



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Situating the South Bank Show: Continuity and transition in British arts television*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/89898/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Lee, D and Corner, J (2015) *Situating the South Bank Show: Continuity and transition in British arts television*. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 12 (3). 364 - 382. ISSN 1743-4521

<https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2015.0270>

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

## **Situating The South Bank Show: Continuity and Transition in British Arts Television**

### Abstract

This article examines aspects of The South Bank Show, the UK's long-running and successful series over 35 years, closely associated with its presenter Melvyn Bragg and since 2010 broadcast on the channel Sky Arts 1 rather than on the ITV network. After placing this series in the broader history of arts television, the article looks at aspects of programme design and address, the diversity of topics treated and the way in which it has reflected some of the changes at work in the social positioning and evaluation of the arts in Britain. It explores questions about the documentary methods and forms used, the relationship of programme design to different kinds of artistic practice, the way in which artists themselves figure in expositions of their work and the forms of engagement both with the high-popular divide and the playoff between the established and the new. The series is seen to be defined not only by its attempts to be 'accessible' but by its 'sociability', often grounded in the settings, informality and tone of the interview exchange. The article gives attention to the continuation of SBS on Sky Arts 1, including the 'SBS Specials', before concluding with some more general observations on arts coverage within a changing television economy and an increasingly diverse cultural landscape.

Keywords: Arts broadcasting; television studies; documentary; public service broadcasting; populism

## **Introduction**

The South Bank Show (SBS), the UK's series on the arts since 1978, was cancelled by London Weekend Television (LWT), part of the ITV network, in 2010, and has since been resurrected on Sky Arts from 2012. This article attempts first of all to place the series within the history of arts television in Britain, considering the relationship of the series both to the evolving political economy of broadcasting during this period, and also wider currents of social and cultural change which underpin its production. It then undertakes an examination of three selected editions, which illustrate core aspects of the programme's design, its 'offer to the viewer' and its diversity of subject-matter as well as the broader indications it provides of how arts activity is described and evaluated within a changing national culture.

Throughout, the issue of viewing pleasures and forms of knowledge generation for diverse audiences will be raised as part of a critical assessment of the programme's declared commitment to the further democratisation and expansion of arts experiences. The article ends by looking at the implications of the shift from a public service broadcaster to a 'narrowcast' digital channel, making some general observations about television arts coverage within a changing television economy.

### **'Arts Television': the contexts and precedents for innovation**

For over thirty five years, The South Bank Show (SBS) has been at the forefront of contemporary arts television programming in the UK, producing over 750 editions on subjects as varied as Ken Dodd, Francis Bacon, The Darkness and Ian McEwan, and aiming to inform and entertain viewers about and through the arts. From 1978 until 2010 the show was produced by London Weekend Television (LWT), then after a rather acrimonious split from ITV, Sky Arts have continued to produce the show from 2012.<sup>1</sup> Fronted throughout by Melvyn Bragg (now Lord Bragg) the author and broadcaster who has become a central figure in British cultural life, the range of artists and art forms covered by SBS is distinctive within British arts television history. Perhaps only the BBC series *Arena* (1975 -) holds a comparable record, with its wide ranging run of arts documentaries on mainstream and more 'alternative' themes. However, *Arena* was first broadcast on BBC2 and then also on BBC4, so it has always been positioned outside of popular mixed-programming. SBS, by contrast, had 33 years on Britain's main commercial channel. Despite the undoubted significance of

the series, relatively little academic attention has been given to it to date, although this situation may change as studies into the history of television's factual genres continue to develop. The present article makes some preliminary moves towards a more detailed, contextualised account.

Appearing on British screens on ITV in 1978, SBS signalled its accessibility in a number of ways. The title sequence by Pat Gavin was specifically commissioned with the brief to 'make the arts look accessible' (Walker, 1993: 109), mixing modern popular imagery (The Beatles) with the canon of 'classic' art (Michelangelo). SBS immediately asserted itself as working within a democratising and inclusive framework, with early programmes on the comedian Ken Dodd (1978), and Paul McCartney (1978) establishing the hallmark SBS style, combining backstage documentary access with Bragg's intimate, convivial interviewing.<sup>1</sup> Bragg has stated that his driving objective has been to make arts programmes that are both 'serious and entertaining, rigorous and accessible' (Walker, 1993: 110). According to him, 'I started with McCartney partly because of his great talent, partly to make a point. I wanted The South Bank Show to reflect my own life and that of the team around me; to stretch the then accepted boundaries and challenge the accepted hierarchies of the arts; to include pop music as well as classical music, television drama as well as theatre drama and high definition performers in comedy as well as in opera' (Press Association, 2013).

The creation of SBS by LWT is best understood within the context of the television climate of the late 1970s, as well as broader patterns of social and economic change. Two areas are of particular importance: British broadcasters' desire for a new form of arts programming and the changing television economy of the time. These are briefly outlined below.

