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# THE TELEVISION ARCHIVE ON BBC FOUR

## From Preservation to Production

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**Abstract:** Reusing audiovisual archive material is a growing trend on television and has many purposes, ranging from commercial to more 'purely' social and cultural ones. Focusing on the uses of the television archive on BBC Four, the BBC's 'custodian of archive' and digital channel for arts, culture and ideas, this article examines a selection of archive-rich programmes shown on the channel, in order to explore the ways in which the television archive is becoming indispensable in programme making. The article is based on interviews with BBC Four programme makers. It posits that memory, nostalgia, aesthetic and moral judgement and, crucially, self-reflexivity are all at play in archive-based programme making. The article further proposes three distinct production approaches – interpretative, interventional and imaginative – all of which contribute differently to the television archive's being seen as a 'creative tool'.

**Keywords:** BBC Four; the BBC; television archive; television production; cultural value; nostalgia.

*There is a double paradox in [this] privileging of memory today. Our mnemonic culture rejects the idea of the archive while depending on the archive's contents for its own sustenance. And it marks its vital difference from the archive by insisting on novelty, the novelty of no longer fetishising the new.<sup>1</sup>*

*The word 'archive' is ceasing to be an adequate term for describing what might be done with it.<sup>2</sup>*

The television archive is thriving in the digital multiplatform and television ecology. In the United Kingdom alone, digital television channels such as UKTV's Yesterday, Dave and Drama depend on acquiring and broadcasting television programmes from the BBC, ITV and Channel 4 archives.<sup>3</sup> Public service broadcasters have also been following suit: the expansion of ITV, Channel 4 and the BBC into multichannel portfolios means that an increasing amount of space is given to television repeats and archival programming. Indeed, the BBC's own vast audiovisual archive, which was only a couple of decades ago considered a 'sleeping asset' became stimulated by digitisation. By focusing on BBC Four, the

1 Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 6.

2 Anthony Wall, *Arena Series Producer*, interviewed at the BBC Bush House, 11 February 2010.

3 '[About UK TV](#)'. This is a worldwide trend; for example, the case of American television has been examined in Derek Kompare's *Rerun Nation*, Routledge, 2004; or Lynn Spigel's 'Our TV Heritage: Television, the Archive and the Reasons for Preservation', in Janet Wasko, ed., *A Companion to Television*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

BBC's digital channel for arts, culture and ideas, this article examines the ways in which the audiovisual archive is mobilised for new broadcasting activities and programme making.

BBC Four has been, since its inception in March 2002, the 'custodian of the BBC archives'.<sup>4</sup> In 2011 it became the only BBC *television* channel with a remit of curating the vast BBC audiovisual archive to create permanent online collections.<sup>5</sup> The television archive is also prominent in the channel's linear scheduling and programming strategies; with a service budget of £44 million in 2014/15<sup>6</sup> that allows less than one hour of origination a day,<sup>7</sup> BBC Four is heavily reliant on programme repeats and reutilising old programmes from the BBC archive. The repeated content often gets 'refreshed' through editorialising and curating activities, with archive programmes often prominently featuring in the channel's signature 'seasons' and themed evenings. But centrally to this article, the television archive is also indispensable in the production of original programmes for BBC Four.

In order to critically explore the television archive as a site of not only preservation but also a launchpad for production of new television programmes, it is useful to situate it briefly in a broader scholarly context. Recent studies of the television archive have been invigorated by a renewed interest in television aesthetics<sup>8</sup> and a more systematic understanding of television historiography.<sup>9</sup> But while aesthetics and historiography frame the television archive within a social, aesthetic and historical context, there is also an important and problematic issue of personal context, as the value of television texts is highly contingent on individual memory and nostalgia.<sup>10</sup> The medium of television forges, as John Ellis points out, "intimate connections between its programmes and the moment of their intended broadcast"<sup>11</sup>, collapsing the external world into personal, lived experience.<sup>12</sup> Television scholar Horace Newcomb, for example, observed recently how finding rebroadcast programmes he had enjoyed and written about (*Ironside*, NBC, 1967 – 1975; and *St Elsewhere*, NBC, 1982-1988) was like watching "reflections of what they were, incomplete images and imaginings of time, place, significance, pleasure".<sup>13</sup> I wish to argue here that these intimate reflections are also keys to understanding how the television archive is understood in a production context.

