Biography

Ben Lamb is a PhD candidate at the University of South Wales. His work is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of the ‘Spaces of Television’ research project. His thesis examines the developing aesthetics of British television studio drama, particularly focusing on how certain technologies impacted upon performance styles. Through a genre examination of key police series his thesis charts how desires, expectations and evaluations of fictional space changed over time for programme makers, performers and reviewers.
Narrative Form And The British Television Studio 1955-63

Abstract
This article examines how the material design of the television studio influenced the resulting fictional mise en scene of different narrative formats broadcast on UK television. Through this spatial analysis the article considers how a bias was formed within the industry between high end single plays and popular series. Using archival production documents that detail the design and resourcing of studio space, it explores the different working studio practices that existed for the single play and series from 1955-63. Drawing on studio floor-plans, internal memos and institutional records of policy discussions that detail the creation, modification and resourcing of studio production facilities, including production control rooms, lighting systems, and camerawork, this article compares the different production practices for the popular BBC police series, Dixon of Dock Green (BBC 1955-1976) and the anthology series of single plays Armchair Theatre (ABC 1956-74). Although each text was produced for the rival channels of BBC1 and ITV, my intention is not to provide a direct institutional comparison of the production practices of the BBC and ABC but rather to demonstrate how the design and technological resources of a studio can impact upon the aesthetics of different televisual narrative formats. Hence my primary aim is to examine the relationship between the physical attributes of studios and resultant styles of the cheaper, popular series and the more prestigious single play, offering an original approach to considering television space.

Keywords
British television drama, British television studio, BBC, ABC, Armchair Theatre, Dixon of Dock Green, BBC Written Archives, Dr Kabil, Afternoon of a Nymph, BBC Riverside Studios, ABC Didsbury Studios, ABC Teddington Studios, Douglas Moodie, Sydney Newman, Leonard White.
NARRATIVE FORM AND THE BRITISH TELEVISION STUDIO 1955-63

Historical studies of studio-shot British television drama do not usually distinguish between the various ways production space has been utilised for different narrative formats. Analyses of the multi-video camera studio technique undertaken by academics, such as Jacobs¹, MacMurrough-Kavanagh and Lacey ², Barr³, and McLoone⁴, have attempted to identify the distinctive aesthetics of the studio approach in relation to dramas shot on location with a single 16mm or 35mm film camera. However, there is an intrinsic assumption made by these authors that the studio was used in the same manner to videotape a single play, serial or series. This article is interested in how studio space was used differently in single plays, a ‘one-off drama…that begins and ends within a single episode’⁵, compared to series defined as ‘continuous stories (usually involving the same characters and settings) which consist of self-contained episodes possessing their own individual conclusion’⁶ from 1955 to 1963. The purpose is to identify how a bias was formed within the industry between what was considered the high end single play and more popular series fare. As Brunsdon has already established, ‘in Britain, it is the single play’ over other narrative forms has been traditionally ‘promoted by the institutions of broadcasting’ ⁷.

This article will consider how material spaces of production encapsulated this bias that has endured throughout the history of British television drama. Through an analysis of archival production documents that detail the design and resourcing of studio space, it explores the different working studio practices that existed for the single play and series from 1955-63. Drawing on documentation including studio floor-plans, internal memos and institutional records of policy discussions that detail the creation, modification and resourcing of studio production facilities this article will compare the different production practices of the popular BBC police series, *Dixon of Dock Green* (BBC 1955-1976) and the anthology series of single plays *Armchair Theatre* (ABC 1956-74). These series have been selected
because together they represent two of the most popular programmes to be transmitted on
British television from 1955-63: *Dixon* attracted weekly audiences of ‘10 million by the
middle of 1957’,⁸ and *Armchair Theatre* enabled ITV to ‘surpass the BBC’s audience share’
by 1960⁹. As a result of their popularity a wealth of archival documentation exists at the BBC
Written Archive Centre and the BFI National Archive detailing the production techniques
employed by each production. Although they were produced for the rival channels of BBC1
and ITV, my intention is not to provide a direct institutional comparison between the
production practices of the BBC and ABC but rather to demonstrate how the design and
technological resources of a studio can impact upon the aesthetics of different televisual
narrative formats. Hence my primary aim is to examine the relationship between the physical
attributes of studios and resultant styles of the cheaper, popular series and the more
prestigious single play, offering an original approach to considering television space.

