



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/224116/>

Version: Published Version

Book Section:

Rayner, J. (2025) Conclusion. In: Screening the Fleet: The Royal Navy on Television 1973–2023. White Rose University Press, pp. 225-238. ISBN: 9781912482405.

<https://doi.org/10.22599/screeningthefleet.h>

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY-NC) licence. This licence allows you to remix, tweak, and build upon this work non-commercially, and any new works must also acknowledge the authors and be non-commercial. You don't have to license any derivative works on the same terms. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

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 including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Conclusion

(Navy) days of future past

In surveying and suggesting the significance of nearly 50 years of the Royal Navy's televisual representation, this study has sought to address three expansive but inseparable enquiries: how has the Navy changed as a documentary subject over this period? How have the techniques and practices of documentary television changed around that subject? And what does this long relationship between the Navy and British television reveal about the form, function and responsibility of factual television towards a representative national institution and focus of national identity like the Royal Navy? While the relationship has inevitably charted the transformation of both, it has also encompassed their transformation of each other.

While the respective successes and failures of *Warship* and *Making Waves* suggest no imminent return of naval-oriented television drama (leaving aside the BBC thriller series *Vigil* [2021], set aboard a fictional Trident submarine), the trend since 2000 in proliferating documentary treatments of the Royal Navy via frequent BBC and Channel 5 series underlines a perceived and sustained convergence of purpose, programming and popularity in factual television coverage, public service broadcasting and information, and tacit recruitment agenda. That these most recent series have accompanied both a renaissance of the Navy, in foregrounding its activities and the introduction of its new ships, and an assertion of its relevance amid post-Brexit emphases on Britishness and notions of sovereignty and accompany the recognition of a resurgent Russian threat, further suggests the integration of overt political discourses within the evolving fabric of British factual television. If the Navy has grown in frequency and importance as a documentary subject, this is interpretable as much as evidence of changes in its circumstances (and its attitudes and accessibility to media representation) and its political currency as to shifts in the form, address and audience of factual programming.

How to cite this book chapter:

Rayner, J. 2025. *Screening the Fleet: The Royal Navy on Television 1973–2023*. Pp. 225–238. York: White Rose University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22599/ScreeningtheFleet.h>. License: CC BY-NC 4.0

Having remarked on the frequency, energy and perceived lack of success with which the Royal Navy has striven to engage with the British public in the period after World War II via film, television, public relations and recruitment campaigns, Duncan Redford connects naval culture and national identity indelibly to the UK's global status. He contends that the country's post-bellum and post-imperial decline precipitated the neglect of the former, alongside and because of the enforced re-negotiation of the latter:

In the period up to 1919 conceptions of what being an island meant and that of global status were aligned with a need for sea power. After 1919 these conceptions slowly diverged and naval power became less important in imagining what it meant to be British. With the public disengagement from the Navy and naval strategy came increasing vulnerability to budget cuts. At the same time, the lack of any resonant national myths regarding the Navy (unlike that of the 'Few' and the Battle of Britain with regard to the RAF) ensure [sic] that there are no images around which the Navy can be imagined which would allow popular support and new links to aspects of a national identity to develop. The idea that it is the relationship between aspects of national identity and the Royal Navy that is at the heart of the Navy's lack of success in stimulating popular interest and support for a maritime defence posture will be an extremely worrying one. It suggests that public relations efforts are at the limit of what they can achieve as engagement and relevance at the deepest levels are lacking.²⁶⁵

Melding the national, naval and imperial aspects of British identity and lamenting the decline of all three from a proclaimed post-Victorian high-water mark constitutes a nostalgic reading of and conservative response to the encroaching economic and political realities that transformed the UK's position during the 20th century. While discounting the unchanged relevance of the Royal Navy to British survival, let alone victory, in World War II, which was sustained in 'resonant myths' found in the contemporary media of the conflict (and perpetuated in post-war feature films as well as recruitment material such as *The King's Navy*), this perspective suggests that the co-dependency of national and naval culture becomes, in times of uncertainty and retrenchment, disadvantageous to both:

The ideas of both formal and informal empire drew upon the Royal Navy as the cornerstone of their defence and Britain's resulting place in

²⁶⁵ Duncan Redford, Does the Royal Navy Matter? Aspects of national identity and the Navy's vulnerability to future budget cuts, *RUSI Commentary*, 18 September 2009, <https://rusi.org/commentary/does-royal-navy-matter-aspects-national-identity-and-navy%E2%80%99s-vulnerability-future-budget> [accessed 11 October 2019].

the world. With the progressive retreat from formal empire from 1948 onwards, the role of an imperial navy was weakened and the Commonwealth, as an idea to replace a formal maritime empire, did not engage Britain. The result was that this link into an aspect of a national identity was broken. Increasing ties to Europe in the 1960s onwards have only increased this disengagement from the purely naval aspects of British global power and position.²⁶⁶

However, apart from risking controversy with its regretful retrospection, such an assertion that an idealistic and unidimensional understanding of 'empire' is essential to conceptions of British status and identity and naval significance overlooks the ironic, problematic but palpable persistence of a British naval global presence from the remainder of the 20th century on into the 21st. Whether this is interpretable as self-interested imperialist intervention or as mature moral obligation, the Royal Navy has remained permanently committed to it. Historical retreats from and returns to 'east of Suez', as much as the Falklands conflict and arguably more than European or North Atlantic commitments, have characterised the activity of the Royal Navy since the 1970s. Similarly, the service's other constants since the end of World War II have been restrictions in defence spending, incessant reductions in the fleet's size, and concomitant difficulties in crewing ships by recruiting and retaining personnel to undertake an undiminished range of international tasks. These are the enduring national, political and institutional contexts that the modern Navy has experienced, and which contemporary factual televisual representations have varyingly eschewed, recorded or actively investigated. However, the national political landscape as well as the international political climate have most recently explicitly reconjoined naval, national and global senses of British identity. Christopher Martin, who, though echoing Redford describes the UK as a 'post-modern maritime and globalised nation', delineates the convergent problems of national identity, internal self-perception and external, international projection confronting the present-day Royal Navy:

Less than a century ago there was huge public awareness of the importance of the Royal Navy. The navy was the first line of defence from invasion and protected the empire and the trade upon which British wealth and security depended. Children collected cards of naval heroes much like children today collect stickers of football stars. The Royal Navy was, then at least, synonymous in the public mind with defence and prosperity. Today, despite the UK's deep dependency upon the globalised maritime-based trading system, the general public is almost completely

²⁶⁶ Redford, *Does the Royal Navy Matter?*

‘sea-blind’. Few understand what the Royal Navy does. One might also ask if many policy-makers really understand too.²⁶⁷

Citing a 2015 Chatham House enquiry into the views of the British public on the nation’s image and its right to act as a ‘great power’ on the global stage, Martin summarises the conflicting factors of history, morality and economics afflicting the funding, construction and deployment of the Royal Navy: ‘great wealth brings with it responsibility and self-interest in maintaining the global system; if the UK wants to sit at the top table it has to pay for the privilege, financially and morally.’²⁶⁸ The enquiry’s findings – that 63% of respondents believe Britain should aspire to be a ‘great power’, 69% that the UK has a responsibility to maintain international security, but that 42% think the country should pursue its own interests, even unethically – highlight contradictions in the perception of national identity, defence capability, political consciousness (and conscience) and self-image affecting 21st-century Britain.²⁶⁹ That this enquiry preceded by less than a year the referendum on European Union membership, which reflected similar division and ambition in views on Britain’s national, regional and global standing, underlines the divergence in public opinion when attempting to process the UK’s post-imperial experience and position the country in the ‘postmodern’ present. Although writing before the Brexit vote became a reality, Martin summarised the Navy’s role and nation’s image problems of the post-war period, and anticipated the rhetorical redirection of both in the wake of the controversial referendum:

If there is one aspect that must change, however, it is the persistent conceptualisation of the UK as a post-imperial power as this perpetuates the notion of ‘decline’. Many labels are applied to describe the UK today: ‘post-imperial’, ‘great power’, ‘major power’, ‘medium power’ and ‘declining power’. Often, these labels are applied within the context of what the UK *was* 70 years ago ... it is important to reconceptualise the UK today, not within the context of what the UK *was* but what the UK *is*, a post-modern power with global interests and with a vital role to play in the international system that will change massively in the next decades, requiring a navy suitable for the twenty-first century, not an imperial or Cold War past.²⁷⁰

In an ironic reaffirmation of the vital connections construed by Redford, British identity, a national future and a renewed naval consciousness have characterised

²⁶⁷ Christopher Martin, *The UK as a Medium Maritime Power in the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.v.

²⁶⁸ Martin, *The UK as a Medium Maritime Power*, p.3.

²⁶⁹ Martin, *The UK as a Medium Maritime Power*, p.3.

²⁷⁰ Martin, *The UK as a Medium Maritime Power*, pp.4–5.



Figure v: F-35 over HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Credit: Lockheed Martin. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

political rhetoric following the Brexit referendum. Following on from the inauguration of the UK's National Shipbuilding Strategy in 2017, in 2019 Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson restated the government's commitment to the Five Powers Defence Arrangement, confirmed the return to the permanent basing of British ships in the Arabian Gulf, and previewed the deployment of the Navy's restored aircraft carrier capability (Figure v) to the South China Sea as evidence of 'global engagement' and 'permanent presence'.²⁷¹ The following year Prime Minister Boris Johnson asserted that the future of Britain's stature and influence was dependent upon a restoration of naval power:

Referring to his promise to 'restore Britain's position as the foremost naval power in Europe', the Prime Minister added: *'If there was one*

²⁷¹ HM Government, Defence in Global Britain: Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson gave a speech at RUSI outlining the future direction of UK Armed Forces, *Ministry of Defence*, 11 February 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/defence-in-global-britain> [accessed 5 February 2020].

*policy which strengthens the UK in every possible sense, it is building more ships for the Royal Navy.*²⁷²

The ironies at work in the Prime Minister's statement (in representing a Conservative government ostensibly dedicated to expanding rather than reducing the size of the Navy, in announcing building plans that prevent further shrinkage of the fleet rather than assure its growth, and in aspiring to naval supremacy in a Europe the UK has officially left) extend beyond the re-embrace of an 'East of Suez' policy. This unambiguous revival of a global, high-profile Royal Navy presence, validated on the bases of international order, great power status and the protection of self-interest, stands in particularly stark contrast to the reduction and retreat of the Navy to European and NATO areas under the Conservative government of the 1980s. The unpopular instigator of that policy, Margaret Thatcher's defence minister John Nott, may in retrospect be seen to have been reacting to political and economic circumstances that then (and now) appear to make Britain's ostensible defence decisions untenable, and the moral justification of international intervention no more than 'neo-imperialist do-goodery'.²⁷³

While an acknowledgement of a renewed emphasis on the significance of the Indo-Pacific region can be backdated to 2013, the unequivocal 'return to East of Suez' as stated in British defence policy of the 2020s reflects post-Brexit economic realities as much as it recalls previous imperial obligations.²⁷⁴ By 2019, partners in Asia represented seven of Britain's most important export markets and accounted for 20% of British exports and imports, with three – China, Japan and Hong Kong – outstripping Germany (the UK's second largest export market) in value.²⁷⁵ Within another decade, the region is expected to generate 90% of the world's economic growth, making British commitment to security and trade in the area a necessity, irrespective of no discernible lessening of commitments and connections to Europe, the Gulf and the

²⁷² George Allison, UK to become 'foremost naval power in Europe' says PM, *UK Defence Journal*, 19 November 2020, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/uk-to-become-foremost-naval-power-in-europe-says-pm/> [accessed 14 January 2022].

