



Lifestyling Britain

The 8–9 slot on British television

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ABSTRACT ● 1990s British terrestrial television saw a marked increase in lifestyle programming. Previously associated with daytime television, programmes on cooking, home decoration, fashion and gardening began to dominate the 8–9 early evening slot to considerable critical commentary. This article outlines the social and televisual factors relevant to this slot, while also posing questions about method in television studies. The history of hobby and leisure broadcasting is explored to clarify the innovative features of 1990s lifestyle programming and generational difference between television scholars is explored in the context of the group origins of the project. The role of the programmes in the broadcast schedules is discussed in relation to critical attitudes to banal programming. ●

KEY WORDS ● British television ● disposition ● generation ● lifestyle ● television history ● television studies

There is also the dogma within television, that it is boring to transmit ideas. This is partly to do with the determination on the part of those who work in television to set themselves up as a distinct profession with a quality and a skill and expertise of their own. Therefore, they talk about things being television or not. If someone simply sits in front of a camera and talks and tells you things and points things out with this finger, it is somehow not television. . . .

One of the dogmas of the administrative levels of broadcasting is that in some strange way intellectual broadcasting or cultural broadcasting is a strange

luxury which we allow ourselves to afford. This seems to me to be a very dangerous and ridiculous idea. (Jonathan Miller (editor of *Monitor* 1964–5; freelance director, Arts Features BBC, 1970))¹

Every time I switch on the television, I see someone stooping with a spoon, then sipping from it, and then turning to someone next to them and going 'Aaah'. The BBC is becoming a form of kapok, or wall-filling. If it's not broadcasting cookery programmes, it's about decorating your house, or about vets, or *Men Behaving Badly*. Soon there'll be *Vets Behaving Badly*. (Jonathan Miller, 1999)²

As is well known, British broadcasting has always had a strong impulse to improve its audience. This has, historically, included a rather more 'hobbyist' strand than is sometimes recognized in the histories of Reithian public service. For example, a rarely remembered period in the output of the Third Programme (the summit of cultural aspiration in the three national radio services) involved evening broadcasts in the 1950s to:

minorities who are enthusiastically devoted to some form of self-expression . . . the jazz fancier or the pigeon fancier, the man or woman who wants to learn, say, Spanish from scratch, the fisherman or cyclist or collector of LP records . . . the bridge player or the naturalist, the more sophisticated film-goer, the ardent motorist or the enthusiast for amateur dramatics.³

This is indeed a forgotten history, for, in the 1990s, as the second comment from Jonathan Miller in my epigraph indicates, the substantial increase in lifestyle programming in the evening schedules of broadcast terrestrial television has proved to be a particularly vibrant symbolic site for the discussion of the state of British television. In this article I wish to explore this site to think about both British television and, more generally, television studies. The low critical esteem in which contemporary lifestyle programming is held is echoed in the patchy and meagre archiving of its predecessors – the hobbyist and instructional programming of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s – but, when possible, I will be referring to archive holdings in an attempt to establish the specificity of contemporary programmes.⁴

1. TV for me

I enjoy cooking and I like food. I'm also interested in most of the domestic arts, and, predictably for an Englishwoman of my class and age, am keen on gardening. However, I am not a housewife, and find it difficult to pursue these interests, usually arriving home from work between 7 and 8 in the evening. I think it took me a while, in the early 1990s, to notice that the television programmes that I was choosing to watch between 8 and 9 when I got home were anything more than my own selection from the schedules.

Being able to choose programmes about cookery, home-decorating, clothes and gardening was something I didn't initially reflect on until there began to be so many that issues of generic variation became insistent. By the end of the decade it was clear that there has been a significant transformation of the British broadcast schedules (particularly on the minority channels, BBC 2 and Channel 4), and I would agree with Andy Medhurst's 'outrageous claim' that lifestyle programmes have been the genre of the 1990s (Medhurst, 1999). Thus, for example, in a sample week in May 1999, there were in this slot, across the five terrestrial channels, two cooking programmes, three gardening programmes, three home/decorating programmes, and programmes on clothes, antiques, holidays, aeroplanes and cars. Six months later (9–15 October 1999), there were three cookery programmes, four gardening, two fashion, four travel, two home-decorating, two pets and vets and five on nature in this slot. A six-monthly sample of programmes in the 8–9pm slot at the beginning and end of the decade has shown that the early 1990s boasts no more than two or three cooking/gardening and consumer programmes (in total per week), but by the end of the decade this is more like seven or eight. The programmes that seem to have disappeared from the slot during the decade include 'variety' and most types of 'serious' documentary (Johnson and Wheatley, 1999). So what's been happening in the British television schedules, and how can thinking about this contribute to discussion about the state of television studies?

