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Breaking the Generic Mould? Grayson Perry, Channel 4 and the Production of British Arts Television

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This article examines Channel 4's critically acclaimed series, *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?* (2014). Using interviews with those involved in making the series and textual analysis, we argue that the elements that contributed to the success of the series are inherently difficult to replicate due to the political economy of contemporary television production thereby threatening the sustainability of the genre. However, while arts television rarely constitutes a commercial success in a traditional ratings sense, we outline the strategic value of the genre in contributing to Channel 4's identity as Britain's alternative public service broadcaster.

Keywords: Television production, arts, Channel 4, public service broadcasting, genre, political economy

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Often publicly lauded as evidence of television's commitment to culture, the fortunes of arts programming in Britain have been mixed. In 2014 Tony Hall, Director General of the BBC, announced that the Corporation would place the arts centre-stage across all BBC platforms (BBC, 2014). In the same year Sky declared a new era of growth for Sky Arts, facilitated by a budget increase and better placement on the Electronic Programme Guide (EPG) (Broadcast 2014a). However, such optimistic commitments deny the realities of what is actually a difficult era for the production of arts television. In the five years prior to 2014, spending on arts programming by the main public service broadcasters (BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5) fell by 24% (Ofcom, 2015). These cuts have reverberated through the schedules, most notably in the cancellation of regular strands (the lifeblood of any genre) such as the BBC's *The Review Show* (1994 - 2014) and ITV's *The South Bank Show* (1978 -). In the case of Channel 4 (C4), peak-time arts output fell from 30 hours in 2009 to just 19 hours in 2014 (Ofcom, 2015: 26). Policy research pronounces arts television is a genre 'at risk' of disappearing as relatively small audiences are unable to offset production costs (Mediatique, 2014: 10). Therefore, the provision of arts programming on terrestrial television in the UK is under significant threat.

In today's media-rich environment, competition is so fierce that big arts programming successes are few. One programme that charmed both industry and viewers was Channel 4's three-part series *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?* (2014). In the series, the artist Grayson Perry uses portraiture as a medium to understand the identity of several individuals and social groups. Each programme climaxes with a

final artwork revealed to the subject as part of the permanent displays at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), London.

Writing in *The Guardian*, the arts and culture commentator Mark Lawson proclaimed that the programme ‘revolutionised art on television [...] It’s a mould-breaking combination’ (2014). Indeed Lawson was just one of a number of television critics and professionals to herald the programme’s success in terms of its creative style and engaging narrative (Delingpole 2014; Singh 2014; Wollaston 2014). While such praise is welcomed by industry and can bring programmes to the attention of audiences, Wheatley warns that the praise of ‘moments of heightened visual and aural pleasure on television serve only to highlight the relative aesthetic impoverishment of the rest of television’s broadcast flow’ (Wheatley, 2004: 326). By singling out programmes as unique or special, attention can be drawn to deficiencies in the rest of the genre. Consequently this article frames the series and the professional discourse around *Grayson Perry: Who are You?* as an evaluation of both the possibilities, but also the structural constraints, within arts programming. Extending Wheatley’s argument further, such public praise can also operate as a critical evaluation of the broadcaster’s strategy, in this case C4, highlighting how strategy is materialized on screen but also what elements are therefore marginalized or obscured.

This research uses interviews with those directly involved in the commissioning and making of the series, along with references to the finished programme, to critically examine the logics at work in a hybrid public service institution like C4 which must balance popular demand with a commitment to be different (Born, 2003; Hobson, 2008). It also examines how specialist genres like arts, with their own history, codes and routines, are evolving to incorporate new forms of expertise, modes of engagement and subject matter. The article argues that while arts

television is in a period of change, there still remains an underlying question of sustainability. The very ingredients that the makers and commissioners draw upon to explain the programme's success are challenging to replicate. This challenge is due to the political economy of factual television where declining budgets, shorter time scales for production and an emphasis on format sales for international markets are established features of production. Therefore, while *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?* does *extend* the mould of arts television, one must be wary of claims of a revolution in the genre.

The article concludes that arts television offers a unique and significant microcosm of the political economy of television today. In the present context genres associated with public value are increasingly subsumed to the logic of the market. Through framing television production and its output as both economic *and* cultural, the following analysis contributes to our understanding of the often-complex processes of cultural production.

