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Social Class and television audiences in the 1990s.

In his incendiary MacTaggart Lecture address to the 1993 Edinburgh Television Festival, Dennis Potter spoke of British television having been ‘ripped apart’ by a bureaucratic, cost-driven approach to programme commissioning, based in-part in the deregulatory and consumer-focused economic politics of 1980s ‘Thatcherism’. Whatever the characteristics of the original ‘Golden Age’ of British television drama – and Cooke (2003) regards it as reflecting a time when writers and directors were able to exert broad creative control over their programmes, while Caughie (2000, Pg.203) argues that it refers to a period when ‘television drama seemed to matter politically and something quite important to the culture seemed to be at stake’ – it was clear by this point that the era of radical, socially-focused programming had long-since come to an end.

Bemoaning this transition in a charged passage from ‘British Television Drama. A History’ (2003, Pg. 166), Cooke writes:

What the consumer-led approach to television drama produces is bland, audience-pleasing, undemanding drama [...] which is a pale reflection of the challenging, provocative, author-led drama of previous decades like *Cathy Come Home*, *Pennies from Heaven*, *Boys from the Blackstuff* and *The Singing Detective*, dramas which had made British television ‘such a glory in British life’.

With twenty-first century eyes however, in the era of risk-reduction, data-set commissioning and ‘deep-dives’, we may be able to look back to the early days of this model in the 1990s and form a kinder, if not revisionist, assessment. Indeed, what we may now be able to show is that while more traditional themes of social class in programming, such as working-class perspectives and social-realist approaches, may have waned in the 1990s, the simple fact that commissioning became increasingly audience-led allows us an insight into some of the prevailing goals, aspirations and self-image of class-society in the post-Thatcher era.

In the early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, motivated by an arguably idealised return to ‘traditional’ values and vehement opposition to the concept of Socialism, introduced stringent new monetary policies based on neoliberal principles. This included promoting individual ‘trickle-down’ wealth creation through

tax-cuts for higher earners, while elsewhere VAT and commodity taxes were raised. Privatisation of major industries was also central to the government's approach, while subsidies to nationalised industries were reduced. The result was significant growth in unemployment, higher prices and ultimately recession in the early 1980s. In addition, the 1980 Employment Act introduced Thatcher's attempts to curb labour unions, and taken as a whole this period arguably marked the development of a new north-south divide, as emergent service industries in the south of England were favoured over more traditional production and manufacturing industries in the north and midlands. As the consequences of Thatcher's policies continued to disproportionately affect the working class, the notion that her government prioritised the wealthy at the expense of the poor increased in momentum and circulation, becoming a common theme in working class-focused TV dramas of the period, such as *Boys from the Black Stuff*.

Central to the economic extension of Thatcher's principles was the concept of deregulation. While in recent times, arguments have been made questioning the validity and accuracy of the concept – Booth (2015) for example arguing that financial markets and securities were in fact *more* regulated after 1986, just in different ways – for the purposes of this essay the term 'deregulation' will be used to denote, albeit loosely, the idea of reduced government control over markets and industries, and the promotion of private enterprise and competition in areas such as television.

The consequences of this approach are well-documented; after the initial recession in the early 1980s, the City of London benefitted from deregulation to become the driving force behind a new type of economic prosperity, hallmarked by consumerism and credit-spending, from the mid 1980s onwards. Emphasis on individual wealth creation began to increase 'upward mobility' and even class-movement among those who could benefit from it, and by the 1990s fundamental changes were taking place in the class-dynamics of the country. For example, Halsey (1995, Pg. 151) examines the transition of working class males into middle class employment, writing that:

In 1972, 16 percent of the men of working-class origin had found their way into the middle class: by 1983 the percentage had risen to 23.6 and by 1992 to 31.0. Again in 1972 over 61.2 percent of those of working-class parentage were themselves in working-class jobs: by 1983 the percentage had fallen to 52.6, and by 1992 to 47.4.

