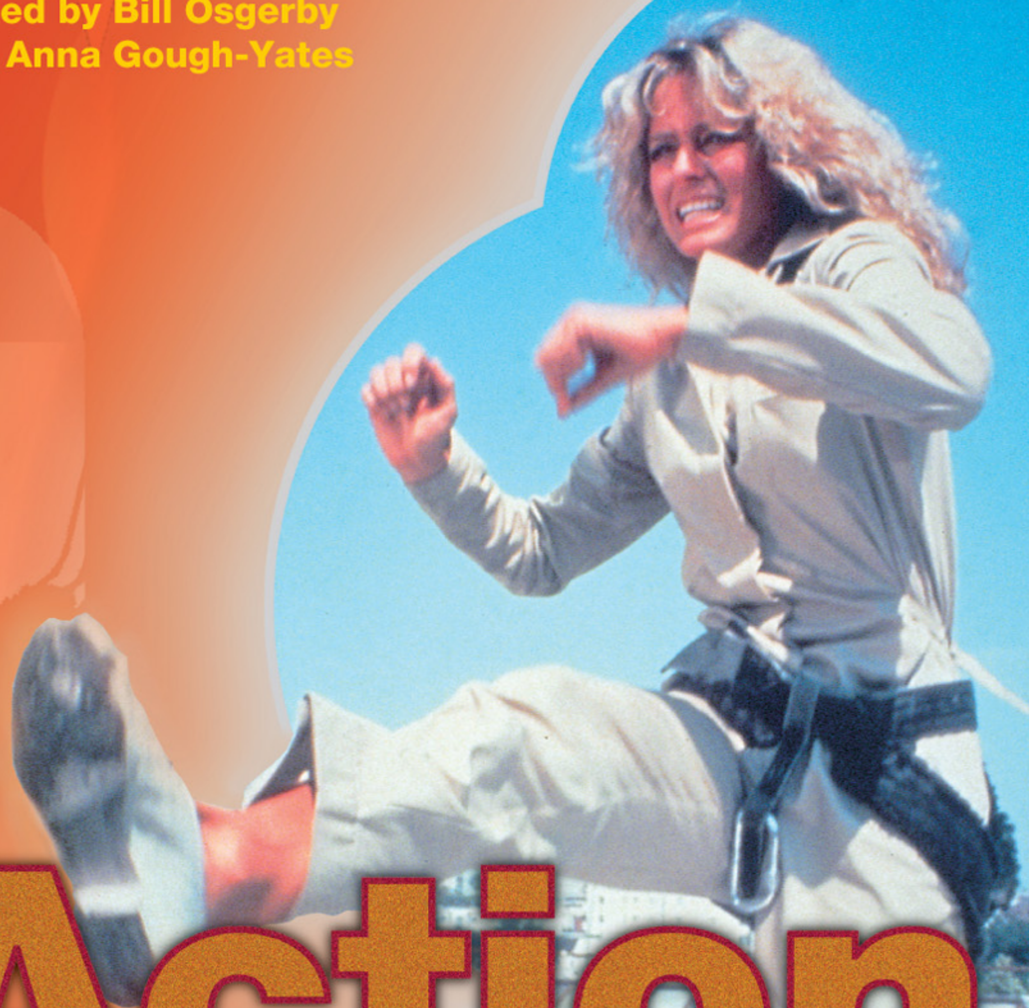
Edited by Bill Osgerby
and Anna Gough-Yates



Action TV

Tough Guys, Smooth Operators and Foxy Chicks

ACTION TV

From re-runs of ‘classics’ like *The Avengers* or *Starsky and Hutch,* to current series influenced by the genre like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* the action series is enjoying a revival at the centre of prime-time TV. Yet relatively little attention has been paid to the specific history, nature and appeal of the action series, and its place in popular culture, past and present.

