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The South Bank Show, popular music and the reframing of arts television

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the framing of popular music on The South Bank Show *(*SBS*) (1978–2010, 2012–present). Popular culture was central to* SBS*'s agenda from its very conception, framed by the title sequence by Pat Gavin and the choice of subject matter – the first ever episode was on Paul McCartney, signal-ling a mainstream cultural appeal and a cultural conservativism given the wider contemporary context of punk sensibility. Therefore, to understand* SBS*'s approach to popular music, we need to understand the context from which it emerges: the British broadcasting political economy of the late 1970s centred around the pre-choice duopoly and intense rivalry between the BBC and ITV, as well as a production environment centred around Melvyn Bragg. Yet,* SBS *was not a radical programme, and its focus on popular music over the years has largely been focused on mainstream artists and tastes – speaking to a mainstream audience rather than to avant-garde tastes. In assessing this history, this article considers two programmes from the* SBS *archive in some detail, as well as reflecting on how production cultures impact cultural outputs.*

KEYWORDS

The South Bank Show
popular music
arts broadcasting
television studies
archive research
genre
public service broadcasting

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the framing of popular music on *The South Bank Show* (*SBS*) (1978–2010, 2012–present) with case study analyses of a profile of Paul McCartney (broadcast on 14 October 1984) and a documentary about Blur (broadcast on 21 November 1999), supported by a discussion of other archival material. In undertaking this study, I refer to material from the *SBS* Production Archive where possible, held at the University of Leeds, and which is currently undergoing a process of digitization.[1] The article connects with and builds on the findings of an earlier article on *SBS* that I co-wrote with John Corner (Lee and Corner 2015).

Popular culture was central to *SBS*'s agenda from its very conception. The first episode (broadcast 14 January 1978) profiled Paul McCartney, signalling a mainstream cultural appeal and a certain conservativism given the well-established wider contemporary countercultural musical context of punk. While *SBS* has won many awards (twelve BAFTAs, five Prix Italia and four RTS awards), it has always attracted critique for being 'middlebrow – the television equivalent of the Sunday newspaper culture section'(Walker 1993: 112). It should, however, be noted that such claims have always been rejected by the programme's long-standing presenter-editor Melvyn Bragg.

The changing terrain of broadcasting in the 1970s was a vital driver for the creation of *SBS*. On the one hand, as Garry Whannel has argued, 'the 1970s, or more exactly the period from 1968 to 1982, constitutes the longest period of structural stability in British television history' (1994: 176). On the other, changing public tastes and the growing cultural importance of popular culture were driving broader changes in commissioning. Both were important factors in the development of *SBS*. Financially, ITV was in robust shape in the 1970s in comparison to the BBC, which had been badly affected by high inflation rates at the time. ITV was able to secure high advertising revenues due to media scarcity, and this led to a resurgent channel that was able to attract skilled BBC staff at all levels (Whannel 1994: 177). Programme budgets were higher than they are today, and arts programming (alongside other public service commitments) could be easily supported by advertising revenues generated by peak-time drama and entertainment programmes. As former *SBS* producer Gillian Greenwood recollects:

> 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)

These economic and broader cultural factors were key drivers for *SBS*, enabling it to undertake productions with extensive international travel, and also to recruit well-known directors to work on key editions.

As such, *SBS* was shaped by the political economic dynamics of TV production in the late 1970s and the pre-choice duopoly of intense rivalry between the BBC and ITV (Johnson and Turnock 2005). This was an environment that provided a mixed programme schedule that sought to entertain, but also to educate and to inform. As Johnson and Turnock note, despite the intense

1. *The South Bank Show* is a television arts magazine show produced by ITV between 1978 and 2010, which brought both high art and popular culture to a mass audience. The *SBS* Production Archive was deposited by ITV with Leeds University Special Collections and arrived in January 2015, having been stored in stable conditions at ITV, and ownership continues to rest with ITV. A formal announcement of its acquisition was made on 24 February 2015. The Archive contains rushes, outtakes and other film material supported by ancillary material. The programme archive is separate and remains with ITV. *SBS* was conceived, written and presented by former BBC arts broadcaster Melvyn Bragg, who was also the chancellor of the University of Leeds from 1999 to 2017 and, therefore, has a personal and professional interest in perpetuating the archive's legacy.