The period between 1955 and 1963 is an influential one in the history of British
television because this is when the BBC and the recently launched ITV production companies
were converting existing cinemas, theatres and film studios into sites fit for television
production. The techniques they trialled and developed in this era informed the design of
their later purpose built television studios including BBC’s Television Centre and ABC’s
Teddington’s studios. From 1955 to 1963 the BBC experimented with the relatively new
series format at its London-based Riverside studios while ABC put a considerable amount of
resources into further developing the spatial aesthetic of the single play at their Didsbury
studios in Manchester. Even though the ability to record drama onto videotape had been
possible from April 1958 onwards, all drama was still recorded as-if-live. Due to the initial
temperamental nature of editing technology, studio drama would still be recorded as one
continuous performance bound to real time. Shooting as-if-live governed the studio technique
meaning that all the sets had to be constructed and erected simultaneously within one studio whilst camera movements were relatively limited.

**Mise-en-scène**

*Dixon of Dock Green* was produced by the BBC’s Light Entertainment department and so shared Riverside Studios and its personnel with various other programme formats including sitcoms and children’s programming. The camera of a sitcom primarily focuses on the spoken word meaning that set designs play a subservient role in relation to spoken dialogue. The sitcom has traditionally been a conservative format whereby ‘the obsessive circularity of the dominant narrative model, in which the situation that gives each series its peculiar identity must be returned to unaltered’. Being treated as form of light entertainment meant that studio-shot drama series shared a visual aesthetic with the sitcom as set designs functioned as backdrops. George Dixon (Jack Warner) and the other characters who occupy Dixon’s front room do not interact or interfere with the immaculately placed objects that populate spaces. Characters always converse with their backs or sides to the space. Whenever a prop is used it is used in the foreground of the space in-between the camera and the actor so that it cannot disturb the surrounding mise en scène. All actors occupy the foreground and cannot make use of the space’s depth or disturb the placement of objects thus providing relatively simplistic archetypal characters. Camera movement is kept to a minimum, relies on the mid shot and is not an inherent part of the performance. There is no visual discourse here to undermine or complicate the spoken dialogue.

In an episode entitled ‘Father in Law’ (BBC, 1/9/1956) Dixon stands in his front room talking to a host of characters the day before his daughter’s wedding. In this opening scene Dixon’s front room is not touched by the actors. The characters are positioned in ‘frontal’ compositions and so do not interact with the set to undercut or complicate their dialogue.
The camera views the characters standing together shoulder to shoulder as they look out to the camera. Framing the actors in two tight mid shots means there is little space for them to move around as they would do in real life. Unnaturally grouped together so closely, an exchange of close-ups then ensues between Dixon and each character as he talks to them one at a time in preparation for the wedding. The focus here is on the spoken word as the surrounding set design functions as a backdrop and is largely out of view.

In this period, however, the single play used more elaborate camera movements and intricate set designs to articulate themes in a visual discourse in relation to, and sometimes in conflict with, spoken dialogue. ABC’s Head of Drama Sydney Newman had a very clear sense of the drama he wanted to make and how it would be shot, and upon his later appointment at the BBC he wrote:

I love good talk in plays, but it is never really a substitute for the demonstration of attitude. Put it another way: people have to do things. The important thing is that attitudes of individuals should be communicated to the audience by what they are doing and how they are reacting. Story, character delineation, all these things: you demonstrate them.  

Newman treated television drama as a form of action and narrative, but significantly, he placed a particular emphasis on ‘the visual’.