Action TV explores the historical development of this TV genre from its genesis in the 1950s, its place within the history of television institutions and systems of production, its relationship to other genres, and its position within broader social, cultural and political contexts. Articles include:

- Of leather suits and kinky boots: *The Avengers*, style and popular culture
- ‘Who loves ya, baby?’: *Kojak*, action and the great society
- ‘A lone crusader in the dangerous world’: heroics of science and technology in *Knight Rider*
- Angels in chains? Feminism, femininity and consumer culture in *Charlie’s Angels*
- ‘Who’s the cat that won’t cop out?’: Black masculinity in American action shows of the sixties and seventies

Contributors: Paul Cobley, Anna Gough-Yates, Joke Hermes, Leon Hunt, Andy Medhurst, Nickianne Moody, Marc O’Day, Bill Osgerby, Elaine Pennicott, Martin Pumphrey, Roger Sabin, John Storey, Yvonne Tasker, Marianne Wells and Elizabeth Withey.

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Elizabeth Withey writes about the confluence of music and television. Since her earliest memories blend, in equal parts, the theme to the original *Star Trek* series, Grieg's Piano Concerto, and the flashing black and white television images of John F. Kennedy's assassination, it is no great wonder that she has been led astray into the study of television music.

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INTRODUCTION
Getting into gear with the action TV series

Bill Osgerby and Anna Gough-Yates

FAST CARS, BLAZING GUNS … AND A WELL-TAILORED WARDROBE

They were tough. They were resourceful. They never shrank from a challenge. And, to cap it all, they also had a finely-tuned sense of style and panache. They were the heroes and heroines of the profusion of television 'action' series that emerged as a staple ingredient in popular television schedules from the late 1950s through to the end of the 1970s. During the 1980s their numbers thinned, but in the 1990s they were back, firmly on top of the situation. The likes of *The Saint*, *The Avengers*, *Charlie's Angels* and *The Professionals* remained a force to be reckoned with. Wherever there was a hot-spot or a tight corner they were there, setting the world to rights and restoring order – but always with a particular élan and sharpness of attitude. Their blend of irrepressible resilience and keen-nerved *savoir-faire* proved a winning combination and, into a new century, audiences still enjoyed their world of fast-paced adventure and sexy flourish. Moreover, their ranks had been joined by a new generation of action TV champions. The times, the places and the motivations were certainly different – undoubtedly nuanced and re-configured – yet there was no doubting their 'action TV' lineage. They may have been vampire-slayers in suburban high-schools, FBI investigators on the trail of an extra-terrestrial conspiracy, or Amazonian warriors in a neo-classical fantasy world – but they were still the nieces and nephews of the original action TV line-up. The tell-tale trademarks were unmistakable. There was the same robust vigour, the same slick dynamism and the same stylish flair.

For some, the recent success of series such as *The X-Files* (1993–), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–) marks a new era of exchange and flow between popular television genres. Indeed, *The X-Files*' fusion of pulp science fiction, police procedural drama and suspense thriller, and *Buffy*'s ironic blending of gothic horror and teen melodrama, seem to testify especially strongly to a new permeability of generic boundaries in popular TV.[1] At the same time, however, Mulder and Scully, Buffy and their ilk can be seen as the latest variants in a longer-established TV genre – the action series. The technical conventions, iconography and visual style of programmes such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy* can all be seen as indebted to a

heritage of action-oriented TV narratives that first took shape in the 1950s and 1960s. Even in its earliest incarnations, moreover, the action TV genre displayed traits of fluidity and malleability – informed by, and crossing-over with, close generic cousins such as the Western series and the police drama.

Popular genres are often difficult to define with exactitude and precision. The intertextuality and dynamism endemic to popular culture makes it hard to determine decisively where one genre ends and another begins. Yet cultural producers and consumers both tend to operate with notions of identifiable generic forms – textual typologies associated with particular narrative formulae, symbolic codes and technical conventions. In the field of television, for example, concepts of genre not only influence the strategies through which programmers compose their schedules, but also organize and marshal audience expectations, viewers relating to shows in terms of their existing experience of programme style and format. The roots of the action series as a recognizable television genre lie in the 1950s and developments in American TV programming. As the network giants competed for mass audiences, the imperatives of economic efficiency and profitability impelled a move away from live drama towards the filmed serial format. Initially, the existing popularity of the Western with cinema audiences ensured that Western-based TV series had a steel grip over 1950s prime-time. By the end of the decade, however, the declining popularity of the Western as a generic form made way for newcomers. *Dragnet* (1951–58) and *The Untouchables* (1959–63) led a growing battalion of crime and hard-boiled detective series, though also taking shape were shows that appropriated both the Western's spectacle of adventure and the crime show's narrative structure of enigma and resolution, combining these with an accentuated emphasis on style and image.