Firstly, SBS was a reaction against what was perceived as elitist, somewhat inaccessible British arts television output at the time. LWT's desire to create a programme that would be engaging to wider audiences, but at the same time able to tackle complex subjects, was crucial to its creation. On the one hand, this can be understood as a reaction against the contemporaneous LWT arts programme *Aquarius*, which SBS replaced, as well as the final incarnation of the BBC 2 arts show *Monitor*, edited by Jonathan Miller in 1964, both of which were seen as failing to engage mainstream audiences.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the shifting terrain of arts programming in the late 1970s, manifest in the move away from rather

---

<sup>1</sup> This was part of a broader trend within arts programming at the time. For example, on the BBC *Omnibus* had moved beyond a 'high art' focus, with a famous film on pop star David Bowie (Yentob, 1974). Equally, the BBC 2 arts show *Monitor* was experimenting with films on subjects such as popular dance and music.

formal magazine shows based largely around ‘high’ cultural forms towards more popular subject matters, and innovative styles of programme-making, is testament to changing attitudes towards cultural value and the ‘democratisation’ of culture.

Aquarius had run since 1970, and was presented by arts figures such as theatre director Peter Hall. Whilst moderately successful in terms of critical reception, the viewing figures were lower than expected, even in the context of the much higher overall audiences for ‘serious’ content than we see today (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002). Monitor had achieved critical and audience success under the editorship of Huw Wheldon, but suffered a decline in popularity when the editorship passed to Jonathan Miller, who shifted the focus towards more avant-garde cultural activity (for example, devoting his first episode in charge to an interview with the then relatively obscure intellectual Susan Sontag) (Irwin, 2011). Following Miller’s appointment in 1964, Monitor was quickly cancelled by the BBC, lasting less than a year. Yet more broadly within arts broadcasting at the time there was a clear trend towards programming which challenged the high/low boundary, and the creation of SBS should be seen within this broader shift. SBS came to British screens as an immediate result of LWT’s desire to have a new, popular arts strand. Its main rival was the BBC series *Omnibus* (1967-2003). SBS sought to distinguish itself from *Omnibus* through its choice of subjects, and crucially through its viewer-friendly style, which the appointment of Melvyn Bragg was central to establishing. Bragg was brought to LWT by Head of Features Nick Elliot having worked previously at Monitor, ‘on the grounds that he had the ability to cope with both traditional and contemporary art forms, with both ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture’ (Walker, 1993: 109).

Secondly, SBS emerges at a period of cultural and social transformation in the United Kingdom where established hierarchies of taste were being increasingly challenged. This occurred not only within intellectual debate, as for instance in the growing academic field of ‘cultural studies’ but was also manifest in some of structures and practices of popular culture (McGuigan, 2002). A broad cultural shift, sometimes seen as a dimension of ‘postmodernism’, saw an increasing amount of cross-traffic between elements of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture alongside attempts at the dismantling of traditional cultural hierarchies and a radical re-evaluation of the artistic canon (Jameson, 1991). Elements of such a postmodern turn, albeit alongside other factors, can be detected in the formation of SBS, with its distinct fusion of the popular, vernacular and ‘elite’. Even the show’s jaunty title, with its combined connotations of established art values and entertainment, indicates this ‘fusing’ ambition.

Thirdly, the television economy and the regulatory framework of the period acted as central catalysts for the emergence of SBS. In terms of regulation, the framework of the IBA determined that the arts should be part of ITV's overall output; indeed, the terms of LWT's licence included such a commitment (Johnson and Turnock, 2005). Economically, ITV was able to secure much higher advertising revenues due to channel scarcity. Comparatively, programme budgets were much higher than today, and arts programming (alongside other public service commitments) could be easily supported by money from other peak-time output. The largesse of SBS's production culture is described by former SBS producer Gillian Greenwood:

Provisions were lavish. On my very first day we went to interview Steven Spielberg, a generous interviewee who left to go shopping in a convoy of limousines. After the filming I was surprised to learn we had to take our crew to a rather expensive Chinese restaurant. And all air fares were Club Class, even short flights to Europe, as I discovered on my first foreign trip to meet Gore Vidal in Rome. (Greenwood, 2009)

Although this economic context changed dramatically in the 1990s, in line with wider shifts in the British television economy as a result of deregulation, the growth of a multi-channel environment, increased competition and a transformed labour market (Lee, 2012), the economic and cultural factors outlined above were vital for the formation and development of SBS, driving the ambitious nature of its subject matters and its stylistic form.

Critical reception to the show has been mixed over the years. While SBS has won numerous awards (12 BAFTAs, 5 Prix Italia and 4 RTS awards), it has also been criticised for aiming itself firmly at a mainstream audience, leading to accusations of it being 'middlebrow – the television equivalent of the Sunday newspaper culture section' (Walker, 1993: 112). Yet from the outset, SBS has also signalled its desire to cover more traditional, 'serious' arts subjects, with profiles of the dramatist Arthur Miller (1980), painter Francis Bacon (1985) and Sir Laurence Olivier (1982). The form has shown variations since the strand's inception in 1978, from an initial, somewhat awkward magazine format, to a more variegated stylistic approach. For example, important editions from 1979 were directed by creative filmmakers such as David Hinton and Geoff Dunlop, and the programme has also always employed elements of an access-based observational style. Yet throughout, the presence of Bragg has been ubiquitous, acting as a point of innovation but also of control in the stylistic developments.

