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# Cultural and Structural Change in Irish Television Drama

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**Edward Brennan**

## A dominant ideology in RTÉ?

According to Devereux (1998), RTÉ drama, and RTÉ television in general, excludes society's powerless. This is, in his view, a result of the ideology of RTÉ drama producers. Devereux's research on RTÉ drama concentrates on *Glenroe*[1]. It states that *Glenroe* fails to represent adequately those who are marginalised in Irish society. In passing, Devereux mentions some material and organisational constraints which may help to explain why this is so. However, disregarding these constraints, he argues that the ideology of RTÉ producers is the real reason for the exclusion of society's powerless from television drama:

> The limitations and possibilities of *Glenroe* all boil down to the kinds of decisions made amongst the programmes makers. There is no real reason other than perhaps an ideological one which is preventing the series from placing either a traveller or unemployed character at the centre of the programme... (Devereux, 1998: 124).

In his conclusion, the financial difficulties faced by RTÉ merely occupy the background and do not explain the 'ideological decisions' made by RTÉ producers (Devereux, 1998: 146). RTÉ television is described as ideological, that is, it 'facilitates... the continuation of capitalism' (1998:146). It does this, chiefly, by portraying poverty as the plight of feckless or unfortunate individuals. Poverty is, in Marxist terminology, abstracted from its causes in society's economic base. However, Devereux is guilty of a similar sin in his portrayal of RTÉ producers. By describing RTÉ producers as being free to make ideological decisions, he abstracts the occupational culture of RTÉ producers from its social and historical determinants. He provides 'the description of an ideological process, but not an explanation of why or how it takes place, except in tautological terms' (see Garnham, 1986: 17).

Cultures are embodied histories. These living histories, which we carry within us, are moulded by material necessities past and present (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). As such, the occupational culture of RTÉ drama producers can not be understood without addressing RTÉ's history and the numerous constraints that act upon the organisation. Beyond this, each programme department and genre will have its own unique set of historic conditions, and so we can not expect to find a single monolithic culture within RTÉ.

Devereux also infers that the ideas and intentions of drama producers are reflected perfectly in the dramas on which they work. Drama is not shaped ultimately by the occupational culture of drama producers. All television production is an emergent, negotiated process carried out by heterogeneous production teams (see Elliott, 1972; Millington and Nelson, 1986). It is equally shaped by social, economic and technological processes, which are beyond their control. This article looks briefly at the occupational culture of RTÉ drama producers and some of the constraints that affect their work. It attempts to demonstrate that the culture underpinning the professional practices of drama producers is clearly linked to processes in a broader socio-technical environment (see Law, 1991: 9). This piece is based upon preliminary research on RTÉ television drama.

## Television drama as the economic world reversed

The immense diversity of television content and culture is seldom recognised (see Newcomb and Alley, 1982). Even when discussing television producers as a group, it is necessary to be aware of the many types of work and culture that exist among them.

1. *Glenroe* is a long running soap opera set in a small rural community within Dublin's hinterland. It is unusual in that it has continuity in characters, families and so on from two preceding soap operas, *The Riordans* and *Bracken*.

Tunstall describes how television producers 'tend to be locked into a genre-specific world'. Their work, and even leisure time, is often entirely devoted to their particular genre (Tunstall, 1993: 2). Each television genre possesses its own conventions, challenges and rewards.

Television drama, like every other genre, possesses peculiar qualities. It is a particularly interesting genre for study. Firstly, despite its political significance, drama has been understudied in comparison with news and current affairs. Secondly, drama is currently making a transition. In the recent past drama was a non-commercial genre but today it is recognised as one of the greatest potential growth areas in commercial television (The Film Industry Strategic Review Group, 1999: 16).

In the past television drama has come close to Bourdieu's description of the field of cultural production as the economic world reversed (Bourdieu, 1993: 29). The field of cultural production is chiefly the domain of the 'dominated fractions of the dominant class' (Marx, 1845: 303; Garnham and Williams, 1986: 126-7; Bourdieu, 1993: 38). It belongs to those who make their living through the generation of ideas rather than by making an active contribution to material production. Class is a field of struggle, and in this struggle cultural producers often try to undermine the dominant fraction of their class by decrying wealth, which they lack, and extolling the virtues of culture, in which they abound. As a result of this struggle, cultural production is the site of a 'double hierarchy' (Bourdieu, 1993: 37-8).

