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Editorial

Special issue: Television seasonality

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In 1988, Paddy Scannell argued that 'attention to the structuring of time and space must be a central concern of any theory that wishes to take account of the actual conditions that shape and are shaped by the activities and interactions of human beings' (1988: 15). In the case of television, this would allow the researcher 'to render more explicit the connections between the social work of production and reproduction in broadcasting' (1988: 15). Scannell drew particular attention to the annual calendar of events broadcast through the BBC, claiming that:

Nothing so well illustrates the noiseless manner in which the BBC became perhaps *the* central agent of the national culture as the calendrical role of broadcasting; this cyclical reproduction, year in year out, of an orderly and regular progression of festivities, rituals and celebrations – major and minor, civil and sacred – that marked the unfolding of the broadcast year. (1988: 17–18, original emphasis)

However, despite this call for the exploration of the temporal structures of broadcasting, and demonstration of the significance of the broadcast calendar to national culture, the issue of how television relates to the passing seasons is one that has been commented on by a number of academics, but has received little sustained attention.

This special issue of the *Journal of Popular Television* seeks to rebalance the situation somewhat, by providing a number of views about the importance and uses of seasonality in

relation to television. Through articles relating to a number of different national contexts, and utilizing different approaches to the question of the seasonal, the possibilities of considering the significance of the seasons in relation to television, and to broadcasting more widely, are opened up for analysis. While the articles gathered here cover different continents and nations and cultures, different seasons, genres and broadcasting contexts, there is a strong focus on the United Kingdom and the United States, and a particular interest in the end-of-the-year celebrations such as Christmas. A future dossier in the *Journal of Popular Television* specifically on Christmas television will pick up this example. However there are still many other approaches that could be taken, and many other examples, texts and contexts that could be considered in addition to the ones presented here and in that dossier.

Broadcasting and the seasons

In some ways, it is obvious that television viewing will change with the seasons, but it is only recently that any work has quantified this in any detail. The British Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) in 2014 commissioned a detailed analysis of how the weather affected British viewing figures. This showed that 'for every degree Celsius increase in maximum temperature, viewing falls by around 0.76 per cent; and, secondly, for every increase in daily sunshine hour, we see a reduction in viewing of around 0.71 per cent' (BARB 2015: 12). This demonstrates the specific effect that the weather has on viewing, but also, particularly in terms of amount of daylight, demonstrates the significance of the season to viewing, supporting the common-sense understanding that people will be less likely to sit indoors in summer when it is hot and sunny than in winter when it is cold and dark outside.

However, season is important in more than just the way that it influences the number of viewers. As Jason Mittell has noted: 'Many series follow the time of year that episodes air, with specific episodes for holidays such as Christmas or Halloween, a specific time scheme that loses meaning when a show is watched in reruns or on DVD' (2010: 224). However, this fails to account for the way that the meaning stems not just from the time that the episode was aired, but also that it is embedded into the episode itself by its very nature as a holiday-specific episode. Through its connection to a particular season, the episode's narrative or on-screen trappings re-orientate the calendar for the viewer, connecting them to the time that the episode was originally intended to be aired.

This can even occur without a specific holiday being mentioned, as the traditions of particular narratives being related to particular times of year within particular broadcast cultures develop. This is especially true when those narratives disrupt the typical narratives of the show, for example with the introduction of horror elements to non-horror programmes at Halloween or Christmas. Once the pattern is identified, consciously or not, the association of type of narrative with calendar time reawakens that connection whenever the narrative type is encountered. So, when a US detective series or hospital drama incorporates apparently supernatural events, then it is likely to be a Halloween episode, unless those supernatural events are heartwarming and family related, in which case it is more likely to be a Christmas episode. Especially if there is snow (see Johnston 2015).

In following John Hartley's work on the frequencies of communication in different societies, we can see how the low frequency of occurrence of seasonal special programming can make it seem more culturally significant than higher-frequency programming. Hartley (2007) differentiates between the frequencies of communication in pre-modern, modern and postmodern

societies, arguing that communications become more frequent in the move from pre-modern to modern, and modern to postmodern. The frequency also depends upon the type of communication; the page is more stable than the screen, but more stable still is the inscription on a public monument. For Hartley, this suggests the move from ‘Rumor, “gossip,” and information’ via ‘knowledge, fiction, and science’ to ‘belief, myth, and religion’ (2007: 58). This indicates that the frequency of communication is significant in its interpretation, that something that occurs infrequently will appear to be more stable and arguably more ‘mythic’ or at least traditional than something that occurs frequently, seeming ‘closer to “nature,” literally written in stone, when compared with higher-frequency messages’ (2007: 59). However, there is a flipside to this, in that regular but infrequent programming can appear out of sync with the rest of a supposedly postmodern culture, used to instant gratification and on-demand access to entertainment or information. In other words, the association of low frequency material becomes less with ‘nature’ and more with outdatedness.