In addition to working-class upward mobility, Halsey also notes the growth during the period of the existing middle classes, commenting on the expansion of the 'professional' and 'technical' middle classes as 'a feature of late twentieth-century Britain' (Pg. 152) while suggesting the emergence of what he describes as a 'salariat' or 'service class' as a sub-group of the middle. He is clear to point out however that this does not reflect an improvement in class mobility and prospects for all; on the contrary he also emphasises the increase in unemployment of the period and that 'class prizes and the risk of prolonged social deprivation both increased. We have, in short, reached a more polarized society'. (1995, Pg. 152) Given the strong themes of class division and Thatcherism in many notable 1980s dramas, and that such division continued into the 1990s, it would be reasonable to suppose that this would have been reflected on British television screens at the time. However, popular dramas of the period, such as *Heartbeat* and the well-known BBC *Pride & Prejudice* adaptation, often eschewed challenging, class-focused, social-issue drama for reassuring and dependable images of an idealised Britain, in-keeping with an hegemonic and arguably middle-class perspective, and devoid of the confrontation and comment of the previous decade. A number of factors precipitated this change including deregulation and a focus on ratings and cost-management, involving a move to audience-led programme commissioning; what this essay will emphasise however is what these dramas are still able to say about the values, demands and social positioning of their audiences, in terms of social class.

Naturally, television was not immune to deregulation, and from the beginning of her tenure as Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher's government was concerned with broadening the landscape of British television from the 'duopoly' of BBC and ITV to include and invite private enterprise. After the Hunt Committee of 1982, the Peacock Committee of 1986, and the 1988 government White Paper 'Broadcasting in the 1990s: Competition, Choice and Quality', the culmination was the 1990 Broadcasting Act, which abolished the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and replaced it with the Independent Television Commission, aimed at being a 'lighter touch' with fewer regulatory powers (Crisell, 2006, Pg. 34). The impact on commercial television was significant; at Channel Four, the abolition of the IBA and the subsequent creation of the Channel Four Television Corporation, coincided with the requirement that Channel Four now sell its own advertising. This removed the advertising monopoly of

ITV, again increasing competition, and consequently placed greater emphasis on ratings. Meanwhile, a controversial bidding process took place for ITV franchises; the newly successful Carlton-Tyne Tees franchise, for example, involving annual repayments of £52.7m to the Exchequer. This resulted in increasing pressure to produce what Cooke (2003, Pg. 164) describes as ‘ratings-winning programmes’ to pay for increased costs, and he concludes that ‘in these circumstances the move from a producer-led to a consumer-led culture was hardly surprising’.

One of the identifying features of this approach was the shift in emphasis in TV drama content. Britain’s long-standing tradition of challenging, working class-focused ‘social realist’ drama initially took a strong stand against Thatcherism during the period of recession and class-division; 1982’s BBC2 drama *Boys from the Black Stuff* being a superb example, while Channel 4’s funding of social-realist film such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Letter to Brezhnev* marked a clear continuation of British television’s left-wing values and tradition into the 1980s. However, by the time of Potter’s MacTaggart comments, many of the prevailing and acclaimed dramas on British television screens were beginning to be targeted more to the expanding middle-classes, and as-such began to reflect the desires and demands of those demographics. The reasons for this were primarily economic; in the 1980s first cable and then satellite broadcasting became available to those who could afford it, meaning that the middle classes became a key target demographic for ITV and Channel Four due to the increased competition of market share with new channels, and the need after the 1990 Broadcasting Act to produce ratings successes. This in turn sparked a secondary consideration of ‘quality television’ – the concern amongst groups such as the Campaign for Quality Television being that an emphasis on programming aimed squarely at ratings could see a ‘race to the bottom’ in terms of quality – which affected the BBC as well; a point which will be revisited later as we turn our attention to the Costume drama of the 1990s.