The first use of television archive identified here is *interpretative*: through the example of BBC Four's *TV on Trial* project (2005),<sup>14</sup> I aim to demonstrate that archive-rich programmes, although discursively framed by nostalgia, nevertheless attempt to expand their programming away from merely "maintaining memories".<sup>15</sup> I also wish to argue that the usage of archive-rich programmes on BBC Four is unlike that on other channels, characterised by the endeavour of making new programmes out of old ones, or the process of actively linking the past and the present in which archives are interpreted through a process of *intervention*, i.e. re-editing or re-contextualising archive material, segments or entire programmes. For example, *What Happened Next?*<sup>16</sup> (2008) uses archives as a story-telling resource which implicitly positions television's role in a broader social and cultural history. Finally, that the archive is becoming a "creative tool"<sup>17</sup> is demonstrated through inventive ways of mining and selecting archives, such as Anthony Wall's *Arena* programme

4 John Das, BBC Four Acting Channel Executive and *Timeshift* Series Editor, interviewed at the BBC Television Centre, 10 March 2010.

5 [BBC Four Collections](#).

6 [BBC Trust, BBC Four Service Licence](#), 2014, p. 2.

7 Don Cameron, BBC Four Head of Planning and Scheduling, interviewed at the BBC Television Centre, 9 July 2010; also Richard Klein, BBC Four Controller (2008 – 2013), interviewed at the BBC Television Centre, 18 March 2010.

8 See, for example, Christine Geraghty, 'Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television Drama', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 (1), 2003, pp. 45 – 62; Jason Jacobs, 'Issues of Judgement and Value in Television Studies', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4 (4), 2001, pp. 427 – 447; Jason Jacobs, '[The Television Archive: Past, Present, Future](#)', *Critical Studies in Television*, 1 (1), 2006.

9 Helen Wheatley, ed., *Re-Viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, I. B. Tauris, 2007.

10 E.g. Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

11 John Ellis, 'Is it possible to construct a canon of television programmes? Immanent reading versus textual-historicism', in Helen Wheatley, ed., *Re-Viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, I. B. Tauris, 2007, p. 16.

12 Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; also, Tim O'Sullivan, 'Nostalgia, Revelation and Intimacy: Tendencies in the Flow of Modern Popular Television' in Christine Geraghty and David Lusted, eds., *The Television Studies Book*, Arnold, 1998.

13 Horace Newcomb, 'My media studies = My TV' *Television and New Media*, 10 (1), 2009, pp. 20 – 22.

14 *TV on Trial*, BBC Four, TX 27 March 2005.

15 Pierre Sorlin, 'Historians at the Crossroads: Cinema, Television... and after?' in Graham Roberts, Philip M. Taylor, Nicholas Pronay, eds., *The Historian, Television and Television History*, University of Luton Press, 2001, p. 25.

16 *What Happened Next?*, ten part series, BBC Four, 2008.

17 John Das, BBC Four Acting Channel Executive and *Timeshift* Series Editor, interviewed at the BBC Television Centre, 10 March 2010.

*Exodus '77* (2007).<sup>18</sup> Its content innovation involves the use of the archive's evocative, nostalgic and ambient qualities and, I argue, can be seen as an *imaginative* development of archive use, representing both continuity and a break from earlier television aesthetics.

## 1 *TV on Trial: Interpreting the TV Archive in Search of a Golden Age*

In March and April 2005, BBC Four undertook a project of finding a “golden television decade”. It was the channel's first large scale project to look systematically at Britain's television past. The idea was to put the television medium itself ‘on trial’ by comparing its different decades. Presented by John Sergeant, *TV on Trial* was staged amidst the “widely-held assumption that British TV has deteriorated in quality since the early yesteryear”,<sup>19</sup> and patently modelled on the countdown, or ‘best of’ nostalgia TV formats. However, from the commissioning and scheduling perspective, the programme had a more ambitious aim: it wanted to provide not only “a way of utilising archives, but also [to allow] people to discuss and have an opinion about archives, to give a kind of context and meaning”.<sup>20</sup>

Six decades of television were examined and placed in competition with each other. The journey started in 1955 with *TV on Trial: 1955*<sup>21</sup>, the decade commonly understood as the beginning of television,<sup>22</sup> and continued with a timeline of chronologically ordered programmes: *TV on Trial: 1965*; *TV on Trial: 1975*, with the last programme dedicated to 2005. The choice of programmes for each decade was not based on ‘the best of’, but was rather a cross-section of different representative genres and TV ‘classics’ in the chosen decade. They were shown in their entirety with an interactive option to see it with or without a real-time commentary of two broadcasting personalities chosen as television experts. I will focus here on the first decade, *TV on Trial: 1955*, in order to examine how ‘deep archives’<sup>23</sup> contributed to the construction of interpretative programme making.

