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Dossier introduction: Northern English stardom

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Recognizing the importance of the regional in studies of popular television is crucial to ‘knowing’ and understanding television and is a site through which the rich identities of, and identifications with, television performers, texts and audiences can be mined. Region is also important in other ways – as a marker of belonging and exclusion and as a framework for countering homogenizing discourses around globalization. In addition, there is a contemporary and acute UK and European focus on regionalism in the wake of recent referendums and a new and (more than ever) geographically divided and regionally defined electoral map of Britain, suggesting that the narratives of place are increasingly worthy of investigation.

British television drama is, historically at least, regional – as the 2012 work of Lez Cooke, *A Sense of Place: Regional British television drama, 1956–82*, attests and explores. Northern English writers, directors and locations (writers such as Paul Abbott and Sally Wainwright, directors of *Play for Today* [1970–1984] such as Alan Clarke and Ken Loach and specific locations such as the Mancunian *Coronation Street* [1960–]) situate a very clearly defined framework for understanding and situating representations of ‘Northernism’, and yet we argue that performance is perhaps an uncharted (and underexplored) territory in this ever-important emphasis on place.

It is, we contest, categorically the case that an overarching canon of (contemporary) regional, Northern drama can be identified by tracing the careers of specific regional actors from soap to serial and single drama and often film.

Christopher Eccleston, John Simm, Ricky Tomlinson, Sean Bean, Jane Horrocks, Lesley Sharp, Siobhan Finneran, Sarah Lancashire, Sue Johnston and Maxine Peake stand as just a few compelling examples. The point here is that these actors bring to their various performances narratives and iconographies of Northern English space, which are excavated by writers and directors for their associative qualities: grit, resilience, emotional reserve, charm and candour. This is not of course just specific to drama but to other television genres (particularly comedy) and regional stars such as Ant and Dec, Paul Hollywood, Paul O'Grady, Cilla Black and Victoria Wood. Yet, in the case of contemporary drama, we argue, these iconographies are more present, more eloquent and more critically significant than ever.

This shifting of emphasis onto the performance of region also enables us to think critically about the regional performance of gender. Indeed, women do have clear roles to play in Northern narratives (suffering mothers, wives and lovers), and yet we lack critical frameworks to acknowledge the full extent of the feminine dimensions within dominant narratives of Northern Englishness. A focus on *performance* enables this because it moves away from traditional notions of individuated male stardom as epitomized via British New Wave texts such as *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960), to a closer exploration of the presence of female performers (and characters) within ensembles. This new perspective enables us to uncover an alternative and rich thread of regionally constructed representations of femininity.

In our co-authored opening article, 'Lesley Sharp and the alternative geographies of Northern stardom', we critically evaluate Sharp's performance across four different televisual texts, namely *Road* (1987), *Playing the Field* (1998–2002), *Clocking Off* (2000–2003) and *Scott & Bailey* (2011). We begin by suggesting that

the ‘space-myth’ (Shields 1991: 208) of Northern England is also a myth of gender, and work to destabilize this monolithic landscape by bringing the significance of television, performance and female stardom to the fore. Exploring the specificities of Sharp’s performances, as well as considering the texts and ensemble contexts of her work, we argue that a focus on Sharp’s performance allows for the mobilization of a shift in the location of a spatial identity and authority away from the realm of the masculine towards alternative feminine and feminist spaces.

In our second article entitled “‘A Revolutionary Voice’: Analysing Maxine Peake’s Northern stardom in *Silk* and *Room at the Top*’, Kristyn Gorton and Alison Peirse explore how Maxine Peake’s explicit and directly articulated social conscience – specifically in terms of class, gender and Northernness – can be explored through television drama. Using the series *Silk* (2011–2014) and the mini-series *Room at the Top* (2012) as case studies, Gorton and Peirse analyse Peake’s explicit and political performances, suggesting that at once Peake adheres to and exposes the fragility of the ‘strong’ Northern woman stereotype.

The third article in the dossier is authored by Hannah Andrews and focuses on the actor Jane Horrocks. In “‘No-nonsense-two-up-two-down-by-gum-you-daft-ha'poth-Northernness’: Jane Horrocks, Gracie Fields and performing generic Northernness’, Andrews argues that Horrocks (like Peake) can be understood as a paradigm of (feminine) Northern stardom. Andrews notes that when Horrocks starred as Gracie Fields in the BBC Four single drama *Gracie!* (2009), most reviewers noted the importance of the geographical (Lancashire) connection between the two women. As with Gracie, Andrews argues that Horrocks’s star image has been built around the ambivalent performance and exploitation of a Lancashire identity as well as the critical tendency to conflate actor with character, and explores how the embodied

performance of known biographical personalities works in tension with the performance of generic ‘Northernness’.

The fourth article in this dossier ‘Sharper, better, faster, stronger: Performing Northern Masculinity and the legacy of Sean Bean’s Sharpe’ is authored by Siân Harris. Focusing on Sean Bean, Harris examines the career of the Sheffield-born actor through an analysis of his starring role in the ITV historical drama *Sharpe* (1993–2008), charting the ways in which the televisual text capitalizes on Bean’s public identity as a Northern English, working-class actor. In addition, Harris argues that Bean’s stardom provides a specific emphasis on regionality through a focus on how the characterization speaks to a popular understanding of Yorkshire, and a consideration of how Bean’s subsequent roles have engaged with *Sharpe*’s legacy.

In our final article “‘The Bake Off beefcake with the best buns in the business’: Sex, pies and Paul Hollywood’ Gill Jamieson argues that Northern star Paul Hollywood is both ordinary and extraordinary, televisually skilled and vocationally gifted. Noting the associations between Hollywood’s skill – baking – and the North of England, Jamieson suggests that Hollywood embodies the often contradictory nature of television stardom where this is achieved primarily in the role of the presenter and yet where success is often dependent on an appeal to a specific demographic, in this case a British audience. Focusing on his failure to crack the US market, Jamieson asks what it is about Hollywood that makes his commodity value appeal resonate in the United Kingdom but ultimately sink without a trace in the international market, suggesting that we might consider Hollywood as a case study in the limits of the transnational celebrity.

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Television programmes

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Clocking Off (2000–2003, UK: BBC).

Playing the Field (1998–2002, UK: BBC).

Play for Today (1970–1984, UK: BBC).

Road (1987, UK: BBC).

Room at the Top (2012, UK: BBC).

Scott & Bailey (2011–, UK: ITV).

Silk (2011–2014, UK: BBC).

Sharpe (1993–2008, UK: ITV).

The Great British Bake Off (2010–, UK: BBC).

Contributor details

Dr David Forrest is Lecturer in Film Studies in the School of English at The University of Sheffield, UK. He is currently working on a monograph (with Sue Vice) entitled *Barry Hines and Working-Class Fiction and Film in Britain*, for Manchester University Press, and two edited collections for Palgrave Macmillan, *Filmburbia: Screening the Suburbs* (with Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner) and *Social Class and Television Drama in Contemporary Britain* (with Beth Johnson). His first monograph, *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics* (CSP), was published in 2013 and he has contributed work on British film and television to a range of edited collections and journals, including *The Journal of British Cinema and Television*, *New Cinemas: Contemporary Cinema* and *Studies in European Cinema*.

Dr Beth Johnson is Associate Professor in Film and Media at the School of Media and Communication at The University of Leeds, UK. She is currently completing her second monograph, *Shameless Television: Drama, Remakes and Resistance* and is working on a co-edited collection (with Dr David Forrest, University of Sheffield)

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