Bragg's departure from ITV in 2010 marked the demise of SBS1, and the cancellation of the series with his announcement was not unexpected. As Susan Shaw (longstanding SBS producer) said in interview in 2008, 'I think The South Bank Show without Melvyn would be a hollow construct. It would have to be reinvented, given a new name. I hope there will be a future for arts programming at ITV but in my view, without Melvyn, The South Bank Show as a brand no longer exists' (Farndale, 2008). At the time of the announcement to cancel SBS, Peter Fincham, ITV Director of Television, declared that 'The South Bank Show and Melvyn go hand in hand and given that he has decided to step down we felt that this was the right time to lower the curtain on this series' (Dowell, 2009). Yet the resurrection of SBS Originals on Sky Arts, as a predominantly archive-based show that draws on material from SBS1, demonstrates the value of the SBS archive, both cultural and also financially. Due to the unusual rights arrangement that Bragg negotiated with LWT, where SBS was licensed for one broadcast only on ITV, Bragg retains the rights to the entire SBS archive for commercial purposes (Dowell, 2010). The Sky Arts arrangement, and Bragg's creation of his own production company in 2010 (set up to produce SBS2 for Sky) signals not only the shifts in the television economy towards niche subscription arts broadcasting, but it also shows the value of such a rich archive, even in an increasingly on-demand, digital environment.

With the archive in mind, we now turn to provide a brief account of three editions of the programme which, together, display significant features of the style, form and content of SBS during its time on LWT. This is not by any means close textual analysis, but it does provide a sense of how the programmes develop as 'questioning encounters' and their interplay of setting and talk.<sup>3</sup> The editions concern very different areas of artistic practice and they show very different personalities in dialogue with Bragg. All are able to incorporate footage from previous editions of SBS, two of them from earlier editions specifically about the person who is the present programme's subject. This last factor provides an extra dimension to the sense of continuity and of change which is generated, adding to the depth and documentation of a retrospective view, and it also brings out the programme's own developing identity as, in part, an 'institution' of cultural record.

The Arts and Programme Design: Faces and Spaces.

a) Billy Connolly (1992).

The edition on the comedian Billy Connolly provides an example of the programme engaging with someone whose fame has been established in the sphere of popular culture and who has a strong working-class identity. Like the 2005 edition on Tracey Emin, discussed below, it is about the sphere of celebrity itself as well as those specific talents which have brought success. As in many other editions, Bragg opens the programme with a to-camera introduction:

Hello. Its 25 years since Billy Connolly left his job as a welder in the Glasgow shipyards to become a professional performer. Recently, there has been a fear that he has become pasteurized up the posh Thames Valley, cosmeticized on a couple of Hollywood TV series which have given him coast to coast recognition but little of the kudos of his one-man show. Even his circle of friends has been criticised, which is to say that he has become an *institution and the bash street gang is out again. Where, they say, is the 'Big Yin' going? Back on the road is the answer. He's just finished a 3 month sell-out tour of the UK and Nigel Wattis' film went back with him into the lion's jaws of Glasgow...*

This introduction carries a strong narrative both of transition and of controversy. Questions are being raised about both the comedian's identity and direction. This pushes the programme towards an even stronger element of biographical reflections than is usual for the series as whole, which has always given the question of the play-off between public and private identity a degree of attention. Such an emphasis is largely to be explained by Connolly's own use of biographical material in his stage act and his more-recent interest in the extent to which early traumatic experiences affected his adult life.

The programme projects aspects of transition right from the start, following a brief scene of Connolly starting his act on stage with shots of him seated opposite Bragg at a laid table in the conservatory-like space of a restaurant by the Thames, through the windows of which the banks and the river can clearly be seen. The terms of relaxed congeniality which we have noted are part of the signature of the series are established quickly here through opening jokes and laughter.

If the riverside interview is the core to which we regularly return, with more extensive exchanges taking place in the second half of the programme, the filmed material ranges widely into Connolly's past. This includes, alongside archive footage, sequences taken from his 'return' to Glasgow after a period of absence to give a performance, a return which allows him both to reflect on formative periods (e.g. on his childhood, the streets and spaces of his



youth, on his time in the shipyards and his spell as a banjo player on the Glasgow folk scene). It also gives him an opportunity to offer dressing-room reflections on his preparation for live performance and the way anxiety is a regular, and perhaps necessary, part of this, involving techniques of relaxation on stage.. There is also a sense in which the sophisticated setting of the riverside lunch projects the ‘successful’ Connolly, the one who has gone ‘south’ and perhaps become ‘smoother’, whereas the Glasgow sequences both connect vigorously with the past and also show, in extensive extracts from the show, a native ‘roughness’ being delivered successfully to a home audience.

