers and their concerns and experiences, and all three can achieve high standards of quality.

This section will discuss these categories with particular reference to popular genres which are most revealing in the global / national debate – soap opera and talent or reality shows – but, first, a few words on other genres may be helpful. At the two extremes of the scale from global to national lie dramas and situation comedies. In the first case, imported series are screened in their original form and complement rather than compete with domestic programmes. Police or hospital series[16] are a good illustration, for both find their popular appeal in universal values, either in narrative terms with regular peaks of plot intensity to maintain tension, or in human terms with appeals to such basic emotions as sympathy for others, the desire to do good, or a belief in the triumph of right over wrong. Comedy, on the other hand, would seem initially to be least adaptable to global television transmission, for, as stand-up artists have long been aware, humour varies widely and jokes that succeed one day with one audience are equally likely to fail the next in a different context. This has not prevented American series of various vintages, from *I Love Lucy*, *The Addams Family* and *M*A*S*H* to today's *Seinfeld* from making an impact in the UK, because of their novelty value, topical quality or technical perfection. It is true, however, that the particular attraction of British situation comedies for a British audience lies in their variety of subject matter and their ability to offer a distorting or politically incorrect mirror reflecting aspects of viewers' everyday lives.[17] The middle ground is occupied by game and quiz shows, which have been a mainstay of British television schedules since the 1950s and are frequently copycats modified to respect cultural differences, for

> games cannot always be imported intact. Many of the original US shows have a tougher competitive and acquisitive tone and have been watered down for the

15. In this context, pastiche may be defined as parody without the ridicule. Copycat is a less elegant, but nevertheless accurate term for programmes imitating or directly inspired by existing models.
16. A third major category is, of course, costume drama, but as this is a field in which British television excels, the global argument hardly applies, except in so far as many British series have been widely exported.
17. A few British sitcoms (e.g. *Absolutely Fabulous, Fawlty Towers, Men Behaving Badly, Mr Bean, The Office*) have been successful internationally, in original form, in adaptation or in translation.

> British market, a process echoed in title changes. So *Family Feuds* became *Family Fortunes* and *Card Sharks* became *Play Your Cards Right*. Such changes are revealing – not that they reflect directly differences in American and British culture, but that they signify differences in the process of cultural production. (Whannel, 1992: 196)

Many quiz shows (e.g. *Mastermind* or *University Challenge*) add to their entertainment value an educative role which might have pleased John Reith, the more so as most of them seem archetypically British. Judgements about origin may be erroneous, however, for this genre includes the first, classic, example of international formatting, long before the term was invented and its financial benefits were fully appreciated. The most famous of the early panel quiz games, *What's My Line* (1951), had all the trappings of a domestic production (a popular Irish presenter, lady panellists in evening dress and their male counterparts in dinner jackets). Its "naturalised Britishness" was so convincing that few if any viewers suspected that it was an adaptation of an American radio show for which the BBC paid its creators the princely sum of 25 guineas per episode (Moran, 1998: 18, 78).

Soap operas (soaps) have every right to be considered the first truly global popular television genre, but they have, at the same time, strong national identity with almost every country or language producing its own quite distinctive example(s). The genre has been called "a primitive exercise in grand story telling" (Cornell et al., 1996: 18), and shares many of the techniques used by the popular serialised 19th century novel to sustain interest,[18] but adds the premise of a flexible, ongoing and potentially unending series of story lines involving the same characters. The first soaps were cheap and mediocre day-time radio programmes sponsored by American manufacturers of household cleaning products, such as Procter and Gamble, and owed the "opera" in their title to the excessively emotional nature of their content. What transformed the genre was the launch on British television in 1960 of *Coronation Street*, which took its characters seriously, aimed at high standards of acting and scriptwriting, attracted large audiences and inspired American companies to do the same, thus leading indirectly to the global success of *Peyton Place* and *Dallas*. As Barker has observed, the national and international in soap opera are not mutually exclusive:

> While we have witnessed the emergence of an international primetime soap opera style, including high production values, pleasing visual appearances and fast paced

18. Such as redundancy, repetition, multiple plots and the suspense of unfinished actions (or "cliffhangers") to be completed in the following episode.

