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From Programme to Program:  
A Narrative Study of Recent British Television and American Remakes

Epigraph: “Most other countries tend to make shows about attractive, witty people in nice rooms, whereas we in Britain like shows about ugly people being nasty to each other in the rain.”

- Steven Moffatt

Television history is littered with unsuccessful American remakes of British television shows. In trying to explain why, most critics focus solely on sitcoms and consequently attribute this track record of failures to cultural differences in what people within each country find funny. Few consider dramatic remakes, and even fewer have taken into account how the formal standards of television narrative in each country might be a factor in the struggle to translate British shows for American audiences. In fact, by analyzing how serial television narrative operates in these individual cultures, we may actually get a more informed sense of why comedy hasn't crossed over consistently.

The recent emergence of a number of remakes of varying success presents an opportunity for such analysis. Accordingly, this paper will compare and contrast a pair of recent American remakes and their British originals, focusing on their formal dimensions of narrative construction. Are the basic narrative and character formulas in these shows similar or are there significant, and even patterned, contrasts? What industrial, cultural and other factors might explain any formal divergences? In exploring these questions, this paper will try to unlock some

central questions about television storytelling and the relationship of narrative structure to culture and industry.

I will begin by establishing a few issues at stake in doing this analysis, and then in the latter half of the paper, I will briefly analyze two programs: the sitcom *Coupling* and the crime drama *Touching Evil*. (I also looked at *Queer as Folk* and *The Office* but had to cut them for time, so we can discuss them afterward). I am aware of some of the potential drawbacks of this approach: these shows are not necessarily representative of either television system, my narrative readings could be mainly subjective, plus my access to British television is limited to DVDs and American channels like BBC America and PBS. However, my intent here is not to put forth definitive conclusions about British and American television but instead to raise exploratory questions, since the opportunity to discuss this topic at a transatlantic conference is invaluable.

While only a handful of scholars have looked closely at the challenges of adapting British television fiction for American audiences, most notably Jeffrey Miller in his book *Something Completely Different*, it is a frequent topic in journalistic circles, where critics frequently explain the many failed translations based on fundamental differences in what dominates on television screens in each country. Generally speaking, it's said that American dramas and sitcoms tend to present gorgeous celebrities enacting fast-paced narratives in glossy settings, whereas British programs offer more 'ordinary-looking' actors in gritty settings, with grimmer and more deliberately paced stories. UK comedies are thought to be darker and rooted in farce, in contrast to American sitcom humor, which is supposedly light and punch-line driven. As far as characters, British programs are said to focus more on failures, deluded losers, and sad people fraught with anxiety, rather than the gallant, self-confident heroes ostensibly preferred by American audiences. Overall, American comedy and drama is considered more universal and

adaptable to mass tastes, hence its dominance in the global export market, whereas British programs are more distinctive and niche-oriented.

Setting aside for now whether or not these broadly drawn assertions are actually true, and as far as transnational adaptations are then concerned, Jeffrey Miller argues that programs “can indeed travel when the norms of the culture producing the...text are recognizable to the culture receiving it—or when those norms can be translated into terms addressing the social and historical utterances of that culture.”<sup>1</sup> I would add for consideration to this another set of norms, and that is norms of industry, meaning the industrial conditions behind the production of sitcoms and dramas, especially because these are not often raised as a key factor in the challenge of transnational remakes. Yet they are crucial to an informed understanding of why any television story is told as it is. For instance, American network television programs must form the narratives of individual episodes into tightly structured scheduling slots and around commercial breaks, as well as organize their season-long story arcs around such necessities as sweeps weeks. Similarly, as Jeffrey Sconce argues, “If a series is to succeed for hundreds of episodes” – the primary goal for American network television – “it must feature an appealingly familiar yet ultimately repetitive foundation of premise and character relations.”<sup>2</sup>