Both Rachel Moseley in her 'Makeover Takeover on British Television' (Moseley, 2000) and Andy Medhurst in his 'Day for Night' have shown how the transformation of the weekday early evening schedules owes much to daytime television. Both point out that the new evening schedule is partly composed of programmes or genres that have been moved to the evening from the daytime schedules, always the domain of the housewife, the mother with children, the retired and the hobbyist. Although the evening programmes may have higher production values, many of the formats and concerns have had a daytime life for some years. This sense of generic and televisual origin, though, does not really explain to us why there has been a day for night makeover takeover and, before exploring the strand of 8–9 programming in more depth, I want to note some broader factors to which I think we should attend in any attempt to think about these programmes.

Here, it is useful to place the programming in the context of changes in both British society and the television industry. In terms of British society, there are three key factors to register when we consider the growth in lifestyle programming. First, is the increase in home-ownership (Britain has the highest proportion of home-owners in Europe, and two-thirds of the population live as owner-occupiers). This steady increase in home-ownership has been accompanied, in the south-east in particular, by the continuing inflation of house prices, and the movement of some property areas from a local

(national) to an international market price. The last 20 years of the 20th century saw the consolidation and proliferation of everyday discourses of value and investment associated with the purchase of housing.⁵ The second factor is the continuing expansion of female entry into the work-force. In depressed areas, there has been a well-documented increase in female, often part-time, employment in place of male employment, while more privileged classes are marked by the increasing inroads of women into the professions. In both cases, there is a consequent increase in women with control over their own income. Finally, despite media hysteria about teenage pregnancies, the most significant statistic about childbirth is the continuing postponement among social classes A, B and C of the birth of the first child (Family Policy Studies Centre, 1999). Put together with factors such as the increase in single-occupant homes⁶ and the much-vaunted privatization of leisure – for example, garden trade has increased by 40 percent in the past 10 years⁷ – we can hypothesize that it is not lifestyle programming alone that is producing an audience that is available to view. If the home and person have always been expressive sites, more people are spending more time and money on these pursuits than ever before, in a culture where the gap between rich and poor has continued to increase.⁸ Although the lifestyling of British television has attracted attention as being symbolic of a deterioration in that television, it is perhaps more helpful to think of it as being one element in the more general ‘lifestyling’ of late 20th-century British culture.

In terms of the more limited context of British television, we can initially note two key factors. First, the arrival of satellite, with its premium channel privileging of sport and films, and the increase in multi-set households have led to a diminution in family viewing, and what I would argue to be a discernible feminization of prime-time terrestrial television (Brunsdon, 2000). Second, with the introduction of the 25 percent rule in 1992, there has been a substantial increase in independent productions appearing on screen. Many of the smaller production companies have much less obviously gendered production hierarchies and the BFI tracking studies on the television industry suggest that there are simply more women working in television.⁹ Many of the lifestyle shows are made by independents, many are fronted by women and many have production teams with quite high proportions of women.¹⁰ For our purposes, what is of interest here is both the multi-layered feminization of the 8–9 slot and the professionalization of what were previously domestic skills. For while hobbyism was dominated by men, lifestyle is full of white, educated, middle-class women.¹¹ The labours of second wave feminism are beamed back to us – in a way as paradoxical as Mrs Thatcher – through the legions of rather bossy white women, earning good money, by telling us how to transform the domestic sphere.

So, the first point about television studies that is raised when we look at changes to the 8–9 slot on British television in the 1990s is that it is only

when we have a sense of these broader determinants that we can move on to thinking about the slot itself. That is, television studies cannot hope to illuminate our understanding of television by looking at television alone. However, as I hope to show, neither can the textual characteristics of television be explained solely through attention to contextual factors.

The 8–9 slot on British television has had a hard end and a soft beginning. The hard end was 9pm, which was for years the time of the main evening news on BBC 1, but which also marks ‘the watershed’, before which programmes must conform to certain standards of ‘taste and decency’.¹² Thus on the commercial channels it is traditionally between 9pm and 10pm that crime drama is shown, whereas on the BBC these used to start after the news at 9.30pm. The early evening is the zone of the local news, US sitcoms and soap opera, and it is the latter part of this zone, with its traditional gardening on Friday evenings, that has been transformed into a cornucopia of cooking, gardening and decorating programmes. Here, the historical hobbyist element in British broadcasting, which ranged from *Blue Peter* to *Barry Bucknell* and *Percy Thrower*, has been transformed through an engagement with consumerism, makeovers and game shows. The new hybrid formats seek to transform instruction into entertainment through the addition of surprise, excitement and suspense. As Peter Pavlikowski, co-director of *Twoockers*, a 1999 bleak drama about under-age car theft, put it when describing the contrast between his work and other TV, the mass of television ‘shows aspirational happy Britain where people have a good time’.¹³

Pavlikowski’s description of an ‘aspirational happy Britain where people have a good time’ certainly catches the tone of much of the 8–9 slot, which is relentlessly ‘up’, with a strong sense that not only can things only get better, they can get better now, for you, the viewer, if you only paint your garden fences purple, install a water feature, rip out that 1970s carpet, select only the best fresh ingredients, learn that wok cooking is fast and healthy and treat yourself to a scented bath after clearing your wardrobe of those mistaken impulse bargain buys. If you have a pear-shaped body, don’t choose short, boxy jackets, and remember that strong clear colours work so much better than messy patterns; and the most unusual plant containers can be made from everyday building materials such as brushed aluminium central heating flues.