In order to demonstrate the more elaborate spatial interactions that occurred in the single play in comparison to series, it is worth contrasting Dixon to an Armchair Theatre play shot at Teddington Studios entitled Dr Kabil (ITV, 6/9/1959). Here actors interact with their surrounding space and this becomes a more important part of this visual discourse. Dr Kabil
(Peter Illing) is an Algerian doctor who is forced to choose between his assumed French identity and his Algerian roots when a dying French businessman Corrazzo (Martin Sterndale), who has exploited Algerian workers, is brought to Kabil’s surgery. The lab house surgeon (Pamela Alan) questions Kabil’s judgement and asks Kabil whether he is either a Doctor or an Algerian. Kabil’s triumphant reply is that ‘I am both and more – a doctor, a Frenchman, an Arab and an Algerian’. Whilst stating this, Kabil walks to the corner of his office and punches a book. There is hesitation in his arm before he dabs the book with his fist. Kabil then proceeds to theatrically raise his arm once he has punched the book, exposing his seemingly triumphant voice. The camera does not frame characters together in tight mid shots like that of Dixon. Here the camera watches from a relative distance thus situating Kabil within a whole host of objects and allowing him the freedom to move around his expansive office. This freedom allows actor Illing to interact with this particular part of the set that was initially in the background of the shot. Therefore, an audience is never completely sure of Kabil’s true motives because any aspect of the setting can be used to place his attitudinal markers out of step with his illocutionary markers. Sign vehicles become more polysemic within such a space and our focus is not exclusively drawn to the spoken word.

Riverside Studios

These different stylistic practices of the single play and series formats were influenced by the designs of the production spaces they were recorded in. What at first appear to be minor dissimilarities between the control room designs of BBC’s Riverside studios and ABC’s Teddington studios are in fact key differences that provide great insight into how the material space was approached differently that substantially affected the fictional space produced. Initially at the BBC, the production control room was referred to as a producer’s turret. When these turrets were installed at the BBC’s Lime Grove studios, shortly after the studios were
bought from the Rank organisation in 1949, they were designed as ‘an all glass control room overlooking the studio in which the producer sits during transmission, wearing headphones and directing his cameramen’. This control room design was then experimented with, changed and developed by the BBC from 1955-63.

The BBC bought a 13.5 acre site at White City in 1949 to be made into their first purpose built Television Centre by 1962. In 1954 the Alliance Film Company’s Riverside film studios were acquired by the BBC as a means of testing and developing the most effective way of videotaping continuous live performances that governed the studio technique at that time. The BBC would then apply their knowledge to the new building design at Television Centre. In the meantime Riverside technicians devised a way in which production personnel could survey the studio space, akin to the all glass producer’s turrets of Lime Grove, as well as being able to focus on the monitors that presented the view of each camera. The design used to create a simultaneous view of the studio floor and the monitors in Riverside’s R2 studio, regularly used for shooting drama, developed a ‘side viewing arrangement’. The control room picture monitors were mounted on double-tier stands that were placed directly in front of the production desk. The observation window was placed to the side of the desk. A clear view was imperative to the BBC’s method of shooting drama as the producer and technical operations manager, placed at the edge of the desk, regularly glanced ‘into the studio to assess the relative positions of cameras and other studio equipment, particularly during rehearsals’.

The floor plans of *Dixon of Dock Green* episodes shot in R2, held in the BBC Written Archives, reveal how the location of the control room impacted upon the positioning of the sets. The floor plan of series seven episode one shot in 1960 denotes eight different sets and four cameras. The cameras are numbered one to four and written inside circles. The control
room is on the east side of the studio and the sets are pushed back against the north and south walls. This leaves a big rectangular space in the centre of the studio floor reaching from the east wall, directly underneath the production control room, to the west wall. This space is reserved exclusively for cameras and sound equipment, and is directly in line with the control room so that the appropriate production personnel can obtain a clear view of the cameras’ positions. What this suggests is that the producer/director and technical operations manager regularly desired to see where the cameras were positioned on the studio floor in addition to the view provided by the monitors placed directly in front of their production desk.

