**History and Place in Television Drama: Liverpool in *Boys from the Blackstuff and Cilla***

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**Abstract**

This article explores historical representations of Liverpool in two television dramas: ITV’s *Cilla* (2014) and the BBC’s *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982). It is concerned with the ways that television drama can both record and recreate places from the past. Focussing on two dramas set in Liverpool at formative moments in the city’s past, it considers the centrality of an evocation of place and specifically the space of the city to both series and the ways that television dramas that mobilise such a strong sense place can become intrinsic to the heritage and history of the places they depict.

**Key Words:** Liverpool, Television, Drama, City, Merseybeat, Place, Nostalgia

**Introduction**

Alan Bleasdale’s *Boys from the Blackstuff* (1982) (henceforth referred to as *Blackstuff*) endures as a prime example of the potential and power of television drama to evoke and use a sense of place to offer immediate social commentary and to record the socioeconomic realities of specific moments from the past. In an interview for the 2008 documentary *Liverpool on the* Box, Bleasdale explained that he intended *Blackstuff* to:

express what’s happenin’ [sic] in this city and in other cities in this country and in fact in the western world at the moment. There are people for whom there is nothin’ down for them’ (*Liverpool on the Box*, 2008).1

*Blackstuff*’s Liverpool is devoid of opportunity and hope, depicting a community ravaged by the economic recession and austerity politics of the 1980s. It follows the lives of five former tarmac layers who struggle to find work and support themselves. The series began life as a *Play for Today* called ‘The Black Stuff,’also written by Bleasdale, which was screened on the BBC in 1980. Bleasdale was then commissioned to write five additional episodes, each focussing on one of ‘The Black Stuff’s’ main characters in more detail. *Blackstuff* was broadcast in 1982 and set in the previous year. It offered immediate and biting social commentary on a socioeconomic situation that was an ongoing reality for its audience.

*Cilla,* broadcast on ITV in 2014, offered a markedly different vision of Liverpool and sought to:

capture the essence of 1960s Liverpool. The atmosphere of promise and excitement as the Merseybeat music scene was on the verge of exploding in a blaze of tight-fitting skirts, stiletto heels, and beehives (ITV Press Centre, 2014).

The series’ depiction of the city is as a space of possibility, creativity and optimism. *Cilla*, therefore, sets out to evoke and capitalise upon a sense of nostalgia for the historical version of Liverpool that it depicts. *Blackstuff*, on the other hand, must be read as a contemporary text and the nostalgia that has come to be associated with it as the product of audiences’ memories of watching and relating to the series when it was originally broadcast as much as the vision of the city and its inhabitants that it offers. Despite these differences, both series rely heavily on a sense of space and time and mobilise versions of Liverpool that are indelibly linked to specific moments in the city’s past.

This article uses these two series to illustrate the different functions and potential of television drama’s evocation of place as well as the integral and productive relationship between such dramas and the history and heritage of the places they depict. Using *Cilla* as a point of comparison to throw into relief the place of a series such as *Blackstuff* in the collective memory of Liverpool as a city and culture, it explores the relationships that both series have with nostalgia and the past. Considering both series as texts in which Liverpool features as a city ‘playing itself’ (Roberts, 2016: 33), it discusses the ways that representations of place in television drama, by serving as record or offering a nostalgic recreation of moments in a city’s socioeconomic history, can become inextricable from its history and heritage.

**Products of a Golden Age**

Both *Blackstuff* and *Cilla* emerged from periods of television production that have been identified ‘Golden Ages’ of television; the 1960s to early 1980s and the early 2000s to 2010s. There is debate as to whether the present moment of media convergence and VOD is a continuation of this Golden Age or constitutes a distinct moment of development and change that can be considered a third Golden Age (see Adalian, 2018; Press, 2021; Jenner, 2016). These two periods, in different ways, shifted the parameters and possibilities of television and elevated its status as a medium capable of attracting and producing quality. In Britain in the 1960s to early 1980s, television drama and especially the television play became a key site of social and political commentary. The Pilkington Committee, established in 1960 to consider the renewal of the BBC’s charter, made a number of recommendations with regard to the future of the broadcasting industry in the UK. The report concluded that:

much that is seen on television is regarded as of very little value […] many mass appeal programmes were vapid and puerile, their content often derivative, repetitious and lacking any real substance (Viscount Hailsham, 1962).

In response the Government restated its commitment to providing ‘a greater choice of programmes. And […] a greater proportion of the more thoughtful and challenging types of programme’ (Viscount Hailsham, 1962). Although the extent to which this can be attributed to the report is contested, there is a perception among scholars and critics that ‘the early 1960s heralded the beginning of a “Golden Age” that produced thoughtful and challenging television that directly engaged with and responded to social issues and anxieties’ (Medhurst, 2003: 40). This golden age persevered through the 1970s and ‘came to an end only with the arrival of Margaret Thatcher’ and the move away from social commentary, towards commercialisation in British television (Medhurst, 2003: 40; see also Bignell et al., 2000; Cooke, 2003; Hilmes (ed.), 2003).

