

John McGrath and the Dialogues of Television Studies

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When I began to study television drama as an MA student in 1984, the *BBC Play for Today* television version of John McGrath's *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (BBC, 1974) was on my course. In teaching television I have introduced students to this play every year for the past thirteen years, and in this article I want to address the question of why McGrath - and this play in particular - seem so central to the academic study of British television drama. My research on this question has confirmed my initial recollection that very many of the significant publications on television drama since about 1980 have cited either McGrath or *The Cheviot* or both. I shall, therefore, have insufficient space to deal exhaustively with the citation of McGrath, or to discuss at length the significance of his critical writing or his television and theatre writing to the theorisation of television. In any case, my aim here is not to give an account of influence, nor simply to praise McGrath's achievement in these and other fields. Instead, I aim to think through the fact of citation itself, to consider what examples do when they are cited in academic texts, and explore how the citations of McGrath, and *The Cheviot* in particular, shape the terms in which Television Studies theorists understand television drama. In this respect, the paper follows on from an earlier essay on television drama criticism, in which I cited McGrath.¹ Conversely, I am also interested in how the concerns of television theory shape the understandings of McGrath and his work that are in circulation in the discourses of Television Studies.

John McGrath's work remains important to the constitution of Television Studies because it provides a location to think through two dominant but often opposed traditions of critical work on television drama. These are on one hand the concern for the text, where writerly and formal qualities are often interpreted in political terms as either progressive or reactionary. On the other hand, a more recent tradition in Television Studies begins from a concern for the audience, regarded either as constructed, positioned and constituted by a text, or more recently seen as agents of interpretation whose pleasures, resistances and interpretive strategies are of greater interest than the textual forms which enable these responses. McGrath's work is important in terms of a history and practice of politically engaged writing within dominant institutions and programme types including the single play and the drama series, and it is also important because of McGrath's consistent concern to connect with, empower and energise the audience as agents. McGrath's work in television has characteristics which enable it to become a vehicle for both theoretical discussions of television textuality, and also discussions of television's relations with its audiences.

There is also a third context in which McGrath's work and the enterprises of Television Studies come together. Part of the agenda of television criticism has been the unevenly successful dialogue between academics and television professionals.² As a socialist writer whose topics and dramatic forms often concern power-relations, dominant histories and hegemonic institutions, and the agency of 'the people' in

political struggles, his work is closely aligned with the agendas of the cultural formation in which many British academics work. That cultural formation could be broadly defined as one in which, as Raymond Williams so powerfully argued, culture is seen not only as the expression of social forces but also an agent of social change.³ British Television Studies academics and creative workers such as McGrath share a commitment to this progressive leftist ideology of culture. The citation of McGrath is also part of this other agenda which I shall not explore here, in which alliances are formed between socialist academics and professionals on the basis of the discourses which they share, and which enable a productive dialogue to occur between them. My guiding topic in this paper is dialogue: a dialogue between McGrath as author, his work, and the various contributors to the dialogues of academic television theory.

So this paper is not an analysis of McGrath's television work, but instead an evaluation of the ways it is cited in academic writing about television drama. The focus is on how a particular identity for 'McGrath' is produced by Television Studies when it cites him as an example. If McGrath's work is separated by television theory from the context of its production as an example, and from an awareness of the subject-position of the theorist discussing it, this runs the risk of fetishizing McGrath's work as an apparently unitary and undetermined object. A reflexive approach to the significance of McGrath's work restores the work to the conditions in which it is cited and therefore to the dynamic politics of theory. In this paper I shall explore the reasons why it is cited, and thus recognise that the citation of McGrath is part of a struggle around the politics of theory as well as of television drama. This essay is an attempt to map out the position and political context which the work occupies in the dialogue which constitutes television theory. Such a reflexive approach also responds to the dialogic and situated form of his work itself, since his dramatic work for television features dialogic structure and is in dialogue with television forms and reception contexts.

