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Silver Screens: Comparative Approaches to Narrative for Cinema and Television

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In choosing this topic to consider here in Graz, I realise that I'm revealing quite a lot about myself. I reveal I'm somewhat of a dinosaur. Anyone who is in their twenties now, will probably think it's a stupid question and wonder, "What is she talking about? When you watch TV you are in no doubt it is TV. Film is bigger and bolder or smaller and more intimate than ever. The distinction is completely obvious!"

But it hasn't always been obvious, and when you think about it, it isn't really even now. I've worked at broadcasters and at film production and distribution companies. And although I started as a script editor in a TV drama department – BBC Scotland - most of my professional life has been involved with film. Currently I'm working for an independent company called Ruby Films in London. I run the TV drama side of things and I have some colleagues who run the film side. In my life I spend more time than I like to think about reading scripts or more often, books or publishers' manuscripts and asking myself, "Hmmm, could this be turned into film or television?" My colleagues and I are forever passing books back and forth to one another: "This isn't for me," I'll say, "but it could work as a film." "This is nice," they'll say, "but it's TV. Why don't you take a look?"

Sometimes it's clear, and you aren't really sure why. You just feel like that about it. Or sometimes you look at the name of the person attached and that makes it clear – they have a track record as a TV writer, or as a film director – and the decision is made to try to set it up one way or another. Quite often those reasons are not intrinsic to the nature of the material you are considering. From the perspective of an independent producer, the decisions about whether you option a piece of material or commission some research on which to base a script often have more to do with opportunism related to local industry politics than a strong sense that something will work spectacularly in one medium and not at all in another.

Basically, if you're considering a piece of underlying material – a play, a book, a blog, a newspaper article – and you know it's becoming increasingly difficult to get original material commissioned in either medium – you decide which medium to plump for because you know a particular film development fund executive, whose budget hasn't run out for the year yet, likes writer x or director y, who has brought the book to you. Or you know a TV drama executive has a personal interest in the subject matter because of something they told you at a drinks party, and you start developing it accordingly.

I hope this doesn't sound cynical. It's not meant to. I don't feel bad about that. It's just the way this industry is and some very good work can come out of those dialogues and relationships. You also get a lot of dross that you wonder about rhetorically, "How did *that* get commissioned?" But it's always been this way and isn't really worth getting upset about. In the end, to earn a living, you just have to be pragmatic and take what opportunities there are and try to do something interesting with whatever paths they open up. And if you can, you have a couple of things that you love on the go, things people tell you have absolutely no chance of getting made, because those things keep you sane.

All of which is to say that I don't think you can consider how different forms of narrative work without giving a little thought to the industrial conditions that produce them. In this day and age, this is probably an unfashionably Marxist notion, but I think it's pretty relevant. So, if you'll bear with me, I would like to talk a little about how broadcasters and film financiers work together in Europe, so that we can start trying to understand the pressures on film projects. Most of you are film people and are interested in film narrative, and that is what this session is really about.

As we've all experienced, I assume, financing people say 'no' to film projects more often than they say 'yes' to them, and a handy reason often given for a 'no' – often in the situation where they *quite* like it but

don't *really* want to do it and don't want to get into picking it apart editorially, is this idea that something is television and not cinema. As I'll get to later, this happens the other way around as well. I thought if we tried to throw the media into relief, we could get closer to this elusive idea of 'cinema,' and it might inform how you conceptualise your stories, hopefully in a stimulating way.

After a long time thinking that well-written things deserve to get made, and being frustrated when they don't, I have belatedly come to the realisation that in terms of getting something made, it doesn't really matter how 'good' a script is – i.e. how technically well achieved it is. What really matters is the concept of the film, or the subject matter of the television piece. If it's an eye-catching subject, but a terrible script, you have much more chance in either medium than with a wonderfully executed piece of writing about some obscure theme. Of course, you need strong concepts beautifully executed to have a creative and commercial hit. I don't think this emphasis on subject matter is a bad thing.