Methodology

To make sense of the relationship between the context of production and the cultural forms that emerge, this article adopts a critical political economy framework recognising how structural power and creative agency shapes markets, institutions and genre (Murdock and Golding, 2005). There is more to be understood in the intersection between the production structures which exist and the forms which emerge, particularly where there are attempts by professionals to disrupt the traditional modes of representation. In this regard the application of this framework to arts television enables both analysis of the complexity of the production process and the exchanges that are often necessary within that production culture.

This research uses semi-structured interviews with those directly involved in bringing the programme to screen. The four principal interviews that inform this study were carried out in summer 2015 by the lead author. They lasted approximately one hour each; two were conducted in person and two via Skype. The sample includes: the former and current commissioning editors for arts programming at Channel 4, the curator of the National Portrait Gallery who liaised with the production company (Swan Films) regarding filming and with the artist in relation to the final exhibition, the director of the series, and a number of other television producers working within the arts genre who commented on the success of the series. Here the researchers acknowledge the challenges of interviewing media professionals, many of whom are skilled and complicit in the carefully managed statements emanating from their organisations (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). However, the diversity of the sample allowed insight into a number of viewpoints, denaturalising some of their responses and enabling comparison between the accounts of those occupying different roles within the commissioning and production process.

The researchers also examined the various industry discourses that surrounded the programme, especially those that gave voice to the artist/presenter himself, Grayson Perry. Much like the television industry, the art world has its own discourses, value systems and norms that increasingly direct behaviour towards a global market. For instance, the professionalization of the art industry and the market value that accrues around artworks is often dependent on the ability of contemporary artists to build a public profile (Graw, 2009). In the UK this merger of the art world with celebrity culture is evident in the emergence of the 'Young British Artists' generation in the 1990s, a group that Perry has publicly criticised (Tonkin, 2013). However, over the past decade Perry's own media persona has 'absolutely exploded' (Interview with

Director) and he is now a regular contributor on television (e.g. *How to Be Bohemian* 2015), on radio (including the prestigious *Reith Lectures* 2013), and is a published author (Perry, 2014); this, at the same time as maintaining a successful artistic career.

The analysis also makes reference to the final text. According to Murdock and Golding, a critical political economy approach highlights the ‘ways in which representations present in media products are related to the material realities of their production and consumption’ (Murdock and Golding, 2005: 77). By referencing both the narrated strategies of the interviewees and the finished text, this article traces how collective and individual agency is enacted within a specific context. While locating the analysis within the production of a single text may limit the generalizability of the research, it does anchor understanding of the structural limits of contemporary television production and it offers a situated account of public value as realised by television professionals.

Once this data was collected and analysed a number of themes emerged which are explored in the remainder of this article. The overall aims were to critically analyse the form of the programme and to contextualize these within the structural conditions of production. To do this, the first section charts the journey to transmission and the format of the series in the context of wider trends within specialist factual television. From this vantage point readers can see the strategic function the series performs for Channel 4 as it reconciles social value with commercial reality. The research then considers the ways in which the artist was employed as presenter and the challenges associated with this positioning. Finally, consideration is given to how the symbiotic relationship between Perry’s role as the artist-presenter and the creation of his work on-screen constitutes a specific mode of representation within contemporary arts broadcasting. Taken together these themes

highlight a distinct set of challenges and possibilities for both C4 as a channel positioning itself as an alternative to other public service broadcasters and as distinct within the television landscape. The themes also illustrate the challenges for television more broadly as it attempts to mediate the artist and their art.

Arts Television: the context of production

In line with many other television genres, over the last few decades specialist factual programming has had to adapt to contemporary production trends, changing audience expectations and increased economic pressure. This is most notable in the ways in which entertainment has been married to traditional documentary as broadcasters increasingly seek more low-cost, low-risk strategies for pursuing both niche and larger ‘mainstream’ audiences. Within the context of specialist factual, defining features of this trend appear to be a shift in expertise toward more personality and celebrity-led programming (Bennett, 2011; Gray and Bell, 2013; Lunt, 2009), narratives based around dramatic storytelling and spectacle (Scott, 2003), and a growth in reality TV/docusoap formats (Hill, 2007). While this could be criticised as part of the erosion of public knowledge, Lunt (2009) is optimistic that the universal themes covered by these programmes offer new forms of public service around innovative narratives of identity and greater space for self-reflection, both of which allow for more diverse audience engagement with television.

