TV Times: Archive, Mood, Media
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Abstract: Today, television is spreading centrifugally: it no longer requires a broadcasting schedule nor the furniture traditionally associated with it (the ‘box’ in the corner of the front room). In this age of Television-after-TV one phenomenon that is particularly important is the increasing access and ease of access to the televisual past. This article investigates (sometimes in a speculative manner) how these changes are forming and transforming popular historical consciousness: the ordinary sense that we have of living at a particular moment that is connected with and disconnected from what came before.

* In this essay I address the contemporary historical nature of television, and by extension the historical experience (or a crucial part of that experience) of a television-viewing subject. I am specifically interested in the nature of historical experience and historical consciousness within a mediascape where ‘television’ (to use what might be an increasingly vague term) has multiplied, migrated, and is exerting an extensive but elusive hold on the popular historical imagination. Rather than be lured by the seductions of the End-of-Television I want to recognise the longer history of television as a dynamic form that has always extended beyond what was recognisable as broadcast TV. By calling YouTube and computer games, as well as DVDs and online streaming, televisual, I want to make a polemic point about the longue durée of discontinuity and continuity of the televisual as a dynamic cultural form.

In addressing popular historical consciousness I’m less concerned with historical content than with the way TV provides a temporal landscape made up of ‘nows’ and ‘thens’ that we can use to measure and locate ourselves as historical subjects. My initial sense is that ‘now-ness’ must have altered to some degree in an era when many of us regularly access breaking news on our mobile phones, but also frequently watch old sitcoms on a television or television-equivalent and scour the internet for half-remembered kids’ shows and Top of the Pops performances. Doesn’t this mean the past will act on the future and the present in a different way now than it did, say, forty years ago when television in Britain was made up of only three channels and shut down for the night around midnight? There is an old pun that proclaims in mournful tones: ‘nostalgia just isn’t what it used to be’. Perhaps today we need to think this through more seriously: perhaps the work of nostalgia is taking
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new directions and casting new phenomenal experiences into the centre of television’s actuality.² Of course, to attempt to tackle the nature of temporal experience and its historical modes in today’s mediascape is far too ambitious for a short essay. Instead I want to point to three aspects of television that could begin to clarify something of the way that Television-after-TV, to cite a phrase,³ might impact on the condition of possibility for popular memory and for the presence of the historical within the ‘now’ of contemporary media. The first is the way that television uses television (news reports, old programmes and formats, advertising, and so on) to show and to tell the past. Television’s use of television to conjure the historicity of the past (the past’s peculiar mode of being in the present) is, I want to suggest, a crucial characteristic of its current cultural form. The second is the way an expanded condition of television (one that includes on-demand services and YouTube, for instance) has altered the archival condition of TV, making it as much a repository of memory-forms as a transmitter of ‘live’ broadcasts. Indeed, if we follow the logic of various media (or medium) theorists, then TV’s storage capacities (accessible in ways that were still undreamt a little more than a decade ago) would be its primary condition. My final concern is to suggest how this condition could inform the way that nostalgia and its various moods is figured as a deep structure of television. My working understanding of nostalgia is that it constitutes an affective barb that accompanies our commerce with the past: the moods of loss and longing it generates are politically and culturally varied. To explore this, I end up briefly considering the television series Life on Mars (BBC 2006–07). Crucially, this drama, which time-travels its audience back to 1973, figures a 1973 that is primarily fabricated out of television’s past, rather than out of a social and economic past. Its nostalgic mode is as much about a loss of, and longing for, the present, as it is about a mourning for a past characterised by ‘muscular’ policing, routine sexism, racism and homophobia. In its time travel form it is a 1973 nostalgia for a future that is the viewer’s present.

Nineteen seventy-three, it turns out, is also the year that Raymond Williams wrote his book Television: Technology and Cultural Form.⁴ It is in Miami in 1973 where Williams, still ‘dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner’, starts watching a movie on TV, only to get so confused by the number of commercial interruptions, as well as trailers for two films to be broadcast later in the week, that he can’t any longer make out what is proper to the crime movie he thinks he is watching. He recognises that he hasn’t watched a movie, but has experienced ‘a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings’.⁵ ‘Flow’, in this particular instance, is the ceaseless rendering of juxtaposed temporal and geographical realms: ‘a crime scene in San Francisco’, ‘deodorant and cereal commercials’, ‘a romance in Paris’ and ‘the eruption of a prehistoric monster who laid waste
New York’. What is rendered in this Miami hotel room is the simultaneity (if we can talk of simultaneity for a time-based medium) of different times and places as a constant, immediate present. Williams was not trying to sell us a version of ‘flow’ that smoothed out the jumpy conflictual experience of TV, but a gestalt of TV where the ruptures, interruption, sudden jolts, as well as the smooth continuities, are a set of complex experiential characteristics.