F. Scott Fitzgerald used to worry that he had been given the gift of expression but without the ability to find worthwhile subjects. I don't agree with him, but I know what he meant – he was worried that his work was indulgent, when in fact, it was mostly about indulgent people. I think that is a very valid subject matter, and he wrote about it brilliantly, but only because he was aware enough of the dangers of approaching such material. So, basically, if there is no real reason for you to write something apart from you fancy a spot of navel gazing, then I don't really think, no matter how clever the navel gazing is, that it's worth doing, and if I were a commissioner, I wouldn't fund it.

Now what I don't want to do with this session is set down a bunch of rules and say, "This type of thing is TV' and 'this type of thing is cinema' and never the twain shall meet." Because the world is just not like that. Thank goodness. Or it would be very dull and nobody would ever be able to actually finance anything!

I have a quote here from Tessa Ross, who is a very powerful woman in the British Film and TV scene. Her job is to run film and drama at the UK's Channel 4, which has been, over the last 25 years, a major force in British film, but not such a strong force in UK TV drama. They have a small amount of money, but they make it go quite a long way, and have been associated with a lot of interesting films over the years. In a recent interview, Tessa said, "In the end there is pure television and pure film, and it is the crossover in the middle which is where we are at our most creative." Initially, it seems like she's sitting on the fence, but actually it makes a lot of sense when you consider the industrial conditions in which she and her budget are operating.

So let's quickly take a look at those conditions. How do film and television intersect? This is a question for the suits, really, so what do they say? Well, they say things like, "Film is a key driver of growth on digital platforms" or "Film and television are more symbiotic than ever." Which, roughly translated, means that reports of the death of cinema have been greatly exaggerated. Cinema, grand old dame that she is, has faced down such reports time and time again. In the 50's when TV arrived, they said, "With TV to watch, why go out of the house?" They said it again in the 80's when video came onto the scene, and again early this century when digital technology became widespread. And now the cry is, "Why would people go to the cinema when they can watch some narcissistic nutter prancing about on U-Tube, *on their I-Pod?*"

Personally, I think the answer to that is obvious, but I am, as I said at the start, a dinosaur – heck, I can only ring people on my mobile phone – so I may well be wrong with my prediction for the future which is this: people like films and will keep watching them in the cinema for some time to come, even if the growth in importance of ancillary markets such as DVD and Internet downloading means that films have to be financed in a different way. This sort of thing is what the writers are striking about in Hollywood – the WGA contract is out of date and doesn't address these new income streams. They don't get residuals for them and they want to rectify that in the new contract. Studios are not keen to do that – hence the strike. But The Long Tail, I hope, will be the saviour of intelligent, proper, cinema, which is definitely not TV.

While I don't believe audiences are falling out of love with cinema, and box office figures across Europe support this conclusion, they *are* falling out of love with watching films on television. Scheduling a big film

in primetime is no longer a real audience draw in the era of multi-channel television. In the UK, in the olden days of four channels, it used to be that a popular film could count on an audience of about twenty million. Nowadays a film you might have heard of – Stephen Frears’ Oscar-winning *The Queen* – attracted eight million viewers when it was shown on ITV1 (a major commercial channel in the UK). Interestingly, *The Queen* was commissioned as a piece of television, and actually looks like a piece of television and sounds like a piece of television, but everyone wanted to go along and see Helen Mirren’s turn in all its glory, so it took on a strange life of its own and ended up doing well at the box office. I think this is an example of the concept over-riding the execution which was standard enough, but the Queen is an iconic figure, here played by a British national treasure, so the whole thing became greater than the sum of its parts, and people were prepared to get a babysitter and tramp through the rain and pay a tenner to watch it.