The field of art may serve as an example. Put simplistically, the field is split between those who value, and are valued for, the possession of culture or those who value, and are valued for, the possession of money. To be an artists' artist one must be loyal to the field of art, producing art for arts' sake, eschewing financial gain and so on. Others may opt for pursuits held to be vulgar in the eyes of purists, most notably the pursuit of money. The field is split between these autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchisation. Bourdieu describes the criteria of art purists as 'degree specific consecration', i.e., recognition by purist artists, critics, gallery owners and so on. These criteria are peculiar to the field of art. If art were free from considerations of money and power these would be the ultimate criteria for success in the field. Ideally, this is a social field where the loser, in terms of economic capital and political power, wins, thus the field resembles the economic world reversed. Art of course can never be divorced from power or money. Both principles of hierarchisation will continue to coexist, with artists being more or less puritanical, depending on how autonomous they are from the influence of political power and economic pressure.

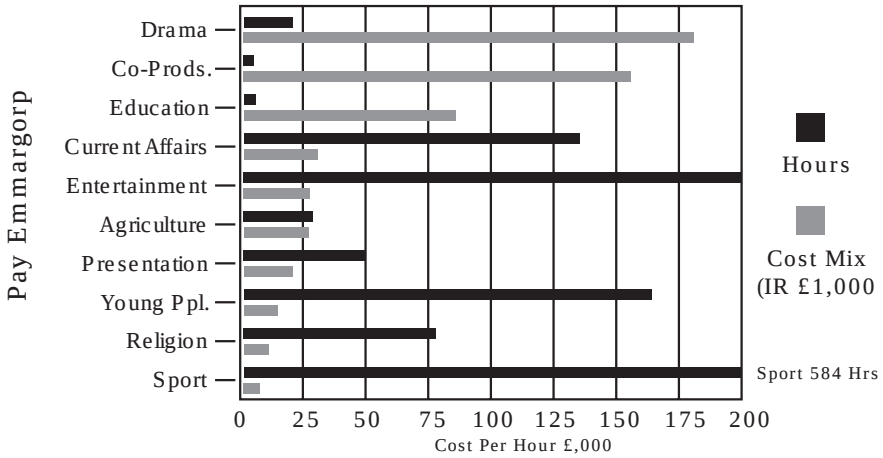
There is a double hierarchy in television drama. The nature of television largely prevents the creation of 'art for art's sake'. Within either commercial or public service broadcasting there must be an audience. Although television drama producers may not make purely disinterested art there remains a conflict between autonomous and heteronomous principles of hierarchisation. Whitemore who sees a rigid structure of distinction within the genre reflects the autonomous hierarchy of television drama.

> At the top are the aristocrats of the single play, then come those who work on prestige serials, followed by the manufacturers of the popular series, with soap opera labourers languishing at the bottom. Somewhere in the middle – the equivalent of skilled plumbers, perhaps or electrical engineers are those who make dramatisations and adaptations (Whitemore in Self, 1984: 1-2).

For purists, the one-off or single play is the flagship of television drama. It is an authored product, the creation of a single producer, allowing the greatest scope for self-expression. The single play is championed as a proving ground for young writers and directors. It is the *avant-garde* of television drama and as such is seen as a source of innovation in form and content.

**FIGURE 1**

**COST MIX OF HOME PRODUCED PROGRAMMES**




(Source: Stokes Kennedy Crowley, 1985: 44)

As can be seen in figure one, in 1985 RTÉ drama had the highest production costs per hour coupled with the lowest number of output hours. While purist drama may be prestigious, it is highly unprofitable. Commercially, single plays are bad news. Generally, they do not attract large audiences and they do not promote repeat viewing. The interests of purist drama producers are opposed to those of advertising and sales and, sometimes, senior management. As predicted by Bourdieu's double hierarchy, many drama producers prefer to put artistic values and innovation ahead of profit.