Picking up on Paddy Scannell’s research, Karen Lury remarks that:

At the grandest scale, television marks the passing of years, and of each year – television’s relaying of seasons (Christmas, summer) echoes and confirms the passing of the real seasons for the television viewer. Special national events – such as Wimbledon or the Superbowl – are marked and happen on television at the same time that they take place in the everyday of the viewer. Every year, the passing of the year at midnight on 31 December is relayed by television. On a

slightly smaller scale, the passing of weeks, the days of the week and the hours of the day are marked out, relayed to the audience at home by television. (2005: 98)

As with Scannell, Lury specifically connects this scheduling with national cultures and identities, understandably as most television is still organized on a national basis. What is important here is the way that repetition serves to reinforce, to recreate and, indeed, to create memories. Amy Holdsworth has argued that:

Television itself is marked by and generates our obsession with commemoration and anniversaries, through its repetition and continual re-narrativisation of grand historical narratives, for example, of world wars and world cups. It is within these ‘new electronic technologies’, such as television, that a contemporary fascination with memory becomes evident. (2011: 1–2)

Television not only marks out the repeating structure of our weeks, months and years, but it also reminds us of them. In doing so, it demonstrates this ‘contemporary fascination with memory’, but it also becomes part of those memories, reinforcing associations and behaviours.

Similarly, Roger Silverstone claimed that one of the reasons that television was worthy of academic study was because of its place:

[...] in the visible and hidden ordering of everyday life; in its spatial and temporal significance; in its embeddedness in quotidian patterns and habits [...] the screen providing the focus of our daily rituals and the frame for the limited transcendence – the

suspension of disbelief – which marks our excursions from the profane routines of the daily grind into the sacred routines of schedules and programmes. (1994: 19)

In other words, broadcast television helps to provide and reinforce the regular schedules of our lives. This, of course, is something that may well be changing with the increasing shift away from viewing at time of broadcast and towards on-demand, personalized schedule viewing. Yet scheduled, broadcast television, while of decreasing importance, is still the dominant viewing experience in the United Kingdom at least: the BARB ‘Viewing report’ records that ‘86.4% of TV screen time [in 2015 was] being devoted to watching TV programmes within four weeks of their appearance in a broadcast schedule’ (2016: 8). This shows that, particularly for older audiences, television is still strongly connected to a sense of being current, of being appropriate to the season.

Television marks this association to the season in many ways, and its metatexts do even more. Listings magazines release special Christmas bumper issues, and popular programmes may have associated print annuals, a publication that links the contemporary television landscape with the nineteenth-century print landscape, where the Christmas book was a popular gift item and where periodicals would regularly have special Christmas issues. But it is not just Christmas that is marked out by broadcasting, but a series of calendars: academic, sporting, political, religious and cultural.

Broadcasting can thus act to support links to long-standing traditions, either by transmitting them directly, or adapting them to the broadcast media. Broadcasting can also generate its own traditions, and make its own uses of the calendar. However, this acts in a number of ways in relation to culture and identity. Most obviously, the continuation of traditions

through broadcasting emphasizes the culture from which they originate. This can act to support the idea of the dominant culture, or it can import practices from other cultures, which can then spread within the culture into which they are broadcast. For example, Lothar Mikos has demonstrated the importance of US television representations of the celebration of Halloween in the adoption of the festival by young Germans (2009: 128). Similarly, Salvador Cardús has recorded the importance of US television imports in bringing the festival to Catalonia (2009: 110), while John Helsloot suggests the same connection for the Netherlands (2009). In other words, broadcasting can act to transmit practices from one culture, which are then picked up for use by another culture, often losing much of their underlying meaning along the way, so that only the outward manifestations of the festival that are recorded in the media are transferred, such as dressing up in horror-related costumes and having a party on Halloween.

The traditions of television operate through personal memory as well as, or as much as, through cultural memory. This is the linkage between the general, cultural engagement with a tradition and with its continuation and evolution. Without the individual, or rather without groups of individuals whose actions and attitudes produce the same results, the cultural does not exist. Note that this does not mean that these groups all share beliefs, interpretations or attitudes, but rather that all of their actions based upon those beliefs, interpretations and attitudes have the same practical result. An individual may associate a particular type of seasonal programming as a time for contemplation, for nostalgia, to indulge in memories, to engage with, or to laugh at, but as long as sufficient numbers are engaging with that type of programming in a way that is perceived as beneficial to the producers and broadcasters, then that type of programming will survive.

So seasonal broadcasting can be seen as supporting national or cultural identity. It can also be seen as corrupting it through the importation of other cultural practices and festivities. What is significant is what is treated as normal through broadcasting, and that while viewers may be aware that they are seeing something produced within another national culture, by consuming the text it becomes part of their culture, and as these texts are broadcast that means a culture that will be shared by many. In this way, the US-style Halloween is part of the practice of many people internationally, and the US Thanksgiving is understood in many countries beyond the United States.

