

**Familiarity and surprise**

Jane Featherstone



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 in an environment where  
 costs are under threat.

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As far as I can work out, at any time in TV's history there have always been those doom-mongers who believe that the way we did things in the past was better than now. I'm sure in some ways that's true, but I believe that while we may lose in certain respects we gain in experience, knowledge and technological advances and that our pool of talent needs to be inspired to create great work, not depressed into thinking they missed some imagined heyday.

Many things make for successful drama, but two, familiarity and surprise, seem to be critical. And TV is the most wonderful medium to allow us to really explore these. We can tell strong stories, worked out through characters that the audience can come to know and love, and then we can twist and turn and take the audience on a journey with those people.

Familiarity, because you prefer not to let a complete stranger into your home, which is exactly what every TV drama asks you to do. *Holby City*, *Casualty*, the soaps and other long-running series succeed because the audience feels familiar and safe with the characters and the format and trusts the product.

On the other hand, programmes like *Spooks*, *Hustle*, *State of Play* and *Shameless* gain strength from the surprises they deliver, not only in terms of plot twists but also because they take you into an unfamiliar world, a world which becomes a secret shared with the viewers and which the drama unravels for them. Familiarity and surprises keep up the momentum of a successful series, but the engine, the heart of the affair, will always be strong writing and strong characters. This will never change.

But change is definitely in the air. The definition of success is changing - particularly with the BBC, facing the renewal of its charter and constant questioning about its public service role. In recent years - and certainly throughout all the time I have been making drama - success was measured almost entirely in audience figures. But what about the other side of the coin? What about programme quality, whether you judge it in terms of the awards, the critical acclaim or the AI (the 'audience index': a rating between 0 and 100 that measures how much the audience enjoyed the programme)? There's been a growing consensus that for the BBC or for public service in general we should look more at the AI than the numbers, an approach which argues that mass appeal doesn't necessarily equate to quality of content. It's always going to be difficult to define success but I'd maintain that the definition has to have roots in both the figures and the critical acclaim. *Spooks* hit both those nails on the head, and there are many others where the broadcasters can claim to have 'won the night', but at the same time the reviewers have waxed lyrical and there's a buzz to the title, which tells you you've got a success on your hands. A modern channel will want both.

Things have changed too on the international front. The research proves that we all want more localised programming than we used to. If you remember the seventies and eighties, you'll remember that there were loads of American dramas on the air. *Dynasty*, *Starsky and Hutch* and *Dallas* were the mainstay of drama then, but those days are long gone; nowadays, we wouldn't dream of having an American drama on at 9 o'clock on a mainstream channel. The audience would not accept it. Different international audiences demand very different fare and when we try and sell dramas to, say, Germany and France, it's always going to be a much harder sell than it is to the Commonwealth countries. Most Europeans want glossy programming with beautiful people - they're not going to queue up for the gritty reality of your average British series.

International co-production, however, is going to be increasingly important. The growth of niche channels means greater market segmentation and therefore less money for individual programme strands. This means we'll need to find international co-production money. This is already happening and we're all encountering the practical problems involved. Co-productions mean that you have to win the hearts of viewers in two countries or more, and if you're trying to cater for the different tastes of each market, you risk ending up with something that doesn't inspire anyone.

The growth in the number of channels has implications beyond the increased number of co-productions. For example, we could see increased polarisation where the mainstream channels become more mainstream and the niche channels more niche. For example, perhaps the broader channels, ITV and BBC ONE will suffer from increased forms of censorship as they come under pressure from family and religious groups, and E4 or BBC Three will become more extreme in their hunt for more audience (so maybe more sex and violence but only on the speciality channels).

On the other hand, instead of polarising, the channels may blur into an undifferentiated blandness and people will turn to other outlets, perhaps watching programming on their computers instead of their television. There has been a lot of talk about drama on broadband and there is some sign of it, but at nothing like the rate some people expected.

One thing is indisputable. All this is going to happen against a background of falling advertising revenue. This is happening not only because the pie is being ever more thinly sliced between a growing number of channels, but also because we're confronting a world where SkyPlus and TiVo are on track to land in every home in the next five years. Soon, our audience will simply not be watching the ads and there's going to be a major readjustment in how programming is funded.

This is going to bring huge changes. In America, there are already advertising-funded programmes - not commercially subsidised, but where advertisers have paid the entire cost of the drama. They obviously get free rein on product placement and promotion. Personally, I can't think of anything worse than making such programmes, and I hope that when - and it is a matter of when, not if - it finally happens here, I won't be around to worry about it. Producers will be making programmes that will lack creative integrity - because they will ultimately be beholden to the whims and ideas of the product marketing departments. That's why the role of the BBC in the UK is so critically important - it must maintain its independence and its licence fee. It has to maintain a standard of quality that the rest of the industry must try and emulate.