What this does to the nature of historical experience is not Williams’ most pressing concern, but this question is taken up a few years later by Susan Barrowclough and Raphael Samuel. Recognising that a large proportion of television’s output has a temporal and historical dimension (from old movies and programmed repeats to the figuring of history in drama, popular social history, science programmes, and so on) Barrowclough and Samuel draw attention to the heterogeneity of TV’s historical consciousness. Commenting on the range of temporal velocities that TV offers, they write:

In one register [TV] offers us a past that is completely static, a time when family was the backbone of society, when ‘old-fashioned’ virtues were unquestioned and everyone knew their place, an indeterminate past, a retrospective haven of stability to which we can escape from the disorders of the present. In another all is movement, discovery and innovation and we are whirled about in an exciting kaleidoscope of change. In a third the past is presented as a chamber of horrors, a sequence of catastrophic events – revolutions, depressions, violence and poverty – from which we can count ourselves fortunate to have escaped. In the same contradictory way the past and the present can be interchanged at the push of a button. This was the year before Channel 4 went on air, when the ‘push of a button’ was still limited to a choice of three options (four if we take account of, as we should do, the ‘on-off’ button).

Writing a year before YouTube was created, Bill Schwarz takes up some of these themes to push the point that television’s ‘media time’ impinges constitutionally on the experience of ‘historical time’ in ways that ‘scramble’ it, but that are not ‘indeterminate’ or ‘outside historical time’. Alert to the sensitivities of Fernand Braudel’s conception of the multiple durations of historical time (roughly put: event-time, social-time, and the longue durée of geo-time) Schwarz invites critical scholars to be concerned with television’s multiple figurings of temporality in relationship to other forms of rendering historical time; to be attuned to a world where television is recognised as a ‘critical constituent of our temporal world’. It is to such an invitation that this essay is a provisional reply.
Television’s Historicity

In the last decade or two it has become fairly common to see dramas with a period setting of the recent past signal pastness, not just through scenic details (‘vintage’ cars, wallpaper and the like), but via a television referent. For instance, both Our Friends in the North (BBC 1996) and White Heat (BBC 2012), which both start out by picturing the mid-1960s, show us people watching the variety programme The Black and White Minstrel Show (BBC 1958–78). Historical distance is performed by showing something that seems not simply outmoded (singers and dancers performing ‘blackface’ music hall) but also offensive to present-day sensibilities. This is television using television to generate historicity. Temporal distance – the extent to which the ‘past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’, so to cite11 – is now (on television at least) as much about the diction of presenters, the production values of dramas and the landscape of media permissibility (what counts as good and bad taste; allowable and disallowable language and images; etc.) as it is about haircuts, manners and transport options. Or at least the mediated and the remembered, the televised and the experienced, are now inextricably entangled.

This sense of historicity – of television as a contemporary form that pictures even the most recent past as fundamentally distant – has perhaps been a constant aspect of television’s operations. Speaking in 1986, Williams could describe a long-running drama from the 1970s (Upstairs, Downstairs BBC 1971–75) that showed the lives of rich and well-connected Edwardians and their lowly servants, as inviting people to watch ‘not in order to say that this is a past which connects with our present, but almost inevitably in the manner of some of the presentations, that this is a past which doesn’t connect with our present – “Oh, gosh, what clothes we wore then!” and that sort of thing’.12 The fact that Upstairs, Downstairs was revived as a new show in 2010 gets me nearer to the phenomenal world of TV that I want to think about, a world that constantly generates multiple temporalities. By reviving Upstairs, Downstairs, should we connect this programme’s historicity to the Edwardian period (its most obvious referent) or see it as (simultaneously) referring to the 1970s and a much-loved TV show? Of course, this will depend on the viewer’s own historical consciousness and whether or not the 1970s version of the programme is part of their televisual memory. Alternatively the ‘original’ show and its rehash are both available, for a price, to buy as DVDs or, for free, in fragmented form on YouTube.