The overall picture – the picture of film struggling to find a niche in a multi-channel environment – is similar across Europe. All of Europe’s major broadcasters are involved in producing both films and television. BBC and Channel 4 in the UK; Canal Plus in France; RAI in Italy; Telemunchen in Germany, to name but a few. Public service broadcasters remain absolutely vital to film production in all these countries. In the UK, Italy and France, public service broadcasters have a legal obligation to invest in film production. There are also compelling economic and marketing arguments for doing so, rather than simply acquiring films down the line. If the budgets are low enough, films, which can be shown many times, can be an inexpensive source of programming. Film is also a key way of creating and maintaining a channel’s brand. With every theatrical release, an investing broadcaster’s profile is raised. The cultural value in local markets is very important. So although they want films that can ultimately be used to fill the schedule, broadcasters have a vested interest in backing projects that are distinctive enough to make it into theatres. They may be TV folks, but they are certainly not looking for TV drama.

So let’s switch gears now and consider what these TV-company film executives are not looking for because chances are, to get your film made, you will need some cash from a broadcaster. So what constitutes TV drama? I’m going to state the obvious now, but let’s just deal with it for the sake of completeness: TV drama comes in a number of forms. Let’s think about the characteristics of each:

1. The soap opera. Usually 30’. An open-ended long running format about a group of characters, usually united by a physical location. In the UK they are called things like *Eastenders* (a miserable soap, set among miserable people in an impoverished area of London) and *Coronation Street* (a street of terrace houses in a northern city). There was one called *Brookside* that ran on C4, which was ground breaking because instead of having only working class people in it, it was about a newly built suburb that contained elements of the aspirational working class and the down on their luck middle class. This was its Unique Selling Point – the clash of cultures. Characters lead remarkable lives in soap opera places, have affairs, come out as homosexual, invest in dodgy business schemes and lose everything, have long-lost children who come back when all other storylines are flagging, that kind of stuff. The bread and butter of the schedules. The key thing audiences and broadcasters want from a soap is volume. Never mind the quality, we can show it and watch it every night.

2. The returning series: also an open-ended format, but longer, usually a TV hour (i.e. about 43’ of actual drama, depending on which country it is shown in), By this we mean something like *ER*, or *Desperate Housewives*, both of which have some of the same characteristics as a soap opera, but characters are better looking and production values are higher. They are more of an event in the schedules. Returnable series are big business. If you have a series idea with legs, then you are onto a winner and producers want to hear from you. A word to the wise here – if you have an idea like *Heroes*, *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *CSI*, *Spooks*, *Hustle*, *Hotel Babylon*, *Life on Mars*... these are the holy grail at the moment, and some people are making a lot of money making them and selling the format rights around the world. So read the small print and make sure you writers negotiate your share of format up front, because that’s where the money is. If you write five pages of a treatment for a series that gets made, specifying three or four of what the lawyers call ‘three dimensional characters’– even if you haven’t written the scripts – you have created the format, and from that day on you are due a share of the revenues of that programme and every other version of that programme that gets made around the world.

There's a fine screenwriter in the UK called Jeremy Brock, who writes films now, but way back in the mists of time, he wrote the first few episodes of a hospital show called *Casualty* – a sort of low-rent UK version of *ER*, and years later it is still running. There are spin off shows – *Casualty 1907* and so on, which has a little appearance from Florence Nightingale. He hasn't had anything to do with it for years, I am told, but is apparently still getting paid. So let me tell you, if you want to pursue your art, I suggest you pursue a series format or two first. Unlike a soap opera, each episode is a story in itself – the crucial thing about a series is that you don't have to watch every episode to understand it. Characters and situations are stock enough to make sense for the first time viewer, but with enough 'in' character jokes and quirks to make it rewarding for those who tune in every week. Jerry Bruckheimer is brilliant at them – *The Closer*, *Cold Case*, all those kinds of things. Total format. The very same every week – you know exactly what you will get when you tune in. That's what broadcasters want.

