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Ghosts On and Off Screen

An Interview with Helen Wheatley

In the following interview, Professor Helen Wheatley discusses her past and current research. She is Director of Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick. She is also co-founder of the Centre for Television Histories at the University of Warwick. Wheatley is the author of the monographs *Gothic Television* (2006) and *Spectacular Television: Exploring Televisual Pleasure* (2016), which won the BAFTSS Award for Monograph of the Year in 2017. She is currently working on a forthcoming book, *Television/Death*, and is the primary investigator of the research project *Ghost Town: Civic Television and the Haunting of Coventry*, which were the main topics of discussion.

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You're currently writing a book about television and death. And considering that television is such a conservative medium, and because of its self-regulation, these might seem like incompatible topics. So, what is the relationship between death and television? And what's the role of death on television?

I think the best way to answer that question is to explain a bit about the structure of the book. The first part of the book is about the representation of death and dying on television. The first chapter of the book looks at the representation of death and dying in archive television, and documentaries made about what I call the 'auto/pathography': people telling their own stories of their dying experiences, or their experience of bereavement. Then the second chapter of that section looks at the way that television has handled the difficult topic of assisted dying. It deals with questions of how documentary filmmakers can represent a process which is already ethically fraught: the requesting of an assisted death. That chapter looks at historical documentaries on this but also at more contemporary documentaries from around the world. I've also interviewed some programme makers who've

worked in that area and talk to them about the process of making their documentaries as a process of caring for the subject of the documentary but also the viewer. The subject of death at the beginning of the book is very much wrapped up in issues relating to public service broadcasting and about death education as a public service. I've been tracking through these documentaries how documentary programme makers take care of their audiences and envisage their audiences as receiving representation of death and dying. And then the final chapter of that section thinks about how death appears in mainly contemporary American television drama. When you talk about television as an inherently 'conservative' medium, I think there has also always been an anxiety about the representation of death, particularly in American fictional programming. In the early 1950s, in Britain in relation to the coming of American television programming to Britain through broadcasts on the new commercial television channel in the mid-1950s, there was this anxiety that children were going to see lots of people being killed in Westerns or cop shows. There has been this continual worry and concern about the fictional representation of death. I track some of those critical concerns and the discursive contexts that circulated around the representation of death in fictional programming. Later, I look at some contemporary television programmes that represent the process of death and dying — for example, *Six Feet Under*, which is a landmark in death representation in American television — but the chapter ranges across a variety of different programmes, and thinks about television afterlives, too. So that's section one, death and dying on television. Section two is about how television works through and represents grief and bereavement, as well as death-related trauma. The first chapter of that section looks at what I've been calling dramas of grief. I noted, just in my own viewing for pleasure, that a lot of the programmes that I was watching were dealing with people who had been recently bereaved, or who were working through the trauma of grief in some way. From big family sagas like *This Is Us* to *The Leftovers*, which deals with grief from a slightly different perspective, in relation to disappearance, which is also imagined as a death, and also the programmes that handle recovery from grief, things like *Sorry for Your Loss*, which is a programme made for Facebook Watch. It's a poignant study of grief and bereavement and lots of other things as well. Then the second chapter in that section looks at the ghost drama and the way that ghost drama relates to some of the earlier work that I've done on hauntings and the ghost on television. It looks again at contemporary television drama to think about how hauntings work through the trauma of grief across a range of UK programming from recent years, including *The Living and the Dead*, *Marchlands*, *Lightfields* and *Remember Me*. There's a whole series of short ghost serials in which bereavement trauma is worked through. And then, in the American context, I'm looking at some new Netflix serial dramas like *The Haunting of Hill House* and *Archive 81* to think about how they are really dramas of grief and trauma, as much as they are ghost stories. Then the final section of the book thinks about how television works as a posthumous medium. This might be through broadcast television and thinking about how we encounter the dead on TV: how television allows us access to people who have already died and what it means to watch them on TV. That chapter draws on a recent case study I had published in the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* about the serial rapist and TV presenter Jimmy Saville, and thinks about what the encounter with his spectre on television is like. And then the final chapter of that section looks at an archive

project I've been running, which has been to take programmes made in and about Coventry out of the archive and rescreen them around the city. This is a way to create encounters with the dead and with the past more broadly and to talk to people about their experiences of that in the context of a particular place, a particular city. These discussions of posthumous images therefore tie back to the beginning of the book and think about television as a medium that captures life before death.