To offer a sense of the 1960s by picturing for us a vision of the televisual world as constituted by families watching blackface minstrelsy is not to clarify history but to submerge it within what Ernst Bloch called ‘non-synchronous simultaneity’: the sense that the contemporary is made up of non-synchronous
times. Bloch’s interest in the way that the non-synchronous (die [Un-]gleichzeitigkeit) constituted contemporaneity was directed at an analysis of the growth of National Socialism in Germany and the way that the atavistic and the futuristic could be lived simultaneously. The Black and White Minstrel Show was ‘of’ the 1960s and 1970s inasmuch as it was a nostalgic representation for a form of ‘variety’ that had a historical dimension, though not represented as historical in the same way as Upstairs, Downstairs. Any analysis of television’s temporal phenomenology would want to be attentive to the multiple figuring of nostalgia as something fundamental to the historical consciousness (and unconsciousness) of TV. To figure historical distance by referring to The Black and White Minstrel Show is to show us a nostalgia that is no longer available. If this too has a nostalgic tone, then it is one that is doubly coded as nostalgia: we are placed as nostalgic for a form of nostalgia that has now passed.

The transformation and double-coding of nostalgia might well account for the durability of some of its forms. Take, for example, a BBC TV show I remember from my childhood: The Good Old Days, which ran for thirty years from 1953. Its launch coincides with the establishment of television in Britain as a truly mass-medium; its end is marked by the birth of Channel 4 and the increasing deregulation of British TV and the reneging of TV’s Reithian heritage. If viewers in the 1950s were invited to feel the warm glow of nostalgia for the music hall (the show was filmed at Leeds City Variety in front of a live audience dressed, like the acts they were watching, in Victorian and Edwardian clothing), then by the 1980s, nostalgia is multiplied inasmuch as viewers were watching a 1950s format referring to the entertainments of the 1880s. To add to the complications, by the 1980s the nostalgic coding is also filtered through the generational differences of the audience, some of whom might be watching for the first time, others who had watched the show since the 1950s.

Nostalgia as a mode and mood can be found in the content of many television dramas: the endless supply of costume dramas that often transform social realism into affirmative nostalgia; the ‘best of’ shows that trawl through the archives to show us why ‘we love the 1970s’ or what the best sitcoms of all time were. But nostalgia might also account for some of the formal arrangements of television that we are witnessing today: for instance, the raft of channels now dedicated to nothing but reruns; Yesterday, Watch, Comedy Central, Dave, and so on. Dave employs a pun to designate its one-hour delayed channel: Dave Ja Vu. Of course for all these channels and for much of the schedules elsewhere, it is all déjà vu. What does such relentless replaying of programmes do to popular memory? Does the present-ness of TV eradicate the sense of past-ness to reruns of Dad’s Army (BBC 1968–77)? Or does it offer a complex of time that embroils a sense of the early 1940s (when the
show is set) with the 1970s (when the majority of the show was produced
and first shown) with the current moment when the show is being rerun, re-
watched, or watched for the first time?
The current ‘archival’ scene of television suggests that John Ellis’
understanding that old television programmes discourage nostalgia would need
some adjusting. Ellis usefully points at the fact that often our sentimental desire
for the programmes of our youth jars with the actuality of the programmes
and their out-dated production values. Where we might go in search of
depribly affective resonance, we find instead wobbly studio sets and poor
presenting skills. Instead, what old television does give us, according to Ellis,
is ‘an unexpectedly vivid insight into what it felt like to be alive in a particular
moment’.\textsuperscript{15} TV times move fast, and in the intervening years between Ellis’
book and now (2013) we can see that it is precisely the wobbly sets and poor
presenting skills (the forms rather than the content) that are often the object
of nostalgic desire.
The ‘scrambling’ of historical time by television isn’t all backward facing; or
rather television’s historical consciousness is not only concerned with a historical
past that is over, but with the future of the present as historical testimony.
This is to say that television’s historical consciousness isn’t only concerned
with the production of hindsight and recollection, but is also anticipatory. The
production of the present and the future as inevitable and unavoidable rather
than as contingent and ideological is the labour of turning history into nature.\textsuperscript{16}
Nowhere has this been done more successfully than in rendering the late 1970s
as a scene of endless strikes and power cuts to be followed by the seemingly
unavoidable dismantling of union power under Thatcherism.\textsuperscript{17} No televisual
account of the late 1970s in Britain is ‘possible’ (or imaginable) in our present
that isn’t replete with images of Thatcher and of streets strewn with piles of
rubbish, picket lines as some inevitable consequence of union power. And this
is because television in the late 1970s was producing such images as historical
documentation of the present for the future. The idea that, according to the
New Economics Foundation, the mid to late 1970s was a period of relative
contentment and prosperity, amounts to little when the televisual iconography
of contentment and prosperity is missing.\textsuperscript{18} Barrowclough and Samuel write
that, ‘another problem that the use of these [filmic, televisual] “traces” of the
past raises is the often unbalanced importance they are given in relation to the
absent traces’.\textsuperscript{19} If television is, to a large extent, the receptacle of popular
and collective memory, then it can only remember what has been recorded
as memorable in the first place. In the television era what counts as historical
evidence is filmic evidence. This emphasis has shifted the dominant practices
of rendering pre-television history: instead of making-do with the evidence
that exists (manuscripts, illustrations, and so on) television now routinely