Following a brief montage of key events that took place in 1955, we see a couple of television critics sitting in front of a television set, in a simulated living room space designed in the style of the decade in question. The programmes they watch are “framed upon a blue digital background, emphasising their position within the ‘flow’ of *TV on Trial* or via split screens which displayed the reactions and responses of the commentators”.<sup>24</sup> Each critic is chosen for his or her position in the debate, with one pundit representing and defending the decade, while the other taking a sceptical view. These two positions, ‘prosecuting’ and ‘defending’, correspond to Ellis's distinction between two contrasting interpretive procedures in textual analysis: *immanent* (text-centred and focused on its potential meaning in the present), and *textual-historical* (tying the meaning to its historical context).<sup>25</sup>

The structure of *TV on Trial* consists of the original archive programme with an optional analytical narrative by critics, filmed in real time in order to offer a spontaneous commentary of archive programmes as they are unfolding so that the viewers get a sense they are actually watching television *with* the critics. In effect, the programme results in a built-in textual analysis of itself, constructed *vis a vis* the tension between the immanent and textual-historical readings. The

18 Arena BBC Two/Four, 2007.

19 John Sergeant in *TV on Trial*, BBC Four, TX March 2005.

20 Janice Hadlow, Controller of BBC Four (2004 – 2008), Telephone Interview, 2 March 2010.

21 BBC Four, TX 27 March 2005.

22 The 50<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the television duopoly with the launch of ITV in 1955 is considered as the moment in history which had a “transformative effect on drama production” as well as the beginning of a transitional period between the “near total reliance on live studio drama production and the increasing use of pre-recorded material, on tape and film”. See Jason Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama*, Clarendon Press, 2000, p.5. But perhaps more importantly, it is the pre-recorded material that enabled a dramatic increase in the availability of visual archive material (ibid.), enabling the *TV on Trial* programme to start with the year 1955.

23 By ‘deep archive’, I refer to the footage whose audiovisual properties are easily observable as being old. This is signified by the footage being either black and white, looking ‘dated’, or in general, with clear temporal markings and/or origin.

24 Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p.121.

25 John Ellis, ‘Is it possible to construct a canon of television programmes? Immanent reading versus textual-historicism’ in Helen Wheatley, ed. *Re-Veiling Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, I. B. Tauris, 2007, p.16.

1950s, represented by the former Labour politician Roy Hattersley, are defended as being the best decade on account of it being a product of a “more innocent time, a much more deferential age”. Taking a sceptical position is *theObserver’s* television critic and columnist Kathryn Flett who, unlike Hattersley, focuses on the old-fashioned nature of the programmes, and notes how their content clearly reflects the gender inequality of the times. While watching the first scripted sitcom of a real-life American family, *Life With The Lyons* (BBC, 1955), for example, Flett comments on the overt theatricality, while Hattersley defends the situation comedy by contextualising it within the values of post-war Britain, which, he explains, were characterised by a sense of cultural renewal that was reflected in the “newness and freshness” of the programme. Hattersley’s clear textual historicist position is evident throughout, even though he is unable to “defend that programme when comparing it to 2006”. They continue their analysis by watching an episode of an “early makeover show”, *Can You Tell Me* (BBC, 1955), devised and presented by Mrs Digby Morton. Mrs Morton engages her female viewers in discussions about fashion, and asks experts to discuss women’s style. In the episode shown, it is exclusively men who are chosen as ‘experts’; they tell women what to wear, how to accessorise, to become fashion models and to identify what men find attractive in women. Flett’s feminist perspective problematises the exclusive reliance on ‘male expertise’, while also continuing to remark on issues to do with the slowness of narrative pace and duration. Hattersley’s historical contextual perspective is temporarily abandoned here, as he agrees that the programme is “fantastically patronising” to women. For Flett, the archive examples are “slow and dull, almost unwatchable” until the arrival of an episode of ITV’s *Double Your Money* (1955) fronted by Hughie Green. This is a quiz show where contestants from the audience are picked to choose one of forty-two distinct subjects to be asked questions about; each correct answer to a question doubles the amount of money they have so far won. Both Hattersley and Flett notice the relaxed, accessible tone of the ITV programme, and its faster pace in contrast to the BBC programmes they have watched. Flett also remarks on the quiz’s progressive element observing how the choice of quiz questions is much more challenging when compared to contemporary quiz shows. Hughie Green’s style of presenting, they both agree, is trailblazing and fresh, “virtually unchanged” from the present, in terms of the banter and the style.



