**Hannah Andrews, *Biographical Television Drama* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 231, ISBN 978-3-030-64677-6 (hb), £89.99.**

Hannah Andrews' book is an exceptionally well-constructed and discursive account of the connections between ideas including truth, fidelity, biography, reputation and narrative which thoroughly delineates how, through various storytelling modes, television drama has represented real people's lives on screen over the past sixty years.

The six core chapters provide a cross-disciplinary overview, exploring how the methods of screenwriters are informed by the approaches of biography and journalism, and are affected by legal and institutional constraints and the influence of literary estates as 'keepers of the flame' or direct relatives.

Andrews provides a timely taxonomy of a wide sphere of television output, mostly but not exclusively, covering biographical dramas – there is also an engaging analysis of Michael Apted's longitudinal *Up Series* (Granada/ITV/BBC, 1964-2019) and the personalised genealogies offered by *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC1, 2004-) (192-198, 202-207). In her analysis, Andrews utilises Christine Geraghty's (2003) approach of describing texts which are illuminative of historical trends in biographical television drama, though avoids the prescriptivism of value judgements. The breadth of the field makes it justifiable that Andrews' fifteen case-studies are entirely focused on British television.

Conveying a lost age of creative licence, Andrews incisively analyses director Ken Russell's cycle of BBC-made biographical films, from his widely-acclaimed *Elgar* (1962) for Monitor, to the outrageous *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), an imaginative and critical take on the life of composer Richard Strauss (159-167). Andrews reveals that, despite BBC disclaimers that this was Russell's 'personal view', the Strauss estate ensured it was never repeated again.

Across her study, Andrews discerns the importance of verisimilar aesthetics and how

this ‘authenticity’ is used to gain credibility with viewers; however, ‘convincing’ details of production design can also lead to controversy. For example, Andrews dissects the fraught reception of Brian Fillis’s *The Curse of Steptoe* (BBC Four, 2008), a highly proficient recreation of the sitcom world of *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1962-74) which foregrounds troubled aspects of its lead actors’ lives (171-180). Corbett’s relatives complained it was unnecessarily damaging to his reputation.

Through this book’s cumulative analysis, Andrews reveals how any deviation from anodyne drama, designed for approval by critics, lawyers and the ‘keepers of the flame’, is now deemed too risky by television commissioners. Today, contemporary-set serials and one-offs where a writer uses poetic licence to reveal underlying truths are marginal compared with their prominence in the era spanning *Armchair Theatre* (ABC/Thames, 1956-74) and *Play for Today* (BBC1, 1970-84). The latter strand included several biographical dramas beyond Jack Rosenthal’s *Spend, Spend, Spend* (1977) that Andrews does not mention, which illustrate the challenging and conservative potentials of the form: John Elliot’s *A Child of Hope* (1975), Horace Ové and Jim Hawkins’s *A Hole in Babylon* (1979), Tony Perrin’s *The Union* (1981) and Roger Milner’s *PQ17* (1981). While Milner dramatises the life of Captain Jack Broome, a British Naval officer, centring on his command of the ill-fated Arctic Convoy during the Second World War, Elliot and Perrin’s plays are liberal humanist docudramas concerning recent historical wrongs: Apartheid in South Africa and ballot-rigging in the Electrical Trades Union (ETU). While all three considerably expanded *Play for Today*’s repertoire, they are formally conservative beside *A Hole in Babylon*, a deeply researched docudrama which gives an insight into the subjective perspectives of three men behind the 1975 Spaghetti House Siege.

Parallel issues surrounding the current dominance of true-life crime dramas are also under-explored in Andrews’ book. Current television’s safety-first approach *is*

understandable, given the consistent ratings success of true-life crime dramas. However, considering the BBC and Channel Four's Public Service Broadcasting remits, there are arguably now too many sanitised dramas, which have gone through the 'legalling' process that Andrews explains using Derek Paget (2011)'s vital work (167-171). Many legalled dramas run totally counter to PSB ideals and the practice of challenging drama overseen by the likes of Sydney Newman, David Rose, Tony Garnett, Margaret Matheson and Nicola Shindler.

The current acquiescence before the powerful is especially evident when biographical television dramas dramatise contemporary politics. A heavily-legalled drama such as *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (Channel 4, 2019) merely burnished the reputations of its central real-life protagonists, especially Vote Leave strategist Dominic Cummings whose self-image as a maverick intellectual truth-teller remained largely uncriticised. Such biographical miniseries as *The Salisbury Poisonings* (BBC1, 2020), *Des* (ITV1, 2020) or the one-off verbatim drama *The Interrogation of Tony Martin* (Channel 4, 2018) are, exacerbated by their detailed verisimilitude, solidly conservative in form and content. However, Russell T. Davies's *A Very English Scandal* (BBC1, 2018) exposed underlying truths of British power structures in the 1970s with an exuberant humour. These highly-popular dramas usually function as rhizomes in the television schedules with linked off-shoots often becoming among the most watched single documentaries on each channel: indeed Tom Mangold's reflective *The Jeremy Thorpe Scandal* achieved BBC Four's best-ever audience of 2.4 million, as Stephen Price notes (*Broadcast*, December 2021, 58-59).

Andrews highlights how many biographical television dramas are self-limiting in their obsession with verisimilar realism, when the non-naturalistic dramatic mode of melodrama and the cultural practice of gossip are especially well-placed to discern the underlying truths in a society and clarify a range of people's values to each other (41-54, 154). Comparably,

Andrews outlines a historical lineage of self-reflexive non-naturalism within British bio-dramas from David Turner's *Daisy* for The Edwardians anthology (BBC2, 1973) to Tony Jordan's *Babs* (BBC1, 2017) (81-88).

Building upon *Television and British Cinema: Convergence and Divergence Since 1990* (2014), Andrews provides exemplary aesthetic and stylistic analysis informed by her wide-ranging knowledge of the historical development of British screen mediums. Her contrasting of two versions of Alan Turing's life story, the TV drama *Breaking the Code* (BBC1, 1997) and the feature-film *The Imitation Game* (2014) is deeply insightful concerning how the former conveys pedagogically Turing's scientific ideas via a stately editing pace, while the latter's fast-cutting shapes a more emotive presentation of his life (36-40). Furthermore, Andrews contrasts *mise-en-scène*, set design, hairstyles, costumes and acting styles within Christopher Fry's *The Brontës of Haworth* (Yorkshire Television, 1973) and Sally Wainwright's *To Walk Invisible* (BBC1, 2016) to illuminate period drama's shift from the studio-drama era where words and their performance in interiors had primacy, to a more distanced mode of magical realism using exterior locations (48-54).

With this highly thought-provoking book, Hannah Andrews reinforces her position as one of Britain's most eminent television historians.

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