His calm off-stage delivery, his thoughtful engagement with his own motives and anxieties, and his own fluency in talking about himself, allow a kind of self-interrogation through monologue to occur in the passages showing him in his dressing room and visiting places from his past. This produces material of ‘interior’ exploration which, with other artists, might only follow close and probing interview questioning. The relatively unmediated intimacy of the relationship with him that the programme offers is reinforced by several sequences of him talking ‘to the viewer’, anecdotally and unprompted, while driving his car around Glasgow.

Two other prominent Glaswegians, Jimmy Reid, the labour movement activist and Gus Macdonald (later Lord Macdonald) the television executive, both former Shipyard men, testify to Connolly’s qualities. However, Reid’s suggestion that Connolly is a ‘down to earth’ socialist does not quite fit with Connolly’s own comments to Bragg that he has doubts not only about the number of people who now ‘talk left and vote right’ but about the whole applicability of political ideas which the majority of people now seem to have rejected (‘I don’t like Socialism any more...I’m struggling with being wrong all that time...because when the world rejects it, it is wrong.’). So willing is Connolly to articulate his hopes and fears, including his sense of his own ‘wounded’ childhood and the self-help therapies he has used to address this (‘talking to the little boy inside you’) that Bragg has little to do in most of the interview but provide cues.

The ‘interior view’ offered by the programme deepens further when Connolly talks about the ‘uncomfortable’ feelings, including in social relationships, brought about by fame, which he likens to the less positive aspects of the experience of ‘athletic’ rather than ‘normal’ levels of physical fitness. He talks of needing ‘solace’ (which fame can bring the money to buy) but notes finally that ‘I want my act to make me happy’, citing Picasso as an example.

There is a more recent SBS (2010) on Connolly, using material from this edition and taking into account the 18 years that intervene. However, the approach, tone and content of

the 1992 programme show a tracking across questions of class identity and the experience of fame at a point of mid-career which has an important place in the larger SBS perspective.

b) Tracey Emin (2005)

The 2005 edition about Tracey Emin appears deceptively straightforward on first viewing, hiding complex, rich viewing pleasures and multiple meanings behind a glamorous surface, echoing the nature of Emin's art itself. As Bragg states in the opening piece to camera (PTC), referring to screened footage from an earlier edition of SBS on Emin broadcast in 2001,

*...we see that* long before reality television, Tracey Emin was already tapping into society's increasing obsession with ordinary people's lives with her honest, direct and often disturbing portrayal of her own, everyday existence.

Structurally, the edition is framed by Bragg's PTC, followed by a long tracking shot which takes us inside Emin's limousine as she passes through an anonymous urban landscape (this sequence also ends the documentary). We discover that she is en route to the Colony Club Rooms where she will be interviewed by Bragg. Emin is shown wearing dark glasses and one of her 'gorgeous dresses' (Bragg, 2006), talking on her mobile phone, looking every inch the contemporary artist as celebrity. Throughout, the soundtrack of David Bowie's 'Fame' disturbs the voyeuristic pleasure of this sequence, ironically framing Emin's position within the art world, and sets up the key themes of the programme including the conflict between accessibility over excellence; form over content and the corrosive impact of celebrity culture. Bowie's lyrics undercut Emin's posture of entitlement, further complicated by her own ironic self-awareness of celebrity's absurdity, and indeed by the fact that the sequence was almost certainly staged for the camera

The location of the interview, the Soho members club Colony Club Rooms, itself has rich, intertextual irony for SBS viewers as it is one of the locations where Bragg famously interviewed Francis Bacon in 1985, in the process becoming increasingly inebriated. The interview starts off with Bragg playing the role of devil's advocate, putting this rhetorical proposition to Emin:

There are those that would say that being a celebrity gets in the way of being serious. That if you're a celebrity you can't possibly be serious. What's your take on that?

This allows Emin to assert her own artistic significance, and viewpoint on this assertion, which she haughtily dismisses as 'middle England... middle minded'. However, the preceding set up sequence somewhat undermines this assertion, which works to subtly question her credibility and significance.

The interview progresses, allowing us into the biography of Emin, including her childhood and adolescence in Margate, a period which she has mythologised in her work. A central part of the programme is the full screening of 'Why I Always Wanted to be a Dancer', framing Emin as vulnerable, a characteristic in some contrast with her strident public persona. Indeed, the interior/exterior dynamic, also seen in the Vidal edition below, is also employed here, as the 'Dancer' film appears to reveal a much more vulnerable Emin, while the interview/limousine sequence implies that this vulnerability may be something of a facade, as she exudes a worldly professionalism. Of course both personas (that in 'Dancer' and the one she presents in this SBS edition) must be interpreted in the context of Emin's art, which places a central emphasis on role-playing.