> action-oriented narrative modes, many soaps retain local settings, regional language audiences and slow paced story telling. (Barker, 1999: 55)

The experience of British television fully endorses this view of diversity. The luxurious, or simply different, life styles shown in American and Australian soaps have heightened their appeal in the UK, while domestic series are more down-to-earth and "popular" in their closeness to the viewing audience, for in this case, "soap opera […] tends to focus not on the elite of society, but on the masses. Soap opera is the people's theatre" (Cornell et al., 1996: 18). The first British soaps, *Coronation Street* and the rurally set *Emmerdale Farm*, were successful in attracting viewers by deliberately adopting a style of "social realism" which already had a touch of nostalgia. Writing as long ago as 1973, Marxist commentator Raymond Williams (1990 [1973]: 61) called *Coronation Street* "a distanced and simplified evocation and prolongation of a disappearing culture: the northern urban backstreets of the depression and its immediate aftermath". For British viewers, American soap operas necessarily have a different realism built on narrative technique and audience expectation. As John Fiske and Ien Ang have respectively observed: "Realism is not a matter of fidelity to an empirical reality, but of discursive conventions by and for which a sense of reality is constructed" (Fiske, 1987: 2), "[w]hat is experienced as real indicates above all a certain structure of feeling which is aroused by the programme" (Ang, 1985: 47). What matters, whatever the origin of series, is a serious approach to the genre which is almost a condition for success.[19]

Apart from the narrative convention of the "absence of the moment of final closure" (McQueen, 1998: 33), key points in the longevity and popularity of British soaps include scheduling (for the series rarely compete with each other, but may be viewed successively on different channels), appeal to diverse groups within society (over-65s for *Coronation Street* and *Emmerdale*, late teens for *Hollyoaks*, school-age children for *Grange Hill*) and their capacity for evolution. Most now have far less of the "slow paced story telling" mentioned by Barker, and much more of rapid action and sensationalism not far removed from the pages of the tabloid press. Indeed, storylines are widely discussed in newspapers and magazines, as well as on websites, which tends to obscure the boundary between fact and fiction and strengthens the links between programmes and their audience. The readiness of viewers to identify with characters has offered British soap operas the opportunity for a surprising educative role, in commenting on and influencing social attitudes and behaviour. In 1967, *Coronation Street*

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19. British schedules have been littered with mediocre, sometimes expensive, but always short-lived failures.

was encouraged by the Labour government to include a script line where two well-loved characters discussed Supplementary Benefit, a new social security payment available to all. It was, however, the advent of *Brookside* in 1982 which was to make the depiction and discussion of contemporary social or health issues and their resolution a regular feature of soaps, and the same approach was soon adopted by other series, notably the BBC's *EastEnders*, which had made its mark originally by the aggressiveness and violence of many of its characters.[20]

In contrast to drama and comedy, which are carefully structured and rehearsed genres, talent shows and reality television are, by their very nature, presented as being spontaneous and offering the chance for ordinary people to show their skills or reveal their faults, to the pitiless gaze of other ordinary people present in the studio or safely installed at home in front of their television screens. If talent shows can trace their origins back to popular culture and to a basic human desire to entertain family, friends or others, television has necessarily given a more formal structure to this activity, adding to the fallibility of public performance a competitive edge which appeals to a wider audience. The initial British programme *Opportunity Knocks* and its successor *New Faces* functioned in similar fashion: the acts of a variety of unknown performers were judged by a studio panel of experts who decided who should compete in the grand final and named the eventual winner. Today's versions of the genre (*The X Factor*, which succeeded *Pop Idol* in 2004, and *Britain's Got Talent*) have increased popular participation by allowing viewers to vote by calls to premium-rate telephone lines or by SMS over which candidates should be eliminated each week and even to choose the winner. These shows are of British origin and might therefore be considered examples of domestic inventiveness, but they are formatted worldwide in almost identical versions, have lost virtually all national identity and smack strongly of the homogenising effect of global mass culture. Moreover, they meet the demands of a marketplace dominated by commercial competitiveness: they are extremely lucrative both for creators and broadcasters, for high audience figures are virtually guaranteed, participants other than presenters, judges and the final winner receive no payment and viewers contribute to profits through the telephone voting system. The saving graces of this type of broadcast seem to be the relatively small prizes[21] and the fact that amidst the many artists who

20. Programme initiatives have been supported by charities working in the fields in question, by voluntary *Helplines* whose mission is to inform and help victims, and in certain cases by government.

21. The winner of *Britain's Got Talent*, for instance, receives £100,000 and the possibility of appearing in front of Her Majesty the Queen in the Royal Variety Performance.

lose what little talent they may have in front of the cameras, some of the acts are of astonishingly high quality.[22]