However, whilst other areas of specialist factual such as history, natural history, business and science have experienced tentative ‘revivals’ in recent years through the success of a number of high profile series, the fortunes of arts programming have been comparatively limited. Once regarded as a vibrant area of factual programming (Walker, 1993; Wyver, 2007) arts on terrestrial television in the

UK is now largely relegated to the BBC and C4, and within those to their off-peak schedules (Ofcom, 2015). Furthermore, there has been a steep decline in independent producers specialising solely in arts content as reduced production budgets suggest the genre is not commercially viable. Their withdrawal from this provision is a major threat to the genre's ongoing sustainability.

Historically associated with the BBC, the arts documentary is the most established form of programming within the genre (Wyver, 2007). Often styled in the form of a lecture, programmes like *A History of British Art* (1996) and *The Face of Britain by Simon Schama* (2015) predominantly take a retrospective approach, focusing on the final artwork, its historical significance and its location within the artistic canon. Individual interpretation or judgment by the viewer is discouraged through an emphasis on the authority of the expert (Gray and Bell, 2013; Lunt, 2009). Locating the filming within a major gallery, museum or art institution also serves to further anchor this expertise. However, the arts documentary has had to evolve not least because of the relatively high production costs incurred both in the location filming and the need to secure image permissions. There have been some changes in the style and aesthetics, for instance the use of the competition format (e.g. *Portrait Artist of the Year* (2013 -)) and the observational documentary (e.g. *What Do Artists Do All Day?* (2013-)). These serve as relatively low-cost commissions and are perceived to appeal to a dual audience: one with a specialist interest in the arts and a larger 'mainstream' audience. However, despite these generic innovations arts television continues to command a relatively small audience, albeit a stable one (BARB, 2015).

Channel 4 and the Arts

For Channel 4, the arts were initially a key part of its output with 10% of its programming budget in 1986 dedicated to its provision (Wyver, 2007: 55). Fostering creative collaboration between artist and broadcaster was crucial to Channel 4's early arts strategy. In particular, the commissioning and exhibition of video-art during the broadcaster's formative years bolstered the channel's reputation for innovation with series such as *Continuous Diary* (1984), *Dadarama* (1985) and *Ghosts in the Machine* (1986-88). Between 1991 and 2004 Channel Four also provided sponsorship for the Tate Gallery's annual Turner Prize. Consistent with its coverage of modern and contemporary art, this further contributed to the channel's brand identity as a broadcaster at the cutting edge of British culture. By showcasing often complex art (Wyver, 2007: 55), the genre contributed to the channel's 'reputation for being different' (Hobson, 2008: 73) at a time when brand distinction had both commercial and socio-political value.

However, like many other areas, commissioning soon succumbed to the inherent tension within the channel – that it must be creatively distinctive at the same time as being advertiser-funded. Over time a concern for audience share would condition output leading to a contraction in the diversity of content and a foregrounding of talent-led formats which had both domestic and international appeal, especially in the area of lifestyle programming. This shift is evident in the strategic rationale offered by this interviewee:

Everything we do has got to reach out to a broad popular audience.

[...] I think it's no good at all to make things for really tiny

numbers of people, I don't think that is what television is for. I

think you want to try to take the best stuff to as broad an audience as possible. That's the mission, if you like. (Arts Commissioning Editor, C4)

Here the interviewee highlights the shift from a public service commitment to universality and minority provision, to an omnipresent drive for lucrative demographics where public value is framed firmly in terms of audience reach (Born, 2003). The historic emphasis on niche programming, particularly in prime time, is marginalised both in the strategy outlined above and in the declining number of peak-time hours dedicated to the arts (Ofcom, 2015). In this regard, appealing to niche and specialist audiences is framed in direct opposition to the prevailing logic of market competition and consumer choice.