Rachel Moseley (2000) has pointed out that many of these programmes are dependent on the key trope of the ‘makeover’, with its condensed narrative of ‘Before and After’. It can be a woman, a man, a garden, a room, a house, but on the television programme a story is told that shows the ‘before’ of the person or place, and then, through the intervention of some kind of expertise, the ‘after’. There is a long history of hobby or enthusiast television programming in Britain: gardening, cooking, and ‘do-it-yourself’ (home improvement), all of which implies a narrative of transformation.

However, in the older hobby genre, the narrative of transformation is generally one of skill acquisition. So, for example, in the 1967 BBC series, *Clothes that Count* (tx 10/10–12/12/67) each of the 10 30-minute programmes focused on the making of one garment, interspersing very close camera work on hands and sewing machine with more fashion-show-like segments in which the garment is modelled, made up in a range of fabrics. The whole process of making, for example, a piped buttonhole in a coat, was shown in real time with framing that mainly excluded the dressmaker's face.¹⁴ Similarly, in the earliest surviving *Gardener's World* (tx 7/4/72), we are shown appropriate spring pruning, how to divide herbaceous perennials and the planting-out of hardened seedlings during 20 minutes of continuous address by Percy Thrower. The long takes require the concealment of garden tools such as trowels and forks near the appropriate plants so that Thrower does not have to walk between his different demonstrations laden with tools. Here, too, the close-up is on the operation being demonstrated. The programmes are didactic – they show you how to do or make things – and, historically, they deal with the difficulty of doing this in the 'now' of television through the device that has become a catch-phrase in Britain, 'Here's one I made earlier' – or else they simply use real time. The hobby genre, like the short-lived broadcasts on Network Three in 1957, addressed the amateur enthusiast. By the end of the programme, the listener would know how to do something. The new makeover programmes are different in that they offer a different balance between instruction and spectacle, which is articulated most clearly through a changing grammar of the close-up, and they most commonly address their audience as customer or consumer.¹⁵

While contemporary lifestyle programmes retain a didactic element, this is narratively subordinated to an instantaneous display of transformation. Thus while the viewer is shown how to perform certain operations, the emphasis of the programme, what the producers call 'the reveal', is when the transformed person or place is shown to their nearest and dearest and the audience. The gardening in successful and popular programmes such as *Ground Force* is a combination of designing the new garden, clearing the old one, and then planting purchased mature specimens. This is clearly both more televisual (it takes a long time for a seedling to grow into a shrub), and more attuned to many contemporary lifestyles. It is a world away from Percy Thrower's cautious reminder to his viewers in 1972 that 'we've talked before about these containerized plants and planting them'. The emphasis now is on the result, not the process. Moseley shows how there is frequently a double-audience structure in these programmes: an internal audience who knows the person or place transformed, and to whom the transformation is a surprise, and the external television-viewing audience, both superintended by the television presenters and experts who have effected the transformation. For without the internal audience to express shock or joy or

astonishment, how would we, the external audience, understand the emotional significance of what we see? And it is in this double-audience structure that we see the changed grammar of the close-up. Instead of focusing on operations, the camera focuses on reactions. The climax of *Ground Force* is the close-up on the face of the garden owner, not the garden.¹⁶ This is melodramatic television.

This emphasis on affect in 1990s surprise makeover programmes can usefully be contrasted with the moment of revelation in a 1979 BBC 2 series, *Design by Five*. This series commissioned five designers to transform rooms for well-known figures. Individual programmes included 'A Kitchen for Magnus Pyke' (tx 16/1/79), 'A Bedroom for Claire Rayner' (tx 23/1/79) and 'A Study for Anne Nightingale' (tx 30/1/79). In these programmes there was clearly a mission to explain the design process. Clients were shown samples of the designer's work and polaroid photographs and models were used to discuss options and possibilities. The fact that the clients were already in the public eye — Magnus Pyke as eccentric broadcast scientist, Claire Rayner as an agony aunt and Anne Nightingale as a rare female disc-jockey — meant that the viewer would have some sense of their persona and enthusiasms. Thus the Pyke programme engaged with his scientific curiosity about cooking while the main task of the Nightingale redesign was the accommodation of her records. The celebrity of the clients, all of whom were accustomed to the media, produced a very different balance of power from that in programmes where the transaction is conducted between television people and ordinary people. The design stage was one of negotiation when, if anything, the clients had the upper hand. Claire Rayner put up a very spirited defence of 'the plain' against Tricia Guild's intention to give her bedroom 'lots of pattern'. The reveal, in most cases of rooms that seemed grotesquely at odds with the client persona and wishes, became the opportunity for further negotiation in which the client negotiated good manners with dissatisfaction. Nightingale, the least successfully polite, can only look sceptical when she observes that they have turned her study into a space age 'bread-bin'. But the key element here, which allows this negotiation to be conducted without gameshow affect, in addition to the status and cultural capital of the clients, is that the transformations have been effected on unacknowledged sets. Thus when Anne Nightingale observes, 'great theory — but I don't think I could live with it', she is secure in the knowledge that she doesn't have to. The lack of fit is entertaining, but the hypothetical quality of the exercise means that there is no possibility of humiliation for these celebrity clients. The clients have participated partly in order to collaborate on an educational project about what designers can do. We could say that this is realist, rather than melodramatic television.

