

An Aristocratic Plod, Erstwhile Commandos and Ladies who Craved Excitement: Hammer Films' Post-War BBC Crime Series and Serial Adaptations

David Mann, Independent Scholar

Hammer Films' post-war production was reinvigorated thanks to a package of adaptations of largely forgotten BBC radio crime serials and series (1949-1951) that have so far escaped sustained critical attention. Yet these properties were regarded by the film industry as "gilt edged title booking for the majority of halls", their "exploitation angles [...] unbounded" (Review of *Dick Barton - Special Agent*, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1948: 16). Furthermore, in reflecting a period of profound social change, there can be no doubt that the original radio programmes are of social and cultural significance. Few recordings or scripts remain of the radio programmes, however, and so Hammer adaptations appear to proffer the last, best hope of retrieving their concerns and ideological posture. This article begins by examining the industrial and cultural context of the BBC programmes as well as their formal evolution and perceived potential for copyright exploitation. Hammer's own post-war evolution – its business acumen as a producer of films aimed primarily at the bottom end of the double bill – and its industrial strategies are then scrutinised. Finally, I analyse and account for the ideological, thematic and formal modifications that emerged as a result of the process of adaptation.

BBC Crime Programmes

The Second World War had brought a belated, grudging acceptance of the crime genre by the BBC. Before that time, the Corporation had rarely engaged with the genre. When it did, its contributions declined to engage with social and psychological issues, preferring instead to stay with purely ratiocinative concerns, as exhibited in the crime puzzle serial *The Mayfair Mystery* (1925). This was not entirely the BBC's fault. An early broadcast of Patrick Hamilton's play *Rope* (also 1925), a dark study of psychopathic narcissism, was subject to sustained, negative criticism. The Corporation was accused of pandering to "a section of the public which enjoys the degenerate" (Black, 1972: 166) and there were protests from the wider establishment. Even after the war, the BBC's crime content continued to endure criticism both for its moral decadence and its artistic mediocrity and the Corporation was constantly reminded of its obligation "to be a means of raising public taste" (Drakakis, 1981: 13).

Mann

However, such proselytising disguised deeper ideological disquiet within the BBC itself. In the thirties, it feared the commercialisation, or in the parlance of the period, the "Americanisation" of European radio. Crime thrillers incorporating innovative, American-influenced formats infused with a democratic and modernising sensibility were in the vanguard of the perceived threat; they were programme staples of the European-based International Broadcasting Company (IBC), which openly competed for the domestic market (they broadcast in English) from 1934 until the outbreak of war. In 1939, 53 per cent of British listeners were adjudged to be regularly tuning in to these foreign stations (Poll for the British Institute of Public Opinion cited in Drakakis: 62). For its part, the BBC broadcast only "suitable" American programmes, stripped of their advertising component, whilst simultaneously (and perhaps ironically) citing "interference with reception" as the key factor behind its conservative, discriminatory policy (Camporesi, 1990: 86).

During the war, though European competition was silenced, the Americans set up on their own American Forces Network. The BBC's paranoia about what it imagined to be the imminent American takeover of the European broadcasting market intensified. The BBC's senior management sought to particularise its output by stressing its divergence from American endeavours. Imported American shows were subject to quota restrictions as early as 1944 (Camporesi: 168). Basil Nicholls, the BBC Senior Controller, issued a series of directives implicitly promoting "the effective resistance to the Americanisation of our Entertainment" (Camporesi: 173). However, despite these ideological misgivings, the pressure of the competition forced the BBC to engage more fully with such an obviously popular form, especially as the ideology of the People's War had forced the Corporation, as with other public institutions, to become more egalitarian. The success of the wartime Forces Programme (initially produced with the American forces prior to the inception of AFN) with its emphasis on light entertainment eventually led to the introduction of the Light Programme in July 1945 with a remit to provide entertaining popular genres. Consequently, senior BBC executives undertook annual excursions to the major American cities to reconnoitre and, on their return, produce "Anglicised" items of interest (Drakakis, 1981: 11).

By the end of the war, it was possible to determine two distinct strands in the BBC's burgeoning crime fiction output. On the one hand, building upon the tradition of *The Mayfair Mystery* and its ilk, there were the conventional cases of fictional Yard officers that were presented as crime conundrums and exhibited little considered engagement with changed social conditions. Examples include *Inspector Hornleigh Investigates* (first broadcast in 1937, it spawned a crop of amusing films starring Gordon Harker and Alastair Sim); *Crime Magazine's* "Barton of the Yard" (1940); the eponymous hero of *Chief Inspector French's Cases* (1943); and *Inspectors Cobbe and Duncan* (1945).

On the other hand, there were a number of more diverse, American-influenced crime programmes. The career of the American writer John Dickson Carr illustrates the incestuous relationship between the British and American narrative traditions at this time. With the outbreak of hostilities, Carr was initially forbidden by the American government to continue writing for the BBC. He returned to America and created a new series called *Suspense* (1942-1962). When America entered the war, he came back to Britain and created the extremely successful series *Appointment with Fear* (intermittently 1943-1955), which incorporated adaptations of many of the *Suspense* plays as well as its distinctive narrator "The Man in Black" (who acquired his own series in 1949). In turn many of the scripts for *Appointment with Fear* were recycled in America as part of the *Cabin-13* (1948) radio series (Nevins Jr., 1978: 335).