The meanings of 'McGrath'

The television play by John McGrath which is mentioned most in this essay, because it is mentioned most in Television Studies publications, is *The Cheviot*. *The Cheviot* usually figures in accounts of the arguments over the politics of naturalism, for example in John Tulloch's book *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (1990), and such citations also give acknowledgement to John Caughie's seminal article in *Screen* which discusses *The Cheviot*.⁴ It is important to note that the television version of *The Cheviot* is almost always cited in work on television drama, and in particular on television documentary-drama. Despite the significance of documentary forms in the programme, its placing in the *BBC Play for Today* anthology slot, its association with the theatrical *Cheviot*, and the perception that it represents an innovation in television drama form, are some of the reasons that it is cited in these contexts and not in books and articles about television documentary. McGrath's name appears very frequently along with Brecht's, signalling connections between theatre and television in the alternatives to naturalism and the debates over the politics of form that have preoccupied theorists of both media. In an interview with Tulloch, McGrath explained that the television form of *The Cheviot* would 'use

the theatrical presentation as a kind of alienating device - as a consciously Brechtian thing... to enable television... to carry polemic in drama, to be able to advance an argument through the theatrical presentation, and yet use the documentary and the drama reconstruction, the powers of television... to show the world - but in a context which was polemical.⁵ Derek Paget cites McGrath on numerous occasions in this connection, and refers specifically to *The Cheviot* in noting how the hegemonic discourse of Leslie Halliwell's *Television Companion*, a popular reference book, omits an entry on the play.⁶ The *Companion* establishes McGrath as other to its norm by describing him as a 'film-maker of ardent left-wing views'. For Paget and Tulloch, as for many others, the citation of McGrath functions as a marker of academic criticism's distance from a conservative tradition of canon-formation. This tradition is based around the primacy of the author, literary-critical evaluations of 'quality' based in the organic unity of texts, and the exclusion of politics from critical criteria for judgement. The citation of McGrath enables boundaries to be established between forms of theoretical and critical writing: he is, to put it crudely, a litmus test of the political alignment of a discourse. But, furthermore, McGrath was not only a dramatist but also a theoretician himself, represented and cited especially for his essay 'TV drama: the case against naturalism' and his book *A Good Night Out*.⁷ So the boundary between a 'committed' criticism and 'conservative' criticism is drawn in part by the citation of someone who crossed the boundary between the television (and theatre) institutions of production and the institutions that produce theory in the forms of books and critical journals. McGrath was already partially in the territory of theory, and a voice in the dialogue that constitutes it.

The audience of theorists and students who are spoken to by television theory is not the same as the television audience on whose behalf McGrath's work claims to speak. There can be three audiences for *The Cheviot* for example: the readers of television theory which cites the play, the viewers of the television play, and the audiences which are both featured in and which attended the theatrical event documented by the television version. The reason that McGrath's work is so significant is its inclusion of the audience within its own form, and its attempt to represent the diversity of voices of that audience: to make the audience a representable object or referent and also a subject of discourse. But this concern with audience is necessarily repackaged in the discourse of television theory for its own audience of readers. And here it becomes clear that the audience of readers is not the same as the audience represented and given speech within the work. It is for this reason that some viewers, critics or theorists feel a resistance to the work, because they recognise the theoretical significance of the work as an example, but do not regard themselves as part of the audience which is being represented and addressed. Some of the students who have studied *The Cheviot* with me, for example, have adopted this dual audience position. They have been audiences for the theory that cites McGrath and the play, and audiences for screenings of *The Cheviot*, and they have written essays about how important yet unengaging they found the play. Some students willingly recognise the aesthetic and political significance of *The Cheviot* in the discourse of Television Studies, but do not identify with the audience visually represented in the television version, and are unwilling to take up the audience-position laid out by the programme for them as television viewers. Television viewers resist the 'preferred readings' of television programmes and the positions programmes lay out for them, as television theory has repeatedly emphasised.⁸ This resistance can also occur in the decoding of television theory

itself because of the cultural formations of the writers and readers who engage in it as a dialogical form. Like drama, television theory hollows out a space for its audiences to occupy, a discursive space that some critics, students or readers refuse to occupy. As this article proceeds, I consider in more detail what speaking for an audience and to an audience mean for McGrath, his work, and for television theory.