rivalry between the two broadcasters, this was a 'cosy duopoly' (the BBC and ITV were not competing for revenue) and one in which the ITV companies were significantly protected from a 'free' marketplace within a highly regulated and unionized labour market (2005: 24). Such a context undoubtedly allowed for greater editorial and creative risks to be taken than is possible today, largely because audience fragmentation and intense multi-channel competition were not yet a reality.

SBS's approach to the arts, with its focus on popular culture, can also to some extent be set against contemporaneous arts television, such as *Monitor* (1958–65) and *Aquarius* (1970–77, until 1974 edited and presented by Humphrey Burton), which tended to focus on traditional arts rather than popular culture, and which had more formal modes of presentation and style. While *SBS* did not divert from the dominant patriarchal alignment of arts and culture with the authoritative male presenter, such as Huw Wheldon's role presenting *Monitor* (Irwin 2015: 166), the more casual and contemporary presentational style of Melvyn Bragg and the focus on artists from within popular culture certainly represented a shift in style and content. Relatively low viewing figures for arts TV programmes at the time were also a key factor in *SBS*'s creation: *Aquarius*, for example, had run since 1970 and was presented by arts figures like theatre director Peter Hall. It was critically successful but achieved low audience figures for the time.

Such a context created a desire on the part of the broadcasters (particularly the ITV companies that were funded through advertising revenue, which was in turn largely based on audience reach) to cater for popular tastes and generate mass appeal, given that the genres such as arts broadcasting were key planks of a public service offer that was designed to appeal to a mass audience. Central to this was ITV's desire to counteract the BBC's elitist image in respect to arts broadcasting at the time.

Understanding shifts in the presentation of popular music on *SBS* from 1978 to its later years also means grappling with the implications of a transformation in the broadcasting ecology within which arts broadcasting operates. As recently as 1993, John Walker argued that 'for millions of viewers art is a phenomenon they encounter primarily via their TV sets' (1993: 1). Of course, television remains 'a key feature of most people's everyday cultural life' and the BBC's services across all media reach '96.5% of the British population' (Warwick Commission 2015: 33). However, new modes and platforms of media consumption, a rapidly splintering media landscape and the growth of subscription-based media platforms mean that the way in which the arts are covered on television (in all its various forms) has fundamentally shifted (Genders 2017). The shifting modes of presentation within the *SBS* format relate to, and encapsulate, wider trends in public service broadcasting over nearly half a century (see also Lee and Corner 2015). Examining *SBS*'s presentation of popular music in this light allows us to note historic shifts in presentation and form during a period of transformation in broadcasting. In order to do so, I will consider in detail two popular music-based programmes from the *SBS* archive and reflect on how production cultures shape cultural outputs.

THE SOUTH BANK SHOW, ELITISM AND THE MIDDLEBROW

As I have argued elsewhere, *SBS* demonstrated its desire to reach out to a broader public audience right from the start, including the title sequence by Pat Gavin that fused popular culture with tradition (Michelangelo) –

Figure 1: Title sequence screenshot from The South Bank Show *(1983).*

see Figure 1 (Lee and Corner 2015: 366). The title sequence graphics changed over the years, but always kept this mixture of 'classic' art with contemporary popular culture.