BBC Radio Crime Series and Serials: Themes and Subject Matter

Many of these American-influenced programmes represented a variety of gender and class relationships that would have been impossible for the BBC to characterise before the war. The BBC's belated engagement, in quite carefully circumscribed ways, with such concerns and with the changed social conditions that now prevailed, is well illustrated by *The Adventures of PC 49* (1947-1953). Several series adopted the "sleuthing couple" format that was indebted to American models such as *The Thin Man* (in one incarnation, a successful radioseries that ran between 1941 and 1950). One of the most successful BBC crimes series – at its height attracting an audience of twelve million – *The Adventures of PC 49* exemplifies the profound shifts in ideological stance – both conservative and innovative – that accompanied the process of the adaptation of the format. The hero, ex-Varsity the Honourable Archibald Berkeley Willoughby, PC 49, is in the long line of aristocratic gentlemen sleuths in English popular fiction, but the comic updating is to make him a rookie constable, newly emerged from training at Hendon, whose privileged background is at odds with the working-class surroundings he now patrols. Typically, but also in the tradition of British crime fiction, it is Willoughby's inability to cope with the mundane reality of "Civvy Street" that provides his incentive. The inept Willoughby's ambition is to become a detective, a "plainclothesman." However his enthusiasm is jeopardised by an unbridled propensity for misguided hunches and a tendency to be duped by glamorous females; the realisation of his own inadequacy invariably acts as a cue for his catchphrase, "Oh, my Sunday helmet." Unlike other adult-orientated crime programmes, the series was required to tone down sexual and violent content because it was repeated on the seven o'clock slot when children, keen fans of 49, would be listening.

Typically, as a counter to 49's ineptitude, it is his resourceful girlfriend, Joan Carr, who gets results. However, the couple's marriage, in 1952, heralded a return to more traditional roles and the once plucky Joan became domesticated.

Mann

This drove one listener, a stonemason's wife, to complain: "Mrs PC 49 acted too much the weeping, clinging female [...] ask her to speak like a grown woman" (Listener Research, 1952: BBC Archive R19/16).

Another sleuthing couple series, *Dr Morelle* was first broadcast in 1942 as part of the regular thriller slot *Monday Night at Eight*. It ran intermittently until 1948 and enjoyed a revival as late as 1957. The series centred upon the casebooks of an eminent criminal psychologist turned investigator and his intrepid secretary, the ironically dubbed Miss Frayle. Whilst the villains inevitably conduct themselves according to the behaviour patterns that the sedentary Morelle's theories predict, Miss Frayle's courageous impulsiveness, on the other hand, is the catalyst for fraught exchanges with both the criminal fraternity and her employer.

Edward (Ted) J. Mason's series *Celia* (c. 1948) is arguably the most innovative and entertaining of the sleuthing couple series. Celia, "the girl who always means to say 'NO!' – but somehow says 'YES!'," as the series' publicity poster had it, is an actress who is all too frequently found "resting." A private eye, Larry Peters, intermittently employs her to infiltrate various dangerous locations in order to get the low-down on criminal activities. Celia uses her acting ability to impersonate a variety of characters in order to allay the suspicions of the villains. Celia's adventures are inevitably dangerous and at the end of each one she vows never to work for Peters again. The popularity of these characters – the unmarried Joan Carr, Miss Frayle and Celia – suggests that men were not alone in finding it difficult to return to "Civvy Street," with these characters delineating a changed relationship between the sexes in which women often prove more resourceful than their male counterparts.

Other programmes such as *Return from Darkness* (1948), filmed as *The Black Widow* (1947), and *The Lady Craved Excitement* (1950) likewise privilege sleuthing relationships in which women play a proactive role. In fact this was an area in which radio and the cinema were in concert. Films of the period frequently featured females who, like their male contemporaries, desired a "legitimate way to action in peacetime." However, we should be guarded in our approach to this phenomenon; as we have seen, their activities were often proscribed. Perhaps the most extraordinary realisation is Margaret Lockwood's Frances Gray in the feature film *Highly Dangerous* (1950). Therein, whilst fearlessly taking on a swathe of dastardly, foreign no-goods, her action persona is explained away because, whilst under the influence of a truth drug, she believes herself to be the protagonist in, ironically, a radio thriller in the Barton mode which she had listened to previously. After apprehending the villains but receiving a blow on the head, she "comes to her senses."

At once a variation on the sleuthing couple format and a return to more traditional affiliations, *Meet the Rev* (c. 1946) was a rare experiment in social

egalitarianism or, for the cynically inclined, social anthropology. Like PC 49, the Reverend Simon Cherry ventures into the "Abyss" – his parish being located in the London's dockland. As a vicar, he has a privileged access to different social strata and the series consciously exploits differing class relations. Cherry is single and his plebeian sidekick, Charlie, in the mode of Bulldog Drummond's helpmate, is his former Army batman. The basis of the ongoing relationship is Charlie's mechanic sensibility and his knowledge of the East End in concert with Cherry's keen sense of observation and deductive reasoning. Cherry, like Drummond, finds the return to peacetime difficult and needs the stimulation and excitement that war provided. Another contemporaneous radio serial *The Show Must Go On*, also featured an ex-Army officer and his batman, with the twist that the latter, having won the pools, provides the wherewithal for the former's sleuthing dalliances. However, it was another former Army hero that was to enthral the masses, or perhaps more accurately, their young male offspring.

Dick Barton

Dick Barton – Special Agent (1946-1951) was the most prolific and popular of these radio crime series despite the Head of Drama, Val Geilgud's view that it was "a purely mechanical piece of puerility" (Geilgud, 1949: BBC Archive R19/263/1). Many of the programme's hallmark features – its exploitation of high-speed modes of transport and frenetic, stichomythic dialogue and sound effects – were borrowed wholesale from American models of production, scenarist John McMillan having previously introduced the daily thriller format to Radio Luxembourg before the war with *Vic Samson: Special Investigator*. These elements conspired to make the programme the "fastest thing in radio"; hence Dick's catchphrase "no time for melodrama Snowey." E.S. Turner asserts that "at the height of his fame, Dick's adventures [...] were followed by between one in five and one in three of the population" (Turner, 1975: 285).