Today, the principal arts output on the channel is Grayson Perry's quintet of series exploring identity through the arts, and *Random Acts* (2011-) a series of short artist-made films transmitted late at night. Therefore, while *Who Are You?* does not represent the totality of C4's arts output, its format and presenter Grayson Perry have come to represent a cornerstone of the channel's present arts strategy. This, coupled with the critical acclaim it received, offers academics an insight into how production professionals evaluate and apportion significance to a text and its production. While it is vital to acknowledge the dangers of analysing a single series as a proxy for the entire genre, the researchers believe it offers a pathway to understanding how artistic craft and knowledge is conditioned by the structures of television, dictating the style, form and positioning of the art content that reaches our screens (Murdock and Golding, 2005). In doing so the article also seeks to examine how attempts to disrupt

traditional generic codes also holds strategic value for C4 by reaffirming their identity as an ‘alternative’ public service broadcaster.

The Form of *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?*

Following from *All In the Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry* (2012), *Who Are You?* is the second series commissioned by Channel 4 in which Perry takes on the role of both presenter and artist. After much promotion the three-part series aired on Wednesdays at 10pm beginning 22nd October 2015 following one of the channel’s most recognisable and successful series’: *Grand Designs* (1999-). Like *Who Are You?*, *Grand Designs* offers an artistic materialisation of individual creative authorship and an education in public taste (Stead and Richards, 2014). In both cases the presenter is central to the tone and affect of the series, imbuing the resulting objects with greater meaning and authority. 10pm is also a slot frequently dedicated to C4 documentaries, examples of which include the *Born in the Wrong Body* season (2015) and *Muslim Drag Queens* (2015). In a similar vein to *Who Are You?*, these programmes often seek to explore marginalised groups and identities within society. This highlights the nature and tone of factual television on Channel 4 and the context in which arts programming must compete. Within these subjects the focus is on universal themes and storytelling where expertise becomes less visible and there is direct appeal to a mainstream audience.

In the case of *Who Are You?* interviewees attributed the success of the series to an engaging and natural onscreen talent unpacking an emotional subject through real-life contributors. Incorporating these elements, a typical narrative arc runs across all three episodes: announcing himself as ‘part psychologist, part detective’ Perry introduces his journey to find the ‘truth’ about identity. He then presents this

interpretation back to the subject through a piece of artwork using tapestry, brass sculpture or his signature ceramic pots. The narrative is assembled through footage of Perry interviewing and sketching the subject, a series of monologues from Perry interpreting their identity, an explanation of his creative rationale for the artwork, his musing on the social significance of identity and, cutaways of the final construction of the artwork. Filming tends to be in informal settings such as the subject's home, the artist's studio and various public spaces blending the personal and the professional, the public and the private, the accepted and the exceptional.

In closing each episode, Perry is 'allowed' to display his artwork in the National Portrait Gallery. While Perry's informal, outsider style remains central to his artistic image and television personality, he is also firmly embedded in the art system through his use of language, the cultural capital he exhibits and most obviously his dependence on the NPG for final acceptability. Elements of the final artwork are filmed in close-up and interspersed with film of the subjects walking through the closed gallery where Perry and the artwork are revealed. For the majority of the contributors, this is a positive moment and the episodes conclude with an occasionally emotional narrative where the subject reaffirms Perry's interpretation of their identity and his creative brilliance thus offering little space for a critique of the final work. A monologue to camera from Perry on the complexity of identity closes the programme while the closing credits of the series invite the audience to view the artwork in person at a free display in the gallery.

The series attracted 640,000 viewers (a share of 4.36%), with the first episode being the second most-watched programme in the category of music and arts (Broadcast, 2014c). While these figures would be regarded as good for arts

television, which tends to command low audience numbers - ‘a million, if you’re lucky’ (Interview with Director) - there was a warning that this doesn’t necessarily represent a commercial success in C4 terms:

[T]hey weren’t *Gogglebox* sized hits [...] I think commercial means either you got a ton of eyeballs which translates into revenue, or you sell a ton of DVDs afterwards or you make format sales. [...] I’d put that under critical success rather than commercial success. (Former Arts Commissioning Editor, C4)

Consolidating this evaluation as a ‘critical success’, the series received positive coverage in the television sections of *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Telegraph*. Further peer recognition was also bestowed on the programme when it won the BAFTA for Specialist Factual beating *David Attenborough’s Conquest of the Skies 3D* (2015) and *The Great War: The People’s Story* (2014).