Walker describes *SBS*'s title sequence as a 'mixture of traditional and modern, fine art and popular culture imagery immediately signifies that this weekly, Sunday evening series adopts a broad, pluralistic approach to culture' (1993: 109). *SBS* immediately asserted itself as working within a new kind of democratizing and inclusive framework, with early programmes on establishing the show's hallmark style, combining backstage documentary access with Bragg's intimate and convivial interviewing. The series was based on three core principles: 'to respect the integrity of the subject; to respect the audience; and to be professional and skilful in the use of the medium' (Wyver 2007: 43). Bragg's comment shows how core values of production 'professionalism' and a mode of 'cultural democratisation', therefore, is at the heart of *SBS*'s approach and production culture, echoing wider changes in broadcasting and culture from the 1970s onwards (Briggs 2009). Its focus on popular music over the years has largely been focused on mainstream artists and tastes – speaking to a popular audience rather than to avant-garde tastes. Overall, the commercial context of LWT with its focus on audience numbers reduced experimentation on the programme, and as such it has been open to criticisms, such as those of John Wyver, perhaps unfairly, that it concentrated 'on established reputations and rarely took risks with the truly edgy' and as such 'failed to develop a critical voice' (Wyver 2007: 44).

SBS's production team was centred around Bragg, who cultivated a modish presentational style distinct from his more traditional peers, in keeping with a post-1960s sensibility towards popular culture that rejected the elitism of 'high' culture in favour of charting a 'middlebrow' line.[2] 'Middlebrow' is a difficult and complex term (generally used in the context of disdain) to define,

2. For Bourdieu, the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture is a matter of cultural capital and is understood through a sociological analysis of the work that such distinctions do in terms of reproducing and maintaining class fractions (Bourdieu 1984). See also Gripsrud (1989) for a discussion of high culture using a Bourdieusian approach.

though it can be seen as standing in discursive and stylistic opposition to the 'underground', 'marginal', 'countercultural' and 'experimental'. The artists covered by *SBS* over the years fall into the middlebrow category: the show has tended to focus on those who have attained a certain mass appeal by way of commercial success, mainstream audience reach (not one purely confined, as in the case of popular music, to a youth demographic) and whose earlier radical or experimental appeal has been well assimilated into the cultural canon and status quo. So, for example, in 1984, some years after its heyday, punk rock was indirectly covered by *SBS* in its profile of Malcolm McLaren, who was by then a household name. Yet, middlebrow is not only about the choice of artists covered by *SBS* but also the *way* in which *SBS* engages with them: sometimes more innovative in style (as can be seen in the turn towards observationalism and auteur approaches to documentary in certain editions), sometimes more mainstream and conservative in style, but not to be understood as purely popular programming. Rather, *SBS* straddles the two poles of 'high' and 'low' culture.

Despite what might be seen as an innate tendency towards conservatism in terms of subject matter, *SBS* sought overtly to position itself as distinct from other contemporary and recent arts programmes of the period on television and radio, and in particular BBC rivals such as the by then defunct but still influential *Monitor* and *Omnibus* (1967–2003). As already mentioned, this was partly a matter of subject choice, covering traditional artists alongside mainstream artists from popular culture (particularly music). It also experimented formally (albeit within well-tested conventions of documentary and TV presentation), from a magazine format (which had been one of *Monitor*'s successes) at its inception to a 'talking head' interview model, and offered increasingly a focus on access with a more observational style.

SBS is generally understood as a more mainstream and commercial alternative to BBC's long-standing and often highly innovative series *Arena* (1976–present). *SBS*'s style and approach reflect a broader tension within public service broadcasting to increasingly 'entertain' as well as 'educate' audiences about complex art forms and movements. The tension within public service television during the late 1970s and early 1980s between popular mainstream appeal and drier and more intellectual fare, which was also apparent within other genres, notably current affairs, could also be felt in arts broadcasting.[3]

POPULAR MUSIC AND *THE SOUTH BANK SHOW*

The cultural and social status of arts programmes such as *SBS* was much greater within the duopoly and terrestrial broadcasting ecology than today.[4] Regularly reaching audiences of several million (its highest ever audience was 8.9 million for a profile of Michael Flatley in 1997) (Anthony 2009), *SBS*'s mainstream status within a primetime ITV slot – an unthinkable position for an arts programme today – was pivotal to its ability to gain access for interviews with major global cultural figures of their times, including Paul McCartney (1978, 1984), Francis Bacon (1985), Eric Clapton (1987), George Michael (1990, 2006), Dolly Parton (1999), REM (2002) and Coldplay (2009). Bragg himself became an established figure within British society and even the subject of satirical presentation in the 1980s show *Spitting Image* (1984–96), generally an 'accolade' only afforded to the most recognizable contemporary figures in politics and entertainment. If many of today's British arts programmes exist within a 'narrowcast' environment such as Sky Arts or BBC 4, increasingly dependent