Comparing these characteristics to, say, the BBC, we can see evident contrasts: the BBC does not interrupt programs with commercials, and partly because of that, it also offers a more flexible scheduling structure for programs. Additionally, British terrestrial television in general is not organized around the September-to-May 20+ episode season structure as is American broadcast television. With the notable exception of the soap opera format, sitcoms and dramas in Britain largely operate as short-run series, with only six episodes making up a “season”’s worth of a sitcom or twelve episodes making up an entire drama series. We should thus assume that

these behind-the-screen aspects would also result in divergent modes of storytelling. As Russell Davies, the creator of *Queer as Folk*, said of the American remake at its inception, “The most important thing is to think of the U.S. version as a new show, a different show. Even before they’d written a word, a twenty-two episode series [and at this point it’s now a 70-episode-and-counting series] is a profoundly different thing, a different concept, to an eight-parter.” Similarly, whereas Davies wrote each of the eight first U.K. series episodes of *Queer as Folk* before one even aired and knew while writing them that the first series would be entirely contained within those eight episodes, writers for American network programs in particular can’t plan for a certain twenty episode cycle, because a show could be cancelled at any time, but they also can’t tie up all narrative threads at the end of twenty episodes, because the show could potentially run for years.

And we can add to these examples any number of significant industrial differences: the dominance of the pilot system in the US, for instance, or the differences in budgets available to create shows, or the contrast between team-writing and the use of spec scripts for sitcoms in the US versus the individual, more auteur-driven writing model in Britain. We might even look at some of the contrasts outlined above in this light: the difference between glossy and gritty can certainly also be understood as the relative difference between high budgets and low budgets. And the disparity between intricately structured farce and punch-line based humor could be rooted in part on individual versus team-based scriptwriting. We can also correspondingly think of how audiences then become accustomed to particular national storytelling standards of this sort. And I believe that we can see some of these very differences in the paired versions of *Coupling* and *Touching Evil*.

A sitcom based around the sexual adventures of six friends in London, *Coupling* premiered its six-episode first series on BBC2 in May 2000. These episodes and the three series that subsequently followed it were written by Steven Moffatt and produced by his wife, Sue Vertue (incidentally, the series, particularly the relationship between lead characters Steve and Susan, is roughly based on incidents from their own relationship). NBC decided to adapt the show for its prominent Thursday night line-up in Fall 2003, and groomed it as a replacement for the soon-departing *Friends*. This was seemingly a logical choice, as many considered *Coupling* to be a British version of *Friends*. As you all probably know, however, *Coupling* became one of the most notorious flops in recent television history, as only four episodes made it to the air. Much ink has been spilled in trying to determine why the show failed so miserably, but for the purposes of this paper I'm less interested in that issue than in the evident formal differences between the two versions.

The very first of the eleven total episodes shot, the pilot, actually went unaired. It was adapted by Steven Moffatt himself and even helmed by the program's original director, Martin Dennis. NBC executives, however, were unhappy with how the pilot turned out; one source claims that they felt it was "too British," giving no explanation of what that might mean, while another claims that it was too sexually explicit for network television. Whatever the reason (and unfortunately, the episode is nowhere to be found for analysis), two actors were replaced, Martin Dennis was sent home, and Steven Moffatt was marginalized in the writing process, as creative control shifted into something resembling the typical American team-writing approach, supplemented by the inevitable "notes" from network executives.

And despite its identification as a British *Friends*, Moffatt thought of *Coupling* as quite unlike a typical American sitcom: "it's not gag-driven, there are no jokes per se. The laughs in

our show are about context, about what's happening, who said it and why...[American sitcoms are] very wisecrack driven, we're very farce driven." And in fact, each British episode's narrative structure is key to its effect, and any modification of that carefully written structure would fundamentally alter the nature of the story told. A narrative comparison of the American episodes that were adapted from the British scripts illustrates exactly that. Each is cut down from approximately 29 commercial-free minutes to 23 commercial-accommodating minutes of narrative content, the pacing of each scene is increased, and much of the tangential narrative action is pared out. But while some of these discarded moments are peripheral to the core story being told, they do relate to core themes threaded throughout each British episode.