Soaps and returnable series are what I think Tessa meant by 'pure television' in the scripted entertainment world. Sitcom would also be pure television. Moving along the scale, I think we are getting closer to the muddy crossover waters when we consider the Serial, or, as the Americans would have it, The Mini Series. This is the sort of thing that my film colleagues and I have endless conversations about. Ruby is a classy kind of film company and Alison Owen, who owns it, particularly enjoys mounting period entertainments – which we are very good at in the UK, so the Ruby film brand should lend some cachet to doing big pieces of historical TV. That's our theory and we're sticking to it. In fact it is almost impossible because the BBC in-house people have it carved up! They're very good at it and the BBC commissions scripts for just about every English Classic there is (usually from Andrew Davies), then sits on them until they decide that they've had enough Jane Austen and its time for a bit of Thomas Hardy. Or then he goes out of fashion and Trollope comes back in, or Dickens, or Fielding, or the Brontes. It's a cyclical thing.

But to get back to the topic of Mini Series, frequently, but not always, the material that we are debating – is it a film or is it a mini series – is some kind of historical story about a well known character. A couple of weeks ago we got all hot under the collar regarding whether or not to bid for the rights in a non-fiction book – a new biography of Mr Selfridge – the turn of the century entrepreneur who established the famous shop in London's Oxford street. Now he was, in fact an interesting guy, if not a likable one, and did in fact change the face of consumerism forever, so he did a lot of stuff that has had an impact on the world of today. But was his story a film or the stuff of a TV mini-series that we would try and set up with, for example, the BBC and HBO or WGBH Boston? If it was a film, we wondered, who would play Mr Selfridge? Tom Wilkinson? He was a charming showman. He would be good. And a film about one of the architects of contemporary consumerism might be interesting to somebody like him (At this point I should say that we didn't really ever think he would do it as he is off with George Clooney et al, but this is the kind of conversations you have to decide if something has potential for film or TV – you leap to the best case scenario and work backwards from there). But would Americans understand the significance of Selfridges? Is it too parochial in terms of subject matter? Perhaps. Could you somehow dovetail it with the history of Bloomingdales? Maybe, we thought, it is TV, but then the same questions would apply if we needed an American broadcaster: would there be enough cultural relevance to justify the large expenditures necessary for mounting a period production? So let's say no US involvement. Could you do it out of the UK as a mini-series? Maybe somebody like Alfred Molina playing Mr Selfridge could make it 'event TV'. And what format would work best on TV? 2 x 90? 3 x 60'? Sales agents prefer 3 x 60'. It would be expensive, so even if the BBC went for it we would definitely need a pre-sale to a sales agent to top up the budget, which means 3 x 60' makes more sense.

See what I mean about industrial conditions dictating the form of narrative? So then, going the TV route, we would be looking for a writer to create about 130 minutes of drama with a natural three-act structure. Within each of those acts you need 4-5 parts to allow for commercial breaks. Are there enough turning points in the story? Are there enough reversals and slings and arrows of outrageous fortune to keep people from changing channel through at least twelve ad breaks? No, we decided, there weren't. So, after our initial excitement, we decided it was neither film nor TV drama. What the story of Selfridges could be, we thought, is an interesting section in a documentary about the history and development of consumerism. Those kinds of things aren't something we do at the company I work for, so I called a

woman I know who makes great authored documentaries and suggested she read the book because she might be able to do something with it, and we all moved on to the next idea.