Although the series received a positive reception in Britain, to date international sales have been limited to a small number of English-language markets and commercial entities (personal correspondence with Series Director, 2015). Nevertheless, overseas sales are not the only way a text is mobilised internationally. A further indicator of the success and influence of the series is its direct impact on other channel strategies both in the UK and beyond. In 2015 the channel controller for the Irish state broadcaster, RTÉ drew on the programme in terms of best-practice to illustrate his commissioning strategy for the forthcoming arts season on his channel (Adrian Lynch quoted in the *Irish Times*, 2015). It was professional praise like this

and the assessments of the interviewees that brought the researchers to look at two elements which were repeatedly singled out as central to the success of the series: the use of Grayson Perry as an artist-presenter and the process of creating art on screen. The researchers argue that the prominence of these elements highlights deficiencies in traditional arts television in terms of the representation of the artist, the visualisation of the process of artistic creation, and how these are enabled or constrained by television's political economy.

The Artist as Presenter

Although living artists are often the subject of arts programmes, rarely in contemporary arts programming do they direct the narrative. In the past few decades, the voice, and thus authority, of arts television has predominantly belonged to art critics, historians, collectors and academics. The arts documentary presenter is characterised as a well-educated, white male underscoring the relationship between class privilege and cultural uplift that arts television continues to imply (Spigel, 2008). From the archetypical figure of Kenneth Clark in *Civilisation* (1969), to more recent broadcasters such as Alastair Sooke, Andrew Graham-Dixon and Simon Schama, these experts are chosen as objective conduits for expert knowledge, operating as supposedly credible intermediaries between the viewer and the arts. The expertise represented by these presenters is often associated with national arts organisations and cultural institutions, demonstrating the interdependence of arts and broadcasting.

Grayson Perry is a noteworthy, and the researchers would argue strategic, counter to some of this didactic tone. In many ways Perry's on-screen persona resists

easy categorisation: on one level he is a white, male artist and public intellectual, but this is destabilised by his appearances in the media as his transvestite alter-ego Claire. Although hugely successful both commercially and critically, his professional persona cultivates an outsider status from the art world: ‘For even I, an Essex transvestite potter, have been let in by the art-world mafia’ (Perry, 2014: 2). This outsider-within narrative is subsequently built up over the course of his media work and foregrounded in this series. As Perry observes: ‘There’s me, the oik with a bit of a chip on his shoulder, bringing a parade of the unusual and the troubled in amongst these seemingly impervious icons of British solidity’ (opening sequence of all episodes). In the case of *Who Are You?*, Perry’s own position as an outsider offers a narrative pathway into other marginalised identities in society. On-screen Perry’s own struggles with identity and acceptance offers comfort to his subjects and legitimises his televisual performance. This is established in the opening sequence to each episode, in which Perry frames the subject of identity within the context of his career as a professional artist and his everyday life: ‘In the work I make and the way I live my life, I’m interested in identity; in what’s behind the masks we wear’. This artist-led narrative challenges existing tropes of expertise and legitimacy within arts programming and was rationalised by the interviewees as a more authentic engagement with the arts.

Perry’s presentation skills, narrative style and cultural legitimacy are essential to the series’ success and to C4’s arts strategy as it attempts to differentiate itself from its rivals. His narrative normalises the interpretive process and his mode of address points to a more inclusive interpretation than previous didactic forms. This break with the narrative tradition of the arts documentary is, in the mind of the interviewees, tangible evidence of the channels’ commitment to innovation and part of their

attempts to reinvigorate the wider arts genre for a contemporary audience:

[G]et artists to show us the world through their eyes. [...] This is something that Grayson believes as well, that the role of the artist is to notice things and make meaning. And that's fascinating. So why wouldn't you ask them to notice things about us rather than ask us to notice things about them which seems so wrong. It's like you've got the telescope the wrong way round.

(Former Arts Commissioning Editor, C4)

Here, criticism is discernable of the traditional mode of address and the approach of other broadcasters in which the artist's perspective has been marginalised in favour of institutional authority. The power to offer representation and interpretation is, according to this former commissioning editor, in the wrong hands and this means that the creative potential of the genre has been curbed – part of the reason for its current 'at risk' status.