In contrast, contemporary lifestyle programmes in many cases introduce the possibility of humiliation and embarrassment for participants through devices such as having neighbours decorate each other's rooms (*Changing*

Rooms) or partners buy each other outfits. It is the reaction, not the action, that is significant in this strand of lifestyle programming.

Andy Medhurst (1999: 27) suggests that in lifestyle programmes as a whole, '[o]ur dreamscapes have become domesticated – we now look for fantasy and escape in our back gardens and on our dinner tables'. He continues:

[s]o these lifestyle shows adhere to a sensibility that's very inward, insular and small c-conservative, and in this context it's worth noting the non-too-hidden class dimension of such programmes. Despite token gestures elsewhere, all are deeply rooted in white, English suburbia, where the houses and gardens are big enough to warrant makeovers.

While I don't disagree that there is something consummately Blairite about the lifestyle world, I think we can make some useful distinctions between the programming. This I would do partly on the basis of the balance between what I have characterized as 'realist' and 'melodramatic' modes, and partly on the basis of how they characterize their audience – and hence contemporary Britain. So, for example, if we look at two gardening programmes from October 1999, we can open up some of these issues. *Ground Force*, which is broadcast on BBC 1 on Friday evenings, has become the BBC's most successful gardening programme. Two of its regular presenters have become celebrities, the novel-writing Alan Titchmarsh and the specialist in water features, Charlie Dimmock.¹⁷ As already mentioned, the format of this show is the conversion of a garden in collusion with household residents, but in concealment from the person seen to care most about the garden. An indication of the stature of the programme is that the special millennium edition converted a garden for Nelson Mandela (tx 02/1/02). *Real Gardens* is a Channel 4 programme hosted by the gardener Monty Don, also broadcast on Friday evening. This programme chose continuity, and followed the fortunes of six groups of gardeners over the season. The presenters here are lower profile, and are seen to build up a continuing relationship with 'their' gardeners, who are presented in fortnightly segments to report on progress.

In the *Ground Force* of 15/10/99, the plan is to revamp the garden of a cricketer without his knowledge. As is often the case in England, the weather is rainy, and so the dedicated transformation time is more pressured than usual, and ground conditions are extremely muddy. The *Ground Force* team become involved in clowning for the camera as water drips down collars and boots stick in the mud, repeatedly demonstrating a rather terrifying mateyness. In the climax of the programme, when Karl (the homeowner) innocently returns, and the *Ground Force* team ostentatiously hide themselves against a wall while his wife and mother usher him into the garden, it is difficult to be certain about the causes of his evident emotion shown in close-up, juxtaposed with long shots of the transformed garden.

Is it, as the programme would have us believe, joy at the transformation and being deeply moved by the loving concern of his family? Or is it shock at coming home to find your house full of television crew, your cricket run destroyed by patio and decking, and incredulity at the deceptions of your family?

Real Gardens offers no reveal. Instead, the selected gardeners are shown over the weeks. Although one of the gardeners in this series did have a large middle-class garden, this was not true of the others, and I want to comment briefly on the novice gardeners Jem and Drew, who had only a tiny garden in the south of England. In the programme on 7/10/99, Jem and Drew were taken to the home of an older gardener, Maurice, and his wife, to learn a little about tomato cultivation. This rather charming sequence offered a juxtaposition of a very traditional image of the country gardener with a clearly urban gay (white, male) couple, who all shared an interest in organic tomatoes. Jem and Drew were called 'the boys' in a very relaxed way by the presenter, and made a very slightly camp joke about Basil being euphoric when they were in the polytunnel with Maurice. The information about complementary planting to confuse pests was clear, but so also was the unfeigned pleasure all the participants took in the encounter – very different from the presenter-mugging-for-the-camera in *Ground Force*.

In both programmes, there was no comment at all about the identity of participants. The family in *Ground Force* was mixed race and included a grandmother who was a black woman with a strong Derbyshire accent. Jem and Drew were identified as novice gardeners, not gay men. An interest in gardens and gardening was the key characteristic of participants, and this shared interest rendered difference ordinary. So I would want to suggest that through their choice of participants, programmes such as these make a considerable contribution to changing ideas of what it is to be British – and watching television – at present, and that this may mark changes a little more substantial than Medhurst's 'tokenism' suggests.

2. Contexts of study

I now want to shift discussion away from this version of the 8–9 slot to one of the contexts in which I have been thinking about it, in order to raise some questions about the constitution of the object of television studies.