For instance, the third episode of the British *Coupling*, entitled "Sex, Death and Nudity," constructs a plot organized around the theme of personal repression in the face of potential public humiliation. The American adaptation cuts out a few brief moments that are thematically, if not narratively, relevant in the original, breaks the flow of one scene in half to insert a commercial break, and most crucially changes the ending gag from one that closes off the farcical trajectory in an ironic way to one that instead delivers a striking, racy punchline (a character yells out the word "nipples" after a moment of silence). As such, it's less a tale of the spiraling impact of repression and more a fast-paced romp through a set of interrelated gags.

In considering the reasons behind these changes, a number come to mind: stereotypically, the theme of social repression may resonate more in British culture than in American culture, making the moments that relate to it in the original relatively extraneous in light of the need to cut out nearly six minutes for American television. The legacy of farce and its intricately structured plots in British performance traditions is also quite strong, whereas American television humor in particular has always been based more around the set-up/punchline mode.

Further, the fact that Steven Moffatt himself constructed this story around his own experiences and then had it recrafted by a group of writers trying to thread punchlines onto a narrative skeleton and thereby satisfy a network's demands certainly had an impact. This is especially relevant when we consider that NBC chose to market *Coupling* to the public not as a show that challenged American standards of television storytelling but as one that broke boundaries of the discussion of sex on broadcast television, and thus it is not surprising to see the American episode end with a character exclaiming "nipples," rather than the mere inappropriate laughter elicited in the British version. I don't want to argue that the American version is necessarily less funny than the British one or poorly written in comparison, or that such changes are why it failed exactly, just that it is notably different in these ways.

At the very least, we can see that the adaptation of *Coupling* was fraught with a number of challenges. One might assume that these challenges are especially heightened for the sitcom format, given how crucial basic elements like timing can be for comedy and since humor is often connotative of culturally specific social tensions. This makes the American adaptation of the British crime drama *Touching Evil* particularly interesting, since one might assume that the show and its genre would offer a simpler translation process than with *Coupling*. Plus, it was transplanted from one commercial channel, ITV, to another, the basic cable channel USA network. However, the changes that *Touching Evil* underwent were still substantial.

*Touching Evil* premiered on ITV in April 1997, and its first two series, aired one year apart, consisted of six one-hour episodes, with three plotlines each contained within two-episode chunks. The program was devised by Paul Abbott, previously lauded for his work on the landmark crime drama *Cracker* (incidentally, another failed American remake) and acclaimed more recently for the hit *Shameless*. *Touching Evil* focuses on David Creegan, a detective for the

fictional Organized and Serial Crime Unit in London. The narrative premise is that Creegan has just returned from an extended medical leave, courtesy of a gunshot wound to the head that left him clinically dead for ten minutes. Creegan survived this near-death experience with his detecting skills actually heightened but with a similarly increased level of anger, ruthlessness and anti-social behavior. *Touching Evil* ran for three series in Britain, and its American remake was picked up by the USA Network for a spring 2004 airing, where it completed its contracted 13-episode run but was not renewed for a second season.

The necessity of adapting these two-hour storylines into a one-hour time slot presented the first major hurdle: either the plotlines are drastically condensed in the American episodes or, more frequently, the British version's multi-layered stories are divided across separate episodes. Correspondingly, the American episodes are much more singular in their narrative focus, and as a result, and in a striking similarity to the *Coupling* adaptations, thematic parallels especially get dropped in the translation. For instance, the British version's central conflict essentially circulates around the moral ambiguity of Creegan's particular brand of relentless justice. This idea is then thematically developed across multiple episodes and even among multiple characters. In pulling apart otherwise united storylines, the American version often drops particular linking events and character actions and instead just isolates the key narrative touchstones necessary to tell the basic thread of a particular story. The traditional argument might be that the American version thus "dumbs down" the more complex British stories for less patient American audiences, but a more focused narrative does not necessarily mean a more simplistic narrative. Furthermore, this transposition can just as easily be viewed as inevitable when taking a tightly woven multiple-episode, short-run story arc and draping it onto individual episodes for an intended long-running series.