Photo 1. Kathryn Flett and Roy Hattersley discuss programmes shown in 1955 in *TV on Trial: 1955* (BBC Four, TX 27<sup>th</sup> March 2005)



What becomes evident about the programmes chosen for this first instalment of *TV on Trial* is a sense of the 1950s as an under-represented decade. Hattersley notes that “there were a lot better programmes than this. We haven’t exactly gotten the acme of perfection from 1955”. Indeed, the problem of “the physical survival of the programmes”<sup>26</sup> which presents a key challenge in evaluating the early decades lead to the re-broadcasting of archive programmes, which, according to Wheatley, “often have little or no historical accuracy in relation to the broader picture of television broadcasting in a particular time or place”<sup>27</sup> thus limiting the possibilities of revising the television canon. The 1950s *TV on Trial* archive choice, then, becomes valuable for visual idiosyncrasies that represent the ‘50s feel’, the antiquated everydayness, and what Flett describes as the “nascent feel of television”. In summary, the Hattersley/Flett debate is consequently framed by interpretations of social change and cultural history, rather than the canonical quality of the programmes themselves.

## 2 BBC Four’s Archive Interventions: Archive Mining and Re-Examining Social History Through *What Happened Next?*

The use of the archive takes yet another turn with the documentary series *What Happened Next?* (BBC Four, 2008). The programme, produced by the *Timeshift* team, is one of BBC Four’s longest running series, “long specialised in plundering the archives to tell resonant tales of social change”<sup>28</sup>. *What Happened Next?* continues this model: it is also an analytical documentary series in which each programme in the series is defined by the same, uncomplicated premise, to follow up on people who were the subjects of older documentary programmes. Indeed, the birth of the programme was, according to the series producer, John Das, an outcome of a deep archive search for the parent series: “we saw things while looking for other things... and you think, that is interesting - let’s make a note of that so we can do something with it one day”<sup>29</sup>. This archive mining is the most essential and far-reaching part of the production process that the *Timeshift* team took part in, and the notion of “accidental discovery” is not unlike real archaeological excavation. Das elaborates:

We looked for films where you would be curious to find out what happened to the people afterwards, and where there was a real chance of showing change. We ruled out some films which were perfectly good, but where we felt we could only ask the same questions and never really add anything more. Or else, films which were so difficult in terms of the subject matter that it would be very difficult for people to revisit that subject.<sup>30</sup>

The process of ‘updating’ archives can therefore be linked to programmes being removed from their ‘original habitat’. But changing the television archive’s pace and visual language are not the only concerns; preserving ‘the feel of the content’ is an ethical as well as an aesthetic issue. In *What Happened Next?: The Broken Bridge* (BBC Four, 2008) the production team pays particular attention to the changed social and moral attitudes towards the developmental disorder of autism and early attempts at its treatment, the focus of the original archive material from the documentary *The Broken Bridge* (BBC, 1968). This documentary is about two autistic children, Philip Morrall and Iris Faith, and the desperate plea of their parents to improve their learning disorders as they embark on the intensive behavioural therapy called ‘Operant Conditioning’ developed by a psychiatrist from Los Angeles, Dr. Irene Kassorla. We follow the early transformations of these children, in their comparatively rapid gaining of language, previously thought impossible,

26 Maire Messenger-Davies, ‘Salvaging Television’s Past: What Guarantees Survival?’ in Helen Wheatley, ed. *Re-Viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2007, p. 40; also in Jason Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen: Early British Television Drama*, Clarendon Press, 2000.

27 Helen Wheatley, ed. *Re-Viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, I. B. Tauris, 2007, p.10.

28 Roly Keating, ‘[Archiving the Army with BBC Four](#)’, *About the BBC Blog* [Online.] 16 September 2011.

29 John Das, BBC Four Acting Channel Executive and *Timeshift* Series Editor, interviewed at the BBC Television Centre, 10 March 2010.