Barton was a complex construction. Firstly, and most conspicuously, there was Victorian/Edwardian legacy: Barton, the nationally celebrated, virile, "special agent," was essentially a poor man's Bulldog Drummond, a *Boys' Own* hero and the natural successor to the D.C. Thompson comic adventurers. Geoffrey Webb, who together with Edward J. Mason wrote the majority of the Barton scripts, insisted that Barton was "essentially a man out for adventure, a type who does not sit down in an armchair to elucidate and deduce at great length as do our celebrated criminologists" (Mason *et al*, 1950: 52). Barton, then, was the ideal "adventure-monger," whose personal traits (or perhaps more pointedly, his intellectual failings) prompted the series' dramatic peaks and cliffhanger endings that were designed to ensure the return of the audience. Together with his faithful working-class, former military and social inferiors, Jock and Snowey, Barton took on every kind of criminal miscreant. Like Drummond and his radio contemporary, the Reverend Cherry, the war had spoiled Captain Barton, M.C.,

Mann

No. 20 Commando, "completely for a nice, peaceful job" (Cited in the first broadcast episode of the first Dick Barton serial, *The Secret Weapon*, The Light Programme, 7 October, 1946).

Like other *Boys' Own* heroes, Barton is ill-at-ease with women, his emotional immaturity belying his nominal age of thirty-four. In the very first broadcast episode, Dick's original "love interest", Jean Hunter ("a regular Amazon, captain of the hockey team and all that") observes that Dick "doesn't seem to know much about girls." Jean was written out of the series for such impudence and later, intermittent attempts to embroil Dick in passions of the flesh proved futile as "in this kind of story girls only hold up the action" (Turner, 1975: 262-263).

We get near to understanding the apparent contradictions inherent in the construction of Barton if we consider him as neither an inept adult, nor as a child masquerading as an adult but as somewhere in between – as an adolescent. A child psychologist writing at the time considered that Dick was ultimately an alienated figure because, unlike his American counterparts, there was no understanding or acceptance of adolescence "as a definite social phase. [In America] the bobby-soxers, the in-betweens, have an accepted life of their own [...] in Britain, however, where they are not recognised as a group, our adolescents are nothing more than displaced persons" (cited in Mason *et al*, 1950: 132-133).

Formal Specificities

Whereas cinemagoing is a public experience, many radio listeners listen alone. The cinema must work hard to attain intimacy and is justly rewarded when it succeeds whereas radio drama is the province of intimacy. In film, direct address may break the illusion of voyeuristic pleasure but, in radio, such surveillance is internalised, stream of consciousness often replacing visual montage whilst space must be evoked, conjured up as a result of that essential covenant with the listener who, for his or her part, must permit no distraction. For some at least, radio storytelling is, at its best, atavistic; a reversion to the bardic tradition in the midst of unparalleled technological innovation. Compton Mackenzie, for example, welcomed "the greatest opportunity he has had since the days of Homer to express himself without the mechanical barrier which the progress of human inventiveness has raised higher and higher between the artist and his audience" (Mackenzie, 1927: 667).

As we have seen, however, the BBC's belated exploitation of the specificity of radio drama came primarily as a result of an increasing awareness of American innovations. Shows such as *The Shadow* (1930) starring Orson Welles (which ran intermittently in one form or another for fifteen years) delighted in ushering the listener into unfamiliar, petrifying situations. Similarly, in one of the most famous of the *Appointment with Fear* episodes – that of Poe's "The Pit and the

Pendulum" – it is the Grand Inquisitor who accurately foretells the coming dread: "It must approach you slowly and force itself upon your mind. It must stalk you like a tiger; it must bring you face to face at last with the king of terrors." Likewise, in "The Clock Strikes Eight," Carr's own gargantuan detective, Dr Gideon Fell, intones, "I ask you to imagine [...] Suppose that you wake suddenly in the middle of the night. You wake up as though from a nightmare [...] in a room you've never known before." That room (oh, the horror!) is the condemned cell.

Such intimacy, often realised by exploiting the device of the interior monologue, was a critical component of the radio programme's success. The protagonists' restricted viewpoints and resulting paranoia readily coincided with the anxieties of the wartime audience. Many of these programmes exploited the psychological perspective of first person narration or the ambiguities of the author/amanuensis relationship to great effect. Both PC 49 and the Reverend Cherry narrated their series, whilst in the early Dr Morelle episodes, the good physician dictated to his long-suffering secretary, Miss Frayle. At least six other crime programmes employed first-person narration.

But the most potent relationship established with the audience at this time was that between Dick Barton and his young fans. Though subject to exclamatory third person narration ("WILL DICK AND SNOWEY ESCAPE THE CLUTCHES OF..." etc.), the series utilised a more subtle device. Barton was the purveyor of "Bartonese" – a bizarrely conceived discourse proffered as sage advice to the younger apprentice "special agent"/listener. An example from the first series occurs when Barton advises Jock to feign weakness when captured by "blink[ing] your eyes hard to make the tears come." The intention is to situate the younger listener alongside Barton, to create an intimate relationship that, at such moments, temporarily excluded the adult audience.

The Exploitation of Copyright

Appointment with Fear attracted the most sustained interest from the film industry. In addition to a request for stage rights from a provincial theatrical producer (Watts, 1945: BBC Archive R/22/949/1), British Foundation Pictures, until then a marginal producer of industrial, propaganda, and training films, soon declared an interest (Mills, 1945: BBC Archive R/22/949/1). BFP's original intention was to make three ten-minute shorts at a £100 each. In turn, the BBC offered an option for a further three films, providing the standard of the first films was satisfactory (Mills, 1945: BBC Archive R/23/2). The produced films actually came in at half-an-hour each though BFP was obliged to decline the option – it ceased trading in 1950, victim of the hostile post-war economic climate.

Mann

British producer Daniel Angel also declared an interest but the BBC's insistence that the films be available for domestic television broadcast stymied the deal (Angel, 1947: BBC Archive R/23/2). Paradoxically, protracted and complex discussion with the American producer, Fortuna Films, also collapsed, when the BBC declined to agree to the inclusion of American television rights; already by then, a necessary prior condition if the films were to be produced in America. Explaining its interest as being "because our memory of numerable BBC mystery stories [...] were excellent," Fortuna originally enquired about the availability of sixty scripts (Geilgud, 1947: BBC Archive R/23/2).

