

‘Structures of Alignment: Jack Regan on screen and page’

Paper delivered by **James Zborowski** at ‘*You’re Nicked!*’ *The Sweeney and Crime Drama in British Film and Television*, University of East Anglia, 21.9.2012

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A resource that I’ve often used in undergraduate teaching is Henry Jenkins’ 2006 book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. One context in which I’ve used it is a module on television drama, and the chapter I used was ‘Searching for the Origami Unicorn: *The Matrix* and Transmedia Storytelling.’

Early in that chapter, Jenkins offers this preliminary definition of transmedia storytelling:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best - so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction.

The case study that I was concerned with when I set this reading for students was the work of Joss Whedon. As many of you will know, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Firefly*, as well as being television shows, also have existences in the worlds of film, comic books, tie-in novels, games, and so on. But before there was what some call a Whedonverse, there was, something that we might call - but probably shouldn’t - a ‘Sweeneyverse’. *The Sweeney* television series that sits firmly at the centre of that multimedia text was preceded by an Armchair Cinema single

play, *Regan*. And whilst the television series was running, there were ancillary texts including ten tie-in novels, two films, and at least three *Sweeney* ‘annuals’, seemingly aimed at a juvenile audience, which I’m infinitely grateful to Network for reproducing as pdfs on the ‘definitive collection’ *Sweeney* box set.

The two sets of texts that I’m going to focus on today are the television series and the series of tie-in novels. And within them, the thing I’ll be focusing upon is the representation of the character of Regan.

But before I get to this paired case study, I need to take a detour through some narratology to lay some groundwork. Let’s go back first of all to Henry Jenkins’ words. Jenkins suggests that ‘In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best.’ Later in the chapter, Jenkins does elaborate a little on what he means by this, but he continues to take it rather for granted that there are things that particular media ‘do best’, and that identifying what these things are isn’t too much of an aesthetic or philosophical difficulty. Jenkins is running the risk of medium essentialism here, and ignoring the vast amount of ink that has been spilt on the question of, as Seymour Chatman put it, ‘What Novels Can Do That Films Can’t (And Vice Versa)’, and so on. In the time available to me today I can only offer the most cursory sketch of this debate, but I hope it’ll be enough to set up what follows, and I’ll of course be happy to refine my points in conversation and debate afterwards.

Let’s start with something ostensibly simple and build outwards from there: the optical point of view shot, a device we’ve probably all seen used thousands of them in our careers as film and television viewers.

As Murray Smith notes in his book about characters in film fiction, ‘Optical POV shots have always held a privileged place in discussions of “identification” in film [...] POV shots are considered to have a special effect in drawing us into the subjectivity of character, regardless of context.’

I agree with Smith’s argument in that book that it’s short-sighted and misguided to give optical POV shots as central a place in a poetics of filmic character subjectivity as they often have been given. Such a manoeuvre dooms films to failure in comparison to the resources of literature from the outset. It leads to the overvaluing of experimental failures such as Robert Montgomery’s 1947 film *Lady in the Lake*, a film composed almost entirely of optical POV shots. In most films, POV shots comprise a tiny proportion of running time, and also a tiny proportion, insofar as it is possible to quantify and separate out such things, of the ‘subjective access’ we are granted to characters.

Film, and I’m talking here for the next couple of minutes *especially* though not exclusively about classical Hollywood cinema, gives us access to characters’ thoughts and feelings in a range of ways. I suspect that what often lurks behind the prizing of the POV shot is a rather forced analogy, explicit or otherwise, with first-person or character narration in novels. I’ve come to believe that a more profitable analogy might exist between the free indirect style often employed by novels and the *mise-en-scène* of a certain type of film.

In novels employing free indirect style, the narrator is not a character within the fictional story being told. However, the narrator has the ability to report on the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist, and often other characters too, and there’ll often be a blending of the voice of the narrator and a given character, so that the

prose either ventriloquises the character, or takes on some of the flavour, if you like, of their thoughts.

I think we can see something similar going on in classical Hollywood cinema, and it's something that's particularly prominent in the melodramatic mode, a mode to which one could argue all classical Hollywood cinema belongs, depending on how one defines the term. The quasi-symphonic score, the decor and the angles from which it is filmed, the lighting... all these things can indirectly articulate elements of the characters' experiences and at the same time articulate an authorial figure's perspective on those experiences. They *tell* us about the characters without the characters being the ones doing the telling. This mode is, I think, one of the fundamental achievements of classical Hollywood cinema, and its descendants working in the same mode.