Apart from my own living room, the place where I have been thinking about this slot has been the Midlands Television Research Group (MTVRG) which, in 1999, started, as group, to work on what we have called 'the 8–9 project'. The group has been meeting for several years, and has included Ann Gray, Jason Jacobs, Tim O'Sullivan and a shifting population of postgraduate students. The group has provided a forum in which we can read new books and articles together and present work in progress.¹⁸ Its relevance here

is two-fold. First, it is not just ideas of television studies that are formed and debated in the group – it is also ideas of television. The composition of the group means that a distinction can be made between older members (Tim, Ann and I are all over 45) who have been teaching in higher education for some time, and younger members, many of whom are full-time graduate students for at least their initial period in the group. The television we watch and know is different. Karen Lury (1995–6) has written about the complex pulls of memory and autobiography in our understanding of what television is in the classroom. These individual and generational determinations are thrown into greater relief when the television that different group members have and have not been watching encompasses not only the different ‘availability to view’ of those in full-time work and those studying, but a period of massive change in British television, from the arrival of Channel 4 and daytime TV in the early 1980s to the expansion of non-terrestrial services in the 1990s. Not only do younger members of the group watch different television, but the television that is there to be watched is quite different. In John Ellis’s periodization of the three ages of television as scarcity, availability and abundance (Ellis, 2000), television studies is the discipline of television’s ‘availability’, and our viewing in the group encompasses both temporal ends of this era. But it is not just that the younger members of the group watch different television and that television itself is different – they have a different *disposition* in relation to television. Television, and the options it offers and the demands it makes, is both more and less significant. Herta Herzog, in the early 1940s, when she was researching women who listened to radio soap opera in the US, spent some time puzzling over the issue of whether there were any consistent differences between regular listeners and others (Herzog, 1944: 20). Finally, she chose to suggest that regular listeners could be described as being ‘more radio-minded’ in general. The different disposition that I am referring to could perhaps be thought of as being ‘more television-minded’, in that television is much more readily accommodated into other activities (eating breakfast, doing homework, making phone calls), and is thus both more ordinary, and less important. Television for them is very different from television for Jonathan Miller. In another distinction of Ellis’s, Jonathan Miller watches programmes but it is more ordinary nowadays to watch television (Ellis, 2000: 5).

This becomes germane in the context of the 8–9 project because of the way in which the group showed me that I had conceptualized the 8–9 slot as a lifestyle slot. Here, it must simply be said that, initially, I characterized as I watched – I just didn’t see some of the lifestyle variants in the slot, such as pet and car programmes, nor did I notice some non-lifestyle material. The younger members of the group were much clearer about the daytime origins of many of the programmes, and also drew my attention to the ‘pets and vets’ strand (Johnson, 2001). They also pointed out that lifestyle includes car programming, which in Britain at present is unable to sustain

a consistent tone, veering wildly between late-recognized environmental issues and hilarious attempts to address the growing number of women who now buy their own cars. But it was one of the group, Helen Wheatley, who pointed out to us that in this homely aspirant world of lifestyle and makeover there is also an *unheimlich* strand, a subgenre of programming about security, burglary and property crimes – the aspirant world under threat. This strand includes emergency service docu-drama programmes and CCTV footage programmes, and offers a chill other side to the late 20th-century drama of 19th-century self-improvement which is lifestyle (Wheatley, 2001). The profile of the slot is transformed when we think of it as offering both ‘aspirational happy Britain’ and a constant minatory thread. Self- and home-improvement become more ritualistic and propitiary, the constant ‘up’ tone a little more like whistling in the dark.

The group context in which I was working changed my understanding of what I was studying, and I have been reliant on work done for and in the group in the writing of this article. I suggest that this is symptomatic of the increasing difficulty of addressing contemporary television by oneself. So my second point about television studies is that the well-rehearsed problems about the constitution of the object of television studies (crudely, political economy, production context, text or audience) have become, and will continue to be, enormously extended with the decline of mono-nation broadcasting systems, while the issues of generation will become more accentuated. The analytic models of television studies have been developed when television is either, in Ellis’s terms, ‘scarce’ (the national monopolies of the early days), or still graspably ‘available’ (the extended provision of the later part of the 20th century). Many established authorities in the field are programme, rather than television, watchers. The scale of the changes to what television is as we move into the age of abundance makes it increasingly important that we conceptualize what I have called television ‘disposition’ as part of our approach to this protean medium. It is in this context that taking a scheduling period such as 8–9, rather than a programme, serial or genre, can produce an object of study which is specific to television as a broadcast medium, and can grant appropriate significance to scheduling – even as it, maybe, decreases in importance. Choosing a time band for a group project permits the productive interplay of different television dispositions, and allows us to see how approaches to television are greatly inflected by these.

