'Time-warp Television' – A review of new historical drama from the BBC:

***Life on Mars*, created by Mathew Graham, Tony Jordan and Ashley Pharoah, BBC, 2006.**

***Robin Hood*, created by Foz Allan and Dominic Minghella, BBC, 2006.**

***Torchwood*, created by Russell T. Davies, BBC, 2006.**

Robin Hood in an anorak and touting an anti-war message? Costume drama in the gritty back streets of 1970s Manchester? Clearly this is not your father's BBC. While there is still plenty of Austen and Dickens for the purist, the BBC, long the home of waistcoats, mutton chops and empire waists, has breathed some new life into the historical drama with two series that seem to engage as much with the way we respond to history as to the historical setting itself.

A cult and critical hit, *Life on Mars*, follows Manchester Police Detective Sam Tyler (played by John Simm) who is 'transported' back to 1973 after being hit by a car. Used to being a Detective Chief Inspector with expensive digs, a well-cut suit, and police-work governed by political correctness and computers, Sam finds himself demoted, dressed in a leather jacket, living in a dingy room with a Murphy-bed, and working with DCI Gene Hunt. Hunt, played with joyful relish by Philip Glenister, is the very antithesis of modern policing. He is unabashedly racist, sexist, homophobic and not above bashing the uncooperative suspect mid-interview. All guts and reaction, he is the ying to Sam's yang, as it becomes clear that DI Tyler has lost the ability to trust his instincts. What keeps the series interesting though is that Hunt never quite becomes a cartoon. He is willing, albeit reluctant, to learn new tricks, and across the series is seen to be loyal, able to correct his own mistakes and offer Sam a lesson or two. They are joined by DC/DS Ray Carling, a more extreme, less likeable version of Hunt, the sweet but dumb DC Chris Skelton and WPC/DC Annie Cartwright, who becomes Sam's confidant and voice of reason; and is rewarded by being treated as a police officer rather than the tea lady for the first time in her career.

It becomes increasing apparent that the story is unfolding within Sam's coma-addled brain (writer Matthew Graham expressed surprise that audiences didn't immediately accept this as fact and were willing to give equal credence to all parts of Sam's query: 'Am I mad, in a coma or back in time?'). [1] As such, perhaps more is owed to *The Sweeney* than an historically accurate depiction of England's police forces. However, from an historian's point of view, it is the way Sam negotiates the changes that have taken place within his own lifetime, within his own history, that make this show an above average piece of costume work. Much has been written about the allusions to *The Wizard of Oz* but in fact the show owes more to Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* Sam is a man who has been stripped of the technology around which he has built his life. But the show is to be commended for the fact that it does not dwell on the loss of his computer, Ipod or mobile. Our hero makes do with stacks of folders and a radio, and seems quite happy with Hunt's tendency to send Annie anytime he wants Sam found. Instead the readjustments are often shown in more poignant ways. When a young woman is caught up in a shooting, Sam barks orders about saline and blood pressure to the ambulance driver who finally points out that he is not a doctor and that his job is simply to drive the vehicle. Years of trauma treatment research and life-saving techniques fade before Sam's eyes. He is forced to confront the reality of what cultural historian Lawrence Levine has argued: people from the past are not simply earlier versions of ourselves, rather they negotiate a very different landscape with its own challenges and demands.[2]

Life on Mars challenges the tacitly accepted notion that costume drama needs to reference the Regency or Victorian periods and as such should be warmly welcomed by those historians – particularly public historians – who work to remind the populace that history did not end in 1900 or even 1945. The processes of urban renewal depicted in 1970s Manchester raises just as interesting social issues as the Dickensian industrial revolution, and *Life on Mars* engages with these (at least as a side note to the police drama). In the third

episode, the team investigates a death at a factory, a factory which in 2006 has been converted into flats including the residence of one DCI Sam Tyler. When he points out to Annie that the body has been found in what will be his kitchen, she dismisses the possibility, and not merely as the ravings of a madman purporting to know the future: 'Houses are houses, factories are factories, things are built for a purpose', she informs him. She further suggests that he should tell the assembled textile workers that they will lose their jobs so that their workplace can be converted into a place for him to live and see what their reaction is. The scene beautifully encapsulates the way landscapes can become historical documents, replete with meaning and stories.