The potential for the television play and authored drama serial to offer socio-political commentary is closely linked to the concept of authorship. Jonathan Bignell et al. argue that, in the same way that literary adaptation lent television credibility, the foregrounding of authorship in television drama was key to negating charges of triviality:

if television could attract writers who demanded to be taken as seriously as any stage dramatist, novelist or poet, then it, too, could claim significance as a medium (2000: 27).

This significance and legitimacy gave authored television drama licence ‘to intervene, radically, in the politics and culture of postwar Britain’ (Bignell et al., 2000: 27). *Blackstuff* is part of a canon of socially conscious and realist dramas that made use of this licence. Further to its origins as a *Play for Today*, the subsequent series was advertised as ‘“a series of five new plays” in the *Radio Times*’ (Millington, 1993: 124), placing them within this elevated context. *Blackstuff* must therefore be read as the product of a moment in which the political function and scope of television had undergone significant expansion.

**The Golden Age TV Family**

*Blackstuff* also dramatises the ideological differences between the Golden Age of British television and the first Golden Age of American television. Andrea Press dates this US Golden Age as spanning from the 1950s to 1970s and suggests that images of the American family from this time in particular ‘have become cultural icons’ (2009: 140). These depictions ‘presumed a unified American majority identity’ structured around the white, suburban middle-class family (Press, 2009: 140). Traditional family structures are also central to *Blackstuff*, which depicts all its main characters as part of a family unit. However, rather than the stable foundation of a cohesive society, within the series their disfunction and collapse indicate the severity of the problems facing Liverpool in the 1980s. There is a marked distinction between the happy, ‘middle-class families showcasing very simple problems’ (Press, 2009: 141) of the American Golden Age and the families of *Blackstuff*, who are facing crushing socio-economic depravation.

In ‘Moonlighting’(1982) Dixie’s (Tom Georgeson) eldest son Kevin (Gary Bleasdale) is forced to move out and fend for himself because the family can no longer support him, or withstand the vicious arguments caused by his inability to find work. In 'Shop thy Neighbour’ (1982), Chrissie’s (Michael Angelis) wife Angie (Julie Walters) laments the loss of her youth and prospects as a result of her marriage to Chrissie. This offers a marked contrast to the women of the American Golden Age television family, who are shown to be content and fulfilled within their domestic roles (Press, 2009). *Blackstuff* depicts Angie’s life as one of unrelenting misery and deprivation and viscerally renders visible the emotional damage wrought by long term unemployment. Rather than a straightforward critique of patriarchal social and family structures, *Blackstuff* casts Angie’s oppression and Dixie’s wife, Freda’s (Eileen O’Brien), misery more as a product of economic recession in Liverpool. Attempting to explain her unhappiness to Chrissie, Angie tells him:

I am 28 years old, I married you when I was 17, I was a mother at 18. I’m not blaming you for that […] but I’m a person. I live and breathe and fart after 5 lagers and limes. I have a mind up here and its screaming Chrissie […] [Motherhood is] not like you imagine it to be, it’s not like it is in the Women’s Own […] I have never had a life outside of you and [their children], but I was going to, I was going to do a lot (‘Shop Thy Neighbour,’ 1982).

Although this certainly speaks to feminist critiques of the patriarchy, in the series Angie’s misery is framed specifically as the result of her socio-economic status as the wife of an unemployed man. Chrissie is unable to see beyond his own suffering to acknowledge the impact living in Liverpool in the 1980s has on his wife. *Blackstuff* does, therefore, mobilise a kind of feminist critique of 1980s Liverpool society. However, it is one that places most emphasis on the destructive impact of the relationship between patriarchal constructions of masculinity and economic deprivation. Chrissie’s inability to live up to the patriarchal ideal of breadwinner and provider due to his socioeconomic circumstances has a deleterious effect upon his role as a husband and father.

**The Elevation of Television Drama in the Second Golden Age**

The second televisual Golden Age, in both the US and UK, is loosely classified as beginning around the turn of the century. HBO productions such as *The Wire* (2002-2008), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Band of Brothers* (2001) are frequently cited as inaugurating a new era of quality in television programming (see Leverette et al., 2009; Fuller and Driscoll, 2015; Jaramillo, 2002). The higher production values of these series as well as the calibre of star they were able to attract elevated the status of television drama in much the same way as the association with television authors had done previously in the UK. The ‘HBO effect’ (DeFino, 2013) has persisted in both America and the UK, with series such as *Mad Men* (2007-2015), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *Peaky Blinders* (2013-present) and *Fleabag* (2016-present) replicating the formula of high production values and high-profile stars. This era of television has been broadly categorised by Roberta Pearson as TVIII, ‘the era of proliferating digital distribution platforms [and] further audience fragmentation’ (2011: 107). Despite significant changes in technology, audience behaviour and industrial practice resulting from the proliferation of streaming services, Mareike Jenner argues that television in this period retained enough traditional characteristics that it ‘still sought to align itself with the familiar medium’ (2016: 259). However, Jenner suggests that Netflix’s move into the production and distribution of original programming in 2013, when it released the first Netflix Original *House of Cards* (2013-2018), may have presented a shift in the contemporary media landscape that is ‘significant enough to allow for a terminology of TVIV’ (2016: 269). Netflix’s continued development into a somewhat independent television producer (Mahoney, forthcoming 2022), teamed with the increased output of original programming from other online platforms such as Amazon Prime, Hulu, Disney+ etc. have resulted in debates as to whether the current moment represents ‘peak TV’ or a third Golden Age.