How SBS deals with the critical backlash against Emin is significant, and is part of a broader house style. Critique never comes directly from Bragg, who maintains a detached journalistic objectivity. Rather it emerges from rhetorical questions (as seen above, in Bragg's use of 'some people would say') as well as explicitly from interviewees and archive footage. For example we are shown John Humphry's riposte on the satirical news show *Have I Got News for You* about Emin's infamous work 'Bed', a sequence given greater tension because Emin was a participant on the same show. We then cut to art critic David Lee declaring that 1990s British art was about the triumph of publicity, PR and visibility over artistic ability and content, and Emin is the 'Queen' of that phenomenon:

Because the vast majority of contemporary art has no criteria on which it can be judged, you can therefore say that anything is good art. The only difference between the people who are unknown and those who are known is in the marketing.

Emin then defends herself through attacking such critics:

*I'm just sick of journalists paying off their credit cards or mistresses writing stuff about me. Why don't they write about stuff that they like or stuff they want to champion. Why slag me off? I'm not slagging them off.*

The key moment in the edition is the exchange between Bragg and Emin on craft. It comes about half-way through the documentary and although it is non-confrontational, Bragg raises the question of artistic craftsmanship, with the implication that Emin's work is lacking this quality. However, reflecting on the interview years later, Bragg has expressed his admiration for Emin, suggesting that he is merely playing devil's advocate: 'Tracey was smashing. She's a serious artist and people don't realise she knows what she's doing' (Anthony, 2009).

The last sequence of the edition provides narrative circularity, as we return to Emin's limousine. However, this time the song playing the programme out is Marcia Aitken's 'I'm still in love with you', perhaps ironically, given the content of the programme has dwelled on critiques of Emin's artistic talent, the commercialisation of the contemporary art scene and the self-promotional culture at the heart of the BritArt Movement. This last factor is epitomised in the interview with art critic Sarah Kent describing the marketisation of the 1990's British art world, and the collusion of key art education institutions in this process, arguing that they became 'not so much art schools as preparations for selling your work'.

#### c) Gore Vidal (2008)

This edition of SBS is grounded in the form for which the series as a whole has become noted and which we remarked upon above—the congenial interview in an informal setting, developed across its more relaxed and more intensive moments and with a strong biographical element. However, its organisation is aided by two other factors. First of all, the availability of material from an earlier (1987) edition of SBS, in which Vidal was interviewed in Rome, where he then lived. Secondly, as with other editions concerning writers, the opportunity for the subject to read passages from published works. Together with sequences of commentary over other archive material, used to establish aspects of biography, these two modes are interspersed with an interview design that moves through an agenda of issues structured both by the chronology of Vidal's work and by a loose sequence of themes (e.g. fiction, essays, sexuality, history, religion and politics).

The programme starts with Bragg standing in front of Vidal's house in Hollywood and delivering to camera a frame for what will follow:

*Hello, Gore Vidal is the last survivor of that great postwar group of American novelists....*

He has always been a trenchant critic of American politics, expressed in many essays. His novels range from Myra Breckenridge to Julian, and he has written a series of novels on the history of the United States and lately two memoirs. He is an intellectual, a polymath. He has been and continues to be active in Politics and for the last 40 or so years he has lived in voluntary exile in Italy, sending blasts across to America still, still his subject, attacking what *he calls ironically 'freedom's land'*.

*We have come here back to Hollywood, to which he's returned, on 'Presidents' Day' to interview the 82 year old author in his old home.*

Bragg thus formally 'places' his subject for viewers, before the programme quickly moves to a more colloquial register.

Inevitably, given the long writing career of Vidal, the subsequent exchanges are heavily inflected towards reflection and reminiscence, in part taking their cue from the author's memoirs, extracts from which are read out by him. Wry humour and a caustic wit lighten the interchange and many intercut shots of Bragg show him amused and smiling or laughing at a point made. The brief use of the 1987 material, in which Vidal provides his own commentary on aspects of life in the area around his flat in Rome and also appears as an in-shot presenter discussing aspects of the Roman empire, reinforces the sense of retrospection and biographic depth as well as providing engaging footage of Roman scenes.

Although primarily supportive in his questioning, Bragg queries quite early on the extent to which Vidal might be undercutting himself too much, if only for effect.

*You're underselling yourself ridiculously, Gore. So I am not having this, I am enjoying it but it's not what is going on in the books.*

Here, the phrasing is indicative of the intimacy of the interview, which is such as to 'allow' Bragg to be firm to the point of admonition, if only in defence of his subject's reputation and in the interests of sustaining the programme's emphasis on Vidal's stature. Another, more serious, point of disagreement comes later when the interview turns to questions of religion and to Vidal's categorical dismissal of Christianity – 'its history is smeared with blood'. After a number of follow-up exchanges, Bragg finally responds by observing 'to say it is a totally

black record, just doesn't bear out', before closing this theme down and moving on to another topic. At a number of those points in the interview where Vidal offers a 'provocative' response, such as in his assertion that lying is endemic in America, that 'this whole American society is based on advertising', that 'our people are very simple and they're uneducated and our media is totally corrupt', and that the president is 'literally demented', Bragg allows the comments to go un-queried. This gives them greater space as free-standing judgments in the 'Vidalian' style, blunt propositions about which viewers can make their own assessments while enjoying Vidal's expressive performance here as a 'solo' rather than strictly dialogic one. In response to a last query from Bragg, after a long pause he observes 'I am much slower now than I was....' and then reads lines from his one of his novels, including:

As for the human case, the generation of men come and go and are in eternity no more than bacteria upon a luminous slide

So the programme concludes with the full resonance of Vidal's literary voice at its most dourly reflective.