3. For example, Georgina Born (2004) discusses a similar dynamic in current affairs comparing the studio-based policy-oriented forensic current affairs programme *Weekend World* (1972–88), edited by John Birt and presented by figures such as the economist Peter Jay, to the more audience-oriented programmes such as *World in Action* (1972–88) and *This Week* (1956–92). Writing about *Weekend World*, Godfrey Hodgson notes it was 'willing to be boring, serious and analytical' (1998: 26), something that few current affairs programmes can afford to be now.

4. In their first review of PSB television in 2004, Ofcom reported that 'specialist programming on topics such as arts, current affairs and religion was increasingly being pushed out of peak viewing hours' (2004: 5). Then, in 2008, they reported that 'hours of Religious and Arts programming continue to decline' (Ofcom 2008: 5).

on subscription funding, *SBS* along with its contemporaries *Omnibus* and *Arena* (not to mention earlier landmark arts series such as *Civilisation* [1969] and *Ways of Seeing* [1972]) were major features of the national media landscape and, as such, could pick and choose subjects, as well as allow considerable artistic autonomy to their directors.

Popular music has always been a mainstay concern for the programme since its inception. The inclusion of an interview with Paul McCartney in the first edition of *SBS* helped define the approach and identity of this new arts programme, which then had a magazine format in common with many other British factual TV series of the time (Genders 2019). According to Bragg,

> 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 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines popular music as 'any commercially oriented music principally intended to be received and appreciated by a wide audience, generally in literate, technologically advanced societies dominated by urban culture' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2019). However, such mainstream dictionary definitions have not settled academic debates about the form, partly because, as Frith notes, '"popular music" is not in itself a critical concept'. Frith goes on to argue that it could be defined as being (a) music made in a commercial context, (b) music made using ever-changing technology, (c) music as mediated, (d) music primarily made for pleasure and (e) music that is hybrid (Frith 2004: 3–4). For the purposes of this article, popular music is used to refer to contemporaneous modes of music such as rock, pop and folk with a commercial appeal.

Based on this definition, of the 743 *SBS* programmes produced during the core ITV/LWT years 1978–2010, 80 focused on popular music. It is also noticeable that despite the emergence of highly influential subcultural strands of British and American music during this period (for although *SBS* does cover international artists, its focus is overwhelmingly on British and American popular musicians), such as punk, post-punk, rave, house, grunge, jungle, metal, indie and others, *SBS* generally only engages with such modes once they have reached a certain mass-market cross-over appeal to the mainstream. As with the example of Malcom McLaren in 1984, indie waited for coverage until a 1987 profile of The Smiths after the band turned mainstream with the release of the hit single 'Shoplifters of the World Unite'. Defining features of mainstream appeal include high audience reach, sales of albums and coverage in the national press. The archive also shows that the coverage of popular music is not consistent over the years: series 12 and 20 have no popular music programmes at all, while series 28 has five on the topic, with subjects including The Darkness, Ronnie Wood, Willie Nelson and Iggy Pop.

I will now turn to provide an analysis of two editions of the programme – one on Paul McCartney from 1984, and one on Blur in broadcast in 1999. Taken together, they provide a sense of how the programmes seek to present popular music through television form in two case studies with very different styles and approaches to their subjects, but also with elements of continuity.