McGrath's name can be used as a synchronic example of television drama in the 1960s (e.g. *Z-Cars*), or in the 1970s (e.g. *The Cheviot*). But his name is also important as a diachronic example in relation to a tradition of political television drama. In this latter case, the discourses of Television Studies could consider what the legacy of McGrath may be, and who his predecessors were. There are equivalent examples before and after McGrath, and such a study would ask about the ways these predecessors and successors shape the place which might be given to McGrath himself in a history of television drama. Such an extended analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, though it raises the interesting issue of the unitary nature of this textually constructed 'McGrath'. It is not the case that the citation of 'McGrath' has the same meaning in each of the different diachronic segments from the history of television which one might wish to differentiate. In the largely synchronic framework I am using in this paper, it is also the case that 'McGrath' is cited in a conception of the field that has a centre and boundaries. Citing McGrath as an example relies on a notion of the field: how British television drama is constituted and what it includes and excludes, for example it may exclude children's television drama or soap opera. In the texts of academic television theory discussed here, McGrath becomes an example representing a central part of the field, namely authored single-play drama. Yet his work (especially *The Cheviot*) exceeds the norms of the single play form and is regarded as more than typical: it is in the vanguard of a possible and preferable kind of television play. This duality between representativeness and exceptionalness is necessarily the case with any example, since exemplarity connotes both the representativeness of the example in standing for a wider field of equivalents, and also a necessary non-representativeness which arises as soon as one example is cited instead of the others which could have occupied the same role in the argument.⁹ Discussion of McGrath's work poses it often as an example used to contrast with an opposing dominant tradition. His work exists as part of a dialogue conducted within the pages of television theory. In this paper, I concentrate on the use of McGrath's work, and especially *The Cheviot*, in relation to debates over dramatic form and the engagement of audiences in political dialogue. The formal characteristics of his work are significant enough to form such an example because of the primacy of dialogue within the work itself as a means of representing the heteroglossic discourses of 'the people'. The distinguishing feature of the work is its inclusion of a variety of voices of the popular, and its combination of forms deriving from different genres and modes of television. In other words, the distinguishing feature of the work is that it is not homogenous, but is itself dialogical and internally differentiated.

Audiences and democracy

The two aspects of McGrath's work which have been significant are its formal heterogeneity, and its political significance in presenting the diverse voices of 'the people'. But there is a tension between representing the voices of the people and therefore speaking on their behalf, and on the other hand speaking to the television audience when there is a possible mismatch between the people who are spoken for and the audience which is spoken to. Each of these audiences has to be constituted by the text, in the sense that positions for interpretation are laid out for the theatre audience in *The Cheviot* (on whose behalf the play 'speaks') and for the television audience (to whom the play 'speaks') in the 1974 television version. Tulloch quotes McGrath explaining that the particular form of *The Cheviot* was appropriate to the audiences for which the theatre play was designed, but that at a certain point the audience no longer saw itself as a subject of history and an agent of change:

whereas through the '70s - up to about '77/'78 - there had been a sense that the work we were doing was expressing a kind of near-revolutionary upsurge of political optimism in the country, and certainly that amongst our audiences we were saying things that they wanted to hear when we said "things will change", suddenly through the Callaghan dog-days of '78, beginning of '79, and then into the appalling debacle of Thatcher being elected in May '79, the mood of the country changed totally.¹⁰

For this reason, McGrath adopted a critical naturalist form in his later television drama *Blood Red Roses* (Channel 4 1985) for example. Tulloch argues that: 'Left-wing dramas (of the Loach, McGrath varieties) always exist as a product of theoretical and experiential negotiation between "authors" and "audiences"'. In that collective sense they articulate experience; and as Fiske says himself, "to articulate one's experience is a necessary prerequisite for developing the will to change it".¹¹ The active agency of the audience is required in order for viewers to constitute themselves as an audience, to take up an orientation to the text which enables a communicative relationship to exist and for the articulation of experience to become dialogical and productive.