In America, *Peter Gunn* (1958–61) was an early precursor to the action series format, its central character's mixture of two-fisted machismo and suave cosmopolitanism being set off by the show's fast-paced visual style and slick jazz soundtrack. During the 1960s and 1970s the networks' attempts to capture lucrative 'niche' advertising markets laid the way for the heyday of the action series – a burgeoning number of prime-time shows featuring detectives, spies and trouble-shooters whose chic and exciting lifestyles were designed to appeal to audiences of young, affluent and style-conscious consumers. In Britain, too, the action series came of age in the 1960s. Shows such as *The Saint* (1962–69) and *The Avengers* (1961–69) were indicative of commercial programmers' attempts to develop products that could not only guarantee high domestic ratings, but would also deliver profitable returns in an increasingly trans-national television market.

In the past ten years the academic study of television has undergone considerable expansion, though the action-oriented series formula (using recurring protagonists in discrete episodes, as opposed to the 'soap opera' *serial* format of diverse characters in a continuing narrative) remains relatively uncharted. In one of the first of the few analyses of the development of the action TV series, David Buxton interprets the history of the genre in terms of three thematic strands – the human nature series, the pop series and the police series (Buxton, 1990). The golden age of the human nature series, Buxton argues, was the 1950s. Anthology drama series such as *Alfred Hitchcock*

Presents (1955–65), *The Twilight Zone* (1959–65) and *The Outer Limits* (1963–65), together with Westerns such as *Gunsmoke* (1955–75) and the early crime show *The Untouchables* (1959–63) represented, according to Buxton, attempts to explore and illustrate timeless truths about human nature in the context of a rapidly changing society. Buxton also includes 1960s series such as *The FBI* (1965–74), *Star Trek* (1966–69) and *The Invaders* (1967–68) within the 'human nature' category, but argues that their search for moral certitudes was increasingly anachronistic in an age of intensified consumerism. Instead, the pop series came into its own, Buxton citing *The Avengers* as the quintessential 'pop' show through its self-conscious modernism and integration within the world of design and consumer aesthetics. The pop show was attuned to the accelerating rhythms of the consumer society – socially mobile and sexually liberated, it side-stepped the 'yardstick of social reality' as it waged war against conservative traditionalism and trumpeted 'the victory of consumption and pleasure values over those of the moralistic stuffed shirts' (Buxton, 1990: 108). But by the mid-1970s, Buxton argues, the moment of pop had faded and the period's deepening political and ideological crisis found its corollary in a new breed of 'realistically' gritty police series.[2] The new police genre included shows with inflections of both conservatism (*Ironside* (1967–75), *Hawaii Five-O* (1968–80)) and liberalism (*The Mod Squad* (1968–73), *Starsky and Hutch* (1975–79)), but they shared a common theme of tough cops who worked within the system yet were individualistic and unorthodox in their fight against crime and social disorder.

Buxton's account is informed and insightful – indeed, his ideas are referenced and drawn upon by many of the contributors to this volume. Nevertheless, while providing an impressive semiotic analysis of his examples, Buxton gives only limited attention to their institutional and production backgrounds, while their place within wider social, economic and political contexts is also fairly underdeveloped. The three-fold thematic classification is also something of a blunt instrument, tending to understate the elements of continuity and overlap between those series placed in the different categories. By implication, this analysis also presents a somewhat pessimistic history of the genre. While 1960s 'pop' series such as *The Avengers* are treated as the harbingers of an exciting, style-conscious modernism, these aesthetic sensibilities are seen as losing their meaningful edge as they became integrated into common-sense expectations of popular television, advertising, fashion and music in a 'postmodern' media universe dominated by image and surface. As Buxton ruefully puts it, it is 'impossible to recreate the excitement provoked by the emergence of a modern consumer society, the seduction exercised by pleasingly designed objects, the overwhelming presence of a greater aesthetic sensibility' (Buxton, 1990: 117). In contrast, many of the contributors to this volume insist on the enduring significance of the action series as a genre that is not only constituent in wider patterns of social, economic and political change, but which provides audiences with an avenue through which to articulate meaningful cultural responses to these patterns of change. Indeed, a theme which recurs through several of the chapters is that action series can be seen as a kind of 'lifestyle' television in the way they combine fantasies of thrilling adventure with mythologies of affluence and consumption. In these terms, programmes like *The*

Saint, *Charlie's Angels*, *The Professionals* and their more recent incarnations are understood as being embedded in a matrix of commodity relations in which spaces exist for a broad variety of differently gendered and 'racialized' identities.