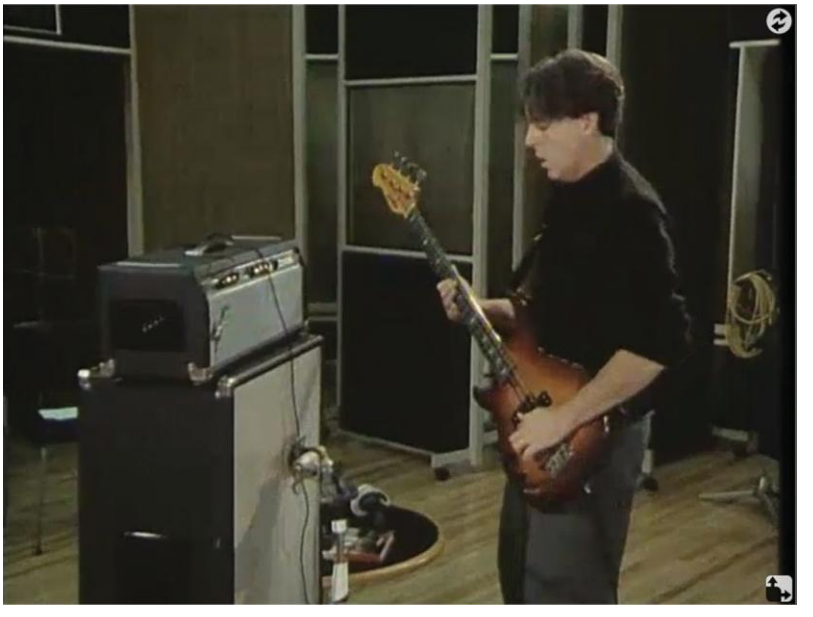

Figure 2: Screenshot of McCartney in the studio, The South Bank Show *(Season 8, Episode 2, 1984).*

MIDDLEBROW ENCOUNTERS OF 'STRETCHING BOUNDARIES'?

Following McCartney's appearance on the first edition of *SBS*, Bragg returned to interview the singer in 1984 to discuss the release of McCartney's musical film *Give My Regards to Broadway* (1984). Immediately, we can see some of the signature *SBS* techniques: the set piece interview with Bragg, behind-the-scenes vérité footage and a mode of presentation that is consensual, uncontroversial and essentially non-critical. The latter is neutral and observational, in the sense that the artist is observed at work and then invited to reflect on their process (see Figure 2).

Returning to Bragg's declaration of stretching boundaries, to what extent can *SBS* claim here to be innovative in form and content, or are accusations of it being 'relentlessly middlebrow' justified? The subject matter was certainly controversial for the time. Some art critics were less than enthusiastic, and *The Telegraph*'s arts correspondent declared: '[m]y own definition of the arts would stop short of Lennon-McCartney ballads' (Farndale 2008: 8).

Bragg's own take on the early *SBS* approach is interesting:

> I had accepted through university that quite a few of the things I enjoyed, such as the blues and radio drama, were not 'the arts'. The arts were opera and ballet and so on. But I had begun to realise that this was not the case. I thought, why not treat high culture and popular culture equally? It doesn't always work, because popular literature, for me, doesn't seem to be anywhere near as good as popular music. But still, the critics hated that idea, like your man there in the Telegraph. We got roughed up and I wondered how long I was going to last.
>
> (Farndale 2008: 8)

Figure 3: Screenshot of Paul McCartney being interviewed by Melvyn Bragg, The South Bank Show *(Season 8, Episode 2, 1984).*

In terms of style, there is a clear sense evolving of 'being there', which is pivotal to *SBS*'s documentary appeal. Here, the behind-the-scenes footage of McCartney rehearsing can be seen as a relatively polite, sanitized version of the vérité techniques that were becoming more popular in TV documentary output in the late 1970s, and which originated in documentary filmmaking in the 1950s and 60s in the Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité movements (Nichols 2017: 172–74). We are told in voice-over that *SBS* has followed McCartney for a year in the making of a film soundtrack with the composer George Martin – immediately foregrounding a sustained observational approach as a central feature of the film's encounter with the artist.