*Cilla*, released a year after *House of Cards*, is much more recognisable as a product of the more traditionally aligned television production of TVIII than as a product of the putative TVIV. The series is the clear result of ‘more traditional modes of branding infrastructure’ and is very much ‘linked with the brand identity of’ ITV (Jenner, 2016:262). *Cilla*’s star Sheridan Smith is an accomplished stage and musical theatre actress, as well as an award-winning television actress. However, rather than offering social or political commentary, the series utilises elements of the high concept series to engage audiences in celebratory nostalgia. *Cilla* is also a product of the ongoing ‘nostalgia boom’ in British popular culture. The proliferation and popularity of series that evoke nostalgia for their historic settings is evident in the success of series such as *Call the Midwife* (2012-present), *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) and *Bridgerton* (2020-present). Although these series to some extent highlight the social inequalities and issues of their diegetic periods, the prevailing tone of all three is one of fond nostalgia. Both *Cilla* and *Blackstuff* are therefore products of two distinct moments in television production, in which the potential and purpose of television drama had undergone change. The characteristics of these two moments are visible within each series and inflect their depictions of historic Liverpool. Both dramas are reliant on a strong sense of identification and place, however whilst nostalgia was inherent in *Cilla*’s generic and narrative construction, the nostalgia that has developed retrospectively for the version of Liverpool depicted in *Blackstuff* stems instead from a sense of recognition of the series as an accurate and immediate snapshot of the socioeconomic deprivation in Liverpool in the 1980s.

# ‘I’m Yosser Hughes!’ - Character Driven Dramas

Both *Cilla* and *Blackstuff* are character driven dramas; the experiences, desires and emotions of the characters provide narrative impetus and exposition about the city around them and the period in which they live. Each episode of *Blackstuff* is told from the perspective of a different character, but the most frequently cited character from the series is Yosser Hughes (Bernard Hill). Yosser and his ubiquitous catch phrase ‘Gis a job’ (colloquial slang for ‘give me a job’) have become emblematic of the series as a whole. His constant hunt for work and his struggles with increasingly severe mental health issues, all whilst trying to provide for his three small children as a single parent, speak to the general air of hopelessness and deprivation that characterises this period of Liverpool’s history. Yosser has, in effect, become cultural shorthand for the consequences of austerity politics and economic deprivation of that period in Liverpool’s cultural memory.

Returning to the discussion of theAmerican Golden Age, Yosser also emerges as the antithesis of what Press describes as ‘the phenomenon of the family oriented dad’ (2009: 141). Beginning in the original *Play For Today*, Yosser’s homelife is shown to be tumultuous and unhappy. His strained relationship with his absent wife Maureen (Jean Hughes) leaves him with sole responsibility for his three children, whom he is constantly flanked by throughout the series. Yosser stands in stark contrast to and critique of the emotionally and economically stable Golden Age father, epitomised by characters such as Danny Tanner (played by Bob Saget in *Full House*, 1987-1995). Despite his increasingly manic efforts, he is patently unfit and unable to care for his children. However, as with Angie, the critique is more nuanced than a straightforward questioning of the essentialist male paternal role. Instead, *Blackstuff* explores the physiological, emotional and material consequences when socio-economic crisis renders that paternal role untenable.

Yosser is an antihero, displaying overtly misogynist, violent and abusive attitudes and behaviours. In the original *Play for Today,* Yosser asks a female student whether she has ‘been raped lately, love?’ (The Black Stuff, 1980). Despite this Yosser is frequently cited by viewers as the most relatable of the series’ characters, to the extent that he is esteemed as ‘a considerable folk hero’ (Millington, 1993: 119). Discussing audiences’ reaction to ‘Yosser’s Story,’ the fourth episode of *Blackstuff* that focused on Yosser and depicted the loss of his children to social services as well as his steady decline into mental illness, Bleasdale said:

Those things that Yosser does, a lot of us are well capable of and there was a sense of identity with Yosser. He did fearful things, he did things that were anti-social, embarrassing, unpleasant and nasty and yeah the fascinating thing was that a lot of people went with him and the reaction I got to Yosser’s Story was quite amazing (*Liverpool on the Box*, 2008).

Yosser’s depiction of hostile, unreconstructed and ‘recidivist masculinity’ (Hamad, 2014) bears some similarity to Gene Hunt, played by Phillip Glenister in *Life on Mars* (2006-2007) and *Ashes to Ashes* (2008-2010). Hunt’s embodiment of politically incorrect attitudes and behaviour generated a cult following and led to the character becoming ‘an unexpected, toxic crush for millions of viewers’ (Lusher, 2010). Fans of the character praised his ‘unrepentantly plainspoken views’ (Lusher, 2010), which ranged from racism — ‘Are we in Dalston, or did just we take a wrong turn to Bogo Bogo Land?’ (series three, episode seven, 2010) — to homophobia —‘I’ll call you what I damn well want to you gender bender, weirdy-beardy, freak of nature’ (season two, episode six, 2009). In spite of the offensiveness of many of his remarks, or perhaps because of it, Hunt became a similar anti-hero figure to Yosser; an icon of a type of recidivist masculinity that was perceived to have been lost.