The important point to make here, as I start to move back to *The Sweeney*, is that whereas free indirect style is easy to do in prose, even if it's not necessarily easy to do *well*, it requires ingenuity, time and money to do the analogous thing on screen. And when we look at *The Sweeney* and read some of the key documentation relating to its production, we see that its aesthetic energies were directed elsewhere. Before I carry on I should try to make abundantly clear that I'm not trying to denigrate *The Sweeney* for not doing something that it was almost certainly not trying to do anyway. What's at stake here is not a comparative evaluation between *The Sweeney* and classical Hollywood cinema, but rather an attempt to understand how the reader or viewer relates to characters presented within different aesthetic modes.

In their indispensable book *Made for Television: Euston Films Limited*, first published in 1985, Manuel Alvarado and John Stewart reproduce the production

format document that outlined the template for and the restrictions upon *The Sweeney*. Here's a brief extract that's relevant to my argument:

This series is based on the use of a film unit which moves very quickly across a number of locations. The nature of our film operation itself very much determines the style of our films. In general terms, we can cope with action more readily than we can with multi-handed dialogue. Unlike television, where extensive rehearsal facilities and the use of several cameras for any given scene enable fairly complicated sequences involving several actors to be staged quite easily, we have to light every shot individually for one camera. Also we cannot enjoy the luxury of extensive rehearsal. This makes complicated dialogue comparatively difficult for us.

On the other hand, the mobility of our equipment and the sophistication of our editing and dubbing techniques allow us to produce action sequences which can attain a considerable degree of pace and excitement. (p61)

So the decision being described here is that resources are being directed towards location shooting, which achieves an important authenticity of a certain kind, and towards action sequences, which provide pace and excitement, and not towards creating elaborately scripted and edited scenes of character interaction.

OK, I now want to make good on two deficiencies in the paper so far. I haven't yet shown a clip from the series, and I've also been ignoring the matter of performance and how that gives us information about characters, even if a melodramatic mise-en-scene is not present. So, first I'm going to show the two minute clip that marks Regan's first appearance in the first broadcast episode of the

series *The Sweeney*, then I'm going to read you a short extract of Regan's first appearance in the first *Sweeney* tie-in novel, then I'm going to compare the two.

Show clip

Read extract:

Detective Inspector Jack Regan, Flying Squad, sat in Gennaro's restaurant in Soho and watched his Scallopini Marsala go cold. He had ordered it. He couldn't eat it. He was thirty-six. He'd been eighteen years on the piss. But never ever a night like last night.

All he remembered was the full bottle of Jack Daniels which he'd seen off in the opening two hours of the Flying Squad Ball at Grosvenor House. He remembered that label, but not the others. And the hell of it was that he wasn't a drunkard. But just being around his colleagues socially made him nervous. And he'd worked out why last night. Before he went on to whatever it was after the Jack Daniels. What made him nervous around his colleagues was that they respected him, and he did not respect them. And that he had realised for the first time last night, and it was a hell of a lousy discovery. (p6/7)

No doubt we could spend hours comparing these two moments, and we'd all have different things to say. The first thing I'll say is that I know which version of the character I'd rather spend time with, in a fictional or non-fictional context. This is relevant to other observations I'll make shortly. I'm going to organise what remains of this talk under three loose headings: 1. Screen versus page. 2. Television versus novel. 3. Personnel and performance.

So, 'Screen versus page'. In the novel extract we just read, we learn the first things that we learn about Regan by overhearing a modified interior monologue, in which Regan is brooding over the fact that he is respected by but respects none of his colleagues. This is indicative of a key narrative device in the three *Sweeney* novels written by Ian Kennedy Martin. We spend a lot of time following Regan's train of thought, and very often it's a misanthropic train of thought about how he is contemptuous or dismissive of almost everyone he meets.

Now, I don't want to deny the importance of the fact that a novel is particularly well-equipped to deliver this kind of brooding interiority, or of the fact that Regan's silent contemplation creates an interesting parallel with the activity of the reader. Similarly, those two minutes of screen time I just showed you do things that screen fiction is well-equipped to do. We jump quickly between characters and locations, which do not have to be named or described because the viewer can individuate them just by looking, and we start to get to know characters by watching them engage in everyday acts. But equally, there's nothing about the two media that makes these choices inevitable. A novel could describe Regan going about his daily activity more from the outside, as it were, and a television show could begin with a focus on Regan alone and thinking, using several techniques at its disposal. I think that in order to arrive at a fuller explanation of the differences between the two texts, we need to move beyond a simple 'screen versus page' distinction. So onto 'television versus novel'.