> We've tried awfully hard but we haven't been able to save the single play, because everybody who does my job would rather have single plays - that's where the new series ideas come from - but the Director of Programmes finds it risky, and the Director of Advertising Sales hates them; they'd rather have an ongoing success (BBC executive producer in Tunstall, 1993: 123).

## The producer as artist

RTÉ drama producers are managers. They manage budgets, cast, crew, directors and so on. In many respects they are like artists (see Newcomb and Alley, 1982: 88). Like many artists, drama producers display a sense that something inexplicable called them to television drama. Their work may be as much of a vocation as a job. The producer of a long-running RTÉ drama series described this.

> I got involved [in drama production] simply because I actually like it. I was always interested in it. Forty years I've been interested in it, from the time I started working with amateur drama and things like that. I don't think you can articulate it really. There's an instinct or there's something that you feel. I suppose, in a way, it's like asking a painter why do they like to paint, or asking a poet why do they like poetry. You know, it's because you have to do it (Producer A).

This sense of a personal calling contributes to a strong, individualist culture among drama producers. The fact that drama production is seen as individual work is an integral part of a producer's experience of RTÉ. The power possessed and employed by producers, lies with individuals rather than groups. The effectiveness of individual power is heightened by the importance of informal work practices within RTÉ.

## Power through informal strategies

Drama has traditionally occupied a weak position within RTÉ because it has generally lacked the financial attractiveness of other genres such as sports or young peoples' programmes. RTÉ drama producers lack power within the organisation. Many producers hold that drama is traditionally the first to suffer in budget cuts. Despite this relative lack of power, drama producers fall back on a number of resources that, occasionally, allow them to realise their intentions in spite of opposition.

Underlining the individualistic and character orientated nature of their work, producers stress how they rely on 'powers of persuasion', 'social skills' or the ability to 'sell' their ideas to department heads. This is an integral part of a producer's job. These struggles to sell or push programme ideas often take place informally. An ex-RTÉ drama producer described some of the informal methods employed in trying to sell a programme.

> You would have a pet project that you wanted to do; you would talk to the Head of Drama. You could have a meal with [the Head of Drama] and keep pushing pushing pushing and eventually he might say yes or he might throw you out. And you did an awful lot of that. You did your own pushing if you wanted to do something. And sometimes you'd go over the Head of the Department (Producer B).

Given the historically weak state of public and private revenue possibilities in Ireland, RTÉ has always lacked funds and facilities (Edwards, 1973: 105; Savage, 1996). There is a constant struggle among programme makers for crews, equipment and studio time. Producer B, again, described an incident where he by-passed procedures and authority to win studio time for his dramas. During the 1960s, a drama was refused production due to union difficulties.[2] This resulted in a four-day gap in the studio schedule.

2. The union objected to the inclusion of cast members who were not resident in Ireland.

> So I would watch the dates and sort of say 'right there's two days down for a studio play' or 'three days' or 'one day'. At one point I found four days and I couldn't believe this... I said 'Terrific! Four-day slot now we can do a big play.' I walked in to the Controller's office and I said 'I'd like to do either *Yerma, Hedda Gabler or Richard III*.' And he said 'oh let's do *Richard III*.' And I said 'Great, thanks a lot!' and was out the door. I was in and out in five minutes. I went back to whoever was Head of Drama and I said 'I've got the commission, I've spoken to him (Controller of Programmes). We've got the clearance, we're doing *Richard III*' (Producer B).

It is clear that television programmes are not shaped entirely from the top down; conflict and negotiation mould them. Conflicts arise between producers and crew and also between producers and managers (see Elliott, 1972: 11-12). These conflicts may take place in formal or informal contexts. A central means of resistance for drama producers lies in the use of such informal strategies. Among respected purists, the possession of high levels of cultural capital may allow them to exercise a degree of power by taking an aloof stance as practitioners of a somewhat mystified art.

## 'Good drama' is socially relevant

Drama has a potential similar to what Mills referred to as the 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959: 5). It can link personal experiences and social processes, the everyday and the broad sweep of historical events. Drama may mobilise concern about, and engagement in, social problems by connecting social processes to the personal experiences that they influence. Producers see this as a most important aspect of their work.