Also critical to the *SBS* style is the display of the artist reflecting on his process. Considerable time is given to McCartney in the studio discussing his art – something that has come to define the documentary genre for arts and musical documentary. The interview with Bragg is the dominant aspect of the documentary (see Figure 3). The interview demonstrates Bragg's restrained but skilled interviewing technique that allows the subject space to speak, in which Bragg interjects only when it is necessary in order to move the discussion on. For example, this can be seen when McCartney mentions his concerns about stepping into a different field with *Give My Regards to Broad Street* and being perceived as 'just posing'. In response, Bragg moves the conversation on by asking him if he misses John Lennon at such times, creating greater emotional depth to the exchange: 'Is there a sense in which you miss having that person to talk to, in this case John Lennon to talk to? Is there a sense in which you think we could have moved on together?' In such ways we can see it as a gentle and consensual form of interviewing that probes, but within strict limits, the hallmark of the Bragg style (Lee and Corner 2015).

In this programme we see the hallmarks of the *SBS* approach to popular culture and music – politely controversial in connecting popular culture to the

arts; stylistically conventional, centred on giving space to the artist rather than on critique; and with a clearly mainstream orientation.

'BLUR' (1999): OBSERVATIONALISM AND PROMOTIONAL CULTURE

The second example is rather different – this time on Blur, made by long-standing *SBS* director Gerry Cox in 1999. The first thing to note is the shift to an observational documentary format – it is very much positioned as a 'Gerry Cox' film who has, we are informed, been given privileged access to the band. Blur, according to Bragg, are Britpop survivors and innovators, 'and now celebrate their tenth anniversary as Britain's foremost indie band'. Signalling the documentary's observational and access-based intentions, Bragg then informs us that 'Gerry Cox's film follows them from recording studios to a one-off gig at Goldsmiths College to mark this occasion'. The other thing to note from this framing of the documentary is the rather promotional flavour of Bragg's introduction. This is far from a critical look at a band, but a celebration.

The narrative of the edition is loosely chronological, narrating the history of the band, but framed around following Albarn around and interviewing him in various locations – such as in a recording studio and on a train back to his home town of Colchester, giving him the opportunity to speculate and reflect on his own creative process. The train journey then allows the film to revisit Albarn's childhood and his early musical influences. The whole thing cuts back constantly to the gig at Goldsmiths College and the ten-year anniversary celebration.

The self-referentiality of interviewees referring to the status of *SBS* itself is quite distinctive: in the opening interview, Albarn says:

> I remember watching the *South Bank Show* on The Smiths round at Graham's house and then Morrissey said something at the end, he said The Smiths were the last important band and I just got so pissed off with it and I walked all the way home sort of determined to prove him wrong (laughs).

As such, *SBS* is able to position itself through this interview as canonical and era-defining. Perhaps, it is implied, it is even the reason why Blur (the most important indie band of the decade, as we have just been told) came into existence in the first place! This kind of self-referentiality of *SBS* itself within the documentary text is actually a developing feature across the programme as it matures and can be seen in a number of examples (such as an edition on Tracey Emin, broadcast on 19 August 2001). It serves to frame the show as having a pivotal place within the chronicling of popular culture – a reminder to the viewer of its longevity and significance.

Interestingly, there is no 'set-piece' Bragg interview in this edition, as there are in so many other *SBS* editions. Rather, the artist is allowed to speak to an unseen interlocutor, suggesting a formal shift away from the Bragg set-piece interview in favour of a more traditional expository documentary methodology (for another instance of this style, see Mooney and Morgan 2021). Further research would be required to ascertain whether this a decision made on creative grounds, or for the sake of convenience (for instance, Bragg being unavailable to conduct the interview due to other commitments). However, it is certainly an approach that is more commensurate with the observational approach taken, allowing a much greater sense of the text as a documentary

project, rather than with the McCartney edition as the documentary footage being subordinate or even incidental to the Bragg interview.