The negotiations with Fortuna are revealing. Geilgud was against the collaboration from the outset. Complaining that his department couldn't afford time to separate BBC's copyright from that of contributing authors; that it was not qualified to judge what might make a good adaptation and (again) asserting that UK film rights should not be conceded because it "would place the BBC at a disadvantage with the commercial cinema" (Geilgud, 1947: BBC Archive R/23/2). In the end, patriotic duty prevailed and Geilgud sent over 40 scripts in an altruistic attempt to bring in desperately needed dollars. Fortuna bought two at \$100 before the BBC realised it was being fleeced (film rights to American companies typically brought in \$4,000-\$20,000). The resulting films were shown on American television in 1952.

Geilgud's negativity exemplified the Corporation's lack of awareness of the film industry's business and industrial conventions; a failing that was still apparent a decade later (see Mann, 2009: 234-8). Not unsurprising, then, that another offer, from Diploma Pictures, a domestic producer of short educational, travel and musical revue films, also fell through when the BBC found it could not agree to Diploma's essential proviso that the "Appointment with Fear" title could be exploited and Valentine Dyll be allowed to reprise his role as the "Man in Black" (Hyams, 1948: BBC Archive R/23/2).

Eventually, however, and with typical shrewdness, Hammer/Exclusive's James Carreras obtained the film rights to a comprehensive package of BBC radio crime programmes at "highly advantageous" terms; consequently they cost about £5,000 to make – about half the price of comparable product. Moreover, they were some of the first films to benefit from NFFC funding, attracting a production grant of £20,000 (Long Shots, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1949: 4). Carreras had been assiduous in fostering a good relationship with the NFFC as soon as it was established (Meikle, 1996: 11) and, in his negotiations with them, he would have emphasised the industry's view that adaptations of popular radio properties were "good quota." (For example, as noted in subsequent reviews of Hammer's *The Lady in the Fog* in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1952: 18 and *Chain of Events* in *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1958: 14). Even Geilgud had cause for comfort – the

first Barton film alone grossed £1,500 – twenty-five per cent of the net profit going to the BBC (Chalmers, 1948: BBC Archive R19/263/2).

The films were finished on schedule and, even more importantly, under budget. Carreras always repaid the NFFC in full ensuring that the company remained a good risk for future loans. Nonetheless, after 1951, the NFFC decided to withdraw funding from Hammer because low-budget thrillers were exactly the type of film that its then chairman, Lord Reith, did not wish to encourage, judging them, "not of as high quality as the Corporation would have wished" (NFFC, 1950: para. 32 quoted in Harper and Porter, 2003: 138). Fortunately, as the NFFC rather sternly assumed, Hammer was now sufficiently well-established to survive this blow.

The Evolution of Hammer/Exclusive's Production Strategy

In 1947 the distributor Exclusive Films had rationalised its activities and a new company, Hammer Films, was established. On the advice of Jack Goodlatte, at that time booking manager for ABC Cinemas, Hammer had initially produced low budget supporting features (Michael Carreras cited in Eyles, Adkinson and Fry, 1994: 11). Most were crime films that required little in the way of sets, décor and lighting and could be filmed in the tiny cramped studios that Hammer was able to rent. The execrable *Death in High Heels*, together with *Crime Reporter* and gloriously inept *Dick Barton – Special Agent* being shot at the tiny Marylebone Studios, a disused church, in 1947.

Though the first two Dick Barton adaptations were produced by Henry Halstead who exploited outdoor locations, it was producer Anthony Hinds who, with an acute eye for low-cost production, oversaw Hammer's policy of using country houses for filming. The imposition of punitive death duties had left the countryside littered with large houses, void of staff and with their furniture dust-sheeted. As director Michael Carreras remembers it, Hinds "transformed an empty house into a practical and economic working studio, as well as a very comfortable residence, complete with butler, for those who wished to live on the job" (Anon, Interview with Michael Carreras, 1978: 30).

It was a strategy that mimicked that of Cecil Hepworth, who purchased Oatlands Park, Weybridge in 1919 with similar intentions (Low, 1971: 109). Indeed, Oatlands continued to be used by the "quota quickie" producers of the thirties (Sweet, 2007: 25). Hammer leased three such houses – Dial Close, Oakley Court and Gilston Park – before settling into Down Place, near Maidenhead, in 1951 (renamed Bray Studios after the nearby village). The cost of purchasing a house was cheaper than renting studio space, moreover schedules could be controlled without interference. Consequently, according to Denis Meikle (1996: 6), Hammer was able to produce eight films a year, allowing five weeks shooting for each film and two weeks' rest and planning breather between pictures.

Mann

There were some drawbacks. The policy necessarily required, as director Francis Searle put it, "a lot of carpentry," that is rewriting of scenes in order to suit the circumstances. Furthermore, Searle particularly complained that it was impossible "to fly anything [i.e. suspend lights or scenery backdrops] so the most difficult part was finding sufficient, appropriate settings to keep the picture moving" (Rigby, 1995: 34-38).

The Adaptations: Surviving Elements and the Return of the Tradition of Melodrama and the Shocker

Hammer's typically pragmatic strategy in adapting these radio serials was to jettison most of the original plotlines but retain the suspense formula and the main characters. Consequently, the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (1951: 310) complained that Alan Stranks' adaptation (with Vernon Harris) of his own *A Case for PC 49* (1951) contained "many moments of suspense [that] too often end in anticlimaxes;" i.e. it preserved the roller coaster ride of dramatic peaks and cliffhangers inherited from the narrative design of the radio series.

The adaptation of *Appointment with Fear* as *The Man in Black* also preserves key formal elements from the radio original. It begins with "the BBC sensation," Valentine Dyll, in close-up and soft-focus; back lit, unshaven, deadbeat and drawing heavily on a cigarette whilst staring down into the camera beneath the shadow cast by a battered fedora. The cursive script of the title credits further masks our view, mimicking the swirling cigarette smoke. This iconic image coincides with the authorial anonymity of the voice famous to millions whilst likewise denying access to visual clues that might suggest psychological pointers to a personality, and hence, an identity behind *that* voice.