Producer C said he would like to see RTÉ drama about the 'existential angst of Irish capitalism, worked out in terms of marriage breakdown'. Producer A cited Arthur Miller's play *All My Sons* as a piece of exemplary drama. The play deals with industrial malpractice, which rebounds devastatingly on the personal life of the man who perpetrates it. *All My Sons* was regarded as a great play, in part, because it linked the personal and the social. Producers see this linkage between individual characters and a broader social whole as a fundamental part of making good drama. This adds an undoubtedly political element to drama production, which producers are well aware of. All drama, according to Producer A, is 'subvertly political'. That is not to say, however, that producers are free to promote their personal politics through their work. I now turn to the type of politics which producers are likely to want to express in that work.

## Producers and social issues

Generally drama producers have ambitions beyond making money and staying on the right side of those in managerial or political power. 'Good drama' is not seen to depend on political or economic acceptability. A production considered to be a good drama need not have been a financial success. Often drama is admired precisely because it challenges dominant views of society.

Notably, producers cited *Glenroe* as being a quality drama and one that has consistently made sympathetic representations of Irish travellers. Rather than being seen as token characters, travellers in *Glenroe* are seen as an intrinsic part of the show. Producer D commented that '*Glenroe* for example has a long tradition of representing travellers which actually extends back to *The Riordans*; it's been a kind of preoccupation'. It was generally felt that the representation of travellers was biased, but biased in providing an unrealistically rosy picture of traveller life. It was noted that travellers were far more integrated into village life and were far more numerous, in *Glenroe*, than is typical of an Irish setting. According to Producer A 'If you wanted to take it on the pure figures, the number, I mean to have two traveller families in a cast of about twenty is numerically well above what they should be'.

Despite a small number of complaints from academic researchers concerning negative representations of travellers, the majority of complaints come from the general public and are very different. Producer D explained:

> RTÉ is usually criticised by the public, and certainly in terms of the letters that I get on drama, about our dramas. You know by a margin of 99 times out of 100 the public's complaints are why are travellers represented sympathetically.

Despite criticism from audience members, producers have persisted in maintaining the sympathetic portrayal of travellers. Devereux claims that producers are ideologically motivated in misrepresenting travellers and really only care about entertainment and ratings (Devereux, 1998). If this is so, audience complaints beg the question, why do producers persist in representing travellers at all? They see a value in representing travellers, which goes beyond a populist commercial logic. Producers also spoke of their own concerns about social issues, which were being overlooked in RTÉ drama. They mentioned a number of forms of social exclusion concerning disabled people, women, young people and also xenophobia. They said that such issues should have a stronger presence in television drama.

## Exemplary programmes

Television programmes are cultural resources. They embody the culture of the society in which they were created and they serve to reproduce this culture (Sewell, 1992: 13). Programmes which are recognised admired and emulated by drama producers, provide an important insight into the occupational culture that underlies the

practice of drama production. The programmes regarded by producers as being exemplary, again, point towards a concern with social issues and individual experiences of them. Among the programmes mentioned most frequently as being exemplary drama productions, were *Strumpet City*, *Family*, *The Ballroom of Romance*[3] and *Fair City*. Both *Strumpet City* and *The Ballroom of Romance* dealt with political and social issues, albeit retrospectively. *Family* was a short drama series co-produced by RTÉ and BBC. It represented the contemporary problems of social exclusion and domestic violence. Despite the fact that the programme deals with uncomfortable social issues, it is a highly valued cultural referent among producers of drama in RTÉ. Producer D commented that '*Family*... was very uncompromising. It was a brilliant piece of work and I think it is the one project which I'm proudest that RTÉ, during my period, was associated with'.

3. *Strumpet City* addressed poverty and industrial strife in turn of the century Dublin. *The Ballroom of Romance* dealt with religious and sexual conservatism in Ireland.