By comparison, *Robin Hood* is, at first sight, a more traditional historical drama revisiting the legendary British outlaw of the Middle Ages; granted this Robin is a younger incarnation of the hero than either of the most recent movie versions, both of which cast the outlaw as a middle-aged man. Jonas Armstrong imbues Robin with youthful vigour but also impetuousness and at times an idealistic naïveté creating a likeable but flawed, and therefore ultimately more interesting character. Equally engaging is the re-imagining of Marian, played by Lucy Griffiths. While some traditional tellings of the legend, beginning in the eighteenth century, manage to make Marian more than just a faint-hearted damsel in distress, here, she is fully realised as an outlaw in her own right.[3] She is adept with a bow, dangerous with a thrown knife, an excellent horsewoman, and as 'The Nightwatchman', a bringer of relief to the poor, while her boyfriend is away on the Crusades, beating up Saracens in the Holy Lands. This younger cast, which might be nicknamed, 'Robin Hood: The Next Generation' are not the only indications that this production is trying to do something different with the old story.

The production design, particularly the costume design, shuns even the pretence of strict adherence to the styles of the Middle Ages. As stated earlier, Robin's woodland garb clearly references modern anoraks. Beyond that, Marian's clothes

are heavily influenced by the 1920s and the evil Sir Guy of Gisborne's black leather coat is decidedly nineteenth century. Their speech is also laden with modern cultural references such as dialogue that borrows the lyrics of the Bob Marley song 'I Shot the Sheriff'.

Yet these anachronisms are not merely indications of a costume designer gone mad, or tongue in cheek writing. The ties between the twelfth century and more modern times are part of the larger subtext. The producers have taken the story of a young battle-weary lord returned from Crusading in the Holy Lands, and used it as a way of making critical comment about Britain's involvement in (and alliances around) another war in the same part of the world.

This commentary manifests itself in a number of ways. At the forefront is repeated discussion of the lack of the rule of law in Nottingham, as exemplified by the following dialogue between Gisborne and Marian in regards to Robin's impending execution:

> Marian: There must be a trial; it is the law.
> Gisborne: Yes but he is an outlaw. You see in these straightened times, the Sheriff has made special provision, outlaws are classed as enemies of war, thus we can hold them without trial and we can execute them without trial.
> Marian: No it cannot be.
> Gisborne: We're at war.
> Marian: Yes, in the Holy Land. That does not mean that we dispense with justice here!

Clearly this is an argument that has much more to do with modern times, than English Law under the Plantagenets.

The commentary is never very subtle, but at times it does take on sledgehammer-like tendencies. The anachronisms are particularly overpowering in an episode entitled 'Peace? Off!'. The plot of this episode introduces a soldier suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a disease not often diagnosed in the 1100s (interestingly, when in *Life in Mars*, Sam suggests that a fellow officer might be similarly afflicted, the rest of the squad think he's talking about venereal disease). The solider in question wears fatigue pants a combat vest and boots, all strikingly close to modern desert warfare uniforms. It is at this point that the production seems to be saying: 'See, it's not really about the Middle Ages, it's about now. You see? You see?' Such conspicuous indicators of the purpose of the program works to the detriment of the sustained analogy, as they all but destroy whatever suspension of disbelief has been maintained by the audience. Fortunately, the extent to which this episode hammers the point is the exception rather than the rule, and it comes close to the end of the first series, rather than driving away viewers at an early stage.

In spite of the lack of subtlety in the execution, the use of the Robin Hood myth to explore a modern society at war, should be of interest to cultural historians. It is a myth that has been re-told a number of times, so that its variation is often more interesting than its actual plot. J.C. Holt argues that is the persistence of the legend rather than its origin which gives meaning to Robin Hood. He notes that the evolutions of Robin Hood from yeoman to a resistor of Norman rule, to a wronged earl fighting on behalf of the peasant class, each speak to both the needs and desires of the audience in the language of a given period. For Holt there is a direct lineage for 'what began as oral tradition and ended as television script.'[4] This incarnation takes the television script and goes a step further. It is not simply a period drama or a 'Boys Own' adventure: it reflects a need, right or wrong, to have history speak to the present. While this particular production does not take that to a particularly complicated conclusion, questions about the appropriateness of trying to use the past in the present is at the centre of many of the current debates about history, particularly in the public arena. Australia is a

long way from Nottingham but debates about black-armband history come, in part, from the same genesis as the blending of time-periods in this production.