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enacts history as televisual event through the practice of what television production companies call ‘living history’. Television historians now dress as eighteenth-century milkmaids and churn butter by hand: archaeologists now wear mediaeval garb as they forge the iron for wheel-rims.

This sense of television as temporal registration of the past, and of the present as something that will exist as the past for the future, has become a characteristic of television as it has become an organ, even the organ, of record. In the first decades of television most of what was broadcast was treated as ephemera and subsequently disposed of: as it became a historical form, broadcasting was archived. Now, however, we have entered a period where this characteristic needs to be seen as its central operational activity. And the conditions for recognising it as such lead some to see the present state of the media landscape as post-televisual – as if the massive distribution and dissemination of television, and the rendering of most time-based visual media (from movies to amateur video) as televisual, amounts to its demise. Nowhere is this clearer than in the form of on-demand services, new channels dedicated to showing re-runs and the presence of YouTube. The recognition of TV as a distributed archive is crucial for recognising its condition as temporal (un)consciousness.

**Television as Historical Archive**

In that endless game of distinguishing which features separate humankind from its animal kin, various pleas have been made for language and for tools as characterising the difference that makes the human a ‘special’ kind of animal. Humankind, though, turns out not to be the only tool-user around; and language in various senses is hardly confined to human language. Perhaps philosophy might have more luck by claiming that human beings are characteristically archival animals. This, at any rate, might be the logical position if we follow media-technology theorists such as Vilém Flusser and Bernard Stiegler. For Flusser, ‘the transfer of acquired information from one generation to another is an essential aspect of human communication, a general characteristic of humankind: man is an animal that has discovered certain tricks for the purpose of storing acquired information’. We might immediately think of national archives, population databases, museums and libraries, but we could now also think of something like YouTube as the most insistent storage situation of television. Flusser’s understanding of storage-communication is informed by cybernetics, and the activity of archiving communication is seen as fundamentally unnatural, deeply human and existentially crucial. If cybernetics relies on the fundamental principle of entropy (the natural condition of all life,
and the promise of its end), then storing and sorting communications is a fruitless negentropic (negatively entropic) activity, brought about as much by an existential fear of death as it is by any species benefit.

Be that as it may, the storage of information and communication in both documents and tools can also be seen as a fundamental exteriorisation of human memory. This is particularly true in the case of machine-tools and technologies: nothing remembers how to cut things quite as well as a knife.

For Stiegler, tool forms are not just useful items that perform a function, they are the externalisation of the memory of their function for a collectivity of tool-users and the generations of tool-users that follow them (unconsciously communicating memory across generations so that we don’t have to). But for Stiegler the current situation of massive externalisation of cultural memory into storage machines ironically brings with it an amnesia for human users that produces powerlessness:

It is clear that the exteriorization of memory, and the resulting loss of memory and knowledge that Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus*, is experienced today in our daily lives, in all the aspects of our existence, and more and more often, in our feeling of powerlessness, if not impotence. And it is experienced, remarkably, at the exact moment when the extraordinary mnesic power of digital networks makes us all the more attuned to the immensity of human memory, which seems to have become infinitely reactivatable and accessible.21

Stiegler’s words can be seen as a synoptic abstraction of what many of the key critical writers around cultural memory debates have been suggesting for the last twenty years. For writers like Andreas Huyssen, the energy that has gone into archiving and displaying the past hasn’t so much contributed to historical understanding as established the foundations for a ‘culture of amnesia’.22

In this sense, the archive isn’t a source of wisdom because it is a growing repository for understanding: rather it is repository given over to repetitions, to incoherent jumps of thought, to random raids of bits of the past. The archive, then, suffers from a form of dementia: it is lost to itself, unthreaded and without overarching narrative form.

