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Kristyn Gorton and Joanne Garde-Hansen

Remembering British Television: Audience, Archive and Industry

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It was 95 years ago, in January 1926, that John Logie Baird first showed what he called 'true television' for the first time at his laboratories in Soho, London. By 1935, Germany had launched a television service and the following year, Britain did likewise. Television in the 1920s was completely different from what we understand it to be now – it was in its experimental phase, not yet emerged from the laboratory (although it did not take long to make the move to the studio). Its purpose and final shape had not been determined, and it was only in the mid-1930s that it found its home, well, in the home. I would argue that since the launch of regular television services in the post-war period in Europe, the method of engaging with the medium has remained pretty much unchanged … until recently. Television is changing rapidly in terms of its content, production methods and distribution. The days of the 'family gathered around the set' are numbered (or at least, that is what some would have us believe) and audiences are consuming content in several different ways to the point where some are already sounding the death knell of television.

With this in mind, Gorton and Garde-Hansen's timely contribution to the growing body of work on television history is very welcome. However, this is not – as the authors point out – a book on the history of television as such. Its central argument is that television's past – or rather past television or 'old television' – is remembered and made accessible via quite a few custodians, including producers, archives, and museums. Both Gorton and Garde-Hansen have researched and published in the fields of television history, archives, television audiences, and cultural memory and in this book they come together to provide a rich and stimulating debate, sometimes raising more questions than answering questions.

The central argument or focus of the volume is outlined in the introductory chapter: 'We need to approach past television from questions of personal, collective and cultural memory, to think through television's temporality (and visual textures), its spatiality (and locatedness), its materiality (and continued impacts on everyday living) and its continuous change and adaptation (its resilience and durability as an innovative form), to identify continuities and stickiness.' The authors then go on to explain that they 'access television's past from the "communicative memory" of those who have (or are assumed to have) the power to shape popular and cultural memories of British television, and who have worked in television or continue to preserve, curate, commemorate and re-exhibit it'. What follows then are detailed and incisive chapters which locate the book within a wider body of literature on the history of television, television studies, and archives and then focus on the television archive, the role of museums, and

the part played by television production staff. Each of these chapters provides novel insight into television's past.

From their interviews with retired production and freelance staff, for example, the authors conclude that researchers need, as a matter of urgency, to ensure that these memories are recorded and archived for the wealth of material they provide. The interviews from producers and creative staff were used to help understand how memories of the 'business' of making television shaped their work-life story when they looked back at their role in the industry. Termed 'Producer-ly memory', this is not concerned only with how and why production staff share their memories, but how their work has been shaped by their own personal memories of television. And as the authors note, collecting the memories of producers might provide academic researchers with a different way of critiquing the collective memory of British television.

The chapter on television archives is illuminating in a number of ways, not least as the sheer vast output of British television over the years has necessitated the making of key decisions of what to archive and what not to archive (at least, in pre-digital days when storage space was at a premium). The chapter also contains an interesting discussion on access to television archive material for academic researchers which has been – and remains to be – an issue in terms of getting hold of 'old TV' from broadcasting organisations. What is clear is that there are many locations, or 'spaces', in the UK where broadcast archive material, both visual and written paperwork, may be found such as the BBC Written Archive Centre in Caversham, the BBC Archive at Perivale, the National Archives (Channel 4 documentation) and the British Film Institute in London. It is worth noting that one substantial archive missing from the list here is the Independent Television (later Broadcasting) Authority archive which is held at Bournemouth University. Interviews with key figures in the field of television archives such as Mhairi Brennan, Steve Bryant, Dick Fiddy, and Chris Perry provide valuable insights into the methods used to preserve the nation's televisual heritage.

For me, one of the strongest chapters was that on Children's Television. The chapter starts with the statement that '[t]he television set and the ephemera around it prompts memories of childhood, a "vintage experience" that is both evocative and individual….' In the chapter, the authors draw on interviews conducted with mothers and a 'netnography' of the internet-based Mumsnet to understand how and why memories of children's television are key to appreciating what the authors term 'unofficial histories'. Part of this is a study of what memories these parents have of past children's television and a consideration of how social media allow memories to 'travel' outside their normal limits. As a father, I did wonder why the focus for the interviews in this section was on mothers alone, but the authors justify this by stating that the attention to mothers alone allowed them to engage with the netnography on Mumsnet and because recent scholarly work 'posits the role of the mother within the precarity of social media and happiness in the domestic sphere'. Some of the programmes discussed in this chapter evoked happy memories of my own childhood television experiences in the 1970s. One of these was *Bagpuss*, a stop-frame animation from the stables of Peter Firmin and Oliver Postgate and shown on BBC1. Although only thirteen episodes were made in 1974, the programme remains very fondly remembered. One interviewee in the book, a mother, tells that she did not want to share *Bagpuss* with her son as she was afraid he would reject it. For the mother, the programme related to her early childhood

memories of being home from school with an illness, watching the television wrapped in her own mother's cardigan. 'The memories', write Gorton and Garde-Hansen, 'are very evocative and precious yet anchored by a television programme'. I have had the same experience with *Doctor Who* (BBC, 1963–89, 1996, 2005–). I was slightly concerned in introducing my 8-year-old son to the DVDs of 'my' doctors – Jon Pertwee (1970–74) and Tom Baker (1974–82) – for fear that he would consider them old-fashioned and 'boring'. The series brings back great memories of Saturday evenings, watching the episodes with my father as part of a wider Saturday night viewing experience in a three-channel television era. Nostalgia is debated and problematised in the book, with the authors introducing concepts such as 'now nostalgia' and 'fake nostalgia'. *Doctor Who* and another popular ITV series, *Cold Feet* are the focus of two chapters in the book. The latter is discussed in relation to the role of paratexts and how they create a sense of history around the texts themselves. The focus of the chapter on *Doctor Who* draws on the work of Matt Hills on the fandom of the series and also considers issues of paratext and nostalgia/memory in the context of an exhibition at the National Media Museum (now National Science and Media Museum) in Bradford.

If I have one minor criticism, it is one which the authors address in the first chapter, and that is that Wales (and Northern Ireland) do not feature thereby potentially undermining the 'British' dimension of the title. Nevertheless, the authors justify the exclusion in terms of the remit of the methodology of the British Academy-funded project which financed the project upon which this book is based. Also, we must remember that viewers/audiences in Wales and Northern Ireland were, for much of the time, watching the same network output as audiences in England and Scotland. There is an acknowledgement on the part of the authors, however, that work on the Welsh-language channel, Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C) is needed given that 'Welsh language television … has played a major part in the collective memory of the nation' (p.7).

This is an accessible, readable, at times thought-provoking, and thoroughly informative book which successfully examines and synthesises the three elements mentioned in the title – the audience, the archive and the industry. It is based on extensive primary research but also draws upon a wide range of scholarly material on television, history, and memory. For anybody with an interest in television history, television archiving, and memories of television viewing, it is a must-read. And if, like me, you are obsessed with vintage television sets, then the cover alone is worth the price of the book!

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