The Man in Black is so fascinated by a motley collection of oriental bric-a-brac at a country house sale ("Oak Field Towers," actually Oakley Court, see Rigby, 1995: 36) that his "curiosity as a storyteller was aroused." However, director and scriptwriter Francis Searle soon abandons the first-person perspective of the film's opening and, consequently, the psychological potency of the narrative is diluted. He fails to stay close to the predicament of the intended victim and consequently the audience no longer shares her anxieties. The psychological bond with the victim that was the hallmark of the radio series is broken.

Of more interest here, however, is the retention and shift in social focus that emerges during the process of adaptation. *The Adventures of PC 49* is a rarity amongst the Hammer adaptations in that it stays with the concept of social intercourse inherent in the original series. As in the radio original, 49 takes to the job as it is "the only legitimate way to action in peacetime." Others with similar experience are not so scrupulous however. Black market criminals are "intelligently briefed along commando lines" – an allusion to the previous year's attempt by an organised gang of demobbed soldiers to rob London Airport. PC

49 enters the underworld by impersonating a crook. He "gens up" on the minutiae of an old lag's history, determined to "wear his criminal record like a tailor made suit" and "reccies" the cafés along the North Circular Road – the repositories of "pull in cheer and cheesecake" – in order to glean loose talk from lorry drivers that might lead to a gang of hijackers.

Similarly, he maintains his sleuthing relationship with fiancée Joan Carr, and indeed, elsewhere Hammer retained the effective, flexible convention of the sleuthing couple. The *Dr Morelle* and *Celia* adaptations as well as that of the Lester Powell serial *Return from Darkness* (filmed, as already noted, as *The Black Widow*), privilege sleuthing relationships in which female protagonists retain their proactive role.

Though in the main the BBC originals had belatedly taken to contemporary settings, there were some residual tendencies. A 1945 *Appointment with Fear* episode, "And the Deep Shuddered," bids the listener to "come now to a gloomy, pretentious building somewhere in Gloucestershire; Victorian gothic at its worst." As we have seen, Hammer needed little prompting. Its policy of using country houses in lieu of studios instigated a return to the earlier concerns of Victorian stage melodrama and Gothic literature, and the contemporary social preoccupations that contributed so conspicuously to the specificity of the radio originals were discarded.

For example, in *Dr Morelle – the Case of the Missing Heiress*, Miss Frayle, fearful for the safety of an old friend embarks on an errand of mercy. Her journey is portrayed in a montage sequence that takes her from the glossy modernity and hustle and bustle of contemporary London to the nocturnal, portentous shadow land of the "West Country." Daytime exteriors initially pick out Miss Frayle negotiating the traffic of Harley Street and Piccadilly Circus. A quick succession of shots traces her progress by train, bus and, lastly, just as the light fades, by foot across a remote moor, past "Gibbet's Corner" (where Judge Jeffries put paid to some of Monmouth's rebels) and on to "Darren Tor." Cynthia's stepfather, the *de facto* proprietor of the seat (Cynthia having disappeared), laconically concedes to Miss Frayle that the family is unable "to keep the house in the state of preservation it deserves" – an observation that overtly acknowledges the predicament of that portion of the landed gentry wilting under the imposition of punitive death duties and whose crumbling heaps might not be so fortunate as to attract the attentions of a film production company. Later, Dr Morelle gains ingress by pretending to be writing a paper on old country houses in district. (In a similar vein, the gothic pile featured in *The Black Widow* has its furniture dust sheeted).

The opening sequence of *Meet Simon Cherry* (1950) is an overt acknowledgement of its original. Over a montage of East End sights and sounds including the parish's rough and ready boxing club, Cherry exhorts his audience

Mann

to see the positive side of slum life: "This is my parish – London's dockland [...] a tough locality [...] it's my experience that interesting people are the same anywhere." Nonetheless, he soon follows Miss Frayle's example and leaves his flock to tend for itself. Feeling "off colour" because of the imminent execution of one of his parishioners, he borrows Charlie the batman's old banger and likewise heads off to the West Country.

Cherry too finds himself stalking the wind-riven moor at dusk before arriving before the imposing portal of "Harling Manor." The storm having brought down the telephone line, he is unable to raise the exchange and summon help – "always the same when things are nationalised," as one of the family has it. Cherry's excursion back into the melodramatic twilight is not simply a shift of aesthetic sensibility; there are also ideological implications. Cherry leaves the contemporary social realist environs of London's dockland that the radio series explored and returns to the established, "known" topology of melodrama – a Gothic pile replete with its non-egalitarian, "upstairs/downstairs" cast of stock characters. All these expositions consciously invoke the milieu of J. Sheridan Le Fanu's ghost stories wherein the protagonist typically journeys "across bog and hill, by plain and ruined castle, and many a winding stream" (Le Fanu, 1994: 120) to a dilapidated mansion that once bore witness to bloody and even diabolic events.

Elsewhere, melodramatic tropes abound. The domestic space as the site of impending menace and confinement or even incarceration of the female is a classic trope of stage melodrama inherited from Gothic fiction and may be seen as a grotesque parody of the post-war re-domestication of women. This device is exploited in *Celia: the Sinister Affair of Poor Aunt Nora*, *Dr Morelle– the Case of the Missing Heiress* and *The Man in Black*. The exception to this litany of female confinement and murder is *The Black Widow*. Therein the hero is drugged by his wife and her lover who contrive to keep him housebound until they can put him to rest with impunity.

Again, in the tradition of melodrama, the motivation for such machinations is usually financial. In *Celia*, poor Aunt Nora falls foul of her avaricious, younger husband; in *The Man in Black* a widower seeks to drive his daughter insane and so gain control of her trust fund, and in *Dr Morelle– the Case of the Missing Heiress*, the would-be victim is surrounded by predators after her inheritance. There is an interesting twist in *A Case for PC 49*. The fiancée of a particularly immature but financially well-endowed young "swell" has him killed after having become his beneficiary.