While contemporary action TV series such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are attracting growing interest from media and cultural theorists, their forebears remain relatively ignored by the academy.[3] Aside from Buxton's survey, the earlier action canon has been accorded scant critical attention.[4] The contributions to this volume attempt to address this omission. It is a timely intervention. The action TV series of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s developed visual styles, narrative conventions and symbolic iconographies that continue to influence and inform the contemporary crop of action vehicles. Additionally, many of the earlier shows have, themselves, seen a new lease of life with a plethora of cable and satellite channel re-runs and a proliferation of video and DVD sales. Film-makers and TV producers, meanwhile, have plundered the vaults of 'action' television to develop new versions of 'classic' action shows for both the big and small screen. Indeed, the action TV series continues to register its popular appeal across a wide range of cultural forms and texts – from soundtrack CD compilations to toys, T-shirts and all manner of merchandise and ephemera.

This volume brings together a broad-ranging and inter-disciplinary range of specially commissioned chapters to analyse the nature and development of the action TV series from its genesis in the 1950s, through to its re-articulation in contemporary popular culture. In doing so, the collection aims to move beyond a simple focus on the formal properties of 'the text', instead contextualizing the action series within its economic and cultural conditions of production, circulation and consumption. Attention, therefore, is given both to the changing nature and organization of the television industry, and to the wider patterns of social, economic and political relations which provided the context for the rise, and subsequent development of, the action genre. Consideration is also given to issues of reception, several contributors exploring the experiences of different audience groups, understanding these issues within the wider field of debates regarding the relationship between popular culture, identity and consumption.

TOUGH-GUYS, SMOOTH OPERATORS AND FOXY CHICKS

Action TV is divided into four sections, each considering a specific facet of the action genre. Many of the chapters in each section choose to focus on a specific television programme and the selection will inevitably disappoint some readers. The idiosyncrasies of *The Prisoner*, for example, are touched on by several authors, though the series is not considered in systematic depth. Nor are the camp hijinks of *Batman*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* or *Get Smart* accorded detailed consideration. Other favourites may also have fallen through the net – for example *The Rockford Files*, *The Six Million Dollar Man* and even *David Cassidy: Man Under Cover* (we kid you not). Yet each author uses their subject as an avenue through which to explore a collection of themes and issues germane to the action genre as a whole, offering the reader perspectives through which to reflect critically on the action TV phenomenon in its entirety.

The book's first section, 'Situating the action TV series', deals with the emergence and development of the action series from the 1950s through to the 1980s, situating the genre within its wider institutional and historical context. As Tony Bennett (1990: 3–5) cogently argues, the analysis of popular texts always demands recognition of the nexus of economic, technological and institutional relationships that regulate their production. In the first chapter, therefore, the volume's editors, together with Marianne Wells, examine the changing face of the action series as a product of shifts within the American and British television industries since the 1950s. Yet the formal characteristics and narrative themes of the action genre are not solely the outcome of institutional and industrial contingencies. Action series have also condensed and articulated a wide range of contemporary cultural preoccupations and the subsequent chapters in Part I consider the ways that specific series functioned as sites for a many-faceted range of cultural transactions.

In '"So *you're* the famous Simon Templar": *The Saint*, masculinity and consumption in the early 1960s', Bill Osgerby considers the action series as constituent in the broader transformation of constructions of masculinity during the 1960s, programmes such as *The Saint* serving as a forum in which a male consumerist personality was increasingly legitimized and eulogized in a masculine embrace of hedonistic consumption. In the 1970s it was the detective series *Kojak*, Paul Cobley argues, that was especially significant as a response to patterns of social and political change. In '"Who loves ya, baby?": *Kojak*, action and the great society', Cobley shows how prevalent discourses around racism, economic inequality, criminal justice and civic corruption were fundamental influences on the development of *Kojak*, the programme appealing to audiences on the basis of its verisimilitude and uncompromising social realism. In '"A lone crusader in the dangerous world": Heroics of science and technology in *Knight Rider*', Nickianne Moody highlights *Knight Rider* as a programme which engaged with the cultural impact of the momentous technological developments of the 1980s, Moody positioning the series as a relatively ambivalent and open-ended response to the growing penetration of daily life by computer technology and its attendant discourses.