Under the combined influence of Chairman Marmaduke Hussey and Director General Michael Checkland, the BBC had quickly eschewed its previous liberal identity, becoming a more finance-focused organisation by the early 1990s. An examination of the BBC’s Annual Reports and Accounts across several decades is instructive in this respect; in the Television section of each, reports from the 1970s and early 1980s preference discussion of the quality, length and reception of BBC programmes, over

finance and politics. However, after the arrival of Hussey (1986) and Checkland (1987), and as a sign of things to come, the opening page of the 1986-87 Annual Report's Television section includes, front and centre, the new addition of a pie-chart illustrating BBC Television's share of the 1986-87 income, while by the 1990-91 Report even housekeeping seems to have been deemed important enough to be mentioned, the report noting that 'the year also saw the completion of contracting out of cleaning, catering and security services'. (BBC, 1991)

It would be easy to point to Hussey's links to the Conservative party and 'Checkbook' Checkland's role as an accountant at the BBC, before becoming Director General, as evidence that politics and accountancy had taken over the BBC at this time, and indeed many have, including Potter in his MacTaggart address (1993). However, a further look at the annual reports suggests that this may be a simplification.

After a decade of Thatcherism and deregulation, 1990 saw both the Broadcasting Act and the introduction of the BBC's 'Funding for the Future' review initiative aimed at saving £75 million per year on operating costs by 1993. For the BBC, this meant that 1400 hours of BBC programming would now be provided by the Independent sector, and resulted in a significant scaling-back of BBC production budgets, closure of studios and the shutting-down of the Television Script unit. The 1990-91 Annual Report notes that 'Film crew were reduced by 11%, staff in costumes, make-up and scenic design by 10%, and the number of cutting rooms in London by 7%'. (BBC, 1991)

As an alternative to the view that Hussey and Checkland were symptomatic of the problems facing broadcasting at the time – as suggested by Potter - it might be fairer to say that their approach was *representative* of these problems, and even that they attempted a strategy aimed at negating some of the issues the Corporation faced in the era of deregulation. With modern eyes, it could be argued that the strategy of audience-led, cost/return based commissioning actually succeeded, at least going some way towards mitigating the effects of deregulation, with Hughes writing in 2015 that the BBC 'has remained largely untouched [by the 1990 Broadcasting Act]. Indeed, it has grown in scale and stature' (Hughes, 2015).

What ratings in the commercial sector and cost-cutting at the BBC meant in real-terms was a shift in emphasis in the commissioning and production of programmes including TV drama, concerning both format and content. Firstly, the re-emergence of the serial

as the prevailing format for television Drama as opposed to the single-play concept long-associated with author-led drama and social-realism, was driven fundamentally by the need to reduce cost (Caughie, 2000, Pg. 204). Overseas sales were another important aspect of drama-commissioning at the time in both television and film, popular with the BBC as a method of both funding and profiting from TV drama, by offering what Lay (2002, Pg. 119) calls ‘an easily exportable vision of the nation’.

Arguably however, the most important aspect of this shift in emphasis, and the one that most directly pertains to discussions of social class, was the move from an author-led to a 'consumer'-led model, which included ratings and audience-share as one of its main priorities (Cooke, 2003, Pg. 163). In practice this meant an increased reliance on focus-groups, market-research and data-analysis in the commissioning of dramas, and a more 'formal' division between publishing and production (Edgar, 2000, Pg. 73), with Davies lamenting that instead of having control over what is made, drama Producers ‘spend all their time trying to imagine what is going on in Alan Yentob's mind, or Peter Salmon's mind, or David Liddeman's mind, and trying to tailor their taste to that perceived demand’. (Davies, 2000, Pg. 66). The move from writer/producer to executive control of drama was one of the key areas of conflict in Potter's MacTaggart address, a view shared by many at the time. Davies continues:

What all these people [Yentob/Salmon/Liddeman] have in common is that they have no background in drama, none are known for their ability to read a script, and their notions about what they want to commission are tightly linked to what went over well last time. (2000, Pg. 66)