The archive material takes the programme briefly out of the tight physical setting of interview into the visual exteriority of Vidal's distant past while the footage from the 1987 programme places images of a more recent, happy past against the progress of the interview questioning. Vidal's capacity as someone who can still entertain and stimulate with his talk makes the interviewer role essentially that of providing opportunities and cues, occasionally provocative ones. Bragg works, alongside the sequences of more direct exposition, to 'bring Vidal out' for viewers, providing them with a chance not only to hear about him but to witness some of the qualities of mind and language upon which his distinction is grounded.

Each of these programmes stages a sociable 'encounter' which consists both of an 'external' narrative (how a career and a reputation has developed to date) and an 'internal' exploration (e.g what the journey to success has felt like at different stages and how ambition and working perspectives have been modified as a result). The 'humanizing' effect of the approach adopted, an interest in 'talented personality' which must be seen as a factor in the success of SBS with diverse audiences, is combined with an interest in performance and 'product', in how the qualities of the work are generated and how they are variously perceived. Here, Connolly's stage performance, selected works by Emin and readings by Vidal are all given sufficient space to make the exchange comprehensible to those having less

direct familiarity with the achievements. The appreciation of each artist is able to incorporate elements of questioning and strands of critique even though the overall framing is positive and therefore, despite its 'benign' character, the treatment stops well short of unqualified celebration. Moreover, the 'social location' of each artist, including key periods of biographical and contextual shift, is brought firmly into the picture.

### Continuity and Change

Our brief examination of these three programmes gives some idea of the local movement, tone and address to the viewer of SBS editions in a way which a mere indication of topic and broad approach would not.

Taking a broader view and surveying SBS's output over thirty years, despite the varied subjects covered, we can identify strong evidence of both continuity and change. Aspects of continuity include the attempt to work across a full range of the arts; the overall 'mission' of the programme not to assume prior knowledge but always to avoid condescension; the use of Bragg as presenter (and of course, editor); and the title music. So established was Bragg in LWT, that in 2008 (ironically, just a year before Bragg left LWT), incoming LWT Chief Executive Michael Grade said "He's untouchable at ITV. His position here is more secure than mine as chairman' (Anthony, 2009). Another SBS hallmark is the occasional use of well-known directors (including Ken Russell (1983) and Ken Loach (1983)), who add authorial vision and status to the programme. As such, SBS films are often created not just as journalistic accounts of an artist or art-form, but as texts with aesthetic merits in their own right.

Such a sense of overt structural continuity is vital to television series' which have lasted decades, and in Britain, SBS finds itself part of a group including Panorama (BBC 1, 1953-), Arena (BBC2, 1976-, see comments earlier), Newsnight (BBC 2, 1980-), Horizon (BBC 2, 1964-) and Cutting Edge (Channel 4, 1990-), amongst others. Such programmes often seek to market themselves as audiovisual heritage, through anniversary editions, and ancillary cultural products (for instance, Bragg's recent book on SBS (2010) which includes transcripts of famous interviews over the years). However, this self-conscious display of continuity belies to some extent the degree of regular, indeed routine, adaptation, which is also vital for any series' longevity. Perhaps, most notably, there have been shifts in televisual form, as SBS has sought to innovate and adapt to a constantly changing television landscape,

and in particular to the commercialisation of the sector that occurred during the 1990s and 2000s (on this see, for instance, Freedman, 2008).

For example, in Gerald Fox's 1999 film on pop band Blur, SBS is at its most observational, dispensing with Bragg almost entirely, apart from an introductory address. The style gives an edgy sense of realism, in keeping with broader shifts in documentary in the 1990s. Access has always been pivotal to successful SBS editions (such as backstage filming access, and other tropes to position the viewer as fly-on-the-wall). This becomes much more significant during the 1990s and 2000s, as SBS increasingly seeks to gain greater access to its subjects through what are not just tokenistic moments of observation, but approaches that provide an access-led *vérité* cutting across the entire filmic narrative. However, as television audiences sought ever an ever greater sense of *vérité* during the 1990s, and as SBS fought to keep itself strong visible within the 'noisy' context of docu-soap, reality television and fly on the wall formats (Biressi and Nunn, 2005), we see observational styles of filmmaking become more dominant. It is possible that this insistence on access and a sense of dramatic narrative limited the subject-choice, as the behind-the-scenes intimacy works against covering artists who refuse to do more than a sit-down interview or who are modest in the possibilities for dramatic actuality they offer to the programme-makers.