3. TV for other people: the dumbing-down debate and the ‘wall of leisure’

Jane Root, the current controller of BBC 2, was recruited to the channel from the independent sector, where she had a strong record in ‘intelligent

leisure' programming in the company Wall-to-Wall. In her first years at BBC 2 (she became Controller in 1998), she has displayed a scheduling strategy marked by the zoning of programming, introducing the *Art Zone* on Sunday evenings (19 March 1990) to complement the successful *History Zone* on Saturday evenings. She has also been defensive of BBC 2's 'wall of leisure' and is reported to want BBC 2 to "'own" leisure subgenres such as travel, cookery, fashion, gardening and sport'.¹⁹ The defence of lifestyle/leisure programming for the BBC can claim both a historical mission, with continuities between current BBC 2 scheduling, the history of the channel and the hobbyist tradition with which I commenced, and an ethical remit in relation to public service broadcasting. Programmes such as *Gardeners' World* are consistently attractive to large (for BBC 2) audiences, while the *Ground Force* spin-off, *Charlie's Garden Army* (BBC 1), in which Charlie Dimmock enlists a local community in the refurbishment of a neglected space, both appeal to audiences and operate with quite a strong notion of citizenry and the public good.²⁰ Thus we can see lifestyle and leisure programming as an extension of the democratic remit of public service broadcasting. Peter Bazalgette, recognized throughout the industry as a key mover in this field, has been, as founder of Bazal Productions, responsible for *Changing Rooms*, *Ready Steady Cook*, *Ground Force*, *Pet Rescue* and the reformatted *Food and Drink*. He offers a much more pragmatic account, stressing that 'it is very important not to just have individual successes but genres', and observing, 'We only think up ideas for broadcasters who tell us what they need. We are not a bright ideas company, we provide scheduling solutions'.²¹ The success of Bazal, which moved into the field by taking over production of the BBC programme *Food and Drink*, is founded on deeply anti-Reithian principles, marked perhaps most simply in Bazalgette's notion of his product as 'scheduling solutions', by the goal of moving programmes from BBC 2 to BBC 1 (as happened with *Changing Rooms*), and Bazalgette's own comment, 'why have originality when you can have ratings'.²²

We could suggest, then, that Root and Bazalgette, between them, stake out the field when we attempt to understand the significance of these programmes, which have figured in recent discussion in Britain about the 'dumbing-down' of British television. On the one hand, there is an argument that contests the understanding of the public sphere as one solely of citizenry and governmentality. On the other, there is the search for cheap, ratings-led 'scheduling solutions'. They come together in relation to cost and scheduling. For these are cheap programmes, and British television has been for some years clearly moving towards 'stripping' in its scheduling.

So here, finally, I want to address my epigraphs, comments about television made 30 years apart by Jonathan Miller, a cultural heavyweight in Britain. Rather than wading through the mainly pretty dumb commentary

on this issue in the British press I want to take Miller's comments indicatively. Jonathan Miller – or 'Dr Jonathan Miller' as he is usually referred to in the British media – embodies a particular, late 20th-century idea of an intellectual. Oxbridge-educated, trained doctor, acclaimed opera director, curator, involved with television since the 1960s, and well known as an occasional presenter of highbrow but popular programmes, he is liberal, polymathic (polemically committed to arts and sciences) and authoritative. Miller is also modern, in that he is one of the generation that embraced television in the 1960s, seeing the new medium as offering a range of intellectual and creative potentialities. His own television work is robustly intellectual, and this, in combination with his engaged and impressively broad cultural competences, suggests that he can also be seen as an embodiment of a post-1960s public service broadcasting. As indicated in the first quotation above, Miller has never been afraid of 'talking heads', and his main interest in television is as a vehicle for ideas. Thus in the 1969 interview above, Miller is arguing that 'intellectual [. . .] or cultural broadcasting' is not a luxury but a necessity, a key contribution to the body politic.

Thirty years later, in the second comment above, this veteran of 1960s British television is commenting on the lifestyle programming we have been discussing. Miller, who also invokes another vigorous strand of British early evening programming, 'pets and vets', as well as the later and very popular new lad comedy programme, *Men Behaving Badly*, makes clear his revulsion at these 'wall-filling' programmes. It is both cooking and comedy that excite exasperation, and the metaphor of 'kapok', which is actually cushion stuffing not wall stuffing, suggests that this exasperation does not discriminate between interior decoration or do-it-yourself.

This encounter between Jonathan Miller and kapok is useful as a way of focusing our attention on the concerns – both historical and contemporary – of television studies. For if Miller's anger about the wasting of the airwaves on cookery is symptomatic of an engaged high cultural concern about the deterioration of British television – and it must be stressed, Miller is engaged, he is not one of the British establishment who pretends never to watch television – then kapok is surely the end through which cultural students of television such as myself have historically entered.

In many ways, the world of lifestyle TV is not dissimilar to the *Nation-wide* world we looked at in Birmingham many years ago (Morley and Brunsdon, 1999). It is a world of consumers not citizens, a world of the domestic and the private – a world that has perhaps taken down its net curtains, but only to install a trompe-l'oeil 'regency' screen. But if this world of private households has moved closer to prime time in the schedules, it is also worth pointing out that it offers a differently contoured public. Medhurst decries tokenism, but I think there is something more positive to be said about the varieties of people that these shows construct as ordinary Britons. Gay couples do get to the finals of room-decorating competitions

in *Homefront; Looking Good* does regularly include black and Asian viewers in features about foundation, lipstick and hair care; mixed-race couples do have their gardens transformed on *Ground Force*. Cookery programmes do recognize the wealth of culinary knowledge in the different British populations. These people were just not on television 25 years ago – so if there is a dumbing-down, it seems to me that there has also been a pluralling up.