We will go back to ghosts and the haunting of the city. But I would like to stay on the topic of death on TV. In one of your recent papers, you talk about how we are more distanced from death nowadays than we were in the past, when people were dying in their homes instead of hospitals. But how do you think the recent situations with COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine is affecting our relationship with the death through television?

That's a good question. And I think I've pondered on that question quite a lot over the last year or so. I think in a way, it's slightly misleading to say that we have become unfamiliar with death, although death and dying experiences now usually take place in a hospital or outside of the home. This is a significant cultural shift, which is acknowledged by a lot of people, that has affected our relationship with death. But television has always provided access to stories of death and dying. And, as you say, whether it's an international crisis like COVID or in relation to a war, news reporting, documentary reporting, and current affairs television have always provided us access to sometimes quite stark and difficult to deal with stories of death and bereavement. I was interviewing someone a couple of weeks ago who made a documentary about the death of her husband in the mid-1970s and asking her about her experience of making the programmes that she made for the BBC in the mid-1970s. I asked whether she watched other people's documentaries about death and dying, thinking about other auto-pathographies, and her answer was that she didn't really, but the real context for her at that time in the mid-1970s was the Troubles in Northern Ireland. They were the deaths that she was seeing on a regular basis on TV. That was how death was very present in her living room at that time. And, sadly, there have always been events happening in the world that mean that we are brought up close to dead bodies in our living rooms, in front of our TV sets. I remember as a child in the mid-1980s the real poignancy and horror of seeing people dying of famine in Ethiopia. I remember vividly the experience of seeing dead bodies on the television news in relation to that humanitarian crisis. And I guess we all have moments like this. So, I've tried to think through this and write through this a bit in the introduction of the book. We all have moments that stick in our minds where television brings us up close to death. And it might not be as intentional as "Oh, I'm going to watch a documentary about death this evening." But it might be that we've just switched on the news, or looked at our social media feeds and there is a dead body there in front of us. And how do we deal with this? I think quite a lot of the literature on death on screen has been in relation to film, and there has been some brilliant writing on the topic, including by my colleague here at Warwick, Michele Aaron, whose book *Death and the Moving Image: Ideology, Iconography and I* has been really formative for me. But that work doesn't really get to grips with the ways in which television allows us access to death in a different, sometimes quite jarring, unexpected, and disturbing way, or at other times in a quieter, contemplative and meditative way. I'm also trying to write not

just about those moments where we might expect to see the dead. There are also those moments that punctuate all kinds of different live television, where unexpected death takes place: people who die unexpectedly on screen, people who might die during the process of a sport match or race, but there has also been a series of shocking murders and suicides, as well as more mundane, everyday kind of deaths that have taken place on broadcast live television. So, there's something about the liveness of television that always carries within it the potentiality for death.

It makes me think of the film Network *written by Paddy Chayefsky where a reporter, who is going to be fired, announces during a news report that he's going to kill himself on live TV. And I've read that it was inspired by real instance when a news reporter shot herself on live television. How can you escape that?*