Which brings us to the endangered species of the scripted TV world: the single drama. At least in the UK it's endangered. Please let me know how it is elsewhere. I imagine it's the same because most tele needs investment from sales agents these days and singles are really hard to sell internationally. This is where things get really muddy, but actually in quite a good way. At this point I will come clean and admit that I am only masquerading as a producer. I have another life as a writer. Mostly, I've written scripts for films that have not been made, some original screenplays, some adaptations. Some of them will never be made. Some of them show signs of life and with persistence might be made at some point. I wrote a half-hour film recently that shot last week. About a year ago I was commissioned by C4 drama to write a 90' TV single drama on the subject of post-traumatic stress disorder in combat veterans. I've never written for TV before and actually, I was quite excited. I think it's an important subject, much discussed in the papers at the moment, and it felt urgent and controversial and totally suited to being a C4 single drama. They make about eight singles a year and like them to 'punch above their weight,' which means they like to generate stories in newspapers and get the channel embroiled in controversy and, if possible, legal action, all of which is publicity for the channel and contributes to its brand as the corner of British Television that speaks out where the wimps at the BBC and the money-grabbing ITV shareholders wouldn't dare! (A glimpse at the C4 schedule of reality TV shows, shopping programmes and property development shows would challenge that perception somewhat, but that is what scripted programmes – drama and comedy – can do for a channel: give it an identity that it otherwise wouldn't have.)

So, the director and I duly started our research and had a fascinating and very emotional time meeting all these combat veterans and hearing their heartbreaking stories. And at the end of our research we reflected on what kind of a piece we wanted to make and we decided that although it was a piece about violence, it should not be a violent story. What we had discovered, and found really moving, was the idea that PTSD is somehow a very humane and hopeful response. The human brain is not hotwired for violence. That people are utterly traumatised by experiencing or perpetrating violence is perversely hopeful. There is not one species in nature that does not have an utter taboo about killing its own. Lions, baboons, elks – they will all fight each other if they have to, and they will frequently wound a rival if driven to it, but most of the time they hold back from killing their own kind. This drama, we felt, should be about some guys trying to hold on to their humanity after violence. It should be about tenderness among damaged men, the kind of absurd, blackly comic, disguised tenderness that we had found men showing to each other in the treatment homes and institutions that we visited. It should have the structure of a war movie, we decided. These characters should be on a mission through enemy territory, but for them, enemy territory is a place where they are misunderstood and ostracised: their own country, their own society, for whom they perpetrated and experienced the violence that scarred them so deeply.

We went back to C4 and they loved the idea. They thought it was a 'fresh' way to approach the subject matter, and we did too. They told me to go away and write the script. I delivered the first draft and they seemed to like it. They gave me some notes, and I wrote some more. Then they started asking some very strange questions. They wanted to know what the 'political point' of the piece was. I couldn't answer that question. Could it point the finger a bit more at the Ministry of Defence? Not really, I said. I'm not a huge fan of the Ministry of Defence, but it's not like there's a solution for these characters that the Ministry of Defence could provide if it chose to. They are too far gone for that. Yes, they said, but what is this piece *demanding*? It's not demanding anything, I said, it's exploring the inevitable aftermath of violence. It's about people trying to hold on to their dignity as human beings. And it's also funny, I insisted: an absurd tragicomedy. It's not some unwatchable piece of grim social realism. Yes, we like the funny bits, they said, but you have to have a stronger, clearer, political argument if it is to work for us on TV. But I don't want to make a political point, I insisted. Politics is neither here nor there. There's no political point. These people have experienced things beyond politics. Right, they said, accusingly, wriggling about and getting annoyed: "We don't want it. You've gone and written a film. *This is just too subtle for TV.*"

Now, this response interested me, because I didn't think I had written a film. It was written with a TV budget and schedule in mind. I had been careful to consider ad breaks and inject a mini-cliffhanger every

seventeen minutes or so. There was humour in it, which seemed to work and everybody seemed to like. There were no special effects. There were no expensive locations. There were three strong characters, designed to be castable from a pool of TV favourites. There was, as I mentioned, a clear, mock-heroic mission to structure it around. In my mind, it was written very deliberately to be feasible as a TV production and work creatively on TV. But to the C4 commissioner, who seemed quite exasperated by this point, I had “gone and written a film” and it wasn’t something for them.