There is, however, a dreadful sense of déjà vu in the contours of the argument. In a context where it is clearly indicated that the traditional 'quality' genres, current affairs/documentary and drama are embattled (Barnett and Seymour, 1999), I'm not sure I want to come out fighting for lifestyle television. Surely I am not still just defending kapok after all these years? Well no, I think not, but the reason can be found in Miller's use of 'kapok'. It is precisely the imprecision that points the way. He is saying it is all one undifferentiated load of stuffing. In contrast, I would suggest that perhaps television is just more *ordinary* at the end of the century, and that some of it is good and some of it isn't. The 1990s 8–9 slot does not just represent the defeat of the investigative journalist by the television cook – although it does do this, and the castigation of television cooks does very little to address the causes of this substitution. It also represents a greater attention paid to the stuff of everyday lives, and a broader definition of what 'cultural broadcasting' might consist in. For someone like Miller, there is a way in which ideas are his hobby – while others have different leisure pursuits. Attention to cooking, home-decoration, clothing and gardening is not in itself contemptible. The forms in which this attention is paid are various, and the number of programmes available allow distinctions to be made. Comparison with earlier instructional and leisure programming has suggested that we might be able to sketch a broad shift in this type of programming from a realist to a melodramatic mode, signified through the shift from close-ups on objects and operations to close-ups on faces. In that broad shift, we can discriminate, in current lifestyle programming, between programming at the more realist end (*Real Gardens*), and those at the more melodramatic end (*Ground Force*). I would want to argue for the more realist inflection – and rather against programmes with a strong stress on 'the reveal', which I think often verge on the sadistic.²³

Against Jonathan Miller, I would want to argue that there is much of value in contemporary British television. Much lifestyle programming should be welcomed as relatively accomplished, contemporary, secular and socially extensive entertainment texts. Good, ordinary television for a nation that has a different disposition towards television but that is also struggling to understand itself as full of difference. The problem is not the presence of lifestyle as such – it is the broadcasting regimes and economies that validate Peter Bazalgette's claim that it is always better to have genres than individual programmes. Here, I would want to go some way with

Miller. For I would not want my enjoyment of a form of programming that is concerned with everyday practices and activities to preclude recognition of necessity of producing – and scheduling – programmes about a wider world. It is not the presence of lifestyle, an easy and visible target, but the increasing absence of other programming to which we should be attentive.

And so this brings me to my final point about television studies. I have here made a limited defence of lifestyle programming, partly on the grounds that it reflects both a range of everyday pleasures and skills, but also a greater diversity in the audience. This is a familiar move from what we might call the kapok end of television studies. I want to go on to argue that a text-based television studies (that is, one that understands itself in Arts rather than the Social Sciences) cannot restrict itself to this representation/socially extensive paradigm, and must also engage in evaluation. I have suggested that in the particular instances I have been discussing, the more explicitly instructive (realist) *Real Gardens* is preferable to the more showbazy (melodramatic) *Ground Force*. Lifestyle programmes are replete with implicit and explicit aesthetic judgement – television scholars need to make the case why some are better than others.

Notes

I have discussed *Clothes that Count* and *Design by Five* in 'Once More on the Insignificant' in C. Brunsdon, C. Johnson, R. Moseley and H. Wheatley (2001) 'Factual Entertainment on British Television: The Midlands TV Research Group's "8-9 Project"', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4(1).

- 1 Jonathan Miller interviewed by Joan Bakewell/Nicholas Garnham in Bakewell and Garnham (1970), pp. 131-2.
- 2 Jonathan Miller, 'one-time BBC Arts Executive', quoted by John Preston in 'A tale of two schedules' in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 5 September 1999, p. 20.
- 3 Unsigned article in the *Radio Times*, 29 September 1957 (the week that new schedules for the Third Programme were announced). Quoted by Humphrey Carpenter (1997), p. 181.
- 4 I am very aware of the perils of characterizing genres of programmes on the basis of viewing the few remaining editions and would welcome correspondence from anyone who can offer more detail.
- 5 The rhetoric surrounding the Conservative government's sale of council (social) housing in the 1980s provides a fine example of this, as do the weekly personal finance supplements of any of the non-tabloid newspapers. The most significant development in the 8-9 slot after the period in which this article deals is the proliferation of programmes dealing explicitly with the purchase and sale of houses and flats such as *House Doctor* (TalkBack,