Both Yosser and Hunt emerge as responses to economic recession in the 1980s and 2008 respectively. The comparison is even more layered because, although it is the 2008 financial crash that the later series of *Ashes to Ashes* respond to(Hamad, 2014), the 1980s setting of the series means that it depicts the same period of history as *Blackstuff*. *Ashes to Ashes’* temporal distance from the period it portrays moves it away from the kind of social commentary being performed in *Blackstuff.* Instead, the series is inflected with the same kind of nostalgia for the past that is evident in *Cilla*. In this case it is nostalgia for a robust and unreconstructed version of masculinity in response to gendered anxieties over the financial crash (Hamad, 2014). The immediacy of *Blackstuff* allows for no such escapism.

Neither Yosser nor Hunt’s narrative arcs close with the kind of resolution expected in television drama. However, the connotations of these two non-endings are very different. In the final episode of *Ashes to Ashes* (series three, episode eight, 2010), Hunt is revealed to be an angelic figure presiding over a kind of Limbo that dead police officers inhabit before either ‘going to the pub’ (going to Heaven) or ‘transferring to another department’ (going to Hell). In this way, his recidivist machismo is imbued with divine authority and his problematic attitudes are excused and even sanctioned as the product of supernatural knowledge. After successfully shepherding his deceased colleagues through Limbo, Hunt chooses to remain behind to greet the next dead officer in need of his guidance. The cyclic nature of this relationship suggests the endurance of Hunt’s paternalistic machismo and sanctions it as a way to navigate and survive the strange space of limbo in the series and, by extension, the strange space of economic recession in the real world.

In *Blackstuff*, Yosser’s equally problematic and unreconstructed masculinity cannot withstand the circumstances of 1980s Liverpool. In contrast to Hunt’s divine authority, Yosser is ultimately reduced to a pitiful figure, stripped of his children, purpose and his sense of self. ‘Yosser’s Story’ begins with a dream sequence in which Yosser loses his children one by one as they bathe in a lake. His deteriorating mental health makes it obvious that Yosser is incapable of taking care of his children, despite his obvious devotion to them. At the end of the episode Yosser is arrested as a vagrant and taken into custody; the final shot is a close-up of his manic expression as he struggles against the police officer taking him into custody. Although Yosser reappears in the last episode of *Blackstuff* ‘George’s Last Ride,’ he is still without his children. In the closing moments of the episode and the series, Yosser, Chrissie and Loggo (Alan Igbon) walk slowly away from George’s (Peter Kerrigan) wake. They have no direction and the problems and desires that have driven their narratives throughout the series remain unresolved. Where Hunt’s story has no resolution because his masculinity is depicted as the answer to the problems he faces, Yosser’s has no resolution because none is available to him.

That Yosser has entered into cultural memory as a signifier of this moment of masculine crisis in Liverpool in the 1980s is evidenced by continuing references to his character and story. In an episode of *Did You See?* (a weekly television review programme broadcast on the BBC from 1980 to 1993) screened in 1982, two men were interviewed in a Liverpool pub about *Blackstuff*. One of them said that he had not watched the series because ‘it was just too real,’ before the other looked directly into the camera and said sincerely, ‘gis a job’ (*Did you See?*,1982). Both men were unemployed at the time they were interviewed and obviously related to the characters of *Blackstuff*. In 1982 a band named ‘The Blackstuff Lads' released a song sampling Yosser’s ‘gis a job’ catchphrase. Montages of Yosser’s ‘best moments’ are available on a Facebook page entitled *The Way I See Liverpool*,which regularly posts clips from *Blackstuff*, suggesting Yosser and the series’ continued relevance to collective Liverpool identity and the dark nostalgia that has become attached to it (Facebook, 2019).

Although the effects of economic deprivation in the 1980s were certainly not limited to Liverpool, the city and the broader industrial North West was particularly impacted. Speaking in the House of Commons in 1983, David Alton, MP for Liverpool Mossley Hill, reported that 88,000 people were registered as unemployed in the city with only 2,025 jobs advertised as available (Alton, 1983). Referencing the 1981 Toxteth Riots, Alton suggested that the situation had only deteriorated in the time since:

Imagine life in a city where one in five people are on the dole, where half the people in some districts are without a job and where young people face a lifetime without employment (1983).

As depicted in *Blackstuff*, the lack of employment and harsh austerity policies in 1980s Liverpool disfigured traditional norms and signifiers of masculinity. We see the characters in *Blackstuff* grapple with this disfigurement in a visceral way. Rather than venerating a macho caricature like Hunt, *Blackstuff* offers a discomforting depiction of the unavailability of all the traditional signifiers of masculinity, work, fatherhood, productivity and its consequences.