Contributors

In this issue, Sarah Cardwell writes about the connections between the changing seasons and cookery programming in the United Kingdom, and particularly about the ways in which different cookery programmes engage with the changes in the seasons. Considering the fashionable encouragements to ‘eat locally’ and in a way which respects that natural cycles of availability of different foodstuffs at different times of the year, cookery programmes have moved away from the simply cultural markers of seasonal change, such as the traditional British Christmas dinner, and towards an increasing closeness with natural seasonal change. Cardwell emphasizes ‘seasonability – the feeling that something is timely or appropriate to that moment’ (in this issue), and so indicates the importance of an emotional sense of the ‘rightness’ of what is depicted to the seasons. This is done through a focus on the aesthetics of these programmes, and the ways that the seasons are evoked by them, encouraging viewer engagement with the shifting seasons of the natural world and our cultural, and culinary, responses to them.

While practice-based research has been expanding, and there is an increasing engagement with practitioners within television studies, there are many areas still to be explored. One of these is the issue of scheduling, and the production of programmes for a specific time of year. Television director and academic Paul Tucker, together with Howard Sercombe and Helen Wolfenden, here presents a reflective account of the making of the BBC Alba documentary *Is Mise Michelle* (2011), considering how the very ordinariness of its narrative of a celebrity exploring their family roots in the Western Isles of Scotland made it ideal programming for Christmas Day on a minority channel dedicated to serving the Scots Gaelic speaking population. This emphasizes a particular characteristic of Christmas programming, as being an extraordinary day which celebrates the very ordinary concepts of family and homecoming, and shared experience and heritage. This article also points to the ways in which smaller broadcast channels with very restricted budgets for new productions, such as BBC Alba, have to rely on more flexible programming, which can be repeated a number of times throughout the year, and yet can still look for qualities in their programming which they associate with particular times of the year when it comes to placing those programmes within the schedule. This in turn suggests the wider significance of scheduling as an under-appreciated part of the way that audiences interpret and engage with programming.

Simon Huxtable, Sabina Mihelj, Alice Bardan and Sylwia Szostak present a different setting for the examination of the seasonal, in their exploration of seasonality and television festivals under state socialism. This demonstrates tensions between the festivals created to celebrate socialism and its particular victories and characteristics, and those that continued on from previous calendars. So Christmas is seen to survive, even against the force of state

socialism, and each event, no matter how serious, is seen to be celebrated through the broadcast of special entertainment programming, providing a sense of festival.

Emily C. Hoffmann examines an attempted rejection of seasonality, by examining its place in contemporary American 'quality television'. Focusing particularly on *Mad Men* (2007–2015), she shows that this programme's use of seasonal festivals is part of its conscious engagement with audience expectations, with the express purpose of undercutting them. Hoffmann places this within the context of the wider use of the seasons, or rejection of its use, within 'quality television' series such as *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) or *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), identifying a shift which she connects to the characteristics of these cable series. This moves the programming away from the year-long schedule of network television, tied to the calendar, and in doing so emphasizes that it is 'not "regular" TV' (Thompson 1997: 13).

Ordinary television and its relationship to the calendar is central to Lindsay Steenberg's examination of the uses and types of Halloween episodes in US crime procedural series. Through case studies of episodes from *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000–2015), *Bones* (2005–2017) and *Criminal Minds* (2005–), she demonstrates that there are recurring themes that run throughout these episodes. In particular, they are focused around the role of the father, and the need to be a good father in a dangerous world where it is no longer easy to tell the difference between the horrors of the screen and the horrors of real life. In this, the programmes draw upon urban legends about poisoned Halloween candy and razor blades in apples in order to emphasize the need for these law enforcement professionals.

The gendered sense of different genres is tackled by Joanne Knowles in her article on British summer comedy dramas, targeted at a female audience. Taking as a starting point the popularity of the light romantic novel as summer reading, she explores the reasons why this has

not been a successful formula for summer television. In doing so, she demonstrates through viewer comments the ways that the television audience is very much aware of the broadcast calendar, and how scheduling not only suits particular types of programmes, but also demonstrates the broadcaster's attitudes towards those programmes.

Conclusions and continuations

This range of articles demonstrates a number of ways of engaging with the connections between broadcasting and the seasons, but there are still many other ways that the subject can be explored. The forthcoming dossier on Christmas television will address further aspects, such as the way that holidays are positioned rhetorically as markers of identity, as well as expanding upon concepts covered in this issue, such as the connections between season and gender. There is more yet to be done, including expanding the exploration of why particular seasonal traditions and practices have developed, and where they come from. The material covered in this issue and the following dossier is also very much focused on the United States and United Kingdom, leaving great room for expanding this exploration of seasonality and broadcasting out into the rest of the world. The wealth of paratexts and uses of branding related to broadcasting that engage with seasonality have yet to be explored. So there is much more work to do around this subject, but it is hoped that this special issue, along with its accompanying dossier and my monograph (Johnston 2015) on seasonal horror television, will provide examples and starting points to encourage the development of this neglected area of broadcast studies.

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