While Davies comments concern the BBC specifically, as we have seen the consumer-led approach was widespread in the early 1990s due to the emphasis on ratings precipitated by the 1990 Broadcasting Act, and the most popular non-soap drama at the time in terms of viewing figures was ITV's *Heartbeat* (1992 – 2010). A police drama set in the picturesque, nostalgic and quintessentially English North Riding of Yorkshire in the 1960s, its success – 15 million viewers on average for its second season – is notable due to the consumer-research methods of ITV's Audience Planning approach, which were employed in its development. This included ‘concept-testing’, where research participants were offered options from which to indicate their preferences, and which Nelson (1997, Pg.76) explains ‘revealed three elements to have a popular

following, namely nostalgia for the 1960s, interest in a potential north/south or London/rural culture clash, and a preference for a 'soft' character-based drama'. The idea of a police drama by contrast was not as popular, and *Heartbeat* generally preferred human-interest storylines over policing as a result. Taken together these elements are instructive not just of the developmental process taking place in popular drama at the time, but – in commercial broadcasting at least – also in trying to marry the idea of audiences as consumers of programmes and products simultaneously, Nelson (Pg. 75) explaining that 'members of the audience – segmented into life-styles rather than taken *en masse* – are customers'.

Whilst clearly not a *Cathy Come Home* or a *Pennies from Heaven*, nevertheless as a consumer-led drama exercise, *Heartbeat* was a significant success. Running for almost two decades, while it may not have been 'demanding', it certainly had longevity and a clear sense of audience expectation in its development, and this alone makes it a useful study in relation to social class on television. As Cooke (2003, Pg. 164) notes, the audience research process identified three target demographics; 'East-End girls, 'lager-lads' and 'green mums', all of whom enjoyed different aspects of the programme. Developed from audience preferences, clear themes of predictable and safe pre-industrial rural 'Englishness' pervaded the show simultaneously with the inclusion of modern British 'heritage' in the form of 1960s soundtracks, and nostalgia for times-gone-by; not portrayed with the sense of loss of an industrial heritage as in *Boys from the Black Stuff*, but with a sense of affirmation and even aspiration. While clearly it would be a stretch to suggest that the show appealed to all aspects of the middle classes, nevertheless it was clearly aimed at the middle classes of north and south (set in the rural north but with Nick Berry the ex-London policeman in the lead role) as target demographics, and as such is instructive as a lens to view the way middle class viewers with identifiable 'life-style' (Nelson, 1997, Pg. 75) categorisations were seen by broadcasters of the time.

One of the pervading concepts associated with middle class expansion and mobility of the time was that of *lifestyle*, a term both en-vogue and pejorative, which Featherstone (1993, Pg. 81) identifies as being dissimilar to the previous attitudes of post-war mass consumption due to its underlying principle that all aspects of a person's 'lifestyle' are fundamentally linked through consumerism.

Within contemporary consumer culture [lifestyle] connotes individuality, self-expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pass-times, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer.

The notion of lifestyle, of defining one's identity and status through one's consumer choices, lends the expanding middle class of the late 1980s and 1990s an interesting and potentially partly unifying characteristic that we might call 'aspiration'. The promotion of and desire for more and better goods and products is not unique to the 1980s of course, but as Featherstone (1993, Pg.81) notes, 'changes in production techniques, market segmentation and consumer demand for a wider range of products, are often regarded as making possible greater choice'. Increased options came as greater numbers of people within the expanding middle class were able to access them, and as such we may be able to loosely describe the upwardly-mobile elements of the middle class of the period as perhaps an 'aspirant' class; a class who not only had more choice but also more capacity to access that choice.

By the 1990s then, at the time of Potter's MacTaggart address, an unusual and perhaps uniquely British change had taken place in the values and lifestyles of this 'aspirant' middle-class. Halsey (1995, Pg. 32) explains that a strong sense of class-identity is at the heart of British social structure, reinforced though a variety of hegemonic forms such as politics, property ownership and media, but that the terms relating to class are what he calls 'verbal deposits of a pre-industrial age'. As an example, when – during the period of industrialisation in the 1800s – the new 'capitalist class' was wealthy enough to become absorbed into the existing pre-industrial landed aristocracy, it embraced and embodied what were perceived as the identifiers of upper-class definition in terms of property and politics, with emergent Capitalists buying ancient country estates and titles.

In Halsey's view then, what occurs when a class of individuals gains a new level of economic prosperity and social movement as in the late 1980s, is that due to the prevailing hegemony of class structure, the perception is that it has progressed from one social class to another – from working-class to middle-class for example – and in doing so it embodies both the new term, and the perceived signifiers of that term.