None of the chapters in Part I present action series as straightforward embodiments or 'reflections' of the historical context in which they were produced. Instead, the emphasis is on highlighting the ways these texts actively operated to explain and interpret the world, deploying particular textual codes and techniques to suggest particular ways of making sense of cultural relations and patterns of social change.

As Charlotte Brunsdon observes, the rise of new social movements which engage politically with the concepts of 'race', class, sexuality and gender has, since the mid-1970s, generated a body of work within television studies that asks questions about the representation of particular social groups within TV texts, analysing how these representations are configured and how they circulate within a variety of viewing contexts (1998: 108).[5] This volume's second section, 'Representation and cultural politics in the action TV series', contributes to that tradition, examining the various representations of gender and 'race' within popular action series of the 1970s and 1980s.

In 'Angels in chains? Feminism, femininity and consumer culture in *Charlie's*

Angels', Anna Gough-Yates relates the representations of femininity in *Charlie's Angels* to the wider cultural dialogue surrounding feminism in the United States during the 1970s. Though many contemporary critics deplored the show as intrinsically 'anti-feminist', Gough-Yates contends that the programme could successfully appeal to audiences of women through its codification of feminism as a pleasurable 'lifestyle' choice rather than a confrontational political programme. Elaine Pennicott's '"Who's the cat that won't cop out?": Black masculinity in American action series of the sixties and seventies' discusses the action show as an arena for the construction of black masculinity, arguing that the representations of black men in texts such as *Mission: Impossible*, *Shaft* and *The Mod Squad* can be situated in a long history of racist stereotypes that have functioned to regulate the social presence of African–American men in the United States. The focus on masculinity and issues of 'race' and representation is continued by Yvonne Tasker in her chapter '*Kung Fu:* re-orienting the television Western'. Tasker explores the action-Western hybrid *Kung Fu* and its attempts to combine the generic conventions of the Western with representations of Asian culture, philosophy and martial arts. During the 1970s, Tasker argues, the basis of the show's appeal lay in the way it engaged with American perceptions of the East, harnessing these to an emergent counter-cultural vision of a new, non-violent form of masculinity which carefully negotiated the fine line between pacifism and confrontation. The final chapter of Part II, Leon Hunt's '"Drop everything … including your pants!": *The Professionals* and "hard" action TV', explores a peculiarly British articulation of masculinity in the early 1980s. Hunt situates *The Professionals* within the context of the growth of Far Right politics in Britain, conservative discourses about 'law and order', 'the permissive society' and the 'British malaise' being played out through the programme's constructions of 'hard' masculinity. Yet Hunt argues that within the series these discourses often collided with other, more liberal, agendas of the early 1980s – making *The Professionals* a more 'open' text than previous commentators have implied.

The contributions in the third section of the book, 'Audiences reading and re-reading the action TV series' address viewers' consumption of action shows. The relationship between audiences and texts has long been a concern for media theorists, the 1980s seeing a move away from crude models of popular texts as a homogeneous stream of dominant ideological meanings (the audience being regarded, by implication, as passive and undiscriminating) towards a recognition of the polysemic potential of the text. In these terms, audiences were increasingly seen as actively engaging with television programmes, analysing and discussing texts and sometimes producing 'resistant' or 'oppositional' readings. This notion of the 'active' audience has informed a large amount of recent work on audiences within the realm of television studies, yet it is an approach that should be tempered by the recognition that texts often work to channel audience readings in particular directions, 'polysemy' always existing within a distinct set of boundaries and parameters.[6]