The solution is to make programmes more cheaply, enabling you to hold on to the integrity of the show. As a general rule - and of course there are notable exceptions - you get what you pay for. But we do need to find new ways to tell stories - precinct drama is less expensive because it is set in one place; you can keep the cost limited and you can shoot it more quickly. And I expect to see longer runs of series, because it's more cost-effective. *Casualty* and *Holby City* run 52 weeks a year: if you have a good idea and it works, people will exploit it.

Of course, there are some more down-to-earth ways of cutting costs - in America they shoot 16 hours a day and we shoot ten, for example. On the other hand, we often do six days a week, while America does five, but that could change. But do you really want to make people work 16 hours a day? It would be hell.

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The other side of the coin is that less money can sometimes make you more resourceful and innovative. We are already looking at new ways of filming on different formats, moving from film and digi-beta to HD. We're looking at using non-actors, although the actors' union Equity still get their knickers in a twist about that. And there's a lot more cross-genre material which uses documentary or feature techniques on drama and these things can be a great way to push all the genres forward, as long as they don't take the place of strong fiction. But regardless of the obstacles, desperation can breed invention and people are going to have to find cheaper ways of doing things.

Unfortunately, when it comes to TV production values and cutting costs, there's the uncomfortable paradox that cinema is getting more

and more sophisticated in terms of the imagery and wizardry it can offer. The 'Harry Potter' effect is shaping audience expectations of what they could get from TV.

Of course, people still look back (sometimes with rose-tinted glasses) at TV in the seventies and eighties and say that those older series were wonderful. Digital channels like UK Gold and BBC Four show golden oldies because those dramas have the enduring value of a quality script and good actors. Quality storytelling is what gives drama shelf-life; it doesn't last without it. But don't be fooled: while we tolerate *Steptoe and Son's* production values in the nostalgia slot, we wouldn't accept them anywhere else.

We're also seeing changes in the way we create drama and I can see a number of minor but significant innovations becoming more widespread in the near future. The technology is changing: when we edited on film we used to cut it up and splice it together and it was slow; now we can do all that at lightning speed on a computer. Inevitably it makes you more adventurous, but you have less thinking time, the budget's tight, the deadline's tighter and suddenly you don't have the chance to stand back and look at what you have done, think about it and hone it. We can now edit in a quarter of the time - but your brain doesn't always work at the same speed as the technology.

On the other hand, you can and do stumble across new ideas in the course of a digital edit. These things tend to level themselves out: new ideas and techniques arise, everyone gets overexcited and overuses them, but if there isn't a good script and great actors it doesn't make any difference.

On that note, we have to make sure that the writers come through, and that all the channels continue to fulfil the role of providing a platform for them. ITV and Channel 4 do take risks but, in today's more competitive, difficult market, the BBC has a real duty to innovate creatively. The difficulty is that if the BBC doesn't compete on ratings, they're seen to be failing but, if they do, they're seen to be over-commercial.

Genres are going to change too. Reality dramas are a possible growth area, where reality impacts on the dramatic storyline and the two genres start to learn from each other. Personally, I think that in ten years' time we'll still be watching cop shows and shows about families: the same genres but with a slightly different slant. Perhaps terror is the future in many ways, because the spy genre now has the political context to support it. One of our main preoccupations has always been homeland crimes - so we'll continue to have cop shows - but these days we're also concerned about terrorist crime.

I also think we should look more to politics for content. A programme like the brilliant *State of Play* proves there is an interest in politics if it is well done. The world is a more obviously political place today than it was in the eighties and nineties. Somehow things seemed easier then: my generation did not have as much at stake as this one does. There wasn't much back then for people to feel strongly about; there certainly is now, and that's going to impact on storylines and character conflicts. This could also mean that dramas become more international - *Spooks* has been one of the best sells into the US in 20 years: its subject matter is internationally relevant and accessible.

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Training is critical for the future. In the past, the BBC has borne a major part of the responsibility for training newcomers to the industry, but the other channels and the independent sector are now picking up the reins too. It's the responsibility of all of us to train the creative, technical and production staff of the future. Drama is a collaborative activity - you are only as good as the people you are working with. In a sense, training is more important than ever now because, when people are well trained, they are confident enough to innovate.

There's an obsession with youth these days, but there's a limited pool to fish in and we're going to see increasing recourse to the tried and tested talent of the older players. Howard Brenton's a good example; 61 years old, he had not written for TV for 16 years. I approached him about *Spooks*, he came in, and now he's in huge demand, is a lead writer on the present series and many other people want to work with him. People are beginning to realise that, although an obsession with novelty can reap rewards, innovation and youth are not the same thing and enduring neophilia could cripple our industry.

TV production faces greater change and challenges than ever before, but some truths will always be with us: people will always want to be entertained, they will want to feel things, to hear a story, and to meet new characters. That's what drama does, and that's why it's the genre that will always play a leading role in defining a channel. I'm excited about the future and as long as we keep following our creative instincts and letting those with real talent do the same, we'll be delivering surprising and popular drama way past 2014.