²⁷³ John Nott, The adventures of a Chelsea pensioner, *The Spectator*, 19 June 2004, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/diary---19-june-2004> [accessed 11 July 2022].

²⁷⁴ Alessio Patalano, Days of Future Past? British strategy and the shaping of Indo-Pacific security (London: Policy Exchange 2019), <https://www.policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Days-of-Future-Past.pdf> [accessed 14 January 2022].

²⁷⁵ Alessio Patalano, The Indo-Pacific 'Tilt' and the Return of British Maritime Strategy, in *The Integrated Review in Context: A Strategy Fit for the 2020s?* ed. by Joe Devanny and John Gearson (London: Centre for Defence Studies, King's College London, 2021), 50–52, p.51, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/the-integrated-review-in-context> [accessed 26 July 2022].

Americas.²⁷⁶ This period of transformation for Britain's national and naval circumstances has, perhaps unsurprisingly, also been an era of unprecedented coverage of the Royal Navy in factual television, with multiple series of *Warship: Life at Sea*, *Britain's Biggest Warship* and others appearing over the past five years. The current end point for this study therefore marks a period of more sustained, varied and insistent naval documentary programming than ever before being broadcast on British television, with this emphasis notably shared between channels committed to public service and commercially popular programming, the BBC and Channel 5. However, having reviewed up to this point the different series and programmes that have been produced since the 1970s, this study must also scrutinise and evaluate how the history and examples of naval documentary conform or compare to, or confound and contravene, the documentary precepts advanced by Michael Renov, the frameworks and approaches for representations of the real defined by Bill Nichols and the expectations of factual television set out by John Corner.

A taxonomy of naval documentary

The developmental changes overtaking factual televisual treatment and style that the surveyed examples of naval documentary reflect can be divided between relationships with subject and relationships with style. Corner characterises these insightfully in terms of the text's attention and intensities being turned inward, to privilege and promote authorship of the documentary as 'artefact', or turned 'outward', in reference and responsibility to its subject:

The more that a piece of documentary work displays such features as, for instance, a strong narrative and diegetic crafting, the placing of its human subjects as 'characters', a self-conscious styling of its images and sounds, a reflexive play across its own project, the easier it is to approach is as an artefact, the outcome of expressive authorship. The more it sticks within the core conventions of exposition and illustration, the more aesthetically modest it is, the more propositionally and descriptively direct, then the more it is necessary to engage it within the terms of *what it is about*, to take the 'outward' route into the world of the referent and the theme.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ René Balletta, Delivering 'Global Britain'—A Naval Perspective, *USNI Proceedings*, 2021, 147(4), https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/april/delivering-global-britain-naval-perspective?utm_source=U.S.+Naval+Institute&utm_campaign=832f53df3fProceedings_This_Week__2020_6_5_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_aee2c2162-832f53df3f-222721113&mc_cid=832f53df3f&mc_eid=56dca31bd2 [accessed 9 April [accessed 9 April 2021].

²⁷⁷ Corner, What can we say about documentary? p.683.

Corner's distinction of these predispositions to inward or outward perspectives suggests a similar gravitation of Michael Renov's documentary 'tendencies' towards active, directive and impartial depictive poles of factual representation. Although not definitive or immovable as characterisations of intent or achievement, Renov's isolation of the 'tendencies' to 'record, reveal or preserve' and to 'express' accords with Corner's identification of the 'aesthetically modest' directness of the 'outward route', whereas the 'tendencies' to 'persuade or promote' and to 'analyse or interrogate' are more open to crafting, didacticism and 'authorship' taking precedence over the referent. Similarly, Nichols's documentary 'modes' reflect (though more by way of a spectrum rather than a polarisation) the 'inward' and 'outward' draws of documentary practice, with the 'observational' and 'expository' manifesting more immersion in the 'world of the referent and the theme', and the 'interactive', the 'reflexive' and the 'performative' inclining towards an absorption with 'authorship' and 'diegetic crafting'. Although plainly convergent and complementary in usefully providing terminology and describing technique, these frameworks highlight how individual documentary films and programmes inevitably straddle or combine categorisations. Factual representations exhibit or adopt multiple approaches, methods and perspectives, not only across their entire duration but often within single sequences. Given these fertile, illuminating but overlapping terms and definitions, Corner's thematic identification of documentary intention and interpretation as a series of couplets of 'tension and potential conflict' (art/reportage, truth/viewpoint, and institution/forms) offers a more conclusive framework for evaluating the effects and influence of factual texts.²⁷⁸