That reporter was Christine Chubbuck. A number of films have been made about her death, and I write about this at the beginning of my book. Some archive footage turned up on YouTube relatively recently purporting to be the footage of her suicide, but there's some uncertainty about whether it actually is this or whether it's faked archival footage of her suicide on screen. But Chubbock's death is a poignant illustration of the fact that live television always carries with it the potential of death. On YouTube, you can see lots of live deaths on TV; YouTube users seem to have constructed endless compilation films that bring them all together, some of which include the purported footage of Chubbuck's suicide or another news reporter being murdered during a news report, and so on. There are lots of those compilations, but the one I found most difficult to watch was called something like 'heart attacks on television', and it's just a compilation of people in the middle of television programs, news reporters, sports reporters, and so on, and it's just endless footage of people slumping forward whilst performing on TV. Obviously, a death from a heart attack is not a 'big' or 'spectacular' death, so this compilation is just repeated footage of television performers stopping speaking and falling forward. This compilation plays this moment seemingly endlessly, on a loop. A good deal of the programming that I've watched for this book has been quite hard to take. And that was the hardest. It was just kind of relentless death, death as it happens unspectacularly on this spectacular medium.

Let's move on to fictional death on television, because I want to speak a little bit about the horror genre that you've been interested in for some time now. And death is obviously a big part of the genre. So, how does it fit into televisual horror? Or do you think there's been a change in representation, not only of the death, but television horror itself?

As somebody who teaches and researches television horror, I think that's quite a broad category. I write a little bit about this, both in *Spectacular Television*, and in the new book. There are clearly elements of television horror that aesthetize the dead body, and in which the display of the dead body is really part of the visual pleasure of the programme. Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown have written interestingly about this in relation to *Dexter*. But you can also see this in *Hannibal*, for example. There are several shows now in which a really critical part of the team is the art director who every week produces a new presentation of the flayed or rearranged corpse, and *Hannibal* takes it to a crazy extreme. Where I started out with this project on death in *Spectacular Television* is in thinking about the

spectacular presentation of the heavily mutilated dead body in television horror as being a new thing. Horror was pushing the television boundaries of what could be shown in a new era of cable and subscription channels, which could cater for niche television audiences who really wanted to see all of that stuff. And that's taken to real extremes in niche horror and things like *Masters of Horror*. For example, I've taught for a couple of years with the *Masters of Horror* episode by Takahashi Miike, 'Imprint', which you could call the zenith body horror on television; it's a bit much. But that represents something about television that's being freed from the structures of broadcast or network television and being able to do new spectacular things with the dead body. So, there's that whole branch of spectacular television horror, but alongside that there is another branch of horror, which is kind of more serious, perhaps more contemplative, which is not necessarily as focused on the spectacular display of the dead body, but rather on working through the emotional experiences of death and dying. Again, Stacey Abbott has written about this in an edited collection about emotion on television. She writes about the returning dead and zombies, ghosts and vampires, in relation to grief and bereavement. I've sort of partly taken some lead from Stacey's work, and have been thinking through how ghost dramas, for example, depict the long-term emotional impact of dealing with grief. The outstretching of trauma through families, for example, or inherited familial grief-related trauma is something that's been really featured recently in ghost dramas. So, television horror doesn't have a singular approach relation to the representation of death. It both shows the bodily impacts of death, but also its emotional impacts, and sometimes it does both.

Let's talk some more about ghosts, because you recently wrote about the cycle of ghost dramas on the UK television. So, what do you think is representative of today's ghost dramas in the UK?

One of the things that I was really interested in when I was writing about the UK ghost dramas was the ways in which haunting is written onto landscape. Not just exterior landscapes, because also the haunted house continues to be central to exploring ghosts and the fears or griefs or traumas that are attached to them. However, I really noticed that there was a whole cycle of television dramas, from the mid-2010s onwards, I would say, that used woodlands, moorlands, seascapes and seaside, pastoral land and farmlands to manifest haunting through the representation of 'troubled land' in some way: mist-covered moors, or darkened woods, and so on. I've been really interested in exploring how landscape can be marked by trauma and grief. In some ways, this relates to my *Spectacular Television* work because often these are quite beautiful, but melancholy, landscapes. In relation to this, I use Jackie Bowring's idea of the melancholy landscape (Bowring is a cultural geographer and she writes about melancholy landscapes in relation to lots of different *real* landscapes, rather than landscapes on film and television). For me, it's a useful concept to consider. The spaces that characters traverse and the journey that they must go on is not necessarily confined to the haunted house: often the house will lead a character out into a field or under the ground into a mine or into a lake or whatever it is. So, there's this relationship between interior and exterior in the contemporary British ghost television drama that I found really interesting and resonant.