The authors in this section explore the audience/text dynamic with an emphasis on the diversity of interpretations made by audiences as they decode action series in the context of their everyday lives. In 'The games we play(ed): TV Westerns, memory and

masculinity', Martin Pumphrey examines the experience of the action Western genre as it was used, and reused, by the boys (now mature men) who grew up with it. Pumphrey points to the enduring constructions of masculinity within this genre and investigates the ways in which these (now unfashionable) constructions of gender identity are negotiated by the programmes' former viewers. Tony Curtis and Roger Moore may seem an unlikely pair of feminist icons, but in '*The Persuaders!*: A girl's best friends' Joke Hermes argues that, despite the fiercely heterosexual and masculine assumptions characteristic of the action genre, it is possible to read programmes such as *The Persuaders!* in terms of a 'duplicitous masculinity' which (in some contexts) can serve rather than oppose the development of a feminist consciousness. Andy Medhurst concludes Part III with 'King and queen: Interpreting sexual identity in *Jason King*'. Exploring the ambiguous and contradictory constructions of masculinity within the series *Jason King*, Medhurst reads the 'foppery' of the central character as a paradoxical and polymorphous performance of gender that was capable of appealing to a wide range of contrasting audiences. Medhurst also considers the place of *Jason King* within the recent vogue for kitsch retro-culture, arguing that while practices of pastiche may open up space for critiques of outdated attitudes to sexuality, 'race' and gender, these same practices are often fuelled by misogyny and a smug class elitism.

The final section, 'The cultural circulation of the action TV series', continues Medhurst's interest in the way the codes, conventions and iconography of action TV series have cut across a range of different media forms, 'spilling out' beyond the parameters of the original texts. According to John Fiske (1987) television is situated within two separate, but related, economies – the financial and the cultural. In the financial field TV programmes initially circulate as a material commodity, bought by networks and distributors, subsequently producing an audience that can itself be sold as a commodity to advertisers and sponsors. From this point onwards, however, programmes move into the cultural economy where they become bearers of meaning and pleasure for their consumers. Fiske's account is contentious and can be challenged for the level of autonomy it accords to audiences' consumption of media forms.[7] Yet the notion of a cultural economy can be a useful concept and, in different ways, the contributions to Part IV of this volume all consider action TV series as symbolic forms that have circulated well beyond their original textual and temporal 'locations' of production.

The opening chapter, Elizabeth Withey's 'TV gets jazzed: The evolution of action TV theme music', examines the symbolic capacities of action series music scores and the way their intertextual references served to strengthen the profile of the action idiom as a distinct genre. Roger Sabin's 'The comics connection: Low culture meets even lower culture' also highlights the intertextual dimensions to action narratives. Sabin shows how the visual codes and conventions of action TV filtered into the world of children's comics, their adaptation of action shows offering young audiences a kind of 'portable TV' that provided access to an exciting, 'adult' television culture. In 'Of leather suits and kinky boots: *The Avengers*, style and popular culture', Marc O'Day explores the ways in which the imagery, style and symbolism developed in *The Avengers* has permeated the universe of fashion, pop and consumer culture since the 1960s. O'Day argues that the 'stylish' and 'stylized' aesthetic that originally

established *The Avengers*' iconic status is also the basis for its longevity, allowing the show to circulate in (to use Fiske's terms) both the financial and the cultural economies of the postmodern era. The anthology's final chapter further explores the significatory meanings of the original action TV canon in contemporary culture. John Storey's 'The sixties in the nineties: Pastiche or hyperconsciousness?' discusses a range of critical work dealing with postmodern culture and its attempts to explain the recycling of action TV series from the 1960s and 1970s within contemporary culture. Storey argues that, whilst some theorists would explain this phenomenon in terms of a 'postmodern' collapse of traditional boundaries between high and low culture, commerce and art, such explanations fail to grasp the new meanings generated through the processes of cultural recycling. Rather than marking a random, and uniquely 'postmodern', cannibalization of the past, Storey suggests that the re-animation of 'the sixties in the nineties' was constituent in a longer tradition of appropriation, bricolage and intertextuality that has characterized the history of popular culture – practices in which media forms are commandeered and mobilized in meaningful ways throughout the different lived cultures of everyday life.

Action TV, therefore, draws together a collection of diverse and contrasting approaches to the study of the action TV formula. They all, however, share an interest in relating the historical and the particular to broader theories about the nature of television and its place within the wider social landscape. Collectively, they show that the emergence and development of a television genre can only be understood through reference to forces that operate both inside *and* outside the institutions of textual production. This book considers the complex relationships between these forces and the various ways they have worked to shape the form, content and audience interpretation of action TV series.