In the discourse of Television Studies in the 1970s and early 1980s, 'progressive' television drama was defined as realist in the sense that its version of the real could be represented as contradictory, and thus the viewing subject would be pushed towards change. But this position neglects the context's influence on the ways the text is received (in a schedule, in a historical moment) and also the social context of watching television, for an apparently closed naturalist text can acquire political importance because of the ways it fits into a social debate. This crucial contribution of contextual framing to meaning reveals that there is no 'good form' or 'bad form' in television drama. In the case of Brecht, for example, with whom McGrath is often paralleled, spectacular and lavish productions at the National Theatre lose their political force because of the institutional and economic conditions of their staging. McGrath was articulate about this matter of reception context as well as textual form, and the relationship between them, and wrote in his theoretical text *A Good Night Out* of his desire to specifically engage an active television viewer despite the conditions of reception. His aim was to engage the viewer in a dialogic relationship with television: 'television-watching is a frame of mind, and the technically sub-

standard pictures, the reality of the medium as a piece of furniture, and the inconsequentiality built into it as an experience, all conspire to set severe limits on that frame of mind, on what effort we are prepared to put into, and what depth of reading experience we are expecting to take out of, the time spent watching TV.'¹² McGrath on the one hand considered British television institutions to be monolithic and potentially stifling, and on the other considered the television audience to be a mass. Each of these bodies seems to be solid, unitary and prone to inertia. His aim was to disturb the connections between television institutions and dominant state ideologies. Part of this would be to separate the mass television audience from the imperatives of industrialisation, centralisation and hegemony which the forms of mass television broadcasting presuppose. It is an argument for heterogeneity, for multiplicity of discourse, and engagement in the public sphere of politics beyond its bureaucratic and administrative forms: 'television drama, in this country at least, exists as a relatively powerful social force and as a challenge to every dramatic writer who is at all concerned with writing for a mass audience. We all know how important, how central to the legitimation of the industrial, centralised state command structure an efficient state-controlled television service has become.'¹³

McGrath's work, like any political television drama, relies on a description of society on which a prescription for political action is based, with the aim of making society more just and equitable. There are two variables here: first, that the description presented in the drama is recognised by a public as a legitimate basis for the prescription which it enables; second, that the public recognises itself as a subject of history, an agent of change. This subject of history is the addressee of a political prescription, and the audience must recognise itself as that audience which will transform itself into an active political subject on the basis of the drama. The problem becomes one of getting the audience to derive the political prescription from the description of the world that legitimates it. This problem is sometimes framed as the need to get the audience to take on the point of view of the author or, in more sophisticated formulation, to take on the point of view of the author-function constructed textually by the play. The point of view enabling the description and the prescription must be accessible to the audience. One solution to the passage from description to prescription occurs in democracy: if the people mirror their collective sense of justice in the ways that they democratically construct their society, then the society must necessarily be just because it reflects their sense of justice. McGrath's conscious focus on the culture and society of Scotland, and the presentation of drama describing and prescribing about Scotland for a Scottish audience, is a means of narrowing the gap between the public constructed in the drama and the public which is constructed as the addressee of the drama. McGrath's drama constitutes and in a sense substitutes for a democratic process, an argument which fits his work in theatre for 7:84 Scotland better than much of his television writing, where the connection with the audience is necessarily much less close.