Arguably, this is what occurred within the upwardly-mobile middle class of the late 1980s and 1990s, who with newfound economic prosperity and contemporary 'lifestyle' ideologies, began in some ways to aspire towards and embody perceived values and signifiers of a 'traditional' middle or even upper class. The mould for this could perhaps be partially attributable to the influence of Thatcher herself, as various commentators have attempted to position her political compass within the ideas of the past, Friedman controversially commenting that 'the thing that people do not recognise is that Margaret Thatcher is not in terms of belief a Tory. She is a nineteenth-century Liberal' (Beresford, 2016, Pg. 133). Whatever the realities of her political position however, Thatcherism as a concept was hallmarked by an ideological 'return' to perceived traditional values, commensurate with themes of heritage, tradition and nostalgia (albeit de-historicised and idealised) that were also part of the 'lifestyle' ambitions of some elements of the middle class in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Of course, as an overview of tastes and aspirations, this is perhaps simplistic. However, the relevance of the 'lifestyle' concept was that it was used by advertisers to separate target audiences and demographics, and therefore this approach also made the transition to TV drama commissioning (Nelson, 1997, Pg. 75), as a ratings/cost-cutting and therefore *consumer*-led approach to programme commissioning repositions the TV programme from being primarily a creative and expressive endeavour to being primarily a marketable commodity, and this in-turn requires that programmes reflect and match an audience demand.

One of the fundamental aspects of commissioning programmes based on audience demand is a variant of the original Reithian principles of the BBC; namely that 'few people know what they want' (Madge, 1989, Pg. 57). In this context, it might be more appropriate to say that 'people know what they like', insomuch as programming drawn from focus-groups and data analysis will always be based on what has come before. One consequence of this is an emphasis on genre, and its associated problems. As Edgar has noted:

Genre itself involves a transfer of power. It is the viewer saying to the producer, I possess key elements of this event before it's begun. Yes I want you to surprise me and most genres have space for a twist. But if you present me with a whodunnit in which there's no puzzle, or a romantic comedy in which the odd couple agreed it could

never have worked out anyway, you have broken faith with my expectation - which is also my demand. (2000, Pg. 75)

However, it may be that this very aspect of audience-led commissioning is inherently useful to us in our study of social class in television drama, simply because instead of depicting social class - and often one person's view at that in the form of 'author-led' drama - it becomes instead the manifestation of the expectations and demands of parts of a particular class group. It is class 'in action', rather than class 'in representation'. While this will necessarily be generalised and hegemonic simultaneously, nevertheless it can be instructive to use such dramas as lenses to view the perception and manifestation of class among a group or groups of individuals, based on their preferences and expectations.

One of the most notable and popular genres of the 1990s was *Period* and specifically *Costume* drama, the defining characteristic of which being primarily the adaptation of well-known, often romantic, classic fiction. That such expensive and lavishly-produced dramas might succeed in the era of cost-return commissioning is perhaps curious, however succeed they did, reaching a high-point around the middle of the 1990s with 1994/6 responsible for, amongst others, the BAFTA-winning *Persuasion*, *Sense & Sensibility*, *Middlemarch*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Hard Times*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, two versions of *Emma* and, of course, *Pride & Prejudice*.

There were a number of significant reasons for this, one of which was the notion of 'quality television' which – through the efforts of organisations such as the Campaign for Quality Television - achieved common parlance during the period of the 'Broadcasting in the 1990s: Competition, Choice and Quality' White Paper, and which directly relates to attempts by various broadcasters to target middle class audience demographics, Caughie for example describing 'quality' as 'a middle-brow term' (2000, Pg. 210). 'Quality' of course is difficult to define, but by any definition, Costume drama fitted the bill in terms of 'highbrow' culture, production values, overseas exportability and ratings, something that was apparent to broadcasters after the early 1980s successes of *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984).

Costume drama in the 1990s is a genre which became something of an all round success; serial dramas that fulfilled broadcasters' obligations to provide high-quality

television, with excellent opportunities both for funding from, and sales to, overseas markets (*Pride & Prejudice* for example being part-funded by the US A&E network) and popular with various audience demographics. The BBC 1995-96 Annual Report enthuses that *Pride & Prejudice* ‘captivated the nation in a way that few other productions have’ (BBC, 1996) and indeed the programme’s average 10m viewers per week would point to the validity of the statement.