From the earliest editions of the programme, Bragg paid attention to his subjects' personal lives, including their 'inner lives': for example, referring to their childhoods as a source of influence on their development and work. However, there is some evidence that SBS's approach here strengthened somewhat to reflect audience taste in a way that can be seen in the line taken by some of the questions in the Connolly piece, for example. This is so even if Bragg's interviews remain focused largely on the 'work'. We can see this as a muted reflection of the wider turn to 'celebrity culture' within British television from the 1990s onwards (see Turner, 2009).

From 2014, SBS on Sky, as well as continuing with full-length programmes in the established format giving continuity with the last years of the ITV period (current editions include as subjects the actor Daniel Radcliffe, Singer Angel Blue and Shakespeare's King Lear) also introduced 30 'South Bank Show Originals' as an innovative way of using the archive. Not simply repeating the earlier programmes, 'SBS Originals' (described as 'reversioned') reduced the length to 22 minutes and worked-in a new retrospective as well as critical element. Each 'original' was made up of material from the original interview



combined with 2 or 3 new pieces to camera by Bragg reflecting both on the interview and also the artist interviewed as well as short comments by a current critic or practitioner. In some contrast with the idea of Sky Arts SBS completely ‘relaxing’ into the narrowcast space of a subscription Arts channel, the ‘originals’, in their relative brevity and perky energy of structure and address, indicate another phase of ‘inclusivity’ at work, albeit in a different environment. This is a phase in which SBS’s own rich history of encounters itself forms part of the subject. In each programme, new sections of the material work to ‘place’ the original sections.

For instance, in the ‘Original’ on Iggy Pop, material drawn from a 2004 SBS programme has three ‘reflection’ sequences by Bragg woven into it. This allows comments on the circumstances and setting up of the interview in Florida and a new assessment by Bragg of his interviewee – e.g. ‘the thing that struck me most of all was how good-mannered and courteous he was’, a reflection placed tellingly against the singer’s reputation as ‘the wild man of rock’. At the end, Bragg’s remarks close in even more tightly on the original programme itself, ‘I thought, and more importantly, he thought, we did a good interview’. Operating outside the times and circumstances of the earlier footage, Bragg’s reflections to the viewer can be offered with a stronger intimacy than his original introductions, they play-off the distance between ‘then’ and ‘now’, carrying a genial invitation for viewers, including younger viewers, to look with him to find interest and pleasure in the original material. To this extent, they ‘re-socialise’ that material.

## **Conclusion**

SBS is an important series for understanding not only how television documentary form has been applied to the arts over three decades but how ‘the arts’ in Britain have been positioned

and repositioned within national culture across radically changing patterns of provision and of consumption. What we can call SBS1 (the series up until 2010) achieved its impact on a major commercial network within a very different television economy from that in which SBS2 is now placed on an arts-dedicated subscription channel. The earlier project worked in a setting where the limited range of channels meant that very large audiences could be presented with mixed-programming that included serious and often challenging programmes as well as those which offered more immediate forms of relaxation and entertainment. There is no doubt that this situation produced a degree of complacency amongst some producers but it also provided the preconditions for working imaginatively with television as a national 'public space', viewers being perceived as an intelligent collectivity willing to accept and enjoy cultural surprise and experiment, interested in giving some things 'a try' that might not have been actively sought out. Ideas of cultural 'expansion', 'growth' and 'connection' were dominant and notions of 'public service' were not placed in a necessary conflict with revenue.

The move to SBS2 (from 2012, on Sky Arts) is part of a broader movement in UK television towards higher degrees of programme segregation aligned with the strengthening of channel identities as suppliers of a specific range of content. This shift has, for instance, made BBC4 a channel whose 'brand' development is strategically central to BBC policy on arts broadcasting, with implications for the range of other BBC output. Within such a model, many viewers come to programmes as considered choices across increasing options rather than the programmes seeking them out (and then attempting to hold their engagement) across the unpredictable and demographically varied terrain of 'broadcasting'. The advantages of an audience which has, to a large degree, chosen what it gets from arts programming are clear, in relation both to content and treatment. However, the earlier need to 'reach out' to audiences, an economic imperative as well as part of a policy of improved cultural inclusion, brought its own benefits in the energy with which it positioned the arts within broader culture as generators of value, of excitement and of mystery, well worth the attention of anyone, no matter what their background, education or previous knowledge.

It is possible to see this earlier approach as having a distortive tendency, drawing on 'chatshow' appeal and the belief that since people make much more interesting television than ideas it is better to channel any attention to the latter through strong measures of the former. SBS1 tried to strike its own balance here, sometimes producing unsteady moments but much more often showing flair, confidence and integrity. The sheer risk-taking of the venture in its attempt to hold together the serious and the entertaining, the conceptual and the

personal, the provocative and the pleasing, provided it with distinctive qualities both as television and as cultural commentary which may be harder to sustain in a ‘narrowcast’ context, given the changed parameters of approach and address this context brings.<sup>4</sup> At its peak, before the rapid growth in channel competition, it was able to attract an audience of 9 million viewers. Whatever its future within an ‘arts television’ operating within radically changed economic contexts and revised definitions of ‘public service’ (see, for instance, Iosifidis, 2010), we hope to have shown that the instructive nature of its achievements for any serious thinking about television’s treatment of the arts, within the framing idea that the ‘arts are for everyone’, is indisputable.