# Disfigured by Austerity and by the City

A sense of place is integral to *Blackstuff* because each episode explores the ways in which its featured character is disfigured by the specific circumstances of living in Liverpool in the 1980s. Yosser spirals from unemployment to losing his children, to an apparent mental breakdown and incarceration. Chrissie gradually loses all sense of himself as he continually fails to find work to provide for his family and secure his identity as ‘a working man.’ In the first episode of the series ‘Jobs for the Boys’(1982), Chrissie attempts to secure permanent work from Mr Malloy (Shay Gorman) who offers him a temporary job on a cash-in-hand basis. He is refused and his situation gradually deteriorates. Episode three, ‘Shop thy Neighbour’ (1982), depicts the toll of this deterioration on his family life and emotional wellbeing. Snowy (Chris Malone) and his father George (who will be discussed in detail later) are both killed as a result of their circumstances.

In ‘Jobs for the Boys’ Snowy is employed with Chrissie, Yosser and Loggo to work on a building site and expounds on his socialist beliefs throughout the episode. The arrival of two Department of Employment (DOE) vans on the building site where the men are working illegally leads to Snowy attempting to escape the building by climbing from a second story window from which he falls to his death. The camera then cuts to a close-up of Snowy’s blood spreading across the ground like tarmac. As Bob Millington notes, ‘against the harsh realities of Thatcherist economics and enterprise, Snowy’s model of masculinity is shown to be unworkable’ (1993: 130). Snowy’s death can be read as the symbolic death of socialist labour activism in the face of Thatcherite neoliberal individualism and the socioeconomic conditions of 1980s Liverpool.

*Blackstuff* also emphasises the isolation of each of the main characters. It is common in serial drama set within a community to have a ‘focal place in the heart of the community where chance encounters can take place,’ where characters can meet and interact (Cooke, 2003: 34). Examples include the Rovers Return in *Coronation Street* (1960-present)and the market or Queen Vic’ in *Eastenders* (1985-present). The only real instances of community in *Blackstuff* happen at the beginning of each episode when the men congregate in the local DOE office to sign on. It is one of the few moments of genuine interaction, where the men talk to others in the same situation as them. These moments also enforce the sense of locality in *Blackstuff*. There is a sense that the men are limited and ultimately disfigured by the city itself, which is apparent in the frequent shots of empty, derelict buildings and waste ground. Cumulatively, these shots generate a feeling of claustrophobia as the camera and the characters are hemmed in by physical indicators of Liverpool’s decline. Despite the negative connotations of these images, the fact that they are preserved on film in *Blackstuff* (which was entirely filmed in Liverpool) contributes to the sense of nostalgia that has grown around the series. Of all the main characters in *Blackstuff*, the cost of this experience of living and working in Liverpool in the 1980s is most obviously played out on the body of George Malone. Throughout the series, despite a consistent but unidentified illness, George remains an icon of ‘proper’ working class masculinity. It is revealed in ‘George’s Last Ride’ (1982) that he was fired from his job as a docker because of his activism with the worker’s union. He subsequently worked as a tarmac layer before being rendered unable to work at all due to his illness.

In a particularly affecting sequence, Chrissie takes George for what proves to be his ‘last ride’ when he collects George from his home and takes him along the riverfront to the Albert Dock in his wheelchair. As they go, George recounts his past as a docker and tells Chrissie what it was like to live and more importantly work in Liverpool when he was a young man. George describes a bustling and vibrant community centred around the docks as they walk past derelict and abandoned buildings, which are markers of the productive past that he is recalling. The scene ends in the dock itself, with Chrissie holding George up so that he can stand. George delivers the following line whilst surveying the empty and dry dock:

They say that memories live longer than dreams, but my dreams, those dreams of long ago they still give me hope and faith in my class. I can’t believe that there’s no hope! I can’t! (‘George’s Last Ride,’ 1982).

As Chrissie lowers George back into his wheelchair, he realises that George has died. The contrast between the defiant, if desperate hope of George’s speech and the barrenness of the abandoned dock around him can be read in different ways. On the one hand, George’s defiance could be an indication of the enduring spirit and identity of working-class Liverpool in the face of austerity. However, in the final shot after George gives his speech, the camera zooms out from Chrissie and the lifeless George until they can barely be seen amongst the abandoned buildings around the dock, and they are swallowed up by what director Philip Saville describes as ‘a vast edifice of nothingness’ (2003). The sheer scale of the desolation, which renders the two men almost invisible to the audience, instead suggests the futility of George’s conviction. George’s final declaration of hope for his class was entirely improvised by Peter Kerrigan, a former Liverpool docker, who’s acting career began in Jim Allen, Tony Garnet and Ken Loach’s television play *The Big Flame* (1969)**.** The play depicted a “work-in” staged by 10,000 striking dockworkers who occupied the Liverpool docks. Actual dockers, including Kerrigan, were cast in the production. In ‘George’s Last Ride,’ Kerrigan refused to use the defeatist and hopeless lines that Bleasdale originally wrote. Watching this episode as a modern audience, with the knowledge of the ultimate regeneration of the Albert Dock and Pier Head in Liverpool, our perception is somewhat skewed. The reiteration and repurposing of the docks as a site of leisure, tourism and consumption (the direct opposite purpose to the version of the docks that George recalls) makes the area unrecognisable from its depiction in *Blackstuff*. However, considering the reality of Liverpool at the time, it is difficult to speculate which version would have resonated with audiences watching in 1982. Les Roberts suggests that images and ‘memoriali[sations] of […] absent spaces and places […] powerfully evoke the forms of social and cultural engagement which characterised or defined these spaces’ (2012: 11). An influx of investment, particularly from the European Union after Liverpool was named Capital of Culture in 2008, has transformed the city and many of the locations that form the backdrop to *Blackstuff*. Roberts emphasises the ‘role of film (or rather film *locations*) in the construction and consumption of ideas of heritage in […] cities’ (2012: 2). A key aspect of *Blackstuff*’s enduring popularity and relevance as a cultural touchstone in Liverpool in its function as a record for a version of the city as an urban and socioeconomic landscape that no longer exists. This emphasises the integral and productive relationship between place and history in television drama.