All four cameras have their movements planned in advance and are denoted by arrows on the floor plan. However, these cameras are only ever repositioned to either move from one set to another or out of the studio altogether. In each case the cameras are not filming whilst being moved. Similarly, no more than two cameras are used to capture one set at a time. Both cameras observe the set from a relative distance rather than moving around or inside the set whilst filming.

However, only three out of the fourteen Dixon floor plans available at the BBC Written Archives stipulate camera movements. This strongly suggests that the camera movements were so familiar and formulaic to the production personnel that such movements did not have to be planned in particular detail. What all of these Riverside floor plans do share is a big space running down the middle of R2 that is designated for camera positions placed firmly in the production control room’s sightline. Therefore, fictional space in Dixon operates as a backdrop partly because R2’s design privileges the central positioning of the cameras in relation to the production control room. This method of production discourages complicated camera movements as minimal repositioning of the cameras and sound equipment is paramount.
Teddington Studios

With these recording practices firmly in place at Riverside Studios, ABC’s Teddington studios underwent a refurbishment in 1963. ABC technicians designed a purpose built television studio that would better suit the ‘recognisable house style’ of their single plays for which they were best known. The decisions made as part of this refurbishment represented ABC’s single play production methods that they had been developing since 1955. What was particularly noticeable about this refurbishment was that the observation window was placed directly behind the production control room desk. The reasoning behind this application to all ABC studios, according to ABC Vision Control engineer Alan Fowler, was so that the producer and his team could obtain a ‘favourable view of the monitors, unimpaired by direct glare of the studio lamps’. Swivel chairs were provided so that an ‘unrestricted’ view of the studio floor could be obtained ‘if needed’. However, surveying the studio floor was not regularly practiced by the production personnel. To look into the studio floor the production staff would have to neglect their duties at the production desk and put the process at a momentary standstill. Looking into the studio in this manner was a last resort method of resolving a problem. Fowler was predominantly concerned with the practitioners maintaining their full concentration on the monitors. This was also evidenced by the matt black venetian blinds that were placed on the inside of the double glazed observation window to ‘avoid problems of spill light from the studio’ which might glare off the monitors’ screens. Ensuring that full concentration of all the production staff was placed exclusively on the monitors further enhanced a different way of approaching the television studio’s material space.
From the start of ABC’s *Armchair Theatre* anthology series studio space was approached differently from *Dixon*. This was firstly due to the fact that directors and producers were pushed for space at ABC’s Didsbury studio complex in Manchester. The studio had been converted from a cinema and there was not the space to push all sets against the walls of the studio. Sets had to be constructed in whatever space was available and were therefore dotted around the studio. As the centre of the studio could not be designated exclusively for cameras, like that of Riverside’s centripetal design, cameras were placed within the sets and camera movements had to be planned meticulously in advance. With this detailed planning up to five cameras could be used at any one time and move in and around these sets whilst filming. The organisation of space at Didsbury was in part a response to the lack of available space at the cinema site as well as Newman's encouragement of getting up close that determined the plays' spatial treatment.

This design of the Didsbury Studio, partially influenced by a lack of space, complimented the style of shooting adopted by Canadian television producers/directors Ted Kotcheff and Alvin Rakoff who were brought to ABC under Newman. It was these Canadian directors who used the pedestal camera as ‘a hand-held, entirely mobile unit’.

A director on, and later producer of, *Armchair Theatre* Leonard White claimed that the camera ‘rarely stood still for long’ and directors would no longer ‘stand-off and photograph’ the drama like that of *Dixon*, but ‘get in close and move with the action’.