As an example of the way in which consumer-led drama can be used to highlight contemporary discussions of social class, Costume drama is excellent. Given that film and television are – according to Caughie – ‘tradeable goods’ (2000, Pg.208), the genre offers what he calls ‘marketable images’ of a reassuringly nostalgic, safe and predictable England, where depictions of social class and hierarchies are settled and unquestionable. Perhaps not surprisingly, the abbreviated and de-historicised depictions of an historical England, well-suited to an overseas audience, also dovetailed easily with the Lifestyle aims of an ‘aspirant’ middle-class, their own signifiers of wealth and status based on perceived, established class structures.

That depictions of the England of Austen and Brontë were in-keeping with core tenets of Thatcherism – a strongly class-defined, hard working populace based on family over society – is understandable. What is interesting from a perspective of social class analysis is that in addition to being attractive to broadcasters for reasons of sales and quality, the genre - which had its first successes in the pre-deregulation early 1980s – boomed in popularity after the move toward audience-led commissioning. The importance of this cannot be overstated; these were not programmes produced in isolation with the subsequent ratings successes a hoped-for outcome as might have occurred in previous decades. They were risk-management, consumer-focused exercises in which target audiences were specifically requesting more of the same, and which justified their often very high production costs.

The notion of including often quite varied period titles under one genre introduces the problem raised by Edgar regarding audience expectation and demand. Much has been written about the way in which television adaptation of classic literature often overlooks, or finds impossible to accurately render, the implicit ironies and social comment of the original texts. In terms of *Pride & Prejudice*, Caughie (2000, Pg. 217) notes that ‘Jane Austen’s gentle but precise irony, which put a pointed stick in the eye

of the marriage trade and disposal of women, is travestied as a romance in pretty frocks and heaving bosoms’.

Whether we agree with Caughie’s ‘travesty’ – *Pride & Prejudice* arguably being an excellent example of an admirable approach to revisiting classic literature on the small screen, problems in ‘translation’ simply a necessary consequence of adapting a text between both historical periods and media forms - we may still be able to infer interesting conclusions about the audiences of Costume drama in the 1990s. The high-quality associations and perceived cultural value of classic literature were popular, however audiences seemingly wanted these pieces to be modernised and simplified, with any original comment on class, society and culture a potentially unwelcome distraction from more popular and desired themes of stability, heritage and romance. Audiences were perhaps desirous of harnessing the perceived cultural value of well-known titles to dovetail with contemporary values and ideologies, by re-tasking the work to themes more commensurate with the audience’s aims. The introduction of Mr Darcy’s lake swim in *Pride & Prejudice* for example, not featured in the original text, is a clear instance of this. The interchangeability of the original text and the – often significantly dissimilar – television adaptation then, is consequently of marked significance in terms of what audiences wanted from adaptations of classic literature.

The emphasis thus far on consumer-led commissioning might suggest that there were no instances of author-led programmes that might contribute to discussions of social class in 1990s drama. However one of the most controversial and boundary-pushing dramas of the era, *Queer as Folk* (1999), arguably stemmed from a combination of writer-centred approach and consumer-demand. Perhaps a more dissimilar series to the ‘Costume’ genre could not be imagined, and yet as a high-quality, critically-acclaimed and popular drama, it is perhaps similarly instructive to a discussion of social class and television drama.

After the 1990 Broadcasting Act, control of Channel 4 was taken over by the new Channel 4 Television Corporation, which heralded a change in direction toward targeting more alternative aspects of the ‘mainstream’.