30 Ibid.

through a very intensive treatment that involves a controversial system of rewards and punishments. Archive images of the children's transformation bear witness to the cruelty and the effectiveness of the treatment as being two sides of the same coin. However, the voice-over that was retained from the original archive emphasises another moral dilemma, which has less to do with Kassorla's methods and more to do with her true motivations to 'cure' the children. Kassorla's intensive workshops in London's private Harley Street clinic are juxtaposed with her rich Californian lifestyle in which she is seen driving out of her sun-drenched villa in an expensive Bentley. It is clear that the original documentary is a moral investigation into psychiatric practices and the ambiguous effect they have on autistic children and their families, something that is clearly retained and exposed in its revision.



Photo 2. Archive footage of Philip Morall (left) and Iris Faith (right) working with Dr Irene Kassorla in *What Happened Next?* (BBC Four, 2008)

By cutting between archive footage and the present, which reveals the characters as adults, the *What Happened Next? Broken Bridge* programme allows a space for the re-evaluation of the treatment and how it had a mixed effect on the protagonists' lives; the deep transformation of the autistic individuals becomes a dramatic device for the documentary. The change we observe in the protagonists is also enhanced by the juxtaposition of past and present documentary styles; the archive footage with its imposing BBC voiceover becomes softened and observational, and the filmic quality of the archive footage is followed by the crisp, digitised quality of the images of the subjects in the present. The narrative envelops the past and present while the shift in image quality reminds us that the changes that the documentary observes happened over a course of four decades. Das explains the immediacy achieved in the updated documentary:

There is a very powerful moment in *The Broken Bridge* when we effectively cut from the main boy in late teens, early 20s - to him as he is now, in his 50s, or early 60s. It is quite a shocking and moving moment when you see the footage of him in the present day, and so I think that, with regard to the subject matter, part of what this series is really about, is the curiosity you have about human beings and how they change with time.<sup>31</sup>

The rationale behind the choice of archives for the *What Happened Next?* series is to identify qualities that are socially and culturally intrinsic and unique about the subjects. The weight of the archive footage, rather than merely chosen for nostalgic purposes or dramatic effect, is tied into BBC Four's mission to be a mediator of and commentator on the changing nature of British society. Programmes which had all the reasons to be ephemeral and "everyday" such as *Broken Bridge*, now have a chance to be resurrected and ascribed with a new sense of cultural and social purpose. In a way, this can be seen as a producer-centred approach to the archive: it is the producers' conceptual, analytical and reflexive approach to archives that allows television programmes to be valued *a priori*, during the production process and prior to their broadcast and reception.

31 Ibid.

### 3 “The Very New Can Only Come From the Very Old:”<sup>32</sup> Imaginative Uses of Archive

According to Anthony Wall, the producer of the BBC’s long standing arts series, *Arena*, the word ‘archive’ itself is becoming problematic as it is “ceasing to be a valid term to describe what is done with it”.<sup>33</sup> Creative interpretations of archives involve a form of distancing from the sometimes-prescriptive nature of memories and their subjective interpretative frameworks. Yet, engaging with the evocative and nostalgic *textures* of the historical artefact can have a different effect if we consider that television archive programmes have less and less hold on an audience who actually remember watching them ‘live’. The ‘memory’ of television programmes is therefore often referred to as a memory of a mediated past disconnected from any sense of the present. As BBC Four Programme Scheduler, Don Cameron, expands,

There are memories and then there are *memories*. There aren’t many people sitting here who watched them live, when they went out. So ultimately, I wasn’t alive in the fifties so I couldn’t do that ... but quite a lot of these things were repeated later - they were shown in the sixties and seventies.<sup>34</sup>

The distortion between lived and mediated memories changes the terms and conditions of historicity, and in effect, changes the possibilities of the ‘fixity’ of a television programme in the time it was made. As Wall concedes, “what that means is that the past and the present now interact in the way they never did before”.<sup>35</sup> Wall here refers to the possibility of re-editing the recorded past in a more fluid way that allows for different kinds of audiovisual associations as well as a more *hybrid* approach to archive. Hybridity here refers to the mixing of different temporalities, something that has already been explored in music (e.g. reggae) in which innovation in genres is born out of unlikely combinations (e.g. in reggae’s case, indigenous African music with ska), with access enabled through exposure to this temporal art when it becomes part of a material record (i.e. through recording). The temporal hybridity is based on the constant exchange and amalgamation that takes place between mediated and lived memories. *Arena*’s documentary on Bob Marley’s cultural impact in the UK, *Exodus ’77*<sup>36</sup> is almost entirely made out of archive footage, mostly taken from television news broadcasts, aiming to represent the historic events of 1977 as a visually immersive world which Bob Marley inhabited at the time he wrote the album. The original sound and/or commentary of most of the archive footage used in the documentary have been removed, as *Arena*’s ambition is not to unfold a biography *about* Bob Marley. Rather, the premise of this documentary is Marley’s album *Exodus*, and the historical and cultural importance of his exile in Britain in 1977 that informed the album, and which turned Marley “from a reggae star to a prophet”.<sup>37</sup>