A personality whose expertise is achieved through authentic experience rather than academic study, and whose mode of address is both authoritative *and* charismatic (Ytreberg, 2002) has value for both broadcasting professionals and their audiences in the current landscape for personality-led factual television. In this way, Perry's performance and the resulting format become important commodities in the political economy of Channel 4 offering unique symbolic value at a moment of change for Public Service Broadcasting (PSB). This value is emphasised by his exclusive contract with the channel (Broadcast, 2014b). Bennett (2011: 112) outlines the specific cultural and economic value of onscreen personalities, particularly public service personalities who must carry the weight of the PSB brands on which they

appear. Both Perry's background and on-screen persona fulfil many fundamental expectations of the Channel 4 brand and satisfy a wide range of PSB expectations. He has credibility within the art world through his 2003 Turner Prize and his work is prominently displayed in many major cultural institutions. He is provocative but not radical, thereby appeasing advertisers, an important concern within the funding concerns of Channel 4. His often understated but accomplished craft skills differentiate him from peers such as Tracy Emin (criticised for her abstraction) and Damien Hirst (often discussed in terms of financial value). Furthermore, his art blurs high and low culture (e.g. his ceramic work often references pop culture), which crucially allows him to appeal to both mainstream and niche audiences. All of these elements work to reiterate Channel 4's brand as alternative, and to differentiate the channel from other broadcasters whose arts output is framed as staid and institutional. Few artists could successfully navigate all of these requirements and this is one reason why Perry is so crucial to the arts output of Channel 4.

However, rather than claim a total break with tradition, it is important to acknowledge the generic traditions that endure in the series. Perry's in-depth knowledge of art history and intellectual meaning-making permeates the narrative throughout, distinguishing him from his subjects and thereby regulating the openness of the audience's interpretation. In this regard, the specific expectations of the arts documentary are still present, but in many ways subverted through bringing Perry's role as an artist and practitioner to the fore:

It's that we tend to try to make programmes that are, to put it slightly over-technically, based in experience rather than in didactic knowledge transfer and

are presented by practitioners rather than by kind of expert outsiders. (Arts Commissioning Editor, C4)

The lack of artist-presenters within the arts genre can be partly attributed to tensions between the value systems that condition arts and television. Spigel argues that ‘In both academic and popular circles television is widely viewed as the opposite of art’ (Spigel, 2008: 295). This tension carries into occupational concerns that associations with television may compromise ‘creative integrity’ (Arts Commissioning Editor, Channel 4), the residues of which exist even here. Commerce has long been seen to have an adverse effect on the arts (Williams 1960), which today can still be seen in accusations of ‘dumbing down’ (Wyver, 2007: 8). The artist being ‘employed’ to produce something for television appears at odds with the romantic notion of the artist having creative freedom of expression. In particular, this is highlighted in Perry’s initial reluctance to take on the role of artist as well as presenter within the programme:

I nudged him towards making an artwork. He was initially quite reluctant [...] He was worried how the art world would receive the artwork; in that he thought that maybe they’d think it wasn’t a proper artwork, that it was a spin-off from a telly programme. (Series Director)

The interviewees agreed that the production of television and art remain occupationally separate despite their seemingly comfortable marriage onscreen in the series, again another indication of the delicate balance the series has successfully negotiated. Artists operate as both cultural and economic agents within a system that

has its own orientations and restraints. Separating art and television, both forms of cultural production, allows Perry to inhabit distinct professional systems with different occupational norms and market logics. However, his eventual decision to produce the art illustrates the shifting function of publicity within the art economy (Graw, 2009) and how symbolic and financial value is produced through forms of exchange between contemporary art and television, at times challenging traditional cultural hierarchies (Connolly, 2014: 84). Publicly funded broadcasters and arts institutions share a common agenda to continually reiterate their public value by widening engagement with audiences and to justify continued funding therefore collaboration offers multiple forms of value.

By positioning Perry in this way, it is possible to draw parallels with the Romantic ideal of the artist as ‘a special kind of person’ described by Raymond Williams (1960: 39). As a notion borne of the Industrial Revolution, Williams outlines how ‘at a time when the artist is being described as just one more producer of a commodity for the market, he is describing himself as specially endowed person, the guiding light of the common life’ (Williams, 1960: 39). However, such an emphasis on the attributes of a ‘special’ person has consequences for the production process within factual television. The very elements that constitute this ‘specialness’ are, by definition, difficult to duplicate. Practical problems arise in terms of finding the ‘authentic’ person and then convincing them to partake in the value systems of television in which even public service broadcasters do not operate entirely outside of commercial pressures. Therefore, such attempts to challenge the generic mould are difficult to sustain in production terms. Although the artist as presenter follows wider trends within specialist factual in terms of ‘personality-led’ programming and the notion of ‘authentic’ knowledge/expertise, it is a particular challenge to replicate and

sustain in this genre because of concerns that television undermines the value and agency of the artist.