Also, what the other dramas that I've written about for *Television/Death* do well is treat narrative time as quite volatile. I think this is true of the UK ghost dramas I discuss, as well

as the American Netflix dramas. Characters often find themselves between times or skipping back and forth in time. The haunting isn't simply a spooky figure from the past turning up in the present; somebody from the past might be haunted by a figure from the present/future in many contemporary television and ghost dramas. And I think Mittell's idea of narrative complexity works particularly well in relation to the Gothic and to the ghost drama. The Gothic as a genre is narratively complex to start with, but in contemporary television, this narrative complexity is amplified in some ways: skipping back and forth between times, uncertainty about which timeframe characters might find themselves in, are characteristic both of contemporary television and the ghost drama. Often at the start of such dramas, we are shown montages of images or sounds that we don't quite understand — we don't know where or when they're from and what they mean. And then, gradually, the unravelling of narrative time allows us to understand the significance of a particular image or sound or word, even. You don't always love the things that you study, and I haven't always loved some of the programmes that I've watched for this latest book, but I think the ghost dramas in particular have been very engrossing, and I've been very caught by their complexity. It provides a satisfying pay off for the very engaged viewer.

Since we are talking about hauntings… You are a principal investigator on the research project, Ghost Town: Civic Television and the Haunting of Coventry. *Can you introduce the project and explain the idea about the city as a haunted place?*

The Ghost Town project has been about taking programmes made in and about the city of Coventry out of the archive and rescreening them around the city. This is based on the idea that cities are haunted places, that they are haunted by people who once lived there and no longer remain, but also buildings that once stood and have disappeared, or businesses that ran in the city, or ideas that circulated in the city. So, I'm taking death and the posthumous experience of the city here with quite broad strokes: the posthumous doesn't just relate to human being after death, but also more refers to our experience more broadly of things that have passed. My argument is that the traces of those things can be found in the television archive. If we think of the television archive like a kind of mausoleum which houses the dead, and if we think of television as a posthumous medium which captures liveliness at a particular moment in time, a person on the street who's interviewed in the city of Coventry about their life at a moment in the past might be there in that moment but gone tomorrow, their image and their voice, their thoughts and feelings captured forever in the television archive. So, my idea was to inhabit this haunted place, this haunted city, with these ghosts from the archive, to take these ghosts out of the archive, and to see what happened if they were brought back to their place of inception. Subsequently, we've done a whole number of things throughout this project, which has been running for four years We've run pop-up exhibitions in cultural spaces in the city; for example, a week-long exhibition with a four-hour reel of television programming made in and about the city running, and the opportunity for people of the city to come in and watch it and tell us their thoughts and feelings about what they've seen, which was one of the richest spaces to talk about that material. We've also screened things in museums. We've had a big collaboration with Coventry Cathedral and have shown programming both in the new cathedral and in the ruins of the old cathedral. We've also worked with various special interest