During the latter half of the 1990s, Channel 4 as a fully fledged commercial company selling its own advertising sought to capitalise on its ‘alternative’ image in a branding

exercise designed to attract youthful and affluent audiences to its platform of channels. (Arthurs, 2004, Pg. 123)

Prior to the 2003 Communications Act, which revised Channel 4's public service remit, the channel's approach was decidedly more 'populist'. During this period, in 1999, *Queer as Folk* was broadcast. In his later wrangles about payment, Russell T. Davies dismissed claims from some in Channel 4's Executive that the idea for the drama had originated at the channel. In a 2001 *Guardian* interview, he commented that 'Channel 4's then drama serials commissioner, Catriona McKenzie, had seen something I had written and said she thought I wrote 'gay' well. But Channel 4 originally wanted a series about four gay men in a flat and I said no'. (Deans, 2001)

What is instructive about Davies' statement is his confirmation that the channel *did* approach him with an idea for a drama series about gay men, even if he turned down the initial concept. Given Channel 4's more 'populist' approach at the time, this may well have been in response to an identified target audience and based on demand. While Cooke (2003, Pg. 190) describes the series as 'a reaffirmation of the original radical remit of the channel, at a time when it was beginning to seem that the channel's 'alternative' remit had been abandoned', the involvement of newly appointed Channel 4 Head of Drama Gub Neal and Catriona McKenzie – formerly Drama Executives at Granada – suggests risk-management, as part of the framework of executive control outlined earlier, would also be important. What is clear is that the final, broadcast series *Queer as Folk* exceeded Channel 4's expectations with over 4 million viewers, proving an appetite for programming dealing with homosexual lives and issues among audiences. While this success can naturally be attributed to the brilliance of Davies' writing and storytelling - and the series is a writer-led drama in the true sense of the term – it is nevertheless the case that the success of the show illustrates that there was an audience – identified by the channel - ready to receive it at that time.

In terms of its relation to social class, *Queer as Folk* provides a new perspective on the consequences of the consumer-led commissioning model and push for ratings. For all its faults, the sheer fact that the aim of this approach was increased audience figures meant that it necessarily attempted to factor in perspectives of a wider range of audiences, who might previously have been underrepresented and even overlooked in popular drama. Indeed, when we consider the implicit social hierarchies present in

notions of ‘class’ it is possible to suggest that the aim of increased audience figures resulted in the targeting of new and previously unrepresented *classes* within society, and *Queer as Folk*’s stylised interpretation of the late-nineties Manchester gay scene perhaps exemplifies this. The vibrant and affluent characters can, for the most-part, be clearly identified as belonging to an ‘aspirant’ middle class, but due to their sexuality they also belong to an aspect of that class previously not seen on British screens. Because the cost-return commissioning model prioritised increased audience numbers - suggesting increased audience perspectives – so did the breadth of programming themes and the depiction of new social classes expand. Conversely, because class-exploration prior to the 1990s ‘watershed’ was writer-centred, it could be said to have been somewhat inherently reflective of an existing class structure. Consequently, without the cost/return based, consumer-led commissioning of the 1990s, dramas like *Queer as Folk* could potentially have taken longer to reach British screens.

Throughout this essay, we have been working with one fundamental underlying premise, which is that consumer-led commissioning is necessarily accurate. However, audience research methods such as focus-groups and ethnography studies have their critics, and only so much can be inferred from viewing figures. Indeed, Rona Fairhead’s rather public surprise, on her arrival at the BBC Trust in 2014, that the BBC’s audience data was in her view significantly lacking (Fairhead, 2015), is just one example of how even contemporary television often struggles to discover and understand the demands of its audience demographics, at least in comparison with data-set commissioning models such as Netflix. Whether the audience research of the time is strong enough to justify some of the conclusions about audience demands and aspirations made in this essay is, however, of secondary importance to the main fact that the 1990s was undeniably a ‘watershed’ between the way programmes *were* commissioned, and the model that we recognise today. That the programmes discussed here were the product of a cost/return commissioning strategy with its roots in deregulation is convincing. Theoretically then, a popular example of a ‘consumer-led’ programming model ought to be able to ‘take the pulse of the nation’ simply by its very existence, but the fact that these programmes are dramatic fiction also says something more. Unlike Entertainment programmes for example, drama doesn’t simply meet a demand, it is able to comment on and provide examples *of* that demand, and for this

reason the idea that popular audience-led drama necessarily provides an instructive comment on the nature of its audience continues to be persuasive.

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