NOTES

1 For discussion of *The X-Files*' fusion of genres see Vitaris (1995). Analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as a postmodern text can be found in Owen (1999).
2 In a British context, a similar relationship between discourses around escalating crime and the emergence of 'tough cop' series such as *The Sweeney* (1975–82) was highlighted by both Buscombe (1976) and Dennington and Tulloch (1976).
3 Braun (2000), Lavery, Hague and Cartwright (eds) (1996) and Owen (1999) all exemplify the growing critical interest in the contemporary action TV series.
4 Though there exist several thorough-going studies of individual programmes. Especially noteworthy, for example, are Miller's analysis of *The Avengers* (1997) and Vahimagi's volume dealing with *The Untouchables* (1998).
5 See, for example, D'Acci (1994), Feuer (1995) and Jhally and Lewis (1992).
6 Adept critiques of 'active' audience theory are elaborated by Cobley (1994), Curran (1990) and Seaman (1992).
7 For critiques of notions of the 'creativity' of consumer practice, see McGuigan (1992) and Silverstone (1994).

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PART I

SITUATING THE ACTION TV SERIES

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1

THE BUSINESS OF ACTION

Television history and the development of the action TV series

Bill Osgerby, Anna Gough-Yates and Marianne Wells

'MONEY TALKS – BULLSHIT WALKS': THE COMMERCIAL IMPERATIVES OF TV PRODUCTION

Whether we're watching re-runs of the stylish, fashion-forward classic *The Avengers*, marvelling at the precise choreography of car chases on *Starsky and Hutch*, or tuning in for the latest (re-)incarnation of *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*, the presence of the action series in prime-time TV programming is something we now take for granted. To date, most analyses of action series have tended to focus on their roles in social reproduction, viewing them as part of a larger '(unconscious) ideological project' promoted through the media industries (Buxton, 1990: 14). This chapter, however, seeks to understand the emergence of the action series in relation to the shifting political economy of television industries in post-war Britain and North America. Though attention to industry organization and business imperatives are often side-lined in analyses of popular television in favour of textual deconstruction and audience-based research, attention to the dynamics of political economy is essential if we are to fully engage with the ways that the moment of production inscribes itself into the meanings of cultural products (see McGuigan, 1992). Thus, as Douglas Kellner observes (1997: 18), analyses of specific historical, political and economic contexts and relations can illuminate our understanding of texts, enabling us to consider not only the sign value and audience responses to cultural products, but also the role of cultural producers in determining their form and content.

Whilst the organizational forms of British and American television broadcasting possess their own, quite distinct, histories of development, interesting parallels can be drawn between the ways in which pressures for commercial success have affected the types of programming developed in both countries. The American 'network' structure has, from the outset, placed advertising and profit at its core. And in Britain too, despite the (increasingly precarious) survival of a public service ethos, since the mid-1950s television organizations have had to compete with one another for audiences and market share. On both sides of the Atlantic, therefore, competitive pressures have resulted in a more or less constant drive to improve productivity whilst simultaneously

reducing capital outlay – this leading to an emphasis on styles of programming that are both cost-effective and easily reproducible. The drive for cost-efficiency has often entailed trends towards standardization with, for example, the repeated use of teams of production and technical personnel (see Abercrombie, 1996: 121–27). The search for reproducibility, meanwhile, has meant that television, like all modern commercial industries, has tended towards industrialized methods of production in which more expensive 'craft' and 'artisanal' modes of authorship have been marginalized in favour of the economies of the production line. In TV programming this has been exemplified, above all, by the rise of the serial format. Whilst the serial was not necessarily the most 'natural' vehicle for the presentation of fiction narratives (indeed, the single play was the prevalent televisual story-telling device until the mid-1950s), economic contingencies ensured the place of the series format as an enduring mainstay of modern TV schedules.

Nevertheless, while the television industry has strived to develop increasingly efficient modes of production, the TV audience represents a market notable for its variability. As Todd Gitlin has observed in relation to American prime-time programming, whilst television executives may use audience research as a 'guide' to the market for their products, in reality the 'audience' remains an abstraction that defies attempts at scientific predictability. As a consequence, the TV industry 'tries to develop ways to control both supply and demand – supply in order to smooth its workings, demand so that it remains of a sort the networks are set up to satisfy' (Gitlin, 1983: 14). In order to manage market volatility, therefore, television executives prioritize the hunt for shows that will attract significant audiences on a regular basis – and thus generate substantial revenues from advertisers. Hence failure to deliver a solid audience share invariably spells a programme's demise. Indeed, in America it is not unknown for a 'failing' series to be axed mid-season to make way for a show with potential to pull higher ratings. In business parlance, therefore, 'money talks' – and failing TV shows 'walk'.