Documenting Art as Process

The history of arts broadcasting features a number of programmes documenting the creative processes of artists such as Henry Moore, Bernard Leach, Lawrence Gowing, David Hockney, and even disgraced entertainer Rolf Harris in *The Queen by Rolf* (2006). Such programmes allow the audience to bear witness to an unfolding narrative where the final artwork is the end rather than the starting point (Wyver, 2015). Today arts documentaries are often dominated by a narrative focus on the finished artwork and an explanation of its content, context and significance. This is in part due to the narrow cultural canon of well-known and often deceased artists from which the genre draws. Therefore, this article contends that although programming featuring the artist on their creative journey is not historically distinct, it is increasingly rare in the current political economy of television. Competition formats such as *The Big Painting Challenge* (2015-) and *Portrait Artist of the Year* (2013-) provide a structured insight into the work of amateur artists, but there are comparatively fewer examples of contemporary arts programming in which established artists lay bare their creative process from conception to final piece. Like the ways the Romantic artists distinguished their skills from that of the ‘craftsman’ by associating their means of production with an ‘imaginative truth’ (Williams, 1960: 43), today’s professional artists often seem reluctant to reveal the more practical side of their work in such a public medium: ‘It’s vulnerable making. Very few artists have, in a way, the self-confidence to do that’ (Series Director). It is these seemingly candid insights, coupled with Perry’s charismatic mode of address, which contribute to the

programme's distinctiveness within the wider arts proposition and constitute *Who Are You?*'s aesthetic and narrative appeal.

While television is often a medium of movement and mobility, art such as paintings and sculptures are mute and immobile objects. One approach to overcome this stasis is to combine the objects with movement enabling film-makers to bring these works cinematically to life (Adriaensens and Jacobs, 2015: 489; Jacobs, 2011: 40). *Who are You?* uses a specific pattern of montage to bring the representation alive on screen by juxtaposing images of the sitter with a close up of Perry sketching. The art takes shape through extreme close-ups of the pencil on the page and the artist's movement through his studio. Along with adding a visual dynamic (which the lecture form can struggle to achieve) it reflects the process of creating the artwork as one of movement and flow.

For audiences witnessing events unfold, as opposed to the traditional retrospective approach, contributes to the narrative pleasure and dramatic tension of the series. Conceiving of and making the art offers new ways for the audience to encounter the subject, suggesting a semblance of authenticity and more visual stimulation:

All the drama really in creating art is in the journey from the blank piece of paper to the artwork, the stumbles, the mistakes, the "oh my God I'm losing my confidence with this, I need to screw that up and start again". That's the exciting bit. You never see that. (Series Director)

Although the end goal in *Who Are You?* is known (the completion of the artwork), it is the journey to get there that keeps audiences watching, thereby offering a specific production strategy and extending the conventions of the genre.

However, despite the comment above from the director about the on-screen value of artistic failure, it is important to recognise that what is presented on screen in the series is very much an idealized version of the artistic craft. Whereas drama is often created through the mishaps and setbacks of participants on television (Hill, 2007), *Who Are You?* presents the creation of art as a linear process in which the failed attempts in production remain invisible to the audience. The somewhat selective and limited vision of the creative process portrayed in *Who Are You?* highlights the importance of maintaining the artist's professional credibility and status as a 'special kind of person' above the practical hindrances one might encounter in more traditional forms of contemporary documentary production. Documentary truth lies not in the representation of the process but in maintaining the aura of the artist as a 'special person' in line with the traditional forms of arts documentary.

While making art on screen was unanimously seen as a good thing (and a possible lifeline for the genre) aligning artistic work and television production is difficult. Practical limits emerge from the structural pressures which condition television production. Filming, along with the narrative development of *Who Are You?*, depends entirely on its presenter's capacity to produce the artworks. However, the process of materialising the artworks is often a lengthy and unpredictable one. Filming and scheduling of the series 'hinged on' (Curator, NPG) Perry's creative process with the programme taking over 18 months to produce - a luxury in much contemporary television production.