McGrath's efforts to engage the audience in a dialogue and to produce audience activity do not rely on the creation of a new television form, an avant-garde formalism of experiment. Instead they rely on the transfer or translation of formal devices (for example, documentary and dramatic television forms) between the genres in which they are conventionally used, and the mixing of forms against the apparent laws of genre. Two of the interesting consequences of this move are, first, that the Modernist form of McGrath's work is different from that of the avant-garde in which no audience

or taste grouping currently exists for the work and the work must seek to find such an audience anew. McGrath's Modernism, in contrast to the avant-garde, relies on a conscious engagement with the current conventions understood by the audience, and their manipulation rather than their rejection. Secondly, following from this, the mixing of forms in contravention of the apparent laws of genre relies on the existence and familiarity of those laws of genre as the ground against which his work can be measured. He wrote, recommending the critical form of drama explored in his play (written with Troy Kennedy Martin) *Diary of a Young Man* (BBC 1964):

[W]hen we come to the more sophisticated devices for putting images together: montage, with soundtrack, creating a story from selected detail, jump-cuts with the urgency of the story linking the elements; moving from news-reader to film to stills - the language of a great deal of television - very few plays, even fewer series, dare speak it.¹⁴

Once again, the central point here is the diversity of voices, and the transgression both of the norms of internal textual unity and of compartmentalisation of genres in television. There is a radically democratic impetus to this, since both the diversity of voices and the resistance to the orders of genre imply a lessening of hegemonic authority and the fluidity of modes of address and modes of engagement.

Since *The Cheviot* critiques the notion of subjective plenitude by exploring how the subject is both determined by historical processes and yet equipped with agency, it would be contradictory to attribute the meanings of McGrath's work to his own subjective intentions as author. Nevertheless, his agency enables his name to be cited as the source of the plays. Furthermore, the authority of the play as a version of history, and a political intervention, depends in part on the authority of the author as producing agent (auctor) behind the work, and also on the authority (auctoritas) of the people from whose experience the play derives. The effect of composing a work from the diverse voices of the people and placing emphasis on the diversity of voices rather than their possible unification into a narrative or a set of themes, is of course to distance the author or the authorial voice from the text much more radically than is normally the case. Nevertheless, paradoxically, because this technique is so unusual in television and so significant as an example of a formal and political device, it is almost always the case that the particularity and significance of work like this is attributed specifically to the name of McGrath. Indeed I have found it inescapable to refer back to McGrath and his agency as author and critic in this article. In other words, the author himself as the unconventional and significant creator of the work is picked out from the group of writers and creators involved in the production of a work which specifically does not privilege the role of the author. He is mentioned by name very frequently in the theoretical discourse where his work functions as a special and significant example. Yet McGrath was an author who was well aware of the restricting determinants of his own agency as an author and the significance of his relationships with other workers in television institutions.¹⁵ Despite the significance of the work being its closeness to its subject - the people - and its creation around the voices of the popular which it presents, the author becomes a shorthand means of referring to the work precisely because of its uniqueness as less author-based than other drama of the time. The author paradoxically returns when the work becomes a theoretical example (a fate that has also befallen Brecht, for similar reasons).

Political Drama

The term 'political drama' can be used to denote three different ideas.¹⁶ Its first meaning would be performance which deals thematically with ideas recognised as political by the audience. Here the audience's ideological framework is a condition of recognising situations, themes, references and dynamic relationships between characters as marked and foregrounded political signs, rather than simply aspects of a realistic texture, for example. Political theatre in this sense must represent a comprehensible world and make it available for political debate in the play. *The Cheviot* represents a world (actually several 'worlds' performed in different ways, denoting different times and places) which the characters often perceive from political points of view. The filmed inserts in *The Cheviot* use conventional television naturalism, with individuated characters in historically appropriate costumes and settings, often speaking dialogue deriving from authentic period documents. The television version's form of critical naturalism is designed to represent a coherent world, but, unlike television naturalistic fiction, this form shows characters working through their reality from political positions, and reinforces this with occasional narration. Psychological motivations, and conflicts between emotions such as greed and sympathy, are significant. This form is the one with which the television audience is most familiar, providing a recognisable environment into which characters are placed. But character is used as a vehicle for exploring ideas, and not for its own sake as often seems the case in television fiction, and not only for the sake of involving the audience in a story. In this sense, the apparently conventional reconstructions in *The Cheviot* return to the original radical purposes of naturalistic form, in exploring the contradictions of social issues, in a way which might now be termed realist.