We see a record stylus hitting a vinyl groove and hear *Natural Mystic*, the opening track of the album. From this point on, the album tracks serve as a soundtrack for each month of 1977. The album is both the backdrop and the subject of the documentary. We also see news archive footage of Marley himself, interspersed with commentary and interview sound recordings. The archive footage is conceptually organised, and the opening song is accompanied by stock archive footage from January 1977, and the next track, *So Much Things to Say*, with footage from February 1977, and so on. As the album’s songs are chronologically unveiled, the calendrical correspondence emerges as a formal creative intervention: “the discipline was that it had to be that month, and it had to be that year”.<sup>38</sup> The fluid editing of news footage speeds through familiar images of British motorways covered in snow, freezing London streets and handwritten signs that signify a very different time (‘price of a loaf 18p’), but also peculiar footage of an operation to capture an escaped lion on the city’s streets. The programme maker’s choice, seemingly perfunctory, manages to evoke the

32 A quote from Ken Russell’s BBC *Monitor* art documentary, *Bartok* (1964), quoted in Kay Dickinson’s title, ‘The very new can only come from the very old’: Ken Russell, national culture and the possibility of experimental television at the BBC in the 1960s’ in Laura Mulvey, Jamie Sexton, eds. *Experimental British Television*, Manchester University Press, 2007.

33 Anthony Wall, *Arena* Series Producer, interviewed at the BBC Bush House, 11 February 2010.

34 Don Cameron, BBC Four Head of Planning and Scheduling, interviewed at the BBC Television Centre, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, 8 July 2010.

35 Anthony Wall, *Arena* Series Producer, interviewed at the BBC Bush House, 11 February 2010.

36 Originally broadcast on BBC Two in June 2007, marking 30 years of Marley’s exodus to Britain. It was repeated shortly after on BBC One the same year and BBC Four in July 2007 and again February 2011, as a part of BBC Four’s *Reggae Britannia* season.

37 Anthony Wall, *Exodus ’77*, BBC, 2007. Also available on [YouTube](#).

38 Anthony Wall, *Arena* Series Producer, interviewed at the BBC Bush House, 21 July 2011.





Photo 3. [BBC Four Arena page](#) dedicated to Bob Marley Exodus '77 programme, containing clips and additional information<sup>39</sup>

ephemeral nature of television while also emphasising the atmosphere and the mood of the times as so distinctly unique and visually different from the present. The news archive footage is deliberately stripped of sound to give way to its different interpretations. For example, the end of the second track sees the ambient music fading back in, ushering a strikingly dated shot of Queen Elizabeth II on one of her visits to what appears to be a former colonial setting. The documentary does not explain the footage as it removes the original voice-over, which opens up possibilities of the use of the footage as new:

You start to see it in a completely different way, and you realise that there are a multiplicity of meanings existing in this one shot, and that what happened there with the news is that a very heavy-handed voice-over is trying to determine that you only receive that shot in the way that they intend to receive it. Then, if you put something provocative on the top of it, like a piece of music or some speech or some other kind of assemblage of sounds that on the face of it do not reflect that shot directly, or possibly sounds that might be going on around the corner, it takes on an altogether different meaning indeed.<sup>40</sup>

Wall explains that the documentary on the whole was intended to become 'a poetic construct' of archive footage documenting the time. Indeed, the use of the stock footage seems to borrow from, or at least resemble, music sampling techniques, where both audio and visual elements do not 'quote' the archive in discrete and individual sections but rather, blend the samples into a sort of audiovisual synthesis<sup>41</sup>. Archives are textures of associations and here the material represents grainy 1970s colour snapshots of 'pastness', building the temporal architecture of Marley's unique place in world and social history. There is an observable reliance on the dated 'feel' of archive footage, its grainy colour