One clear pattern of critique against *SBS* is that it is intensely celebratory and refutes any sort of critical project. There is certainly some validity in this. But, of course, access is key for arts programmes like *SBS*, and a more barbed and critical project would clearly militate against the sort of access and interviews that the show requires for the format to have succeeded for such a long time. The cultural status derived from appearing on *SBS* is not only a key part of its attraction to artists and musicians, but is also explicitly alluded to in the Blur edition, along with other editions not discussed in this article – consider the edition on Tracey Emin alluded to earlier, which has a similar moment where Emin talks about watching the programme when she was younger and cannot believe that here she is, being interviewed by Bragg!

In terms of its coverage of popular music, this charge of *SBS* being a vehicle for the promotional agendas of artists (or, more precisely, the marketing departments of their respective record companies) is more pressing given the highly pressured promotional dynamics of the recording industry (Klein 2009). Gaining documentary access to mainstream artists is no easy task, and judgements are made about the benefits and risks of granting it within the highly time-pressured schedules of busy artists. Therefore, *SBS*'s success at gaining such access must be seen within the context of its unconfrontational and celebratory style, where to be the subject of an *SBS* profile comes with a distinctive cultural status all of its own.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

Clearly such a selective analysis across *SBS*'s output over 40 years works against a generalizing analysis. However, both point to distinctive features of *SBS*'s presentation of popular music and allow the tracing of change and continuity as well as possible tensions between audience expectations and creative innovations in documentary form.

Perhaps most obviously, and as I have discussed elsewhere (Lee and Corner 2015: 376–77), we can see continuity in the mixed choice of subject matter – *SBS* has always sought to work across popular culture and high culture. The use of Bragg as the anchor point for the series is also a key element of continuity, as is the inclusive mode of address to the audience – one that does not assume prior knowledge of the subject matter.[5] In terms of approaches to popular music, *SBS* has always tended to focus on artists who have already to some extent reached the public eye – rather than introducing an audience to new artists yet to break through.

On the other hand, there are some key elements of change. Documentary stylistic change is pivotal here – for example, we can see the shift from a highly expositional mode of filmmaking in the early *SBS* documentaries, where the interview is absolutely central to the form and style of the programme, to a more observational, access-based mode of filmmaking. While the Bragg interview remains integral to *SBS* throughout, it takes its place alongside a greater focus on 'being there' with the artists. For example, in the Blur film, *SBS* is at its most observational, dispensing with Bragg after his introductory address. The style has something of a vérité feel, providing a grittier 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). However, this becomes

5. Of course, the role of the presenter on factual TV programmes is critical to their success and in establishing the tone and 'brand' of the show. This is reflected in the convolutions that usually occur with changes of presenters on long-running factual programmes such as *Newsnight* (1980–present) (Ellis-Peterson 2014). While there is not space to investigate this issue fully here, see Irwin (2011) in her discussion of the role of Huw Wheldon on *Monitor* in establishing a more conversational, relaxed tone for arts broadcasting in the process broadening its appeal.

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. Such a stylistic shift is increasingly present in other *SBS* popular music films across this period, such as Irshad Ashraf's profile of the rock band Elbow (broadcast on 15 November 2009). This focus on access builds on the success of famous editions, such as the 1989 film on Francis Bacon, where Bragg interviews him in various 'exotic' locations in Soho, including the Colony Club.

Another important shift is the changing tone of the Bragg interviews. In a 2009 interview, Bragg suggested that he had been under pressure to make interviews more personal, less focused on the work: '"I've ignored it," says Bragg. "I just haven't given in"' (Anthony 2009). But if Bragg's interviews remain focused largely on the work, the films themselves do increasingly focus on the artists' inner lives (significantly this occurs as they make less use of the 'set-piece' Bragg interview from the late 1990s onwards). Although Bragg denies such a shift in his interviewing, this does suggest that *SBS* itself altered in line with broader shifts in television and media culture towards a growing fascination with 'celebrities' (Turner 2009) to satisfy audience's curiosity about the personal and emotional lives of the famous individuals being profiled.