- 1999–), *Location, Location, Location* (Ideal World, 2000–) and *Property Ladder* (TalkBack, 2001–).
- 6 See *Social Trends 2000*, p. 34; Richard Scase (1999). This report suggested that by 2010 more than half the British population will be living alone. Newspapers reported it with a limited range of variants on the *Daily Telegraph's* headline, 'By 2010 Britain will be a giant singles bar', Matt Born, *Daily Telegraph*, 18.9.99, p. 9.
 - 7 The National Farmers Union reports in January 2000 that horticulture is pretty much the only bright spot in British agriculture. The report itself attributes the massive increase (the industry is now worth £640 million) to the popularity of gardening programmes and the relief from stress that gardening offers: 'Garden trade grows 40% in ten years', Greg John and Terri Judd, *The Independent*, 17.1.2000, p. 5.
 - 8 The 1999 *Wealth of the Nation* report into household income, the first of the triennial reports conducted under the 1997 Labour government, reports a rise in average income with increasingly marked regional disparities (Cherry Norton, 'Inequality Grows in Blair's Britain', *The Independent*, 25.10.99, p. 5).
 - 9 Department of Trade and Industry figures for 1998 quote 88 percent of film and video businesses as employing fewer than nine people (*Cultural Trends* no. 30, 1999, p. 11). BFI Television Industry Tracking Study (1995) *The First Year: An Interim Report* (London: BFI); *Second Interim Report* (London: BFI, 1997).
 - 10 The jury is still out on whether male and female journalists actually produce different programmes, but it is clear that these programmes are themed within the domain of care of the self and home, which are indubitably *still* feminized spheres. But see Frank Mort (1996) and Sean Nixon (1996).
 - 11 For example, Channel 4's commissioning editor for features and special projects, Liz Warner, appointed in 1999, has spent most of her career in daytime television. A *Broadcast* interview feature on her commented, 'She is also the first to admit to commissioning according to personal preferences in her own lifestyle. "I love eating and shopping", she says. "But I also believe in looking at original ways of tackling popular subjects. They have to have human drama, natural narrative and incredible detail along the way" ' (Azeez, 1999).
 - 12 This news slot was moved to 10 pm – to howls of outrage – in 2000.
 - 13 Peter Pavlikowski, quoted by Jane Robins in '“Bleak TV” takes off in Halifax', *The Independent*, 4.9.1999, p. 9.
 - 14 *Clothes That Count: The Double-Breasted Coat* (tx 6/12/67). 'The Double-Breasted Coat' is the only episode of this series that can be viewed, which is extremely unfortunate as it looks like a rich 1960s text. In another context the series would be a very useful source for discussion of the rise of the 'Dolly Bird' and the role of home dressmaking in the democratization of fashion in the 1960s.

- 15 There has been a strong backlash in more hobbyist gardening quarters about the way in which gardening programmes encourage the purchase of fully grown shrubs and plants, instead of educating their audience about taking cuttings and raising from seed. Peter Seabrook, who writes the gardening column in the *Sun*, when commenting on the demise of a year-old fashionable garden magazine, *New Eden* (IPC), made clear his disapproval of makeover gardening: 'with cooking, if it goes wrong you can do it again in the afternoon. Gardening isn't like that, you only sow one lot of tomatoes a year' (quoted in Jane Robins, 'Modernism Spells Trouble in the Garden of Eden', *The Independent*, 1.8.00, p. 8).
- 16 A 1976 *Gardeners' World* used no close-ups of the presenter Peter Seabrook and his hostess Mrs Prior until the final goodbye before the credits. Although the programme used a great many close-ups, these were all of flowers and plants. The human beings remained in long shot (interspersed with flower close-ups) for the first 9 minutes of the programme, when they were shown in mid-shot from the knees. This was the closest shot until the final sequence (tx 19/5/76). (This is the only programme to survive from 1976.)
- 17 Dimmock, a strong and capable gardener who does not shrink from heavy lifting and other dirty jobs, has shot to tabloid celebrity through much salacious coverage of the fact that she does not wear a bra – and doesn't see this as a problem. 'Of course I'm overexposed, but it's a good laugh. Someone told me "you've got three years."': Andrew Duncan (1999) interview with Charlie Dimmock, *Radio Times*, 23–29 October, pp. 9–13. Dimmock was also on the cover of this *Radio Times*, as she had been in August 1998 as a mock-up Botticelli's *Venus* (she has long blondey-auburn tresses).
- 18 See Midlands Television Research Group (1999) 'A Report', *Screen* 40(1): 88–90, for a short account of the group.
- 19 Peter Keighron discusses a leaked internal report on BBC factual programming, 'What Do You Really Want?', the *Guardian*, Media, 25/10/99, p. 3.
- 20 Katy Elliott, reporting on the audience figures for Friday night gardening programmes, points out that *Gardeners' World* (BBC 2) and *Real Gardens* (Channel 4) share a very similar ABC1 adults demographic; *Charlie's Garden Army* (BBC 1) and *Ground Force* (BBC 1) attract a wider spread of viewers (both of the last two shows were moved from BBC 2 to BBC 1): 'Growing Audiences', *Broadcast*, 4 August 2000, p. 20.
- 21 Peter Bazalgette, in Bishop (1998), pp. 22–23.
- 22 Peter Bazalgette, in Bishop (1998), p. 23.
- 23 See the discussion of the necessity for 'informed consent' from 'ordinary people' in Stirling Media Research Institute (2000) *Consenting Adults* (London: Broadcasting Standards Commission).

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