Producers praised *Fair City* as a show that had improved considerably. It was praised for dealing with issues such as homophobia and marriage breakdown. Producers expressed high regard for a lot of British drama. Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Black Stuff* was frequently mentioned. Producer B described this drama series, which dealt with the plight of the unemployed in Thatcherite Britain, as 'one of the classics of all time'. Generally the dramas considered to be exemplary dealt with major social issues and their impact upon a group of characters. If these exemplary dramas are regarded as resources which shape the occupational culture and practice of RTÉ drama producers, it is increasingly difficult to support the view that there is an ideological consensus within RTÉ drama which leads to the exclusion of social problems.

## An alliance of position

It appears that drama producers, in fact, have an interest in representing minority issues. RTÉ drama producers display an active interest in promoting the interests of groups who are pushed to the fringes of society, such as travellers, homosexuals, poor people, refugees and racial minorities. RTÉ is Ireland's dominant media organisation. Drama producers are a dominated fraction within the organisation. The way RTÉ producers see and understand the role of good television drama suggests an alliance of position between these dominated cultural producers and subordinate groups in society overall. This is based on a homology of social positions (Bourdieu, 1985: 735-7).

As a dominated fraction of the dominant class, drama producers identify with other dominated groups in society. The organisational position of drama producers in RTÉ is homologous to that of minorities in society as a whole. Similarly shaped social relations give rise to similar mental schema. As dominated groups they both struggle for greater recognition and power. This homology of social position predisposes drama producers to sympathise with those who are dominated in Irish society. They aim to make culture a social priority over money and aspire to ally with the dominated and excluded in society. This does not imply radicalism or altruism. If a dominated fraction of the dominant class is to achieve greater power, this can only be done in alliance with other subordinated groups (see Marx, 1852: 121-2).

## Constraints

Despite the liberal/centre left culture which exists among RTÉ drama producers there are still criticisms of RTÉ drama for failing to address important social issues. The inability of RTÉ drama to tackle social problems to the satisfaction of commentators is less a product of the occupational culture of producers than it is of other structural constraints. This section briefly points out some of the constraints that exist for producers of drama in RTÉ.

RTÉ, compared with multi-national conglomerates or even neighbouring British stations, is a financial minnow. This is partially a legacy of Ireland's past. The creation of Irish broadcasting soon after independence was politically necessary but economically

punishing. Like Radio Éireann before it, RTÉ was inaugurated with misgivings from the Department of Finance. Under its framework legislation, *The Broadcasting Act 1960*, RTÉ has to pay for itself with no final cost to the exchequer. The small size of Ireland's potential advertising market, high rates of licence evasion, the inefficiency of the licence collection system, among other reasons, have led to economic constraints on RTÉ. This is reflected in the attitudes of RTÉ's drama producers.

Cost and commercial viability were a concern for most of the producers interviewed. While producers may want to have better sets, better lighting and so on, the issue of cost must come first if they are to keep their jobs.

> There's a load of things that I would like to change in *Fair City*. There's loads of production values that I would like to increase or make better. But I mean I am extremely pragmatic when it comes to the actual production of something like *Fair City*. I think that it has to have a cost effectiveness, I think it is only valid in the schedule if it is cost effective (Producer E).

Cost effectiveness is a concern for all in RTÉ but it is particularly salient for drama producers who have traditionally been at the thin end of any wedge of budget cuts.

## Programme slots and programme ethos

Producers did not generalise about audiences wishing to avoid unpleasant social problems on television. Instead, they paid more attention to the position that a programme occupied in the weekly television schedule. A programme slot corresponds with the size, composition and viewing behaviour of an audience. The importance of the slot is evident when comparing *Glenroe* and *Fair City* and the way in which they both address social problems.

Producer E thought that *Glenroe* tended to take a softly, softly approach to issues while *Fair City* was more realistic and direct. *Glenroe* was described as having a different ethos to *Fair City*. The ethos of *Glenroe* was seen to be a direct consequence of *Glenroe* being transmitted at half past eight on Sundays.