groups in the city, from the city's trade unions to charities that protect the city's built heritage, and everything else in between. We've taken every opportunity we've had to take something out of the archive and make it accessible for the people of Coventry, and then talk to them about those hauntings and their encounters with their dead, or those things that have passed. It has been really fascinating. To give an example, we had people coming into our exhibition, because they knew that their father or grandfather had made an appearance in one of the programmes that we were showing in the exhibition. I had the experience of sitting with a woman who was probably in her 80s, and her daughter who was maybe in her 60s, and they were talking to their dead relatives through the screen. Their father/grandfather was in a section of programming about a factory in Coventry, part of a documentary film (*Coventry Kids,* 1960) made by the documentarist Philip Donnellan. And the younger of these two women called out "Turn around, granddad!" when he was on screen, and then, talking afterwards about having seen him again, and having experienced him posthumously, through the archives, both women talked about the experience 'bringing him back from the dead'. They came in because they knew that their relative had taken part in a television programme, but also, we've had experiences of people seeing people they weren't expecting to see again, or even themselves when they were young, by accident. It's been quite an emotional experience. I've sat with people while they've cried. It's been quite a journey. What I have realized through the course of this research is that a television archive isn't just a collection of a city's or a country's history. It isn't just a collection of the great works of great television directors, writers, producers. A television archive is also, for some people, a family album, or a family archive. And so, I've been really interested to talk to the people for whom those encounters have been countered with a particularly poignant death, or a sometimes difficult past. There's a film historian in the United States called Rick Prelinger who runs the brilliant Lost Landscapes project, which is a similar project to the Ghost Town project. Prelinger does a similar thing, in that he takes films, usually amateur films made in a particular place and screens them around the country in that particular place and invites people along to respond, to contextualise, to talk to him about those films and those places that are represented on screen. His work is interesting in relation to how those audiences manage the contested history of the city. He has experienced in audiences that are lively, disruptive and argumentative and that have different perspectives on a place-specific past. His work is particularly interesting about different racial perspectives on the city and how those are enacted through people's responses in his archive screenings. The Ghost Town project has been a little quieter than Prelinger's Lost Landscapes series. I don't know if that's a national difference. We've made lots of cups of tea — and I don't think Prelinger is chatting to people over cups of tea — but we've tried to create sort of domesticated spaces within our screening spaces and create the space for people to not shout at the screen necessarily, or argue with somebody else in the screening room, but have a quiet word with each other, and also with us as researchers. So, they've been, I think, quieter, more emotional responses to Coventry as it has been passed on through the television archive. Not that everybody's going to be fascinated by the Coventry project. Of course, I think Coventry is a fascinating place, but I have specific, local interest. But I hope that that this project provides a kind of template that other people can borrow and copy in different places and think about the relationship between

people place, television archive, memory, and the posthumous image in different settings. So, it's really… it's a template for collaborative work between media historians, archives, and local cultural organisations for other people then to take away and do whatever they like with it.

It sounds very fascinating, and it makes me wonder how it would work in the Czech Republic because I think it could be traumatic for lots of people, as a lot of the archival material would be heavily ideological. It would be probably not taken very well by everyone.

That's a good point because we've had to deal with some quite traumatic stories and histories that are gathered in the archive of this city. Coventry, particularly in the 1980s, experienced really problematic and difficult race relations. In 1981, the murder of Satnam Singh Gill, a young Asian man who lived in the city, led to protests and rioting both by anti-fascist protesters and counter protests, by the British National Front and others. So, the city's history has not always been an easy history. Its history is also a story of unemployment, and a boom-and-bust economy. Therefore, some of the histories we've taken out of the archive have been difficult ones. When I first started doing this project, I think I was a bit naive about how hard it was going to be for some people to watch some of the footage that we were showing. Initially, I just put it out there and didn't really contextualize it much and just said, 'Here's the city's history, tell me what you think'. And people had some quite difficult and challenging stuff to confront about racism, and poverty or unemployment in the city. I remember I took a reel that was about the city's industrial history to a meeting of the Trade Union Council and showed it there. There were people in the room who recognized people on screen; there were old comrades and colleagues laughing about this encounter and laughing at the television reporting and how biased it was, and so on. After the screening finished, however, a local counsellor, a woman called Kindy Sandhu, was visibly angry with me. She very firmly said, 'This is not the full story'. She said her parents had been active British Asian trade unionists at the time, and they were completely absent from the news archive that I had showed and material that I brought out of the archive. Her position was that I was just replicating the overwhelming whiteness of television news reporting in the 1970s and '80s by bringing this back out of the archive again. Again, this had contributed to these histories being hidden, and she understandably felt really aggrieved about that. And she was right to be. This experience really made me think about how I talk to people about the gaps and absences in this archive, as well as show them what's there. I've been much more sensitive, I think, since that evening, constantly framing archive screenings as "Not the whole story". I have taken care to remind visitors to Ghost Town events that that the story that's there isn't necessarily completely objective and impartial, and have asked the following: Tell me what's missing. Tell me who you don't see on screen. What are what are the difficulties in encountering this posthumous archive? What are the moments that make you sad or angry? Learning to have difficult conversations around and about the archive has been one of the biggest things I've taken away from the Ghost Town project. I think I was a little naive when I started it. I think I'm probably less so now.