The second sense of political drama describes an active relationship between the performance and the audience. Political drama would be a performance which produces political effects in and for the lives of the audience. *The Cheviot* engages and changes the audience in this sense, in two different ways since there are two audiences to consider: the television audience and the represented theatre audience. In order for such a relationship to be constructed, the audience needs to be able to decode the play's dramatic form, and relate its concerns to their own experience and ideas. It is here that levels of competence are important, and both theatrical and television drama is notoriously prone to the twin pitfalls of preaching to a converted audience, or failing to engage an audience lacking in the competence to recognise the modality of the play's treatment of political issues (political theatre in the first sense). The devices in the television *Cheviot* of framing Scotland in the discourse of an other (the astronauts in the opening sequence, for instance), then adopting a discourse attributed to the Scottish people and offered back to them in a dialogue form (the stage narrators), and finally presenting the voices of the Scottish people by quotation or the representation of historical characters (reconstruction) are techniques used in the play both to foreground the authentic and the inauthentic discourses which frame Scottishness, and also to make the position of the television audience mobile. Thus the audience can be at any particular time in an excluded position, an aligned or identifying position, and a fully participatory position. The drama is composed of mixed discursive registers whose mixing is itself a

representation of the diversity of discourses which shape Scottishness both from within and from outside. The dialogic form of the drama engages the audience in the question of how Scottishness is itself not an object, but a process of contested definition within the ongoing dialogues that constitute the historical process itself. Since Scottishness is the product of an ongoing dialogue, Scottishness is open to change through the agency of voices empowered with discursive forms and information. The object of the play is of course to enable such agency, by drawing on the agencies of the performers, writer, director, television broadcasting institution, and the television audience.

Political drama can also denote a performance in which performativity, the fact of representing in the medium of drama, is foregrounded. The audience would be engaged in a self-conscious process of questioning their own modes of understanding dramatic representation, and questioning their assumptions about what the theatre or television media might be. A high level of competence is required for this kind of political drama, and works which undertake to explore it are often those most valued by academic theorists of television drama, and least watched by mass audiences. As Irene Shubik, producer of *Play for Today* wrote in 1975, a year after the screening of *The Cheviot*,

it has always been the straightforward documentary-type subject which gets the highest audiences, while the more adventurous a play is "stylistically", the smaller its audience is likely to be. One can certainly conclude (if one did not know it already) that the majority of people favour the familiar and expected over the new and unusual - why else would *Coronation Street* and *The Archers* run successfully from here to eternity?¹⁷

But *The Cheviot* combines an intellectual Brechtianism with a popular pantomimic form of performance, in order to separate and comment on performer and role, and on discourses of power and discourses of resistance, in ways which potentially foreground the fact of drama as itself political discourse. As Colin McArthur has noted, performance in *The Cheviot* is crucial to its connection with the audience through songs and sketches, but those performances are subservient to a political narrative.¹⁸ This third, reflexive understanding of political drama is an important ground for the citation of McGrath's work in Television Studies, for it opens the possibility of self-consciousness about the medium of television performance. McGrath, along with other writers like Troy Kennedy-Martin and Dennis Potter, have been concerned with the Modernist exploration of television dramatic form in this sense, as John Caughie's recent book, which reconsiders his earlier work on *The Cheviot*, shows.¹⁹

Who is speaking?

Developing the question of precisely how the politics of McGrath's work can be understood, especially in terms of its engagement of the audience, can be assisted by thinking through its dynamics using a theoretical problematic developed unevenly and self-contradictorily by Mikhail Bakhtin.²⁰ Bakhtin writes about the novel rather than drama, and focuses on internal difference in its apparently unified form. His