**Liverpool as a space of optimism and possibility**

At first glance, Liverpool as represented in *Cilla* shares something of the dilapidation and deprivation depicted in *Blackstuff*. Buildings such as the Woolworth’s bakery in which Bobby (Aneurin Bernard) works appear run down and in a poor state of repair. There are also frequent shots of waste ground strewn with rubbish and covered in graffiti. However, the panoramic shots of the city, which feature throughout the series, speak of industry and productivity with tall, smoking chimneys and imposing warehouses. The same buildings that appear as decrepit and abandoned relics in *Blackstuff* are active and in use in *Cilla.* The depiction of the terraced housing in *Cilla* renders them cramped and seemingly endless, however, they are also the setting for functional and happy family life. Cilla’s family happily share their small flat situated above a hairdresser’s, their only complaint being the lack of a private front door. The space of the flat is depicted as light and airy, with the family frequently gathered in their living room. In contrast, Chrissie and Angie’s house in *Blackstuff* is depicted as dark, dingy and deeply unhappy. Shared family spaces such as the kitchen and living room are the site of vicious rows between Chrissie and Angie and the lack of space and light amplifies the feeling of claustrophobia that permeates the series.

This difference extends to the broader space of the city and the ways in which the characters in the two series move through it. The narrative of *Cilla* generates a constant sense of mobility and movement, apparent in the continuous circulation of different bands and singers through the city’s music venues. There is also the potential for this movement to extend beyond Liverpool as bands such as The Beatlesand Cilla find success in London and Europe. This sense of mobility, then, is both geographic as Cillaphysically relocates to London to pursue her career, and social, as she is able to transcend her working-class roots and achieve fame and fortune. Indeed, the signifier of Cilla’sultimate success in the series is her ability to return to Liverpool and buy a large detached house for herself and Bobby and a house (with its own front door) for her parents. For Cilla, Liverpool is a chosen destination and one that she is free to leave and return to at will as a result of her physical and social mobility.

Such notions of self-betterment and social mobility are central to the kind of Thatcherite neoliberalism that provides the sociopolitical context of *Blackstuff*. Social mobility, within neoliberalism, is framed as the product of private enterprise and individual entrepreneurship, erasing social and structural inequalities. *Blackstuff* offers a critique of this ideology in that all avenues to mobility are closed down by societal factors and economic deprivation. Indeed, Millington argues that *Blackstuff* as a whole is a depiction of the consequences of self-betterment gone bad (1993: 125). The ‘foreigner’2 that originally lost the main characters their jobs was an attempt to make money and achieve financial and social security. *Cilla* offers no such critique as her success is framed as the result of her talent. The series therefore gives an implicit endorsement of a neoliberal meritocracy, which is in keeping with the current neoliberal political climate and suggests that, regardless of circumstance, those who work hard enough will succeed.

Despite the different ideological readings of neoliberalism at play in both series, the narrative events of both *Cilla* and *Blackstuff* are depicted being the direct result of living in Liverpool at specific points in history. In *Blackstuff* it is the socioeconomic circumstances of the 1980s recession, which, as discussed, had a particularly deleterious effect on Liverpool, that delineates the narrative. In *Cilla,* it is the altogether more optimistic cultural moment of Merseybeat.

**Merseybeat**

Merseybeat refers to the dynamic and productive music scene in Liverpool in the 1960s, which spawned a number of successful music acts. Among the most notable were King Size Taylor and the Dominos, Jerry and the Pacemakers and, of course, Cilla Black and The Beatles. Peter Atkinson describes Merseybeat as a sound specific to Liverpool and ‘derived from Liverpool’s particular social geography’ (2011: 169). Ian Inglis argues that Merseybeat represented ‘the first time in the history of British popular music when a sound and a city were bracketed together in this way’ (2010: 11). He goes on to suggest that one of the reasons that the Merseybeat phenomenon was so successful was because it was the first example of home grown, popular music that had not been imported from the USA. Merseybeat was also unique in that it was not centred around London, at least in its origins. Indeed, its notable and identifiable ‘Scouseness’3 was an integral component in its success.

Inglis notes that:

[Liverpool] was widely refuted, in the early 1960s, to contain more public houses and bars per head of population than any other city in Britain […] It had supplied, over several generations, many of the country’s leading comedians […] The city was, and is, home to two of Britain’s best supported football clubs […] these factors combined to give Liverpool a reputation as a vigorous, exciting, and independent centre of popular entertainment’ (2010: 12).

