

## **TV Fiction Exchange: Local/Regional/National/Global. An International Conference**

**Manchester Metropolitan University, Cheshire Sept. 5-8, 2006**

**Conference Review by Michele Hilmes**

The TV Fiction Exchange conference held in Crewe in September, 2006 marked a significant moment in the history of media studies. While many international communication conferences have been convened over the last 50 years, and a plethora of national and regional conferences have been organized in locations around the world focusing on various aspects of media study, this conference is one of the first to center on the unique characteristics of the circulation of fictional television texts across diverse cultural environments.

Organizers Kim Akass, Stephen Lacey, Janet McCabe, and Robin Nelson brought together a group of scholars from more than a dozen countries not only to investigate the moment, but to mark the debut of a new journal, *Critical Studies in Television* and a new "Reading Contemporary Television" book series from I. B. Tauris press, both focusing on the production, distribution, impact, and transnational influence of television fiction in the radically-changed media environment of the twenty-first century. A full four days of presentations by scholars and practitioners built important bridges between the worlds of industry, global communication, and cultural analysis, applying a perspective of transnational creative influence routinely applied to art and literature, but rarely extended to television.

Why was this the perfect moment for such a conference? Television as a medium has been marked by a more thoroughgoing national emphasis than the majority of cultural forms in the twentieth century. Produced mostly by institutions whose central mandate involves promoting a specifically national culture, the presence on the screen of television programs from other nations, or the process of borrowing and influence from one national tradition to another, has remained a sensitive and often controversial subject since the days of radio. Though television programs have circulated far outside their national boundaries since the beginning of the medium, more often than not this has been regarded as a negative or merely ancillary factor, to be suppressed and controlled rather than studied or celebrated.

However, recent decades have witnessed the increased permeability of once-dominant national boundaries, not only via satellite television and the circulation of media outside of institutional control—such as videocassettes, DVDs, and the Internet but also through the increased globalization of media industries. We have now reached a moment when individuals as well as corporations and institutions can make decisions about what television programs they will view and can cross formerly resistant borders at will. Television networks have recognized this fact and increasingly complement domestic production with imported or adapted dramas, comedies, and serials, while the international format trade has brought localized versions of now global forms to households around the world.

This point was well demonstrated by a range of papers and presentations. Prof. Robin Nelson opened the conference with an overview of key issues, which acknowledged the shifts in global influence that the television industry has gone through while still recognizing the primacy of the national context in producing meaningful texts. His questioning of the very terms we have used as reference—the local, the regional, the national, set against that global "other," the American—set the parameters for much of the debate that followed.

Keynote speakers provided a variety of national and professional perspectives. Prof. Ien Ang of the University of Western Sydney revisited her groundbreaking 1985 study of the international circulation of *Dallas* to argue for a "more influential, less popular" role for US television worldwide as local and regional alternatives have begun to flourish. Prof. Xiaoling Zhang of the University of Nottingham analyzed the growth of TV drama in China, from the first boom in the 1980s to the current trend towards domestic production. Prof. Jeongmee Kim, also from the University of Nottingham, presented the Korean mini-series *Autumn in My Heart* as a prime example of the program genre that has made Korea a leading influence in Asian television. On the professional side, television critics Mark Lawson of the *Guardian* and *Radio Four*, and David Bianculli of the *New York Daily News* and NPR's *Fresh Air*, discussed the tensions between the television industry and its reviewers, and reflected on the challenges presented by changes in their field. Dermot Horan, Director of Broadcast Acquisitions for RTE, and Tony Garnett, distinguished producer of film and television in both the UK and the US, allowed the mostly academic audience a valuable glimpse into operations at the creative and business ends of the industry spectrum.

Panels and papers ranged across the globe, examining television production, circulation, and reception in a wide variety of contexts. Though such diversity is difficult to summarize, a few dominant concerns emerged. The importance of regional identities within the national context was demonstrated by Ruth McElroy's study of Welsh language serial drama, Enrique Castello's analysis of Catalan fiction in Spain, and Lez Cooke's exploration of Granada's local production in the early days of ITV in Britain. Transnational influences on program genres received a good deal of attention, including examination of the German weekly serial *Lindenstrasse* and its model *Coronation Street* by Kara McKechnie, the impact of US generic conventions on Spanish television drama by Mercedes Medina and Monica Herrero, British elements in the American medical series *House* by Sara Steinke, and transatlantic influences on British television drama in the work of Tony Garnett by Karen Shepherdson.

Other papers emphasized the ways in which pleasure and meanings carry across national cultural boundaries, as in Billur Dokur's presentation on *Six Feet Under* and its audiences' use of the Internet and Lynda Hawryluk's analysis of the international reception of *Big Brother*. Henrik Ornebring's study of the extension of television narratives such as *Alias* beyond the box into reality gaming, Barbara Villez's examination of the ways in which American legal series have affected French audiences' understanding of their own legal system, and Stan Beeler's look at US production of science fiction series in Canada developed this theme.

Overall, the conference went a long way towards breaking open the national as the dominant category of reference for television, and exposed the complicated cross-currents of influence that have characterized the actual practice of television dramatic production, circulation, and reception since its birth—just in time for the digital age to usher in an era of even more hyperkinetic exchange.

*Michele Hilmes is Professor of Media and Cultural Studies and Director of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the author of, most recently, Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States (2nd ed) and editor of NBC: America's Network. Email: mhilmes@wisc.edu*