Reality television is another genre which has been boosted by the global need for inexpensive, yet popular programmes. It also has the advantage of taking a wide variety of forms, from lifestyle shows featuring, for instance, cleaning, cooking, decorating or entertaining, to talk shows where an enthusiastic studio audience is invited to hear intimate secrets of people's private lives or bedrooms and encouraged to voice its approval or disgust. These are surpassed, however, by surveillance reality series "the first truly international new TV genre of the 21st century" (Creeber, 2001: 137), a voyeuristic development of older models and a far cry from the benign *Candid Camera* (1960), a copycat version of the American programme of the same name, whose recipe for success was the simple device of filming people without their knowledge and showing them in embarrassing situations or performing ridiculous or demeaning tasks. As with today's *You've Been Framed*, the footage was sometimes visibly staged rather than spontaneous, but the opportunity of laughing at the misfortunes of others seems an irresistible temptation to a substantial audience. Viewers of surveillance or documentary reality shows are no doubt motivated by the hope that, beyond the interest generated by a paradoxical combination of co-operation and competition between participants,[23] the ordinary people filmed might be caught saying or doing something unseemly. With the exception of the episodic *Castaway 2000* and *Castaway 2007*, the shows now on British television are the formatted fruits of the inventiveness of multi-national production companies,[24] bear all the trademarks of global culture and leave little scope for national variation. In the case of the best-known programme, *Big Brother*, viewers whose appetites are left unsatisfied by the daily episodes can now follow events on a permanent basis by logging on to the dedicated websites of the series, thus passing from a passive medium to an active one and taking a step towards eliminating the need for television altogether. These programmes may soon have run their course as popular television phenomena, for the announcement has been made that the

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22. The 2009 final of *Britain's Got Talent* included middle-aged Scottish spinster Susan Boyle, whose marvellous singing belied her homely appearance. Although she did not win the competition, first place being taken by the equally remarkable dance group *Diversity*, her performance attracted worldwide attention and her career has been firmly launched.
23. In addition to working together in a team or teams, competitors also have to avoid being criticised by their colleagues and eliminated by the votes of the viewing public.
24. Both *Big Brother* and its spin-off *Celebrity Big Brother* were devised by the Dutch company Endemol, while Swedish television invented *Expedition Robinson* which was subsequently developed by CBS as *Survivor*.

current series of *Big Brother* will be the last, but they may well prove to be much more significant for the development of multi-media entertainment.

4. Pockets of Resistance

We have seen then that the popular in television can take a variety of forms and that there are both detected and undetected degrees of global and international broadcasting. In Britain, support for domestic programmes remains relatively buoyant and consequent resistance to obviously "foreign" programmes may be considerable, especially to those made in other languages. The British Film Institute's list of top 20 imported television programmes (over the past 50 years) includes only two which were not originally in English, the German *Das Boot* (1980) and *Heimat* (1993) both of which were not series but single programmes, to which might be added the children's series, the *Magic Roundabout*, seamlessly dubbed from the original French *Manège enchanté*. The demands of European legislation have made little difference, as the required quota of programmes of "European origin" is nearly always met by exclusively British programmes or those resulting from joint ventures with other countries. There is little doubt, on the one hand that familiarity (of actors, settings or themes) enhances popular appeal, and, on the other, that the cultural and ethnic diversity of the British population has led to a more fragmented audience more inclined to actively search out those broadcasts which meet their expectations.

Such diversity can sometimes be found in locally-produced programmes, for within the UK and within broadcasting, regional and national preferences remain strong. The creation of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, followed by the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland, has given stimulus to initiatives in what broadcasters now call the "nations". For their part, the English regions have no legal or administrative status, but have strong cultural and media identities and a current subject of discussion amongst broadcasters and politicians is whether part of the BBC's licence fee should not be ceded to ITV to enable it to maintain its regional news and weather services. ITV's regional structure was a trump card for the channel in its initial competition with the BBC, for it offered a clear alternative to London bias, as John Corner explains:

> However loosely the [ITV] companies chose to interpret their declared commitments to their regions, a stronger sense of different voices, of previously unaccessed experience, came through the filter of their programmes than had hitherto managed to penetrate through the sieve of metropolitan-centredness which habitually, if

> unconsciously, was used by the BBC in fashioning its images of the nation. (Corner, 1991: 9)

Companies did so notably by setting their in-house soap operas close to home, in Salford in Greater Manchester for Granada Television's *Coronation Street,* followed by a fictional suburb of Birmingham for ITV's *Crossroads*, and the countryside near Harrogate for Yorkshire Television's *Emmerdale Farm*. Only the last of these situations was "genuine", but the trend has continued with *Brookside,* produced for Channel 4 by Mersey Television, adding authenticity by buying a whole newly-constructed cul-de-sac in the Liverpool area to shoot all scenes, interior and exterior.