The commercial imperatives of television production can also militate against innovation in styles of TV programming. Unconventional shows are often considered risky ventures – even if they feature well-known actors or established scriptwriters. More often, the television industry attempts to duplicate successful output through a variety of means. The simplest and cheapest is to show repeats of popular shows (or 'classic re-runs', to use a hackneyed TV euphemism). Alternatively, producers may attempt to imitate the formula of an already successful programme on another channel or network, or produce a 'spin-off' of a popular series – using established characters, performers and producers in a new variant of a show with a proven track-record. All of these strategies have impacted upon the production of television fictions since the 1950s and – as we shall see – action and adventure series have been key players in the television industry's search for audiences and profitability.

'SAME TIME, SAME CHANNEL … ': AMERICAN TV NETWORKS AND THE RISE OF THE SERIES FORMAT

The origins of the TV serial format – recurring characters in discrete episodes – lie in 1950s America.[1] During the early 1950s American TV fiction was largely the preserve

of 'one-off' plays and dramas, as many as thirteen 'playhouse' slots appearing on American TV by 1955, sponsored by large corporations (including household names like Philco, Revlon, Goodyear and Motorola) who hoped to gain prestige from linking themselves to 'quality' plays transmitted live, week after week, on network TV. The unpredictability of live production, however, could prove troublesome, while sponsors were sometimes unhappy with dramas like Paddy Chayefsky's *Marty* (1953) and J.P. Miller's *Days of Wine and Roses* (1958) – whose depictions of the turbulence and tragedy of human emotions seemed to jar disconcertingly with sponsors' cheery advertising slogans. Increasingly, therefore, sponsors sought more attractive modes of promotion and looked to Hollywood film companies for more up-beat alternatives.

Unsure of their new rival, film companies initially stood aloof from the developing television industry. By the mid-1950s, however, Hollywood had been forced to acknowledge the decline of traditional cinema audiences and began to see television not as a competitor but as a propitious new market. In 1955 Warner Brothers led the way, recycling their film sets and old footage in three 'film series' – *Casablanca*, *King's Row* and *Cheyenne* – produced for the ABC network's 1955–56 season. Other film companies followed suit (MCA, for example, developed a similar alliance with NBC), David Buxton (1990: 22) observing how Hollywood increasingly eschewed 'B' film production in favour of the greater profitability of series geared to television. Hollywood's growing presence in TV schedules further accelerated the move away from live drama. Whereas 'one-off' plays required the construction of unique sets for each programme, film companies found series production much more economical – allowing the regular reuse of existing studio facilities, actors and locations. The rise of the episodic series was also galvanized by the collapse of the big money quiz show during the late 1950s. Amid embarrassing scandals about the widespread coaching of contestants, TV networks quickly dropped prime-time quizzes from their schedules and scrambled to find alternatives that would fill the empty slots.

Corporate sponsors initially wielded significant power in the production of TV series, able to ensure that a show adopted a 'mood' and 'style' they believed was appropriate to the promotion of their products. By the late 1950s, however, the networks' greater financial stability allowed them to wrestle greater control of their prime-time schedules. All three major networks – NBC, CBS and ABC – pulled away from traditional practices in which advertisers were licensed as the sole sponsor of a prime-time show, in favour of a network-licensing of programmes in which shows were sold to advertisers on a multiple-sponsorship basis. Greater control of their schedules also allowed the networks to win concessions from producers in the form of a greater share of profits from syndication and merchandising. Indeed, such revenues were increasing appreciably as off-network re-runs and international syndication began to open up profitable new markets. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, therefore, the American TV networks possessed both the power and the incentive to work with production companies in the development of continuous and repeatable prime-time shows. Such programmes could not only guarantee advertisers regular audiences for the same weekly slot, but also maximized profitability through their reuse of facilities and personnel and their saleability across a variety of expanding national and international