All of which got me thinking even more about this interface, this alleged difference between film and television. Had I written a film? We’ve started trying to finance this piece as a low budget film. The first financier we went to – at a regional English fund – really went for it. She even went so far as to declare she thought it was a European film. When I go back to the UK we’re meeting other financiers, so maybe it will be a film after all, with a bit of luck. Who knows?

So, I thought that if we thought a bit about what annoyed the TV commissioners, we might get an idea of what gives something potential to work as cinema and not TV. The first thing that annoyed them was that the script didn’t explain everything right away. The first scene is a clearly deranged guy, cackling to himself as he breaks into a storeroom. Then he climbs up on a chair and takes off his belt and you think he is going to hang himself, but he doesn’t. He drops his trousers and makes a photocopy of his arse instead. Now, I thought that was kind of a catchy opening. I thought it gave you a bit of a thrill – Is he going to kill himself? – followed by a laugh of relief. The TV folks didn’t like it.

“What don’t you like?” I asked.

“Where are we?” they said.

“In an institution,” I said, “that much will be obvious.”

“What kind of institution?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. (Those of you who have seen the amazing Palm d’Or winner *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 days* will know that you spend the first ten minutes of that wondering what kind of institution you are in, but eventually you find out, and it is this wanting to find out that concentrates you on the minutiae of what is happening. That guy stole my opening!) But back to the TV people.

“Why is he photocopying his arse?”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll find out why later on.”

“We need to know why he does that.”

“We’ll know, just not before he does it.”

“Who is that guy anyway?”

“He’s the character we’re starting with.”

“Yes, but what do we know about him?”

“He looks mad enough to kill himself and he has a hairy arse.”

“This doesn’t tell us anything the audience needs to know!” they said.

At this point, I got annoyed. At one minute into the story, I argued, it tells the audience something incredibly important, the most important thing they can know at this point. It tells them: “You may know this is about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but really it’s okay to laugh.” It sets up the tone of the whole film.

No. The TV people wanted me to put in an establisher of the institution, including a sign that spelled out exactly where we were ‘Home for People with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’. Now, one shot like that and I’m reaching for the remote control. No thanks. I’m going to watch *Doing Up Houses and Selling them for Lots of Money* on the other side. Even more alarmingly, they wondered if we could follow the establisher with a *Trainspotting*-style credit sequence, which showed each of our characters in turn and gave a little bit of information about them.

“What kind of information?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“Well, what job they used to do.”

“Soldiers,” I told them. “Everybody in this used to be a soldier.”

“But before that, how will we know what jobs they had?” they cried.

“Trust me,” I said – I was banging my head of the partition wall in the Channel 4 drama meeting room by now – “*It doesn’t bloody matter!*”

And on it went like that. And that was just the conversation about the first scene.

So what general truths can be gleaned from that little exchange about the difference between TV drama and cinema? It’s not that executives are alarmingly literal, because you have those kinds of conversations all over the shop. I think it’s something really fundamental and simple: TV drama attempts to ANSWER questions, often irrelevant questions, at every turn. It did not matter a jot for my story what jobs the characters used to do. It simply was not relevant to what they encountered in the course of the story – and Cinema seeks to ASK them. Cinema seeks to create enigmas and possibilities in the minds of the audience; TV drama seeks to inhibit them. TV drama delivers a 12-inch pizza to your door. Cinema tempts you down a forest path with the promise of exquisite Turkish delight, hoping all the time that you will lose your way....

What other points did they have to make? Well, they thought the dialogue was funny and all – mostly the characters talk complete crap to each other about anything but what is actually happening to them because, like most human beings, they find that hard to do – but our execs wanted ‘a couple of scenes where the characters talk to each other about how they are feeling so we will understand’. That these were characters whose sense of alienation and inability to communicate with others was profound, that it was traumatic and impossible for them to articulate how they were feeling, was not something they really took into account.