Some of the most repeated stories around modern television connect it to repetition. Writing in 1990, in the ‘prologue’ as the editor to an important collection of essays about television, Patricia Mellencamp could look back on her 1950s childhood and remember that ‘after the Monday night broadcast of *I Love Lucy* [CBS 1951–60], with “Hound Dog” blaring from the radio, I drove to McDonald’s, then a new teenage drive-in. ‘Today’ she can ‘watch Lucy cavort daily at 10.30 in the morning’ and ‘watch my bootlegged tape of Elvis’s
50s TV stints'. Mellencamp’s media consumption is made possible by cheap videotape technologies and the economic benefits for television networks of endlessly recycling old TV. *I Love Lucy* becomes a synecdoche for television’s propensity for repetition.

In the same volume, Meaghan Morris retells the joke about *I Love Lucy* in the film *Crocodile Dundee*. Mick ‘Crocodile’ Dundee has been taken from the wild outback of Australia to intensely urbanised and sophisticated Manhattan. The journalist who ‘found’ him, Sue Charlton, thinks she can impress Mick with his hotel’s modern luxuries, particularly the television. Mick is unimpressed: he tells her, ‘It’s OK, I’ve seen it before’. For Sue, this is a clear indication of Mick’s backwardness: silly man, she thinks, TV isn’t a one hit deal, a novelty item to experience and move on; it’s a habit, a world, a companion. Sue turns on the TV and we see Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*. ‘Yep’, says Mick, ‘that’s what I’ve seen’. Today, that joke might require swapping *I Love Lucy* for something like *Friends*. But the joke still stands for the moment at least.

What seems like a realm of excessive choice (hundreds of channels, 24 hour availability and endless access to old TV) is also experienced as a dearth of possibilities, a constant recycling of programmes and formats. The nostalgia for a certain kind of nostalgia is also a nostalgia for a lost innocence when the endless repeatability of television was not yet finally realised. Nostalgia is a mood that saturates television and feeds on its repetitive pathology, a pathology caused in part by the exponential rise in forms of delivery and distribution and the concomitant decrease in material production. As television expands in relation to platforms, so it contracts in the diversity of its textual forms, witness the enormous resources that go into the production of formats and series. We live in a time where the one-off drama or the completed drama mini-series is a rarity: it is much more likely that you are in series 7, episode 8 of *Breaking Bad* or *Shameless*.

Most of the time nostalgia is the precondition of television’s scrutiny of the past – its sentimental mood. But sometimes it is also the object of its scrutiny. Such a case could be made for *Life on Mars* – a series that explored the nostalgic potential of old TV not just as a comfortingly sentimental affect, but also as an uncanny charge that contradictorily seems to work as an alibi for the present at the same time as rendering the present as precarious.

‘It’s 1973, Almost Dinner Time and I’m Having Hoops’: Television’s Nostalgic Moods

*Life on Mars* takes its title from the David Bowie song that got to number three in the pop charts in 1973 (from the 1971 album *Hunky Dory*). The series is
steeped in popular cultural references from pop music, fashion and popular technology, but its most insistent reference is to 1970s television. The narrative concerns a present-day (2006) police officer (Sam Tyler, played by John Simm) who is hit by a car while investigating a particularly violent murderer. When Tyler regains consciousness he finds himself on a piece of waste-ground surrounded by decaying industrial buildings. We are in Manchester (a billboard shows us that this will be the place where they will build a flyover: Manchester’s ‘highway in the sky’). We start to realise we are no longer in the present day. Tyler’s clothes have changed: gone is the designer suit to be replaced by brown flared trousers, leather jacket, Chelsea-boots, and so on. Just before he was hit by the car Tyler was listening to the song ‘Life on Mars’ on an iPod played through the car’s stereo; when he ‘awakes’ the sound is emanating from an eight-track cartridge player (a forerunner to the cassette tape player).