This somewhat cramped composite studio space combined with this use of cameras made ‘camera movement an integral part of the performance’. Therefore, it can be suggested that the material conditions of a particular studio can influence the resulting visual stylistics of a drama. A lack of space at Didsbury encouraged elaborate mobile camera movements so that a number of sets could be prepared for future scenes whilst filming was still underway. This solution to the production space’s strict limitations resulted in a distinctively mobile visual aesthetic.
Camerawork

Together, the design of Teddington studios and the distinctive use of cameras within this space combined to create Armchair Theatre’s unique mobile aesthetic. Whilst both Riverside and Didsbury/Teddington studios were resourced with the Orthicon Marconi Mk III camera, the production team at Dixon used it in the manner for which it was designed. The camera was ‘mounted, and fixed, on a pedestal. Often there was a stool placed behind the camera for the cameraman to sit down – he wasn’t going anywhere’.

The Canadian directors of the single play, under Newman, used the same camera but in a way that it was not supposed to be used, requiring ‘a new type of cameraman – strong and agile’. A combination of a lack of space and forward thinking Canadian directors meant that the single play had a mobile visual aesthetic that was completely different from studio-shot series.
FIGURE 1 Afternoon of a Nymph, Act One.
As a result of being pushed for space at Didsbury and using the Marconi cameras in this way, the floor plans of Armchair Theatre’s *Afternoon of a Nymph* (ITV, 30/9/1962) (Figures 1 and 2), shot at Teddington Studios’ Studio One reveal that there is no solitary position for any of the four cameras. Whereas camera movement only occurs in series shot at Riverside Studios.
to change the fixed point of a camera from observing one set to another, here there are so many different camera positions that they have to be denoted with a letter. Each camera has up to twenty four different positions and can have a maximum of five ‘basic’ positions as well as up to twenty one temporary positions throughout the programme. This is a stark contrast to Dixon where the four cameras have three different positions on average.27

In comparison to Dixon, floor plans of Armchair Theatre plays possess no large central space devoted wholly to camera positioning. Here scenery is moved and set designs are constructed in between acts. For example Act One comprises a collection of small settings including a dressing room and bedroom. These are then all dismantled during the advert break for Act Two where the whole studio space is transformed into a large hotel lobby setting. The plan even denotes where the large fountain feature, central to Act Two, is hidden during Act One before it has to be used. This means that the space is in a constant state of flux and alteration to accommodate the movement of the cameras. Again this is a stark contrast to the production of Dixon where sets are fixed to accommodate largely static cameras that are positioned to be viewed from the production control room. The set designs of single plays are more interactive and have, what reporter Philip Purser deemed to be, a ‘three-dimensional quality’28 where the camera can follow characters through spaces, rather than moving to switch between sets, a recognisable house style that he accredits to Newman.

Whilst an Armchair Theatre single play could have five different cameras capturing up to twenty four different shots each, Dixon producer/director Douglas Moodie had to submit a ‘special request’ to BBC management to use a fourth camera. In 1959 Moodie was given permission to use four cameras on a regular basis. However, the use of a fourth camera was only agreed by the BBC’s Light Entertainment Department under the condition that the fourth camera was there ‘in the event of a breakdown of one camera channel’ as Dixon would
continue to be shot by ‘three cameras’. The Light Entertainment management evidently had little interest in pushing the boundaries of the series format’s visual discourse.

**Lighting**

Although *Dixon* and *Armchair Theatre* were resourced with the same type of camera the different lighting methods employed by each studio complimented the different styles of camerawork that were used. The leading engineers at ABC’s Teddington Studios had to decide between two methods of rigging lights in order to support the television studio lamps. The first method was to install a moveable barrel system, ‘as used in the theatre’. The second choice was telescopes suspended by a fixed grid. For former lighting supervisor, and then current head of Production Facilities, Gavin Campbell the barrel system was not as ‘sufficiently flexible’ as the telescope system. The lamps on telescopic hangers were chosen because they could be dropped to six feet above the studio floor. For Phil Berkeley, the Head of Engineering Projects Group, the lighting grid arrangements ‘worked out extremely well and we would not desire to make any great changes here unless it proved essential to fly scenery in traditional theatrical style’. The BBC, however, ‘drew on this practice of the theatre’ and installed a grid of short rigging barrels over the whole studio. The BBC preferred using the barrel system rather than ‘individual telescopic suspension’ because it better complemented their ‘electric hoists’ for ‘scenery suspension’.