Macabre moments are often accentuated. *Dr Morelle's* Miss Frayle rummages around the ashes of an incinerator and finds her friend's earring. Later, hogtied to a chair, she is obliged to watch as her would-be murderer stokes up the flames in preparation for her cremation. Similarly, *The Black Widow's* Mark

Sherwin, on returning home, is immediately confronted with a coffin with his name engraved upon the plate. He later witnesses the arrival of his own funeral cortège. His suspicions are further aroused when seeking out an acceptable snifter in the cellar he stumbles across bags of quicklime plainly intended as the means to the actual disposal of his body.

Dick Barton Revisited

Dick Barton – Special Agent (1948) was Hammer's first adaptation. It was exhibited both as a second feature – as part of a "family friendly" programme – and as a six-part serial intended for exhibition in the Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs as episode titles such as "The Poisoned Dart," "Trapped" and "Nitric Acid" readily testify. Films made specifically for children represent an early recognition of a differentiated cinema audience. Their cliffhanger endings mimicked the radio serials though their true progenitors were the weekly comic adventures which had been suspended due to paper rationing; the film series filled the gap. Gifford (2001) lists 26 children's film serials produced between 1946 and 1967. Many, such as *The Carringford School Mystery* (1958), *The Young Detectives* (1963) and *Five Have a Mystery to Solve* (1964), depicted their young protagonists as crimebusters and so simultaneously initiated the young audience into the conventions of cinemagoing and the mores of the crime narrative whilst also implying guidelines for social behaviour. Initially Hammer clearly valued the contribution of the Cinema Club audience. *The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual* of 1949, for example, featured a promotional visit from Dick (i.e. actor Don Stannard) and his distinctive Allard sports car to the Swiss Cottage Odeon Club (Anon., 1949: 111).

However, *Dick Barton – Special Agent* was the only Barton adaptation tailored specifically to a young audience. Though there are references to the then-dire economic conditions – the crooks derive their income from smuggling rationed luxury items including "nylons at fifty shillings a pair" – predominantly, the film followed the example of other children's film serials in being set in a holiday location wherein a sense of adventure might easily be evoked; in this case, "Echo Bay" (actually Birdham Pool, Chichester). Ironically, it features a schoolboy helpmate of Barton's; a realisation of inclusive, secretive, conspiratorial relationship with the young male sensibility that is alluded to in the radio programme and who is introduced reading a Dick Barton comic. Like many of *The Times'* complainants who objected that the radio series diverted young boys from their school "prep" (see Chapman, 2006: 545-50) the villain counsels that the boy shouldn't "let Mr Barton take your mind off your work."

There are direct citations from the radio original. Jean Hunter appears, though her "Amazonian" profile has clearly been redefined. She now appears closer to Dick's less intimidating ideal of womanhood, fussing over him, comforting him with a hot water bottle and a glass of milk. Indeed she could hardly do

Mann

otherwise; cinema club audiences would have responded vociferously had she attempted to interrupt the diet of thrills and spills (Staples, 1997: 65). Likewise, the dryly-humorous exchanges between Jock and Snowey survive as does a liberal smattering of "Bartonese" such as "take a tip – if anybody takes a pot at you, play possum." The film alludes to a thirteen-rule code of conduct imposed upon the radio series in a light-hearted fashion – a running gag alludes to Snowey and Jock's repeatedly failure to enjoy a drink.

Dick Barton – Special Agent unabashedly cites Barton's radio derivation. Having escaped a murder attempt, Barton's boss, Sir George Cavendish, decides to put the villains off the scent by broadcasting his "death" on the BBC and making an announcement in *The Times* (whose readers, having long been vocal in their disdain for Barton, no doubt read the news with satisfaction). This conceit was taken further; there was even a book, purportedly written by "Barton", on the making of the film ("Barton", 1949).

For all this, *Dick Barton – Special Agent* exhibits appallingly low production standards – inept continuity, a failure to match looped dialogue, actors who dry or fluff their lines and so forth. Furthermore, despite director Alf Goulding's experience making comedy two-reelers, the attempts at slapstick, embarrassingly miss the mark (Staples, 1997: 9). Most of the performances are jaw-droppingly awful. Nonetheless, *Cinema Today's* critic considered, "it is sufficient, surely, that the extravagant action is ... superbly in the tradition of the idolised hero of some millions of radio fans" (C.A.W., 1948: 9). The BBC's Acting Controller, Light Programme was not so magnanimous, venting his ire in a flurry of memos:

Someone ought to say to Exclusive Films that Dick Barton No 1 was a shocker ... I must insist that there is, on the file, our written complaint on the travesty they perpetrated [...] I am at a loss to know why we sold the property to a firm as little reputable as Exclusive. I am told [...] that Sydney Box made an offer. (Chalmers, 1948: BBC Archive R19/263/2)

However in the wake of an article by J.P. Mayer in, yes, *The Times*, the pre-war debate concerning the efficacy of children's films was reignited. This resulted in a flurry of reports, a Commons debate and a *Picture Post* exposé. Children's serials were central to the spat that ensued (Staples, 103-122). In the meantime, the radio series, which was still receiving complaints and which was by now losing its dominant position in the ratings, was taken off air (Chapman, 2006: 550). Consequently, though residual elements related from the radio series are retained, the two later Barton films were made specifically as supporting features and articulate also more adult concerns.

Dick still retains a wary distance from women – in *Dick Barton Strikes Back*, in a chase sequence through the dancehall of Blackpool's Winter Gardens, just as a

"ladies' excuse me" has been announced, he fights off feminine attention in order to maintain pursuit of his quarry. More startling, when the villain suggests to his moll that she might be "a little too interested in Mr. Barton" she slaps him down, asserting that the question is not up for discussion. Elsewhere, there is also a token acknowledgement of Barton's once faithful core audience; whilst Snowey and Jock demonstrate tricks that would have enliven any school playtime, an admiring schoolboy eagerly embarks on a mission to warn the police of an impending sabotage operation.