*Life on Mars* is, I think, both symptom and diagnosis of the archival conditions of television. In many respects it is unusual in its complex time-travelling form, and its use of old television clips doesn’t follow the way that they are mostly used on TV (as a sort of ‘reality effect’). Yet *Life on Mars* plays out some of the key aspects of our present cultural moment where television’s past is also our past in a way that is fundamental and difficult, that we are struggling and puzzling to deal with.

There isn’t the space here to do more than point to some of the ingredients of how it figures 1973 in its relation to 2006. In the first episode, we see Tyler trying to get to grips with his new historical context. To start with, he sees it as a hugely elaborate joke organised by colleagues. To his new police colleagues Tyler asks sarcastically, ‘OK surprise me, what year is it supposed to be?’ His question is answered by Detective Chief Inspector Gene Hunt who, after punching Tyler a couple of times, says, ‘It’s 1973, almost dinner time and I’m having hoops’. The reference is to a once popular and much-advertised food item – tinned spaghetti hoops in tomato sauce, usually served on toast. The work of historical distance is performed for a knowing viewer who might well have enjoyed a childhood of tinned spaghetti hoops: for the more aspirational Tyler tinned spaghetti is clearly ‘now’ (in 2006) a culinary anathema. In class terms, 1973 Manchester is presented as a haven of male working-class ‘structures of feeling’: a large industrial workforce and a vibrant leisure culture built around the ubiquitous pub.

Tyler is seen struggling with what is happening to him: ‘I was four in 1973’ he bemoans, ‘I had an accident and I woke up 33 years in the past. Now that either makes me err, a time-traveller, or a lunatic or, I’m lying in a hospital bed in 2006 and none of this is real’. Right from the first episode we are made to understand that the most logical explanation for what we are witnessing is a protracted set of dream sequences that neatly follow the genre of the
TV cop show in its 1970s guise. The narrative we are following, then, is from within Tyler’s unconscious. If dream material is classically made up of the ‘day’s residue’ and past memories, then the residues and memories of Life on Mars are primarily televisual. This sense that a person’s unconscious might be inhabited by television and other popular culture forms is crucial to Life on Mars, and is signalled from the beginning with the choice of the titular song which includes the lyrics: ‘But the film is a sadd’ning bore, for she’s lived it ten times or more.’ A film might have been watched a number of times, but here there is a much more constitutional understanding of media as lived experience, as constituting our experience not just of the present but also of the past. Such a figuring of popular memory as the televisual unconscious requires TV to be recognised as a storage media in the way that Flusser and Stiegler suggest: it is collective memory externalised; it is constitutional of our intimate sense of lived temporality; and it is operationally amnesic (what is not contained as televisual trace, evaporates).

The past that Tyler conjures up is ‘close’ to his own present (he is still working in the same police station as he ‘was’ in 2006) but this only increases its historical distance. Of course Tyler is a fictional detective in 2006 so when he ‘goes back’ to 1973 it makes sense that he returns to the genre’s earlier incarnations. The televisual world of 1973 in Life on Mars most closely resembles the world of The Sweeney (Thames Television 1975–78); a tough, macho-cop show that shifted the genre away from the more comforting images of police life shown in dramas such as Z-Cars (BBC 1962–78). In the 1970s, The Sweeney was praised and criticised for its purported realism: with Life on Mars tragedy is replayed as farce and we recognise the no-nonsense ‘gov’ (Gene Hunt) as a quotation of genre types (for instance the John Thaw character – Jack Regan – in The Sweeney). Television not only provides the temporal substance of Life on Mars, it also provides the conduit to Tyler’s present: in his bedsit he watches TV, often falling asleep, and awakes to witness his doctors talking to him and about him in the guise of TV presenters (an Open University lecturer, for instance) or children’s television characters (mainly from the late 1960s – Camberwick Green, Trumpton, and so on). Just like the unconscious, TV plays fast-and-loose with any strict sense of temporal sequencing.

