

## When style dominates substance – British Drama

When I was young I was fortunate enough to travel regularly to see family in America. Not because we were a jet set family but because my dad worked for British Airways Cargo and meant we got free flights. At the time during the 70s and 80s America was so different in every way from my home in Hershham. From toy stores the size of a supermarkets to real life CHIPs riding about with shotguns hanging out of their massive Harley Davidson Electra Glides to a shop that just sold ice cream!! The other major difference to a young British teen was the TV. American TV was so obviously commercially based interrupted hugely by ads even directly after the credits. The drama content that was so far removed from real life. Everything else might have been bigger and better in America but our TV was leagues ahead and I was proud of it.



The Singing Detective (1986) courtesy BFi



The Boys from the Blackstuff (1982) courtesy BBC

We had leading playwrights writing especially for TV about subjects that reflected key society issues and led sometimes to real change, such as the power of a Wednesday play like Cathy Come Home or a Play for Today.TV drama like 'Boys from the Blackstuff' to the wonderful Dennis Potter creating seminal pieces like 'The Singing Detective' and later a first with a BBC and C4 collaboration for Icarus and Karaoke. The single play screening died out in the mid-80s'. Play for Today ended in 84'. But hard hitting political thriller drama like Edge of Darkness and social comment drama like 'Our Friends in the North' continued into the 90s'.

So why am I harking back to past age, possibly through a rose tinted camera viewfinder? Back to the title above. I watched the recent BBC series 'Trust Me' which was heaped with praise. Unfortunately for me the writing, acting and story was masked so completely by disconnected stylistic choices. The examples from the past all had stylistic choices and many creative ways to tell a story. It wasn't all three camera studio flat lighting. Plays like Boys from the Blackstuff so distinct in look from say a Potter or Mike Leigh play or series. No Adobe After effects, fancy grading, cinematic digital cameras or online plugins available for those production teams, what you saw was there on set.



Trust Me (2017) courtesy Studio Canal & Red Productions



Star Trek (2009) courtesy Paramount



Trust me (2017) courtesy BBC and Red Productions

So whilst watching BBC drama series 'Trust Me' to suddenly see a mass of very pointedly placed bulbs facing the camera, with post production highlighting light flares smashed across all the casualty and hospital scenes was at the very least distracting.

But it was more worrying that a prime time series with the budget that comes with and a large production team at some point all agreed 'yep let's get all 2009 JJ Abrams Sci Fi on this' ?? It's as if an audience will not be gripped by the story and drama alone. This was a trend from 7-8 years ago especially in Sci Fi. Even JJ Abrams has apologised some years ago for overusing light flares in his first Star Trek foray. See the very similar comparisons spooky or should that be Spocky

A light flare is an old film effect as result of light bouncing directly into a lens. But it became an effect adopted as digital filmmaking rose from 2006 strangely to make a link from digital back to the chemical magic of film seeking a link to organic film moments when a lens looks to the sun or light creating light image rings and lines bouncing through the lens. Now and for some time simple post production packages can be found as easily as the polaroid look on your iPhone and slapped on a shot to achieve the effect. I now have a confession. I too have used light flares, but these have been for corporate films where which is clearly not broadcast drama but more often tries for an interesting way to communicate a mundane message.

Today we look to American drama as a leader. The creativity and production always serving the story of many US series today has meant that unfortunately we don't seem to compete. I don't buy the 'big US budget' argument either that a BBC can't compete the Netflix effect of spending millions eg Game of Thrones S7 apparently has a budget of \$10m per episode. We are a nation of hugely creative and talented TV and Filmmakers we and the commissioners should trust in our own talent and produce our original content without falling into chasing old style fads like stupid light flares. Yes we do have international drama to be proud of e.g. Wolf Hall, King Charles III and Peaky Blinders but there also seems to be a constant fixation with single lead relationship led characters normally a cop or a doctor e.g. Happy Valley, Doctor Foster, Line of Duty and Trust Me. Is it not time for more social and politically led drama?, possibly ensemble drama? Bring Back Mike Leigh and Ken Loach to TV or better still find their replacements.

Written by Lorne.Guy (2017)

## This Blog is not written for commercial gain.

*Image sources:*

The Singing Detective - <https://goo.gl/images/Txj3d6>

Boys From The Blackstuff - <https://goo.gl/images/BFnuSt>

Trust me DVD cover - <https://goo.gl/images/2ZnLFE>

Star Trek - <https://goo.gl/images/uM1bTx>

Trust Me - bbc - <https://goo.gl/images/ZuVdM2>

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