However, the choice of villains now mirrors the changing political milieu. Whilst in *Dick Barton – Special Agent*, Dr. Casper is an impenitent Nazi ("They hang your sort in this country"), in *Dick Barton at Bay*, after the onset of the Cold War, the villain is a Russian communist. In *Dick Barton Strikes Back*, the criminal mastermind is revealed as Lord Armadale, a "fellow traveller" who whiningly complains that "it's no longer possible to live like a gentleman by fair means." The villains' minions are typically coded as "Americanised," "Spiv-like," and, in a period when rationing was still rigorously enforced, overdressed.

The final film, *Dick Barton Strikes Back*, was released prior to *Dick Barton at Bay*; a possible explanation for this being that Hammer may well have originally intended the film to be exhibited on BBC television, a strategy that would have been thwarted by the Cinematograph Exhibitors' Association's blacklisting of pictures going out on television (Dick Barton goes on Strike, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1949: 3). Whatever the case, *Dick Barton Strikes Back* is a precursor of Hammer's exquisite adaptations of the BBC's Quatermass science-fiction series. Army personnel and "boffins," all equally out of their depth, mill about in "Forward HQ" facilities, as they try to deal with a situation that is "worse than anything that happened during the war" clearly foreshadowing the beginning of *The Quatermass Xperiment* (1955). Likewise, another chilling sequence featuring the extermination of a village's inhabitants by a sonic ray gun prefigures the destroyed village of *Quatermass 2* (1957). Consideration for the juvenile audience is, at best cursory. There are lingering close-ups of villagers in their death throes as the frequency of the sonic gun rises excruciatingly ("Such death in the midst of everyday activity," as Barton later observes).

The narrative evolution of the Barton films progressively distanced Barton from his original conception as *Boy's Own* hero. The original Barton clearly did not possess the necessary intellectual wherewithal to suffer psychological disturbance, but in *Dick Barton Strikes Back* there is an indisputable obsession with metaphors that cite emotional distress such as the mind-bending scream of the sonic ray gun, the witnessing of a vicious pogrom in the intimate surroundings of an English village and even a venture into vulgar Freudianism as Barton scales Blackpool Tower in order to wrench the gun's control mechanism from the villain's hands and thus thwart his dastardly intention to wipe out the

Mann

resort's population. However, in reaching out to the more adult audience and assuaging the critics in the process, *Dick Barton Strikes Back* risked losing the series' core audience – that tribe of eager, adolescent, "younger brothers." One critic observed that "[n]erves would have to be strong to resist the fearful screaming of the mystery apparatus, though even an enthusiastic child might find some of the suspense almost beyond bearing" (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, 1949: 59).

The Barton adaptations starred the handsome Don Stannard, who died in a car crash on 9 July 1949 on his way home from a garden party at Dial Close (Report of the Death of Don Stannard, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1949: 7). Thereafter, no more Barton films were made.

Conclusion

There are paradoxes at the heart of Hammer's adaptation of the BBC package of crime programmes. The streetwise, "Wide Boy" acumen displayed by the film industry's numerous suitors for the programmes' exploitation rights is at odds with the BBC's lack of awareness of the utilisation potential of its programmes and its unfamiliarity with wider media markets. This paradox was foreshadowed by the BBC's belated, begrudging response to evolving social and gender relations, which was only instigated as a result of competition from American-influenced crime programmes. Hammer, on the other hand, gratefully exploited a package of popular programmes that promised to be "good quota" material whilst homogenising a cornucopia of diverse, innovative material.

With the exception of the PC 49 adaptations, most of the adaptations jettisoned their given settings and, as a result of Hammer's pragmatic response to market conditions, reverted to the highly stylised surroundings of the country house, replete with inherent gothic and melodramatic overtones. Whilst retaining the popular "sleuthing couple" format in which resourceful, proactive women played a key part, they re-imported stock characters from melodrama; consequently, most promoted a feebler, more domesticated version of femininity than that of the contemporary, plucky female sleuth. Thus a very vivid, developing historical specificity was incongruously positioned alongside the (by then) ahistorical, petrified topology of melodrama. (Though, it might be argued that these realisations reflected the re-domestication of women at this time.)

The exception was Dick Barton. The adaptations gradually divested themselves of the adolescent realisation of its hero inherited from the radio original. As Dick's radio audience dwindled, complaints mounted and the show eventually cancelled, Dick's film persona was belatedly allowed to mature. Moreover, whilst most of the adaptations exhibit a shift in social focus away from a Britain of ration books and old bangers, the Barton films look forward to ever more dastardly technological innovations.

The formal specificities of radio drama – its potential to draw in the listener and immerse him or her into the perceptive universe of another – are, in the main, declined in the adaptations. There are some residual elements – the persona of the "Man in Black" demanded an attempt at visual correspondence – yet, even the Dick Barton films eventually abandoned the hole-and-corner intimacy of "Bartonese." More generally, the adaptations are mostly filmed from a third person perspective and are the weaker for it. They compare poorly with their American noir contemporaries, which ceaselessly exploit psychological perspectives and perception, for example.

Most of these thematic and formal modifications may be apportioned to Hammer's policy of county house-based production that evoked the known, familiar discourse of melodrama. Moreover, the undoubted difficulties encountered in a non-studio environment may partially explain the mediocrity of these realisations. In that context, it should be noted that the creative summit of the corpus, *Dick Barton Strikes Back*, undoubtedly gains much from its reliance on location shooting. Elsewhere, however, the failure of these films to recreate the prerequisites of the melodramatic form – intimacy, fear even – must surely be put down to a lack of creative drive.

Having exploited its package deal with the BBC and with the ending of NFFC funding, Hammer turned to an arrangement with the American distributor Lippert and began its flirtation with domesticated film noir. This arrangement and, indeed, subsequent developments, could not have taken place were it not for the radio adaptations which undoubtedly provided Hammer with a sound financial base and the know-how to go forward.

References

Anon. (1948) Review of *Dick Barton – Special Agent*, *Kinematograph Weekly* 373 (2131), 4 March, p. 16.