The chronological and aesthetic precedent of *Sailor* evinces the motivation to 'record' and 'reveal', relying predominantly on the 'observational' mode (albeit with sparing use of 'expository' voice-over) to underpin its reportage and its claim to veracity in impartial scrutiny (and ultimately support and celebration) of the Navy as 'institution'. The key characteristics of this representational benchmark are carried over into *Submarine*. However, this later series exhibits greater dedication to the 'expository' mode, in striving to illuminate and explain the less visible and understood world of the submarine service. In this regard, *Submarine* moves more to 'analyse and interrogate' its subject, most notably in its deliberate foregrounding of debate on conflict (through the 'Ocean Safari' episodes, and particularly in the record of the Polaris submarine's preparation and patrol). In these instances, the interviewer's inquiries – at first implied by interviewee responses and eventually explicitly included off-screen – propel the 'observational' mode into the 'interactive', with the additional awareness of the filmmaker's presence driving at 'truth' and 'viewpoint' (and *through* viewpoint) to a questioning of institution and 'order'. Arguably, at this point *Submarine* (and the later *HMS Splendid*) crosses further thresholds, into the

²⁷⁸ Corner, *The art of record*, p.11.

'reflexive' by accentuating the process and moment of its production, and also in 'expressing' an opinion on nuclear war and deterrence, if only by foregrounding the recorded views of the Polaris crew members themselves. By contrast, the unique endeavour of *Sea Power* makes no apology or concession for its purpose to 'persuade and promote', to 'express' a rigid subjectivity through reflexive and performative modes. Its didactic exposition advances an institutional viewpoint that it considers and asserts as self-evident truth and seeks to embed its concept of inherited institutional order within a receptive public landscape. Further enhancement or exaggeration of the 'interactive' and the 'reflexive' modes manifests in *Submarine* as the 'performative', which can also be seen to embody the 'tendencies' to 'persuade and promote', and this progression also clearly characterises the evolution of Channel 5's series in subsequent decades.

The naval drama series included in this study because of their contemporaneity with the development of naval documentary can also be evaluated via the same terms and criteria. Despite their categorisation as fictional drama or uniform soap operas, *Warship* and *Making Waves* are interpretable as drama-documentary (i.e. presenting fictional characters in factually based circumstances), with the realism conferred by their collaborative production arrangements with the Navy acting to observe, report, record and reveal. Both these series can be seen to 'persuade and promote' the institutional cause, not least for recruitment purposes, even though the demands of drama frequently (particularly in the case of *Making Waves*) appear to produce less than positive representations of the service. It is remarkable in this regard that, though it featured occasionally exaggerated dramatic incidents alongside its critical, realist and character-based narratives, *Warship* remained consistently more popular through its broadcast history than *Making Waves*, despite the latter's conscious attempts to combine sensational incident and domestic drama. Therefore, despite its status as fictional drama, as factually based television *Warship* (and to an even greater extent *Sea Patrol*) can be seen to unite the otherwise 'generically differentiated delivery of pleasure and knowledge'.²⁷⁹