There are moments of critical tension in this elongated flashback format: for instance, in the third episode of the first series, where Tyler and Hunt investigate a stabbing in a textile mill, Tyler realises he is in the building where he lives in 2006 – a trendy ‘loft’ development in Manchester’s former industrial sector. Issues around gentrification and class, immigration and colonialism, sexuality and gender are all tackled in classical liberal discursive ways: sympathy is produced for those victimised by the processes being shown, but no explanatory framework is offered that could narrativise their
causes. The programme works by inserting the sensibilities of 2006 into the
world (the media world as much as the ‘real’ world) of 1973 and watches as
they rub against each other, demonstrating failings and hubris within both
temporalities. The comfort for liberals is to show how far progressive identity
politics and anti-corruption has taken us: we are thrown into a world where
institutionalised sexism and homophobia are taken for granted; where racism
is glaringly banal; and where corruption and violence are the foundations of
the police force. But for those conservatives who think that the liberal-rot set
in somewhere in the 1960s and who think that feminism was the cause of all
sorts of destructive impulses, there is also lots to be nostalgic about: not least
the figure of Gene Hunt (played by Philip Glenister), the ‘hard-nosed’ DCI,
for whom women are ‘birds’, beating up suspects a daily occurrence and for
whom villains are villains who deserve to be locked up, whether the evidence
is there or not.

*Life on Mars*, rather than being about the past (as such), shows us the future
being written through the use of TV times. Can’t we see the alibi for a more
ruthless capitalism and a more deregulated and brutal policing to accompany
it, inscribed, not in the picturing of 1973 as an archive of children’s TV
programmes or adult cop shows, but in the rendering of the early twenty-first
century (as embodied by Sam Tyler) as obsessed with the rules of political
correctness and health and safety? Nostalgia is always about the uses of the
past for the present and the future: to see the early twenty-first century as
a bureaucratic sensibility, where ‘common sense’ has been stymied and
undermined by ‘political correctness’ and ‘health and safety’ (both ‘gone mad’
as the media reflex might have it) is to see a future as already more barbaric.
*Life on Mars* might occasionally figure this as a warning, but it also performs it
as a promise.

But this is to read it as a loving hymn to 1970s revivalism. Seen as a more
complex figuring of TV times it confronts the comforts of its main narrative
conventions (borrowed loosely from 1970s cop shows) with the more televisual-
actuality of clips of 1970s TV (Open University TV, *Trumpton*, the test-card, and
so on) which are rendered not as comforting but as deeply uncanny conduits
of time. It is these frightening (for Tyler and for us) sequences that secure
Tyler in the past, even though it is through them that we get to the present
that is never simply ‘present’. If this TV is Tyler’s unconscious (and this is the
most plausible reading) then Tyler is overcome by reminiscence (a pathological
condition, a cultural melancholic neurotically repeating the past). He, and
perhaps we, are haunted by old TV, by endless TV clips showing rubbish piling
up in the streets in 1978, or a teary old Margaret Thatcher leaving Downing
Street in 1990. Here *his* nostalgia isn’t for the past but for the present which he
can’t access and which is given a new precariousness. This loosens the present
from its inevitability but refuses to replace it with something else (there is no utopian promise here).

As an allegory of life in an era of Television-after-TV, *Life on Mars* figures us as melancholics endlessly repeating narrative forms inherited from the past. If there is hope here it comes not from the comforts of nostalgia in its sentimental mood, but in its uncanny ability to make the present more precarious (other futures, so to say, are also available). Is it possible to imagine a cultural politics that could capitalise on the uncanny potential within TV’s archival condition, to shake the present loose from its teleological moorings? And how would such a politics inoculate itself against the repetitious drive of its cultural pathology? *Life on Mars* doesn’t show us how to do this but it does figure something of the phenomenal problem we are facing.

**Notes**

1. My comic of choice in the late 1960s was *TV Comic* where favourite TV shows were rendered as strip cartoons.
4. The book was first published in 1974 and all the analyses of programming and television ‘flow’ are from March and June 1973.
This double coding is akin to that experienced with kitsch, whereby we are sentimental at one remove. See Celeste Olalquiaga, The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience (London: Bloomsbury, 1999).


This is, for Barthes, the ‘very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature’. Roland Barthes, Mythologies (London: Granada, 1973), 129.


Thomas, “Bound in by History”, 263. And of course we ‘know’ that the 1980s were more prosperous because we all know the televiral images of yuppies, of young city traders with their huge mobile phones and expensive lifestyles.