Anon. (1949) Review of *Barton Strikes Back*, *Monthly Film Bulletin* 16 (184) April, p. 59.

Anon. (1949) Long Shots, *Kinematograph Weekly* 387 (2192), 5 May, p. 4.

Anon. (1949) Report of the Death of Don Stannard, *Kinematograph Weekly*, 14 July, p. 7.

Anon. (1949) Dick Barton Goes on Strike, *Kinematograph Weekly* 394 (2225), 22 December, p. 3.

Anon. (1949) *The Boys' and Girls' Cinema Clubs Annual*. London: Juvenile Productions.

Mann

Anon. (1951) Review of *A Case for PC 49*, *Monthly Film Bulletin* 18 (211), August, p. 310.

Anon. (1952) Review of Hammer's *The Lady in the Fog*, *Kinematograph Weekly* (2359), 11 September, p. 18.

Anon. (1958) Review of Hammer's *Chain of Events*, *Kinematograph Weekly* (2665), 11 September, p. 14.

Anon. (1978) Interview with Michael Carreras, *Little Shoppe of Horrors* 4, April, p. 30.

Anon. (1978) Biography of and Interview With Anthony Hinds, *Little Shoppe of Horrors* 4, April, pp. 38-40.

"Barton, Dick" (1949) *Exclusive Films' Dick Barton – Special Agent: The Story of the Film*. London: Fenmore Publications.

Black, Peter (1972) *The Biggest Aspidistra in the World; A Personal Celebration of Fifty Years of the BBC*. London: BBC.

Camporesi, Valeria (1990) *Mass Culture and the Defence of National Traditions: The BBC and American Broadcasting, 1922-1954* (PhD Thesis). Florence: The European University.

C.A.W., (1948) Review of *Dick Barton – Special Agent*, *Today's Cinema* 70 (5618) March 1948, p. 9.

Chapman, James (2006) *Honest British Violence: Critical Responses to Dick Barton – Special Agent (1946-1951)*, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 26 (4), October, pp. 537-559.

Drakakis, John (1981) *British Radio Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eyles, Allen, Adkinson, Robert and Fry, Nicholas (eds.) (1994) *House of Horror: The Complete Hammer Films Story*. London: Creation Books.

Gifford, Denis (2001) *The British Film Catalogue: Vol. 1: Fiction Film, 1895-1994*. London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn.

Harper, Sue and Porter, Vincent (2003) *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Le Fanu, Sheridan (1994, first published in 1872) *Sir Dominick's Bargain in Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Stories*. Ware, Hertsfordshire: Wordsworth Editions.

Low, Rachel (1971) *The History of British Film, 1918-1929*. London: BFI/Allen and Unwin.

Mackenzie, Compton, (1927) The Art of Drama? *Radio Times*, September 27, p. 667.

Mann, Dave, (2009) *Britain's First TV/Film Crime Series and the Industrialisation of its Film Industry, 1946-1964*. Lampeter, Ceredigion, Wales, Queenston, Ontario, and Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Mason, Edward and Webb, Geoffrey with Neil Tuson (ed.) (1950) *The Inside Story of Dick Barton*. London: Convoy Publications.

Meikle, Denis (1996) *A History of Horrors: The Rise and Fall of the House of Hammer*. Lanham, Maryland and London: Scarecrow Press.

Nevins Jr., Francis M. (1978) The sound of Suspense: John Dickson Carr as a Radio Writer, *Armchair Detective* 11, p. 335.

Rigby, Jonathan (1995) Francis Searle; the Man in Black and White, *Hammer Horror* (3), May, pp.34-38.

Sweet, Matthew (2007) Fancy a Quickie? *The Guardian*, 2 January, p. 25.

Staples, Terry (1997) *All Pals Together: The Story of Children's Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Turner, E.S. (1975) *Boys Will Be Boys: The Story of Sweeney Todd, Deadwood Dick, Sexton Blake, Billy Bunter, Dick Barton, et al.* London: Michael Joseph.

BBC Written Archive

R/19/42 (C31), *Appointment with Fear*: 1943-1953.

R/22/949/1, *Appointment with Fear*: Stage and Film Rights: Agreements.

R/23/2, *Appointment with Fear*: Film Rights: 1945-1954.

R19/16 (C16), *Adventures of PC 49*: 1947-1954.

R19/263/1, Entertainment, *Dick Barton – Special Agent*, File 1: 1946-1947.

Mann

R19/263/2, Entertainment, *Dick Barton – Special Agent*, File 2: 1948-1952.

Filmography

The Adventures of PC 49 – The Case of the Guardian Angel. 1949. Dir. Godfrey Grayson. Hammer Film Productions.

The Black Widow. 1947. Dirs. Spencer Gordon Bennett and Fred C. Brannon. British Lion Film Corporation.

A Case for PC 49. 1951. Dir. Francis Searle. Hammer Film Productions.

Celia: The Sinister Affair of Poor Aunt Nora. 1949. Dir. Francis Searle. Hammer Film Productions.

Dick Barton at Bay. 1950. Dir. Godfrey Grayson. Hammer Film Productions.

Dick Barton - Special Agent (a.k.a. *Dick Barton, Detective*, USA). 1948. Dir. Alfred J. Goulding. Hammer Film Productions.

Dick Barton Strikes Back. 1949. Dir. Godfrey Grayson. Hammer Film Productions.

Dr Morelle – The Case of the Missing Heiress (a.k.a. *Dr. Morelle*, USA). 1949. Dir. Godfrey Grayson. Hammer Film Productions.

The Lady Craved Excitement. 1950. Dirs. Godfrey Grayson and Francis Searle. Hammer Film Productions.

The Man in Black. 1950. Dir. Francis Searle. Hammer Film Productions.

Meet Simon Cherry. 1950. Dir. Godfrey Grayson. Hammer Film Productions.

Quatermass and the Pit. 1958. BBC.

The Quatermass Xperiment. 1955. Dir. Dir. Val Guest. Hammer Film Productions.

X – the Unknown (1956). Dir. Leslie Norman. Hammer Film Productions.