Another important area of change is the shift from the earlier magazine format, where a range of subjects could be covered in one programme, to a single-subject documentary approach. For example, the original McCartney interview was part of a programme that also featured Ken Dodd (1978), while Blur is covered in a documentary film that allows much greater depth of access and exposition. This shift, however, has come at a cost for arts programming, and the decline of the magazine format can be noted across arts provision on British public service broadcasting, including *Monitor*, and more recently *The Culture Show* (2004–15). As Genders notes, '[t]he television arts magazine and the studio-based discussion programme have been regarded historically as important formats for disseminating and widening access to contemporary cultural debates' (2019: 10). Similarly, as Wyver argued over twenty years ago discussing programmes such as *Monitor*,'the importance of these programmes lies in the way in which they break with television's usual forms of dealing with the arts and with the medium's dominant form of vision' (2007: 42). The decline of the magazine approach has inevitably led to a loss of variety and range in the coverage of the arts, to a focus on stars as opposed to new, experimental and unheard-of artists, and has also arguably led to a decline in formal experimentation on the part of programme makers in terms of how they cover topics.

CONCLUSION

Although it has been dismissed by some critics and academics as 'middlebrow' and less innovative in form than other arts programmes on British television, the study of *SBS* provides rich insights into debates around 'cultural democratisation', changing cultural tastes and shifts within the genre of arts documentary over four decades. As one of a handful of British programmes that has survived from the era of duopoly and media scarcity to one of digital abundance in terms of content, it is instructive to consider shifts in style and presentation alongside political economic changes within broadcasting.

With the shift from duopoly to a multi-channel context, budgets for the programme were inevitably cut, taking place within a much broader context for cuts across factual programming in the United Kingdom (Doyle and Paterson 2008; Lee 2018). More broadly, cuts in funding and competition for viewers have hit arts broadcasting particularly hard (Genders 2017). Further production-oriented research is needed to ascertain the specific impacts of this on *SBS*, but more broadly, we know that programming cuts were at the heart of Bragg's decision to stop making *SBS* for LWT (Anthony 2009).

The impact of the increasingly competitive environment for broadcasters has led to much greater conformity in terms of form and content in British arts broadcasting. As Amy Genders writes,

> [t]he contemporary ratings led commissioning culture described by many programme-makers is one that privileges competitive and economic value over that of creative or cultural value, with already limited funding becoming increasingly concentrated on arts programming that conforms to, rather than subverts television's dominant forms. (2019: 13)

SBS was never at the forefront of televisual innovation and experimentation: in British arts broadcasting, that mantle is usually reserved for BBC programmes such as *The Late Show* (1989–95), *Monitor* and *Arena* (Genders 2019: 13). All the same, this brief examination of its focus on popular music demonstrates that it had a particular role to play in presenting observational documentary profiles of nationally and internationally significant artists that is perhaps unrivalled within British TV history. Its appeal to the mainstream and its shift towards a more culturally democratic understanding of 'the arts' also gave it significant audience appeal, which in turn (along with the persuasive profile of Bragg) gave it the pulling power to attract such artists across popular culture.

Today, as arts broadcasting becomes an increasingly niche offer on subscription channels such as Sky Arts within an accelerating video-on-demand environment, and as public service broadcasters face ever greater threats to their funding and viability (Puttnam 2016), it is difficult to imagine such a programme appearing in the short-term future of broadcasting. Recent innovations in form and content have certainly attempted to raise the popularity of arts broadcasting, with varying degrees of success. However, there is no doubt that numbers of hours broadcast and levels of investment in arts coverage are decreasing, bringing the risk of its potential disappearance on British public service broadcasting channels (Noonan and Genders 2018: 91). This raises important questions about the mediation of the arts and culture within society, as the arts become a product for consumers rather than a public good for citizens. For documentaries on popular musicians, this also means a shift away from impartial, critically informed engagements with music as popular culture, across a wide spectrum of artistic genres, as seen on *SBS*, to the increasingly promotional and authorized accounts of mainstream global artists that we see on subscription video-on-demand channels.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Lee, David (2021), '*The South Bank Show*, popular music and the reframing of arts television', *Journal of Popular Television,* 9:1, pp. 123–137, doi: https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv_00045_1

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