That's interesting. It makes me think about how reruns sometimes literally bring out ghosts on TV. It reminds me of your article about Jimmy Savile and how sometimes television can broadcast things without considering the new contexts in which they are shown. For example, when there is a broadcast of an old show or a movie and there are outdated representations. How do we watch it in this new era? How do we watch it in this new context? And again, it's a big part of television because it relies so much on the archives.

I think the archive in those contexts becomes a real problem for broadcasters. I wrote about this in relation to the Savile case. There's a drive from the BBC to want to work through a really problematic part of their institutional past, so they facilitate that by working through and constantly going back and revisiting archived footage, often recontextualizing it. The BBC will make a documentary that includes extracts from the archive that show Savile's face, his spectral presence, as I've argued, but then when they're broadcasting reruns of programmes in which he was a presenter (for example, *Top of the Pops*), episodes that are presented by him are not shown, or Savile's image is not shown again because it is problematic in that context in which we might stumble upon it. The BBC both goes back to its archive and works over and works through this archive again and again, in relation to its own institutional trauma, but then also has an ethical duty to not have Savile pop up every five minutes on reruns of old programmes that are not recontextualized. This is the problem of posthumous archive. When the story about Savile's crimes first broke, journalists scoured the archive for evidence of him on screen being sleazy, or abusive towards young women on screen, and there were a couple of examples of that which were uncovered by journalists. This is using the archive to show the institution's complicity in his crimes, and it exposes the fact that the broadcaster let this abuse go on right in front of our very eyes. But then one of the arguments that I make in the article, and which will be expanded upon in my book, is there is a very real impact for Savile's victims of his face reappearing on their screens. Even if it's in these newly recontextualized moments: news stories, documentaries, even dramatizations of Savile's crimes or Savile-like characters. Those moments for people who either experienced abuse at his hands, or even for people who have experienced abuse by others, could be very difficult bits of television to see. In the documentaries about Savile, we see his victims talking about the fact that television constantly reinvigorated their trauma by bringing him back to life, or back to the public sphere: he was there again and again and again. Television's repetitiveness, its constant return to its own archive, facilitates those secondary traumas, those reencounters, happening again.

Maybe we can focus on something a little bit lighter. So, you were talking a lot about television archives. I would like to know what the challenges are. Because, as you well know, a lot of things don't exist anymore because television networks weren't archiving it, or they were erasing it. So, how can we do work on television history when it's missing?

I'll talk about the UK context, because that's the context that I know best. At the moment, there are archivists who are really committed to making as wide as possible access to the archived programming that is there. That has been a big shift, and this shift is continuing for television historians in the UK, because for a long time we weren't aware of what programming still existed, or we had no access to it even if we were aware of it. I