## References

- Anthony, Andrew (2009), ‘The demise of Melvyn Bragg’s The South Bank Show’, The Guardian, 13th September, available online at <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/13/melvyn-bragg-south-bank-show>, accessed 18th October 2013.
- Biressi, Anita & Nunn, Heather (2005), *Reality TV: Realism and revelation*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Bragg, Melvyn (2010), *The South Bank Show: Final Cut*. London: Hachette UK.
- Dowell, Ben (6<sup>th</sup> May 2009), ‘ITV to axe The South Bank Show when Melvyn Bragg retires next year’, The Guardian.
- Dowell, Ben (19<sup>th</sup> July 2010), ‘Bragg takes South Bank brand to Sky’, Broadcast, available online at <http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/bragg-takes-south-bank-brand-to-sky/5016163.article>.
- Farndale, Nigel (2008), ‘The South Bank Show - you can’t please everyone’, The Telegraph, 20th January.
- Fowler, Alex (2012) report in Broadcast magazine, 1 March (<http://www.broadcastnow.co.uk/news/broadcasters/james-hunt-sky-arts/5038736.article>, accessed January 2014).
- Freedman, Des (2008) *The Politics of Media Policy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Greenwood, Gillian (2009), ‘The South Bank Show: the curtain comes down after 30 years’, *The Telegraph*, 22<sup>nd</sup> December.
- Hargreaves, Ian, & Thomas, James (2002), *New news, old news*. London: Broadcasting Standards Commission.

- Iosifidis, Petros (2010), *Reinventing Public Service Communication: European Broadcasters and Beyond*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Irwin, Mary (2011), 'Monitor: the creation of the television arts documentary', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 8(3), pp. 322-336.
- Jameson, Fredric (1991), *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Johnson, C., & Turnock, R. (2005), 'From start-up to consolidation: institutions, regions and regulation over the history of ITV', in C. Johnson (ed.) *ITV Cultures: Independent Television Over Fifty Years*, New York: McGraw International, pp. 15-34
- Lee, David (2011), 'Networks, cultural capital and creative labour in the British independent television industry', *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(4), pp. 549-565.
- McGuigan, Jim (2002), *Cultural Populism*, London: Routledge.
- Press Association (2013), 'South Bank Show Classics Repeated', York Press, 16<sup>th</sup> July, available online at [http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/leisure/showbiz/10551648.South\\_Bank\\_Show\\_classics\\_repeated/](http://www.yorkpress.co.uk/leisure/showbiz/10551648.South_Bank_Show_classics_repeated/).
- Scotsman (2009), 'Interview: Melvyn Bragg - Man out of time', Scotsman, 15th September, available online at <http://www.scotsman.com/news/interview-melvyn-bragg-man-out-of-time-1-1356204>, accessed 21st October 2013.
- The South Bank Show (1992) Billy Connolly. Season 16, episode 1. Available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doDqtEr4wKA>, accessed October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013.  
London Weekend Television
- The South Bank Show (2005) Tracey Emin (Originally broadcast in 2001, Season 24, episode 25). Available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxaoAy9oNtY>, accessed August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013. London Weekend Television
- The South Bank Show (2008) Gore Vidal. Season 33, episode 3. Available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmpfcPeBgvM>, accessed November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013.  
London Weekend Television
- Turner, Graeme (2009), *Ordinary people and the media: The demotic turn*, London: Sage.
- Walker, John (1993), *Arts TV: a history of arts television in Britain*, Bloomington; Indiana University Press.
- Wyver, John (2007), *Vision on: film, television and the arts in Britain*, London: Wallflower Press.

Yentob, A. (1975) David Bowie: Cracked Actor, Omnibus, Season 8, Episode 13. United Kingdom, British Broadcasting Corporation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Evidence of the fractious nature of Bragg's departure from LWT can be found in interviews he gave to the national press at the time (Scotsman, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Miller's editorship was described as 'hopeless' by Stephen Hearst (a documentary film-maker who went on to become Head of Arts Television at the BBC), indicative of British broadcasting's aversion to an overly intellectual approach to arts programming (Irwin, 2011: 332).

<sup>3</sup> All editions were accessed on YouTube, between June and December 2013.

<sup>4</sup> The Director of Sky Arts, James Hunt, commented in 2012 on the challenges faced, noting the niche nature of the market: '...to keep growing the audience, you have to aim at the ABC1, 55-plus audience who either don't watch a lot of TV or want a dish on their house, but are the type to go to the Hay Festival of Literature.' (Fowler, 2012). To put the scale of arts television in statistical perspective, it is worth noting that the share of the total audience for Sky Arts 1 in December 2013 was 0.1% alongside 1.00% for BBC4.(Source BARB weekly total viewing summaries).