Not everything coming out of the 'Beeb' engages with history so intelligently. *Dr Who* may have been originally conceived as historical rather than science-fiction drama but its latest spin-off *Torchwood* is appalling in the way it blends distinct historical eras. *Torchwood* operates under the premise that a rift in the time-space continuum (that mythical and yet seemingly ubiquitous presence in Hollywood-style physics) exists under the Welsh city of Cardiff. At various times, characters traverse the rift, as does a small passenger plane that arrives from the early 1950s. Team leader Captain Jack Harkness (RAF) even takes a jaunt back to the Second World War and the Cardiff Blitz.

None of the episodes dealing with historical themes pay even lip-service to the notion that different eras, even those quite close in time, possessed different social mores from our own. The passengers from the 1950s aircraft adapt almost flawlessly and immediately to the twenty-first century and are troubled only by the fact that relatives are now aged or deceased. This stands in sharp contrast to the success of *Life on Mars* in acknowledging Levine's assertions about people from the past.

Jack's trip through the rift is even more problematic. There he meets and falls for his namesake, the real (and soon to be deceased) Captain Harkness, an American RAF volunteer pilot whose identity 'our' Jack will shortly steal. The men connect and while there is an implication that when they disappear for an hour to 'talk' that there is in fact a more physical liaison, the problematic scene is their last one together, just before the modern Jack returns through the rift. He pauses and kisses the other man full on the lips in the middle of the dance-floor. We have been told in previous episodes that modern Jack has already lived through the 1940s at least once (he is both an alien and possibly immortal). Given this, he would be aware of the punitive prohibitions on homosexuality during the

period. Homosexuality was not decriminalised in Britain until 1967. In 1941, after being 'outed' in front of a full crowd of people, Captain Harkness would have been in all likelihood removed from flight duty and quite possibly prosecuted. Quite frankly, their kiss would not have occurred in public between two men who seem to like and respect each other. Series creator Russell T. Davies has been applauded for making Jack, the show's leader and nominal hero, bisexual. But to take the openness of the twenty-first century and to force it upon a period when non-heterosexual people were persecuted is to nullify the accomplishments of those who struggled for change. Rather than celebrating gay rights, the ahistorical behaviour of *Torchwood*'s leader reduces the gay rights movement to little more than the preparation for a pride parade, because it erases the need for a movement in the first place.

It is, I would argue, one thing for the producers of *Robin Hood*, to remaster a legend and in a sense take it out of time to provide an editorial on the present. It is quite another when the producers of *Torchwood*, re-shape the past in the image that they would like it to be, without any clear purpose other than creating a romantic plot line.

Torchwood aside, it is heartening to see historical drama being re-invigorated with forms that do new things with the genre. Whether this will be a lasting paradigm shift or a flash in the pan is yet to be seen. It's rather unfortunate to note that the second series of both *Life on Mars* and *Robin Hood* moved away from engagement with blended time periods in all but the visual. The second (and final) series of *Life on Mars* sees Sam more or less adjust to living in the 70s and more concerned with his relationships with Gene Hunt, Annie Cartwright and the rest of the team. In *Robin Hood*, series two concentrates on an England-wide conspiracy to kill King Richard upon his return, and abandons any commentary on the Third Crusade/Iraq War. This may reflect the change in leadership at Number 10 Downing Street, and recognition that the program was becoming unsustainable in the editorial mode. Hopefully, however, the success

of both of these programs will see historical drama continue to develop, evolve and engage more deeply with popular and public interpretations of the past.

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[1] Ian Wylie , 'The Life of Wylie: Life on Mars, The Answers', *Manchester Evening News,* http://blogs.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/ianwylie/2007/04/life_on_mars_the_answers.html, accessed 20 November 2007.
[2] Lawrence Levine, *The Unpredictable Past*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 280.
[3] J.C. Holt, *Robin Hood*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1982, p. 166.
[4] J.C. Holt, *Robin Hood*, pp. 7-8.