As ABC technicians were able to look at the design of BBC studios in the early stages of their own 1963 refurbishment it seems that a conscious decision was made to enhance their own unique method of shooting drama. Therefore, ABC single plays had a more precise and nuanced telescopic lighting system to accommodate its large number of mobile cameras. BBC series, however, had a largely immoveable barrel lighting system to fit with their comparatively observant cameras and hoisted scenery. Later ABC series shot in Teddington
studios, including *Redcap* (1964-66) and *Public Eye* (1965-75), would eventually make use of this nuanced telescopic lighting system. This was, however, ten years after ABC had begun to establish and develop the three dimensional quality of its single play dramas.

Similarly single plays recorded at the BBC would endure their compromised lighting arrangement until it created an anthology series that became an integral staple of television schedules namely the *Wednesday Play* (BBC 1964-70). These differences in approach towards mise en scène occurred at a formative moment in British broadcasting history and the divisions that were drawn in this period formulated a lasting hierarchy between high end single plays in relation to series that were considered cost effective modes of light entertainment.

**Conclusions**

Ultimately there is a reciprocal dialogue between narrative form and production practice. The spatial design and resourcing of both Riverside and Teddington studios did not wholly determine the visual stylistics of *Dixon* and *Armchair Theatre*. Nor were the set designs of both *Dixon* and *Armchair Theatre* wholly a result of a pre-existing ideology of key personnel at each production centre. The positioning of Riverside’s R2 production control room helped to ensure that a large central area of the floor space was reserved for predominantly stationary cameras. Combine this with a barrel lighting system and an unimaginative management, all factors contributed towards producing a series that provided frontal compositions of characters and a mise en scène that functioned primarily as a backdrop.

Similarly when assessing Newman’s impact on British television drama a number of spatial considerations need to be taken into account, particularly the layout of Didsbury’s Studio 1. As the centre of the studio was not designated exclusively for cameras, they were
instead placed in a vast array of positions. With the movements of up to five simultaneously filming cameras planned far in advance encouraged a distinctively mobile visual aesthetic. This was furthered by the handheld direction of Kotcheff and Rakoff, and the subsequent installation of telescopic lighting hangers at Teddington.

All of these determinants influence one another. There is a continuous interplay between the ideology of certain practitioners and the style of shooting that the studio designs and facilities encourage. Although the decisions made by a production company can determine how a space is used, and the design and resourcing of a production space can impact upon how practitioners decide to use it, we have enough evidence to reasonably suggest that the layout of a television studio played a significant and influential part in this interaction. Therefore, the planning and facilitation of the production space is worth considering as a substantial determinant within this interplay.

Notes

3 Charles Barr, ‘They Think It’s All Over’: The Dramatic Legacy of Live Television, in John Hill and Martin McLoone (eds.) *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations Between Film and Television* (Luton, University of Luton Press, 1997), pp. 47-75.
4 Martin McLoone, Boxed In?: The Aesthetics of Film and Television, in John Hill and Martin McLoone (eds.) *Big Picture, Small Screen: The Relations Between Film and Television* (Luton, University of Luton Press, 1997), pp. 76-106.
6 Ibid.
7 Charlotte Brunsdon, *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 1. Here Brunsdon identifies that the Independent Broadcasting Authority’s annual handbooks, published throughout the 1970s, devote the majority of their pages to promote the single play and briefly mention or completely evade series drama.
9 Ibid., p. 30.
15 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Fowler, Control Room Design, p. 34.
22 Cooke, *British Television Drama*, p. 45.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 139.
28 Purser, Head of Drama, p. 33.
29 BBC WAC T12/75/3.
31 Ibid.
34 Ibid.