For independent production companies such timescales, while regarded as vital to the authenticity and thus success of the series, also bring real and tangible difficulties:

[F]rom the point of view of the business viability of my own company it is madness because obviously you get that series and then get the next one commissioned. [...] I can't say to Grayson "make that bloody pot faster". I can control the schedule of what I'm doing but I can't tell him to work faster on this pot. [...] Also, how do you know what day to be there? There are challenges to doing this; I'm not saying it's easy. (Series Director)

Within the competitive business model of television, time has both creative and economic value. This is one reason why a contributor to Bennett et al.'s study of independent companies concluded that 'arts documentaries just don't exist any more' (Bennett et al., 2012: 28), further underscoring the uniqueness of *Who Are You?* Here the on-going trend within television commissioning to leverage the success of one series through commissioning more of the same is challenging to deliver when a unique artistic process is so central to the narrative success, though it is worth reminding ourselves that since 2012 Perry has fronted 11 hours of arts content for C4 based loosely on the format of creating arts through the exploration of identity.

Conclusion

Despite its long history and the public commitments to strengthen provision from a number of broadcasters, trends in both hours and investment suggest that arts

coverage is still very much at risk of disappearing from British television screens. Within this context, professional discourse around what constitutes ‘good’ arts programming matters and provides fresh insights into how these programmes might be realised in practice. It was the process of production of Channel 4’s *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?* and the discourses surrounding its value and success which appealed to the researchers’ academic curiosity. Through interviews with key figures in the production of the programme and close analysis of the finished text, the article sought to establish whether the series indeed offers a ‘revolutionary’ new model for arts programming and how value is ascribed within specific broadcasting contexts.

The professionals interviewed were united in their view that arts television needs to evolve if it is to survive and indeed compete in the current television landscape. They pointed to a number of deficiencies in the wider genre which limited its sustainability on linear television including: historically established codes of expertise that limit the view of art, narrative treatments which are creatively dull and modes of engagement which are out of step with trends in factual television more widely. They pointed to two underlying characteristics which differentiated *Who Are You?*, neither of which is radical nor innovative within television, but crucially do not operate as typical conventions within the arts genre. These were the use of the artistic-presenter, thus breaking the trend of didactic knowledge transmission, alongside documenting the artistic process from conception to exhibition. Both these elements operate symbiotically to both frame the narrative and constitute the programme’s distinctive appeal. Whilst this highlights that a degree of creative autonomy is possible even within a genre with historically established codes and practices, it also raises concerns around how conforming to contemporary television trends also decreases the diversity of specialist factual content.

This is a discourse that also highlights the strategic value of media texts and the personalities associated with them for broadcasters. Despite not necessarily constituting a commercial success in terms of international sales, Grayson Perry and the series of programmes in which he stars has become an important commodity for C4. This is primarily in terms of reaffirming their brand identity as an alternative and innovative broadcaster with a commitment to popularising the arts even if this commitment is imperfectly realised in practice. This is especially relevant at the moment, as potential privatisation remains part of government debate and raises questions about the distinctive contribution of C4 to the public service landscape.

This research also emphasises the political economy that television professionals occupy. Whilst the series and its treatment of art might have creative significance and strategic value, key elements of its success are increasingly difficult to replicate under the pressures of contemporary television production. The demands of television production can be difficult to reconcile with the complexities of successfully mediating art and the artist. As commercial imperatives overtake public value rationales and creative experimentation, those commissioning and producing content operate within economic and generic limits set by decreased budgets and production time, and increased expectations to deliver high-quality content. The nature and source of these limits is the increased marketization of British public service broadcasting, the long-term consequence of which is a decrease in the diversity of television provision, leading to the marginalisation and potential disappearance of genres like arts from our television screens especially from those channels that are free-to-air.

Finally, the researchers contend that by thinking across industry discourses, public statements and reference to the text, a more nuanced conceptualisation of the

critical political economy of cultural production is possible. By taking a more holistic approach to the field of production this approach acknowledges the ways in which media texts are both situated within and the product of interrelated economic and cultural dimensions that are in tension. Such work is important because it brings specificity to the professional values that operate at a micro-level within cultural production in conjunction with the macro-level structures that condition the making of creative content. Therefore, this article contends that attending to these levels expands both the theoretical and methodological horizons of the critical political economy tradition at a crucial time when the landscape for public service content is shifting so dramatically.

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