work is significant for Television Studies because television theorists have shared with Bakhtin a concern to demonstrate and value internal difference within the apparently unified form of television programmes. Whereas non-academic discourses about television (such as journalistic reviewing) have valued coherence and unity in television programmes, academic discourses have sought out difference and discontinuity. Reference to Bakhtin can therefore provide terms for considering how the necessarily discontinuous discourses of drama (evident especially in dialogue) work in television. This matter of dialogic difference within a television programme is particularly significant to McGrath's work, since it is dramatic and dialogical, yet aims to give a coherent voice to the people represented in it and to whom it is addressed. Bakhtin defines dialogism as the incorporation of different registers of style into a text in order to represent different kinds of social speech. He hesitates between three different positions regarding the functioning of dialogism. In the first position, the text draws on a living heteroglossic speech of the people which precedes the text. Theoretically, however, this produces a problematic a priori 'nature' of popular discourse and makes the writing that comprises the text an other to living speech. In this first view, writing can only ever be secondary and imitative of the social realities it aims to represent. This is an inadequate explanation for how television might engage with its audience in a dialogic process, since television is not a lifeless copy of what it shows, but is part of the dialogue that comprises social activity. Television has an agency and a 'writing' of its own, as McGrath and many other writers and creators have been aware.

Bakhtin's second view is that the text creates the being of an apparent living discourse from which it is composed, and contrasts one kind of discourse with another within the text. Here there is no a priori antecedent discourse of the people. But the only way of discerning heteroglossia is to recognise the boundaries separating one discourse from another. The different discourses must be in some way already known to the reader or television viewer so that they can be recognised. The prior origin is still there, and is located in the reader/viewer who is able to recognise and confirm it. It is this second type of dialogism that Caughie describes amid his discussion of *The Cheviot*.

it may be politically progressive to confirm an identity (of sexuality or class), to recover repressed experience or history, to contest the dominant image with an alternative identity'.²¹

In order to recognise the 'identity' which a television drama might 'confirm' (for example a forgotten and repressed Scottish resistance to empire, British hegemony and ruthless capitalist exploitation), the discourse which embodies it must be already available in some potential form among its audience. Furthermore, such a discourse would be recognised in distinction to another, probably hegemonic discourse which has mastered it hitherto. The presence of a progressive dialogism in the text is predicated on its pre-existence among the possible discourses of its audience, and the dialectical counterpoint in which it is articulated in the text. This formulation works well as an explanation of how McGrath's drama can function to address specific audiences with discourses that empower them to think their lived experience in alternative ways, and thus provide possibilities for political agency arising from that empowerment. But theoretically it raises another question, about where that

alternative discourse recognised by the audience and already existing in its store of forms of articulation comes from. The origin and life of popular discourse has been displaced from the text to the audience, but its presence there still needs to be explained.

Bakhtin's third co-present theory of how popular discourse works in narrative texts is the most sophisticated and interesting, and corresponds most closely to current deconstructive thinking about the dynamics of meaning circulating between author, text and audience. In this third formulation, the languages of the text are more accurately quotations of other pre-existing social discourses which are inscribed in conventional written and spoken forms: discourse is already 'scripted' before it becomes living speech. In this view, it is textuality which creates the possibility of knowing and recognising a discourse as discourse. As Jacques Derrida argued, writing creates the possibility of speech, or to put it another way, meaning creates the possibility of articulating.²² As Bakhtin wrote of the novel form: 'the "already bespoke quality" of the world is woven together with the "already uttered" quality of language, into the unitary event of the world's heteroglot becoming, in both social consciousness and language'.²³ Following this theoretical approach, which is different from McGrath's own stated view of his work, his representation of popular discourse is not a re-presentation of 'the people' and the living reality of their discourse, but a production of the people's discourse and their history. McGrath's 1987 television programme *There is a Happy Land*, was precisely a history of the Gaelic language in Scotland over 2000 years, represented partly through the songs attributed to Gaelic folk culture during that period, engaging in a complex way with the issue of the authenticity of Scottishness and also its construction as a concept within and against neo-colonial domination. A play like *The Cheviot* has a producing and constituting function rather than a mirroring function, for part of its work is to produce and constitute the people, their history and their speech as that people, that history and that speech.