The deliberate combination of entertainment and information in *How to Build... a Nuclear Submarine* reflects the crafting of contemporary factual formats which similarly strive to combine pleasure and knowledge, or perhaps deliver circumscribed knowledge within a packaging of pleasure. The elevation of visual stylisation within this episode from a series (which clearly resembles the pervasive and dominant traits of 'popular documentary' or 'infotainment') therefore distracts from its important social and economic referentiality. The hyperbolic presentation of challenges and crises and rhetorical language of superlatives that characterise such programmes mean that the 'performative' dominates the expository, expression overwhelms record, and 'art' encroaches' conspicuously upon 'reportage'. Nonetheless, *How to Build... a Nuclear*

²⁷⁹ Corner, What can we say about documentary? p.685.

Submarine remains capable of analysis and some 'interrogation' of its subject, in scrutinising the cultural and political context of shipbuilding and probing the institutions and 'orders' behind its history. By contrast, *Building Britain's Ultimate Warship* attempts to navigate an impartial or perhaps ambivalent course through the controversies of naval shipbuilding. It records but also interrogates a momentous construction programme. It reveals and promotes an institutional perspective and history. It combines the observational, the expository and the interactive to accommodate numerous (and inevitably conflicting) viewpoints on institutional narratives, establishment order and the record of a programme as yet unfinished and untested. While certainly reflecting the transformed style and organisation of contemporary factual representations that merge current affairs, journalistic investigation and public information, these programmes also maintain sufficient referential and analytic validity to be pertinent and specifically naval documentaries.

Channel 5's numerous naval-oriented series since the early 2000s have displayed more self-conscious stylisation, deliberate narrative structuring, and 'expressive authorship' than their predecessors. Narrative editing steers these series from referential records into aesthetic artefacts, and in tandem with insistent and invasive expository voice-over (as in *Submarine School* and *Royal Navy: Submarine Mission*) engenders a dominant performative and persuasive mode. Where voice-over becomes augmented by the presence of a presenter (as in *On Board Britain's Nuclear Submarine: Trident*), the interactive mode descends further into the reflexive as the documentary begins to refer only to the circumstances of its own making and to privilege the responses of the intrusive mediating figure. By contrast, earlier series of *Warship* and *Warship: Life at Sea* retain clearer tendencies to 'record', 'analyse' and 'express' and remain more consistently within 'observational' and 'expository' modes. However, it is in the later series of *Warship: Life at Sea* that the expressive and persuasive overtake the recording tendency, undermining the reliability and veracity of the referential record in the support of an overt institutional order. If the intention is to awaken the British public to immediate danger, to equate truth and viewpoint in a tabloidisation of televisual style and plead the Navy's case for funds and support, then Lord Hill-Norton would probably approve.

Chris Terrill's contribution to factual television in general and to naval representation in particular requires similar conceptual evaluation of its characteristics, relevance and achievement. While perhaps privileging the impartial ideal and tendency to record, reveal and preserve, Terrill's approach and its products mobilise and unite Nichols's modes without contradiction. The filmmaker's presence and shared experience function to connect the extraordinary and the ordinary in his subject reliably and veraciously for the audience, as second order observers to the documentarist. While the consistency of Terrill's presence might indicate expressive authorship or imply interactive or reflexive influences upon the 'world of the referent', the documentary record of the Navy as community and institution he has created suggests that art and reportage,

veracity and subjectivity are not hierarchic or exclusive criteria against which to judge documentary but stand as holistic and harmonising facets to the understanding of the observed subject. At once as 'aesthetically modest' and 'descriptively direct' as *Sailor*, the totality of Terrill's work outdistances this honourable precedent in volume, scope and integrity, and is additionally remarkable in becoming its own institutional reflection, consumed within and influencing the evolving naval culture it has documented.