I want this distinction to capture not only differences of aesthetic properties derived, one might say, philosophically, but also the differences that arise from the different contingent cultural forms that television programmes and novels represent. That is, novels are generally written by one individual and then consumed by other

individuals, one at a time. Television programmes are invariably produced by a collective and generally consumed in groups, or at least in the knowledge that absent others are watching at the same time. More stringent restrictions of duration, format and censorship also apply in television. And ideally, in the case of a *series* like *The Sweeney*, it's a text, and a *relationship*, that viewers will feel compelled to return to week after week.

So what are the specific implications in this case of these general notions? The key point for my argument is that a novel can probably accommodate a misanthropic brooding loner more easily than a television series can sustain such a character type. In their different ways, the television scholars John Ellis and John Hartley have argued that television as a industrial and cultural form favours the group and the ensemble, and tends to teach its viewers in a range of ways to be more sociable, accepting of difference, and so on.

When the television series and novels have been briefly compared and contrasted in academic sources and on fan websites, the antagonism and suspicion in the novels versus the 'very good relationship', to quote the production format document once more, between Regan and Carter is frequently emphasised as a key difference. Richard Paterson, on the basis of interviews conducted with creative personnel, observes that:

the original competitiveness could not possibly be maintained over a whole series and was therefore dropped; in fact the relationship between Carter and Regan became such an important feature of the series that a detail of the squad room routine was altered. They were speaking so often in the

Squad Room that Carter's desk was placed with Regan's, whereas Detective Sergeants would in fact keep to the reserve room.

Episodes of the series almost invariably revolve around a collective effort by the Flying Squad, 'the Sweeney'. In the three novels written by Ian Kennedy Martin, Regan tends to work alone. In two of the novels he goes overseas, in the second to New York and in the third to France - something that the television series would have struggled to achieve within the joint constraints of its location shooting aesthetic and its budget.

I'll move on now to my last topic, 'personnel and performance.' A third way of explaining the differences between the television series and the novels centres upon the creative figure of Ian Kennedy Martin. Kennedy Martin created the series and wrote the screenplay for the Armchair Cinema pilot, *Regan*. However, well-documented differences of opinion between him and Ted Childs meant Kennedy Martin parted ways with the series at an early stage - though he always retained a prominent credit as the text's creator, of course. So in addition to the differences between screen and page, and between television and novels, a third layer of explanation that we might want to add is that the Regan of the first three novels, which Kennedy Martin wrote, is closer to his original conception of the character than what the character became on television. We might also speculate that there could be a metafictional commentary of sorts going on here, with Regan the embattled authentic figure in a bureaucratic police force standing in for Kennedy Martin the embattled writer who left the show he created due to a dispute with its producer. But I wouldn't want to linger too long on such a line of thought or lend it too much weight. I will add as a final note though that the importance of this issue of writing personnel is partially confirmed when we dip into one of the other six novels

in the *Sweeney* series, written not by Kennedy Martin but a writer with the pseudonym Joe Balham, and see Regan enjoying a more productive and convivial relationship with Carter and others than he does in Kennedy Martin's novels.

I want to end by talking about John Thaw. Until Ray Winstone burst onto our screens last week, Regan shared a body exclusively with John Thaw. In the television series, there is an ongoing low-level discourse about how Regan's job is taking its toll on his body and spirit. In the single play *Regan*, his ex-wife tells him that he's thirty five but looks forty five. In the novel and television extracts we've just seen, there is a shared reference to excessive alcohol consumption. Various people in the television series accuse Regan of being a 'bastard' of various kinds, and he repeatedly acts in an extremely calculating and cold-hearted way in his pursuit of villains.

However, if Thaw played Regan on the constant-verge of near-apoplexy that we witness in the novel, I suspect he would have died of a heart attack within the first year of the series. I've often thought that Thaw's relatively slender frame offsets the gruffness and roughness of his character in an important way. And although some of the broad contours of Regan's 'cold-hearted bastard' character are consistent between television series and novel, what's crucially lost in the latter is the warmth and twinkle that Thaw's embodiment of Regan offers in a series of quiet, throwaway moments. In what we just watched there's the playfulness of the hand under the duvet, for example. Regan's sexual encounters in the novel are a good example of the lack of humour that characterises the novels as a whole. Like his encounters with his colleagues and villains, his encounters with women tend to be neurotic. They'll either appear to him as the answer to all his problems or as disposable trash. By contrast, time and again in Thaw's performance, a gentleness breaks through, whether he's spending time with a lover or comforting someone recently bereaved. In a way, by

talking about characters embodied in flesh versus characters made up of words, we've come around full circle to philosophical aesthetic questions about medium specificity, so I think here is a good place to stop.