Similar demands alter the methods of delivering Creegan's backstory. For instance, the American pilot episode opens with a depiction of Creegan's shooting and subsequent brief death. We then learn shortly thereafter of the exact behavioral effects that this event has had on him. In contrast, the British version does not present the shooting until a flashback that appears well into the third episode, and it never does detail the particular maladies that linger for Creegan. These are left unspoken for the viewer to infer based on the narrative action presented across multiple episodes. But it is imperative for the initial episode to contain all of this information within the American system, since the pilot must set forth the basic template for the series, thereby allowing network executives to envision whether or not the show has long-term potential and viewers to decide if they would be willing to invest months in viewing the program.

I believe that these pressures for a long-running series also affected the nature of Creegan's character in the American version. Not only are Creegan's behavioral tendencies explicitly specified in the USA version, but they are also strikingly different than those of the British Creegan. CLIPS (can skip for time) Whereas the British Creegan is largely a brooding, morose loner who internalizes his emotions, the American Creegan is a rather wacky loose cannon who literally lacks a sense of shame (actually a medically accurate symptom of his particular brain injury), telling this to his partner while stripping his clothes off during an airline flight. Later episodes also saddle Creegan with a history of seizures and limited peripheral vision in his left eye. Such personality specificities are ideally geared to the demands of a long-running series, which requires an explicitly repeatable foundation with the potential for novel variations. In fact, Jeffrey Donovan, the actor who portrayed the American Creegan, describes his character along these lines: "[My character] can say anything and do anything he wants, which is different than what [actor Robson] Green did [in the British version]. That's what is going to make our

show distinct from the British version. We are really going into the psychological defect of a frontal-lobe injury from a gunshot, *and it plays out in each case.*” The more limited story arc of the short-series British version did not place such demands on its main character; rather than repeatable characteristics, the British Creegan has more ambiguous traits that slowly unravel across the series run.

These are likely not the only catalysts for the differing versions of Creegan, however. Casting could also have a significant impact (and many said that this was the fatal flaw for the American *Coupling*). Plus, one could argue that the brooding internality of Green’s Creegan is more specific to British culture, or alternately, that Donovan’s Creegan is more of a traditional American hero, externally confident and repeatedly triumphant despite his emotional deficiencies. More concretely, *Touching Evil* was intended as a third counterpart to two USA Network hit shows, *The Dead Zone* and *Monk*, both of which featured so-called “defective detectives,” and a thematic unification with those shows would require the specification and even the marketing of Creegan’s particular quirks. Unfortunately, while *Touching Evil* did earn critical accolades, it did not achieve *Monk*-like ratings, and the show was cancelled after its initial run. As with *Coupling*, I can’t necessarily argue that either the particular changes I’ve discussed or the lingering vestiges of the original were what doomed the show. However, there is a certain awkward dissonance between the American Creegan’s flaky personality and some of the horrific narrative events and troubling moral dilemmas faced by his character, which are transferred intact from the British version.

With that in mind, I’d like to conclude with assistance from a quote by Jeffrey Sconce about the distinctive balance of repetition and variation in television series narrative: “The true art in the algebra of televisual repetition is not the formula but the unique integers plugged into

the equation.” This metaphor also applies nicely to transnational remakes, where the art would seem to be in successfully translating those integers while still keeping the equation intact. Of course, there are no repeatable equations for the successful television narrative, and the vast majority of all programs that are devised, both national originals and transnational remakes, ultimately fail. But it does seem obvious that the farther apart a culture and industry fundamentally are, the more complex the translating algebra can get.

In that regard, we might see some intriguing developments in the near future. For the past decade, it’s been argued that British television is becoming “Americanized,” culturally, industrially and narratively; however, it’s also possible that with the rise of such technologies as DVRs and video-on-demand, American network television in particular will become “British-ized,” at least industrially, with the potential abandonment of the traditional year-round season and the growth of short-run series. This change is well underway on American cable television and has helped to produce a set of dramas and sitcoms that themselves contrast with traditional American fare. For network television, then, perhaps these changes will help to bring about an age of more successful British remakes. We might even someday see an NBC sitcom about ugly people being nasty to each other in the rain.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Sconce, “What If?: Charting Television’s Textual Boundaries,” in Lynn Spigel and Jan Alsson, eds. *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 100.