As a result, in the 1960s, Liverpool had a reputation as a vigorous and exciting producer of culture. Although Merserybeat encompassed more than The Beatles, the group has become emblematic of that moment of cultural history, and it was their Scouse sound that characterised Merseybeat. The Beatles regularly appeared on the *BBC Light Programme*, which would go on to become *BBC Radio 2*, where they played their own music and spoke with accents that deviated significantly from the norm of Received Pronunciation. Their accents included elongated vowel sounds, such as the elongated ee sounds at the ends of words in songs such as *Please Please Me* (1963). Atkinson suggests that, ‘if these vowels had been pronounced in the northern way, the songs would prompt cultural associations with the working class inland of northern England’ (2011: p167). Instead, they are inflected with a sense of otherness, of Scouseness, which ‘had become a signifier of working-class upward mobility by early 1964’ (Atkinson, 2011:168). Merseybeat and the Scouse sound became emblematic of an outward looking port town with strong connections to the USA and the meteoric success of The Beatles. It is these outward facing connotations of Merseybeat Liverpool and the possibility of geographic and social mobility that distinguish it as a narrative setting in *Cilla.* In *Blackstuff*, other than the trip to Newcastle that loses the men their jobs, there is no sense of possibility or prospects outside of Liverpool.The majority of the series was written before Margaret Thatcher was elected and, although the series is often and not inaccurately read as a critique of Thatcherite Britain, there is no sense of the nation in *Blackstuff*. The seriesis very firmly rooted in and spatially limited to Liverpool. Authority is vested in the local DOE office, which controls access to both unemployment benefit and work. In both series the city as a setting serves two very different narrative functions. In *Cilla*,it offers the possibility and real prospect of success; in *Blackstuff*,it is a quagmire of deprivation that cannot be escaped. The effectiveness and narrative possibilities offered by both these series’ Liverpool setting, though drastically different, are the result of their strong and specific evocation of place. Specifically, it is their particular encapsulation of the socioeconomic conditions of a specific place at a specific time.

**Constructions of Labour and Leisure**

The representations of Liverpool in *Cilla* and *Blackstuff* call upon two very different moments in which the meanings, consequences and possibilities associated with Liverpool as a place were entirely different. In *Blackstuff* the city and the men’s Scouse masculine identity is like a shackle that bars access to opportunity, employment and self-actualisation. In *Cilla*, Liverpool represents the polar opposite; it is a space of opportunity, vitality and, most significantly, mobility. Another striking difference between the two series is their depiction of spaces of leisure. In *Blackstuff*, the only leisure spaces available to the men are various pubs. Other than the DOE office, where they sign on, and the two funerals that take place in the series, pubs are the only space in which we see the characters together as a group.

However, these spaces are not depicted as spaces of leisure where the men choose to spend their free time, but rather the inevitable destination of men with nowhere else to go. They are also exclusively male spaces. *The Green Man* pub, a real pub on Liverpool’s Dock Road, which Chrissie and Loggo visit after George’s funeral is populated by men ‘who all have too much time to kill’ (‘George’s Last Ride,’ 1982). As the camera pans around to focus on each in turn, the pub’s regulars are described by the increasingly drunk and manic landlord:

we all had something to give. Gnasher, he never gnashed until Tate and Lisle laid him off. And Ronnie was a waiter at the Adelphi, the last thing he did was rob the uniform when he left. Shakehands was a bouncer in town and at least two of those lads had apprenticeships (‘George’s Last Ride,’ 1982).

The pub is a dead end, where formerly useful men go to kill time by drinking now that they are no longer employed and by extension, no longer useful. By comparison, the depiction of the Liverpool cafe and club scene in *Cilla* shows a marked difference. The absence of alcohol is notable in the latter; the majority of such venues in the 1960s were not licensed to serve it. However, iconic places like The Casbah Coffee Cluband The Cavern, which are depicted in *Cilla*, are imbued with a sense of energy and possibility. It is in The Casbah that Cilla is first offered the opportunity to sing with The Beatles. The Cavernis where the latest bands perform, hoping to be spotted and signed and where Cilla ultimately secures her chance to sing for Brian Epstein (Ed Stoppard). As discussed, there is a strong sense of movement and of moving through these spaces of opportunity and on to the next.

*Cilla* also mobilises a markedly different conception of and attitude towards labour than *Blackstuff.* As a series, *Cilla* is entirely focused on the entertainment industry, with only fleeting references to more traditional forms of labour, such as Bobby’s job at Woolworth’s Bakery. However, this job is depicted as little more than an optional inconvenience that hinders his romantic pursuit of Cilla. It is a source of considerable pride for Cilla’s mother, Big Cilla (Melanie Hill), that her daughter is the first in the family to be deemed ‘suitable for office work’ in her final school report (‘Episode One,’ 2014). There are a few subsequent shots of Cilla working in a typing pool with other women workers. Primarily, these shots serve to demonstrate Cilla’s dissatisfaction with such work. In episode one, there is a cut to an image of Cilla working at the typing pool immediately after her disastrous audition for Brian Epstein. The close-up of her unhappy expression and defeated body language suggests that such employment is, in fact, a waste of her talent. This version of work, rather than providing steady income and security, is depicted as holding her back from fulfilling her true potential. The audience, aware of Cilla’s inevitable escape from the typing pool and successful entertainment career, know that this is nothing more than a temporary obstacle on the path to her “true” vocation. “Real” labour in Cilla is depicted as the labour needed to secure a record contract and achieve success in the music industry. Discussing the series, writer Jeff Pope explains that:

back in the early 1960s there were no talent shows and if you made it you did it through sheer hard work, scrapping your way up from the bottom of the pile up on stage (ITV Press Centre, 2014).