Many other genres have used real locations to enhance the popular appeal of programmes, for local scenery or buildings give added value both by their attractiveness or familiarity and by inciting viewer curiosity. The investigations of Inspector Morse (Oxford), Inspector Taggart (Glasgow), Inspector Wycliffe (Cornwall) or Inspector Barnaby (Buckinghamshire) would not be the same in different settings, while the large number of available country houses or family seats has facilitated the task of producers adapting literary classics. In an example of media transfer, popular identification with favourite broadcasts and (in)voluntary confusion over fact and fiction, the settings for all kinds of programmes have become places of pilgrimage for their avid fans, from the studio sets used for *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* to the Yorkshire Dales in which the veterinary series *All Creatures Great and Small* was shot, the church of St Mary the Virgin (Turville, Buckinghamshire) which doubles as St Barnabas in *The Vicar of Dibley*, and the unassuming village of Avoca, in Ireland, south of Dublin, which was home to the outdoor scenes of *Ballykissangel*.

Integral to the identity of place is accent, for, since the 1960s, it has been acknowledged that local speech has a rich and interesting variety and that phonemes other than those of Home Counties Received Pronunciation or London cockney working class have a rightful place on television. Plausibly authentic local variations enhance both the realism and appeal of programmes, but, as the examples are too numerous to allow of a detailed presentation, one may perhaps serve as illustration. Central Television's 1980s series *Auf Wiedersehen Pet* had contemporary resonance in showing the dramatic and comic (mis) adventures of unemployed British building workers more or less reluctantly taking temporary jobs in Germany. What brought the series closer to home was that it chose to highlight not international (dis)harmony but domestic local difference by using characters from various parts of England, all of whom spoke with the unmistakable or unfamiliar accents of their own areas, the Black Country, Bristol, Liverpool, London and Newcastle-on-Tyne, to the delight of some spectators and the bafflement of others. Language is a complex matter, for

it frequently conveys not only regional or local but also class differences, but one part of the United Kingdom, Wales, is a quite particular case. The Welsh language is spoken or used, according to the latest census figures (2001), by 21% of the population and has long had official recognition. At one time, BBC and ITV regions using transmitters covering parts of Wales as well as parts of England included occasional programmes in Welsh in their schedules, but the creation of Channel 4 in 1982 brought with it a new dedicated service for the Principality, S4C (Sianel Pedwar Cymru), which initially screened Welsh-language broadcasts as well time-lapsed items, in English, from Channel 4. Now, S4C's programmes are exclusively in Welsh and locally produced, and the channel boasts its own soap opera, *Pobol Y Cwm*.

These cases show that there are pockets of resistance to centralised national broadcasting in the UK, while as we have seen elsewhere, national broadcasting is alive and well and can sometimes resist international pressures. The question of globalisation remains complicated, though, for, as defenders of the post-modern theory of broadcasting have maintained, the exchange of programmes is not a one-way process. Indeed, Britain is not only an importer, but also an exporter of programmes, to the English-speaking world, of course, but also worldwide, thanks to the charm of local colour and to technical expertise in particular fields like detective stories, situation comedies and costume drama. How far this amounts to global impact is another question, for few British programmes have made much impression on American prime-time schedules, most having been limited to niche slots on PBS or brief network runs, often in amended form. In fact, the 1960s series *The Avengers*, with its strong echoes of James Bond, was the only British programme regularly scheduled nationally in the USA before the arrival of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, "England's [sic] most successful cultural export in the last 30 years", according to the *New York Times*, on ABC in 1999. Both are rare cases of individual programmes making their mark on the world televisual landscape and both were, originally, 100% British productions, in-house for ITV (*The Avengers*) and for the production company Celador in the case of *Millionaire*, but there the similarity ends, or almost. The outmoded Britishness of *The Avengers* has given it a certain cult appeal and it still finds its way onto schedules at home and abroad. *Millionaire*, on the other hand, is a global format broadcast in copycat form in some 100 countries and its commercial success has made it a hot property, the franchise now being owned by Sony. It is not, however, a typical global programme, because it was not initially aimed at the international market and because its genre has allowed it to retain a certain educative value and preserve elements of national identity. Many of the general knowledge and popular culture questions faced by British competitors are related to the domestic context and can be answered, rightly or wrongly, by viewers in

their own homes. It may thus be argued that *Millionaire* is at once an illustration of globalisation and an example of resistance to it.

In conclusion, it is clear that many of the initial conceptions of television have long since disappeared and that global ownership and the concentration on entertainment have made popular broadcasting more important than ever. In Britain, however, this has not led to the demise of national and local broadcasting, which has adapted to survive in the new conditions precisely by preserving close links with the everyday interests and concerns of viewers that international formats cannot achieve. John Reith has no doubt turned in his grave on many occasions at the thought of what his beloved BBC has done with the cherished medium of broadcasting, and refused to even contemplate the worse offences committed by other operators, but British television has a vitality and variety which, in as far as anything is certain in this rapidly-changing world, should ensure that it will continue to face and overcome new challenges.

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