think there are some really committed archivists who are working in collaboration with academics and others to rectify that situation in the UK. More of television's past existed than we knew, say twenty-five years ago when I began my academic career, and there is certainly more historic programme available to view now than we had access to then. So, it's an exciting moment for broadcasts historians in that sense. But how do we critically reconstruct programs that aren't there? There are all sorts of methods to use and do this. Oftentimes, this can be an exciting puzzle for the media historian, like a detective story, to study a programme that you're certain beyond any reasonable doubt has been wiped or never recorded in the first place. What do we do about that? Well, in this country, we're very lucky, certainly in relation to the BBC, that we have the Written Archive Centre. We have production notes and personnel files and so on that exist. They are a rich source for research in this country, but they only tell part of the story because they only cover the BBC, and only up to a certain period. So, people have got creative about drawing on other sources to reconstruct this history. I've just read a really interesting PhD thesis by Diane Charlesworth at the University of Lincoln which uses children's novels about television in the 1940s and '50s to think about what television looked, sounded, and felt like through the fictionalization of a television world that's very similar to the actual television world. That's a canny way of using quite an unusual paratext to tell this story, and to think about what specific genres might have been like in that moment, and programming that doesn't exist anymore. So yes, we must get clever and resourceful with our sources, drawing on reviews and previews of programming, for example. I think there's still quite an untapped wealth of contemporary writing about television in the UK in the mid-20th century, not just in the broadsheet press, but there's also some interesting writing about television and early television reviewing in the local, regional press. There are also viewers letters in these and other publications, as well as audience research reports compiled by broadcasters. It's about cobbling together this history, constructing a jigsaw, via a whole series of paratexts and intertexts. There is nothing like being able to sit down and watch a piece of historic broadcast television, but sometimes when that's not possible, you just have to get creative.

Since we're talking about television history, and you're a co-founder of the Centre for Television Histories, I have provocative question. Recently, I was reading Greg M. Smith's Beautiful TV*, and he makes an interesting note in the introduction about how television scholars are often latching on to the newest thing. He argues that even writing on a TV series that recently ended is not fashionable. So, when considering this idea, how do you view the study of television history? What would you say is a reason that we need to study television history?*

I think if you're interested in television aesthetics, and how television has developed, if you want to know where the television you watched came from, you need to. You could similarly ask why study film history, or why study literary history. We study television history for similar reasons: that sometimes what we want to understand is how certain programmes or genres or styles or forms of making of television came about. Sometimes we want to understand our personal relationships with television, how television was viewed, how television was integrated into the home. And these are all still pertinent questions for today: What does television look and sound like? What do people do with television? Why do we need television? What do we stand to lose if our government dismantles public ser-

vice broadcasting? We cannot ask or answer those questions without television history. It's interesting in the UK now, because we have a Conservative government who would really like to get rid of public service broadcasting, and who are trying to do serious damage to the funding of publicly funded television. I see the arguments that are made by certain politicians about an open market. According to them, we've got to look to Netflix as the model that's going to bring us the great and the good of television. Those things are said from a position of such complete ignorance, and a total lack of understanding of what we stand to lose if we dismantle the television licence fee and the way that public service broadcasting is funded here in the UK. This is done without any care and attention to television history. And so, without television historians, we don't have the counterexamples to say to people 'This is what you stand to lose'. Going back to *Television/Death*, death and dying is something that comes to all of us. It's something we all need to understand and get our heads around. The best and most sensitive, most poignant, most lyrical, most meditative and contemplative television about death is made — not just in the UK but all around the world — by public service broadcasters. And so that's why I think we need television history; we need to understand what we stand to lose, as well as how things came about, why audiences behave in certain ways or how certain genres are produced. There's a real political reason to understand television history.

I need to get better at banging those drums. Often when journalists say the Conservative Party is planning to do this, and what do you think about this? And can you give us a historical perspective? Since I'm busy in my work, I often feel that I haven't really got time to undertake those interviews or make those arguments. But it's important that historians take part in in the public debate about contemporary television and what's happening in television today. I really should get better at saying yes to those interviews!

I'm glad you mentioned the licence fee because it is such important topic right now. It is resonating around the world. There's often a doubt whether we need public service television. But especially with the war in Ukraine and COVID, we can see how important public service broadcasters are. People will seek them out if there's a crisis, but we still have these debates.

Yes, and you know, Netflix is not providing our daily local news or special interest programming or our minority language programming. It's not ever going to do that. It's not going to be commercially viable for them to do that. The question really is, do you want those things to be delivered or not? I can see the reasons why right-wing governments might not want minority interests to be met by television. So, it's no surprise that that there are governments all over the world who are trying to erode that form of broadcasting, but also, that's every reason to hold on to it.

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