This understanding of television drama considers it as a political and theoretical intervention, as both practice and theory, for it stresses not only what is articulated in a play but also how it is said, to whom, and to what effect. However, a further question remains. For if *The Cheviot* is a production which constitutes its audience rather than reflecting it, how can its political responsibility (the productiveness of its dialogue with its material and its audience) be judged? If there is nothing beyond the text but what that text has enabled to come into being as a recognisable people, discourse, or history, there is no pre-existing subject or historical reference against which the text can be measured. It would seem that the rug has been pulled out from under political television drama, and the kind of relativism bemoaned by critics of deconstructive, post-structuralist and postmodern theory has evacuated the possibility of political action. The answer to this question is that this paper, the texts citing McGrath which I have cited, and the numerous other texts citing McGrath which I have not had the space to mention, show how his work has been disseminated at least among students, teachers and commentators. It would be possible, but beyond the scope of this paper, to explore the citation of McGrath in other texts and dialogues, in theatre for example, or among producers of popular television series. The measure of the responsibility and effectiveness of McGrath's work can be shown by its insemination into discourse, and its pervasive presence as a citation, an intertext and an example. It is the dissemination of contributions such

as McGrath's to these different and active dialogues that (paraphrasing Robin Nelson's final words) enable debate to continue.²⁴

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Endnotes

¹Jonathan Bignell, Stephen Lacey and Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh, 'Editors' Introduction to Part II' in Jonathan Bignell, Stephen Lacey and Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh (eds) *British Television Drama, Past Present and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 81-92.

²See, for example, Bob Millington and Robin Nelson, *Boys from the Blackstuff: The Making of TV Drama* (London: Comedia, 1986), John Tulloch and Manuel Alverado, *Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1983), John Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1990), and Jonathan Bignell, Stephen Lacey & Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh (eds), *British Television Drama, Past Present and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).

³ Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981).

⁴ John Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1990); John Caughie, 'Progressive Television and Documentary Drama', in Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd-Bowman, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Television and Film: A Reader* (London: Open University Press/BFI 1981), pp. 327-52, originally published in *Screen*, vol. 21 no. 3 (1980), pp. 9-35.

⁵ John Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 167-8, ellipses in original.

⁶ Derek Paget, *True Stories: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 167.

⁷ John McGrath, 'TV drama: the case against naturalism', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 36 no. 2 (1977), pp. 100-5; John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form* (London: Methuen 1981).

⁸ A key statement of this position is David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁹ I have discussed this issue in relation to postmodern theories of media in Jonathan Bignell, *Postmodern Media Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

- ¹⁰ McGrath, quoted in John Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 171.
- ¹¹ John Tulloch, *Television Drama: Agency, Audience and Myth* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 242, quoting John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 71.
- ¹² John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form* (London: Methuen 1981), p. 112.
- ¹³ John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form* (London: Methuen 1981), p. 110.
- ¹⁴ John McGrath, 'TV drama: the case against naturalism', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 36 no. 2 (1977), p. 102.
- ¹⁵ See John McGrath, 'TV Drama: Then and Now' in Jonathan Bignell, Stephen Lacey and Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh (eds) *British Television Drama, Past Present and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 48-53.
- ¹⁶ Jonathan Bignell, 'Trevor Griffiths's Political Theatre: From *Oi For England* to *The Gulf between Us*' in *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 10 no. 37 (1994), pp. 49-56.
- ¹⁷ Irene Shubik, *Play for Today: The Evolution of Television Drama* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), p. 179.
- ¹⁸ Colin McArthur, *Television and History* (London: BFI, 1978).
- ¹⁹ John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- ²⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (ed. M. Holquist, trans. M. Holquist & C. Emerson, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- ²¹ John Caughie, 'Progressive Television and Documentary Drama', in Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd-Bowman, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott (eds), *Popular Television and Film: A Reader* (London: Open University Press/BFI 1981), p. 350; originally published in *Screen* vol. 21 no. 3 (1980), pp. 9-35.
- ²² See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. G. Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- ²³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (ed. M. Holquist, trans. M. Holquist & C. Emerson, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 331.
- ²⁴ Robin Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 248.

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