The meaning of ‘sheer hard work’ here is very different to that of *Blackstuff*. It is also a very different image of the type of labour that was typical to Liverpool. Indeed, despite the fact that the 1960s was a moment of considerable activism and agitation from dockers in Liverpool, no reference is made to any kind of labour unrest in *Cilla*.

In contrast, labour as depicted in *Blackstuff* is literal and physical. The evidence of labour, as described by Chrissie, is dirt on a man’s hands and the ability to provide for one’s family (‘Jobs for the Boys’ 1982). The series deploys a very traditional masculine understanding of labour and, by extension, of redundancy. Female labour in *Blackstuff* is largely confined to the home, occasionally supplemented by cash in hand work selling cosmetics. Notable exceptions to this are the women who work at the DOE Office. All the staff who process the men’s applications for unemployment benefit are women. There is also Miss Sutcliffe (Jean Boht), who is a manager at the DOE and a spinster. After deciding not to prosecute Chrissie and Loggo for working illegally in ‘Jobs for the Boys’, she reflects on her unhappiness with both her personal life and her job: ‘[I’m] a woman who has recently become aware of the massive, total futility of her life’ (‘Shop thy Neighbour,’ 1982). Finding neither fulfilment in the domestic or professional sphere, Miss Sutcliffe is an interesting counterpoint to Angie. Both women are examples of women attempting to survive and navigate the depicted world of male obsolescence. She is a stark contrast to Cilla, who is able to realise her potential and pursue her dream career because of her talent and her place in a world in which new modes of masculinity, embodied by bands such as The Beatles, have made such things possible. In both series the depicted opportunities for work, or lack thereof, are rooted in the series’ evocation of place. In *Cilla*, Merseybeat Liverpool offers a route to stardom; in *Blackstuff*,1980s Liverpool offers little to no opportunity for meaningful work.

# Conclusion

*Boys from the Blackstuff* and *Cilla* are examples of television drama that is reliant on a clear and definite sense of place and time. They offer two distinct perspectives of Liverpool as a city at different formative moments in its history. As products of very different periods in television history *Blackstuff* and *Cilla* typify the programming and narratives that characterise each era and demonstrate different functions of television drama’s evocation of place. *Blackstuff*, produced and broadcast in the era it depicts,offers immediate and biting social commentary and, in the years since its original broadcast, has come to be valued as a snapshot of a moment in the city’s socioeconomic past that no longer exists. *Cilla*, created with the intention of evoking and capitalising on fond nostalgia for an exciting moment in Liverpool’s past, offers a rose-coloured recreation of history, rather than a ‘realistic’ record or attempt at social commentary.

The evocation of the city in both series is central to their narratives and effectiveness as dramas. The men in *Blackstuff* are steadily disfigured, and two of them killed, by the circumstances of living as a man in Liverpool in the 1980s. All of the anchors to their masculine identities, their professions, their families and their legitimate place in society, are stripped from them. They are unable to find work, unable to be adequate husbands and fathers and so all of the traditional markers of masculinity are unavailable and they become unmoored. In this way, *Blackstuff* can be read as a study of the impossibility of being a man in Liverpool in the 1980s. In contrast *Cilla* dramatises the opportunities and possibilities open to young men and women living in Liverpool in the 1960s as a result of the Merseybeat phenomenon. The distinct sound and character of the city offer the chance of social and geographic mobility for its inhabitants. The enduring relevance of *Blackstuff* and the popularity of *Cilla*, which resulted in Cilla Black’s *Anyone Who Had a Heart (*Parlophone, 1964)re-entering the singles charts for the first time in 50 years (Mellor, 2014), demonstrate the ways that television dramas that mobilise such a strong sense place can become intrinsic to the heritage and history of the places that they depict.

**Endnotes**

1 ‘Nothin’ down for them’ is a Liverpool colloquialism that suggests that a person has limited means, resources or opportunity.

2 ‘doing a foreigner,’ is colloquial slang for illegally using an employer’s time and resources to complete an additional job other than the one you are employed to do.

3 “Scouse” is a colloquial term used to refer to people from Liverpool as well as the dialect and accent specific to the city. The term’s origin is believed to be an anglicisation of either the Norwegian *lapskaus,* the Swedish *lapskojs,* the Danish *labskovs* or the German *Labskaus*. All of which refer to a stew eaten by sailors. The dish was introduced to Liverpudlians through the city’s role as an international port and became popular with poorer residents, as it allowed them to make the most use of a single joint of meat (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017).

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