So another truism: Television, like film, demands exposition. It takes no chances with your understanding. On the topic of this obsession with the audience understanding things, I did hear a depressing anecdote about film. Apparently they are re-making Hitchcock’s *The Birds* only this time it will be ‘for today’s more sophisticated audience’. Sounds good, but what will the difference be? They are going to explain exactly why the birds are attacking! Apparently shifts in the earth’s magnetic field due to global warming drive them all nuts or something... These are sophisticated times.

The third scene that annoyed my TV pals was an exchange that Tommy – an eager, anxious, angry puppy of a man – has with an old lady at one point in the script. This old lady is part of a church group and they have taken our heroes in and given them shelter about halfway through their bizarre ‘mission’. Now this is just a scene of people chatting in the kitchen attached to a church hall. There are a bunch of old ladies who have come for a morning coffee and our guys – nutcases all of them – are being treated kindly, given tea and buns by these nice old ladies. So it’s chatting people, the stuff of TV. What do they chat about? They chat about Jesus and the notion of turning the other cheek. Tommy thinks it’s stupid, non-violence. He says they should get in the real world. Violence is human nature. This old woman tries to explain what the doctrine of non-violence really means. They have a surreal argument about it. Tommy is not convinced, but it’s quite a sweet scene and they agree to disagree in the end, and all shake hands.

The whole scene is about people solving a difference of opinion through discussion, but what they are opposed about is the legitimacy of the use of violence. Now this makes it sound more ponderous than I hope it is. It’s actually quite a funny scene: this crazy guy ranting and raving and saying fighting is human nature, while accepting kindness – tea and cakes and tolerance – from a bunch of old ladies, flirting with them even, and making them laugh. But he’s a time bomb of a man. The old ladies are taking a risk by taking him in. But they do it because they are charitable, and it all turns out okay. I think it’s my favourite scene in the script, and while those are often the ones that have to go, in this case I was gobsmacked by the objection to it: They thought it was all getting too intellectual for their target audience, and old ladies aren’t very C4. Now an old lady having a boob job, or old ladies having sex or old ladies dating young guys – all these things crop up on Channel 4 all the time. *Buss Pass Boob Jobs* was the actual title of a shock-doc about, well, seniors having plastic surgery. But have an old lady quietly articulate something genuinely subversive about the priorities of our society? All of a sudden it’s too weird and out there, or too ‘clever’ for television.

I read what Heidrun Schleef said about writing for TV in Italy and all the executives asking if housewives will understand it. It's kind of the same in the UK, only they want to know if 16-30 year-old men will be interested. I think this is a damn shame and the reason why most TV drama is rubbish these days. Instead of trying to appeal to the audience that TV still has, they try and lure the youth away from their computers with crappy series aimed at them. Then they put them on while all the youths are down at the pub, binge drinking and getting into fights. I don't understand it.

Anyway, I don't want this to turn into a complaint about the treatment of my script at C4. I have a loyalty to C4. At least they commissioned it. Nobody else would have. The general point that this whole old lady thing raises is that if you are conceiving or writing drama for TV, it is important that you know who your audience is. You are not required to challenge that audience, or make that audience uncomfortable. Your most important priority is to keep that audience. If you get a good audience one week, then you basically have to offer up the same again. So writing good TV drama is really a matter of composing a theme and variations. The theme must be strong enough to withstand the battery of variation week after week. It must have a sound structure, but one with plenty of air circulating in it, blowing through it, making it feel open-ended, endlessly returnable. That's TV, that's TV at its best, most watchable and entertaining. You know what you ordered and it's delivered in style.

Everything I say, I then think – hang on – that's true of some kinds of cinema as well! You could say that about *Mission Impossible*, for instance. But that was originally a TV franchise, and designed to go on and on ... so maybe I'm not entirely contradicting myself.

Cinema is more of a symphony, I think, or a concerto or maybe a fugue if it's some slacker 'mumblecore' offering.

END