Beyond its clear evocation in the production and reception of Discovery's HMS *Ark Royal*, *Sailor's* influence can be gauged from the strong resemblance to it exhibited by the 10-part PBS series *Carrier* (Icon Productions, 2008), filmed aboard USS *Nimitz* during Operation Iraqi Freedom between May and November 2005. This 12-hour series of a deployment during war moves from illustrating the Navy to the nation to illustrating the nation within the Navy with observational and ultimately preservative veracity. Following a varied selection of individuals from the ship's massive complement, *Carrier* portrays the repetitive, mundane and ordinary aspects of their work alongside the unusual and the extraordinary, disorientating conditions of an unenvisioned war. *Nimitz's* crew embodies diversity, inclusivity, individuality and tolerance, as well as institutional homogenisation, isolation and palpable tension, aptly representing (in all senses) America after 9/11. *Sailor* is similarly enshrined as an effort to 'preserve', not only in retrospect as a British documentary landmark but by its own rapid concretisation of audience recognition via *Sailor: 8 Years On*. Even more significantly, its relevance to the Navy itself can be gauged from its reappearance in *Britain's Biggest Warship* as a cultural record being imbibed by a new generation of sailors.

Alongside Terrill's *HMS Brilliant*, *Sailor* is shown to provide the same combination of information and formation for HMS *Queen Elizabeth's* (Figure vi) crew as participants and viewers of the same evolving community. The sequence detailing the (re)viewing and (re)appraisal of *HMS Brilliant*, on the communal level for *Queen Elizabeth's* youngest crew members and an intensely personal one for its oldest, crystallises the specificities of purpose and significance for naval documentary for reflection and growth within the Navy community itself, and the universalities of relevance and recognition for the national viewing community as well.

Final words

Christopher Martin contends that the UK is distinguished by indelible 'existential features' that determine its identity as a maritime state, and which therefore necessarily dictate its characterisation as a naval power: being an island with overseas territories, possessing a shipbuilding industry and a domestic merchant marine, and a maritime services sector centred on the world trade hub of London. Under such historical and contemporary impetuses the UK cannot



Figure vi: HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. LPhot Daniel Shepherd. ©UK Ministry of Defence. CROWN COPYRIGHT, 2019: Open Government Licence.

be anything but a ‘maritime-dependent state.’²⁸⁰ In stressing the contemporary geopolitical realities of Britain’s trade and security, Martin observes that ‘there are no “far off places” in the globalised maritime economy.’²⁸¹ Equally, there are no far-off places on television, which renders the geographical, political, cultural and human world visibly and accessibly, but also popularly and partially. Via its pervasiveness and forms of depiction and address, factual television may erode difference or exoticise it (both positively and negatively) in the service of information, influence and entertainment, to foster critical consciousness and active, interrogative viewership (and citizenship) in the recognition of the real. The Navy as both familiar and distant subject, outside of ordinary experience and yet recorded and broadcast as (extra)ordinary British institution, community and constituency, represents an enabling documentary subject for national depiction and engaged audience debate, as Brian Winston suggests:

Grounding the documentary idea in reception rather than in representation is exactly the way to preserve its validity. It allows the audience to make the truth claim for the documentary rather than the documentary implicitly making the truth claim for itself.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ Martin, *The UK as a Medium Maritime Power*, pp.5–8.

²⁸¹ Martin, *The UK as a Medium Maritime Power*, p.8.

²⁸² Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: BFI, 1995), p.253.



Figure vii: Under the white ensign. Photo copyright Chris Terrill, 2018. Used with permission.

The varied instances of Royal Navy representation underline the relevance and also the limitations of Nichols's modes, in an environment in which factual television is protean and populist in the ways in which it chooses to fashion and propagate documented reality. The Navy clearly serves television's purposes in a variety of ways, as a documentary subject from commercial as much as public service broadcasting perspectives. Television, as the varying

examples of *Sailor*, *Sea Power*, *HMS Brilliant* and *Warship: Life at Sea* suggest, can equally serve the Navy's, the broadcaster's or the establishment's purposes. The important point, to return to John Corner's critical framework for documentary, is to remain conscious of the 'order' behind, and the differences between perceived and depicted reality in the landscapes, or better 'seascapes', of public knowledge.