39 The *Arena: Bob Marley's Exodus '77* is available for viewing in the UK in its entirety [here](#).

40 Ibid.

41 This is analogous to Simon Reynolds' description of audio sampling techniques where he likens samples as not needing to "be a quote machine but could also effectively work as a n instrument of pure sound synthesis, something that didn't just decontextualise its sources but abstracted them too" in Simon Reynolds, *Retromania*, Faber and Faber, 2011, p. 321.

qualities, which are increasingly becoming aesthetic devices attempting simultaneously to evoke the period as well as to immerse viewers into the footage and thus propose new meanings, which challenges the conventional use of archive as nostalgic intervention. Wall primarily refers to these historically debased fragments not as formal (stylistic), but content-led elements, as ways of reconstructing or re-mediating memory, as a creative intervention, which represents both a continuation and a break from the traditional, autonomous ways that the archive has usually been represented on television.

*Arena* continues to push the boundaries of television into the realm of experimentation and in its promise of future uses of archives, represents a new television aesthetics. But unlike previous experimental television that, according to Laura Mulvey, was characterised by detaching itself from the surrounding flow,<sup>42</sup> *Exodus '77* embraces television's ephemeral qualities, without any attempt to detach itself from 'the larger textual composite' that is television, or indeed, any other platform. Wall argues that archive usage allows him to aspire "towards the condition of form being content. It is almost like the content itself is necessarily there in order to create a form ... the subject enables me to manipulate archive into a direction of form, and the content is the form as much as it is the content,"<sup>43</sup> using the archive as slippery, ubiquitous material; as a 'creative tool':

You can shoot your own archive. You can play around with it ... the proposition is that it is within the creative process the same way that shooting is. So it is not there to illustrate, it is there to *be* the thing, it is the thing itself.<sup>44</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

The inquiry into the production of archive-based documentaries on BBC Four could have potentially been used to contribute to an argument that BBC Four belongs to the 'nostalgia industry' which permeates digital multichannel television (e.g. History TV, Gold). However, the concept of 'nostalgia', while applicable to some of the channel's archive programmes (e.g. *Top of the Pops* or *Jazz 625* reruns), does not sufficiently explain such a broad range of archive uses from the production point of view, or the fact that the reception of 'deep' archive has a mediated, rather than lived 'memory imprint' on viewers. To put it simply, the tropes that are most frequently associated with television archive – history, memory and nostalgia – rather than being merely ways to describe the reception of archive programmes, are integral to innovative production practices and broadcasting activities.

A closer look into *TV on Trial*, *What Happened Next?* and *Arena's Exodus '77* demonstrate how the television archive (either as a whole programme and/or archive footage) has evolved to become a vital component in the production processes of 'uncovering' a little known past, rather than simply reminiscing about the already seen and familiar. Archive mining and editorial reflexivity are embedded production practices that also articulate new approaches: whether to make sense of past events, to examine social and cultural changes, or for the purpose of creating original programmes out of the existing footage. Indeed, what these very different BBC Four programmes share, are their introspective qualities – a form of institutional 'soul searching', or what John Caldwell defined as self-reflexivity as the production and distribution of self-analysis to the public.<sup>45</sup> The purpose of the *TV on Trial* project, for example, was not only aimed at looking for the best decade; the quest for a 'golden age' it was essentially directed at the search for television's own cultural identity. The use of archive in *What Happened Next?*, celebrates the centrality of television as a social record and a witness to social change; and finally, *Arena's* take on archive footage amply demonstrates the aesthetics of the archive, and "that it is within the creative process the same way that shooting is".<sup>46</sup> The reproduction and reuse of the televisual and audio archives, therefore, can lead to rediscoveries of the archive's new cultural purposes and contribute towards television's complexity as a rich cultural form.

42 Laura Mulvey in Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton, eds., *Experimental British Television*, Manchester University Press, 2007.

43 Anthony Wall, *Arena* Series Producer, interviewed at the BBC Bush House, 21 July 2011.

44 Ibid.

45 John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 1.

46 Anthony Wall, *Arena* Series Producer, interviewed at the BBC Bush House, 21 July 2011.

## Biography

Vana Goblot lectures at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her PhD, which she completed in 2013, examines issues of quality, cultural value and the television archive in the digital, multiplatform age, using the case study of BBC Four. She is currently a research associate on *A Future for Public Service Television*, a public inquiry chaired by Lord Puttnam set up to consider the nature, purpose and place of public service television today and for the future. She worked previously as a broadcast and print journalist in former Yugoslavia.