> There is a very different feeling about *Glenroe*. I mean I've always maintained that the feeling of *Glenroe* is that we're watching it on a Sunday night. We want to know that before we begin the week, all is right with the world. And if all is right with *Glenroe* then all is right with the world. We can go to work on Monday morning, you know? Whereas what *Fair City* is basically saying is that everything is not all right with the world, and this is what's wrong, and this is what's right. And people are dying of AIDS, people's marriages are breaking up and people do become poor, and *Fair City* tries to deal with that (Producer E).

## Production technology and the representation of social issues

The coverage of social issues is also related to production technology. RTÉ drama is currently dominated by the station's two soap operas, which are shot on multi-camera video. Video is relatively cheap. It allows saturation lighting of a set and so does not require careful lighting for each individual shot. Video allows producers to 'churn it out'. Drama produced on video is generally intended for domestic audiences.

Film is much rarer in RTÉ. It is very expensive not only because it costs more to process and edit but it also takes longer to shoot. Each shot must be lit separately and often only one camera is used. This requires a lot of time and a large number of highly trained technicians. Film has been used by RTÉ in its police dramas *Making the Cut* and *District Detective Unit (DDU)*. Both were produced with the expectation of overseas sales.

Production technology can affect the issues that a drama may address. As Producer F put it, 'If you look at it from a purely economic point of view the more money you spend, the more comfortable a slot you want. The one that is going to get the high return tends to be a conservative slot'. Accordingly, expensive film productions are not as likely to upset or challenge the audience. Also, film productions, given their added expense, often necessitate co-production finance. This may reduce RTÉ's control of the production and so reduce the specifically Irish issues that it may address. Film productions may represent important social issues; for example political corruption and xenophobia were major themes in *Making the Cut* and *DDU* respectively. Film does, however, introduce commercial pressures that do not exist for video. As Producer F said, increasingly 'issue driven' drama is more likely to be produced for non-prime time slots using new cheap video technology.

## A transformation among RTÉ drama producers: no longer the economic world reversed

Whitemore's hierarchy was inspired by the BBC, where a robust drama department is sub-divided into sections for single plays, series, soap opera and so forth (Self, 1984). It does not accurately reflect, and never has accurately reflected, the professional culture of drama producers in RTÉ.

In the earlier years of RTÉ drama, this hierarchy could have been used, loosely, to describe the views of RTÉ drama producers. Hilton Edwards, RTÉ's first Head of Drama, imported a purist drama culture into RTÉ by recruiting staff whom he personally respected for their dramatic work. Producer B who was recruited by Edwards epitomised a purist view of drama. During his time as an RTÉ drama producer the most important aspect of a drama production for him was the artistic merit of a screenplay. In the 1960s, Producer B said, viewing figures were never a consideration for him. What mattered was making a competent and faithful production of a screenplay.

There was a desire among such drama producers that they should be producers of drama alone, and that television drama should stand separate from other genres. There was a struggle among producers to develop an autonomous space for drama within RTÉ. They wanted to specialise in drama as others specialised in sport, news or current affairs. RTÉ drama never did achieve the degree of specialisation, or separation from other activities, suggested by Whitemore's hierarchy or Tunstall's view of separate genre worlds (Tunstall 1993: 2).

> We all tried to hold on to our autonomy within the drama department. The way it would work, you would get a memo or you might not. You might even just get a phone call, to come over and talk to the Controller and be sent to a particular department, for the year or for a series. And you may regard yourself as firmly entrenched in the drama department but that's [rubbish]. You'd finish up doing something like Shakespeare and be told 'well we need you to do *Garda Patrol* next week', (Producer B).

Although there is scepticism about the so-called 'golden age' of RTÉ television drama it is undeniable that the volume and diversity of drama activity in RTÉ declined dramatically in the late 1980s. By 1990, RTÉ's Drama Department had ceased to exist as an independent department. It had been merged with Variety Television. The battle for drama's autonomy had been lost.

Contemporary drama producers are quite different. Increasingly, knowledge of television, rather than knowledge of drama, is prized among contemporary producers. They harbour artistic aspirations like earlier drama producers. Many aspire to producing single plays. They think that drama is socially important, and believe that marginalised issues should be represented in television drama. They also, however, have

a keen sense of the *realpolitik* of contemporary drama production. They operate with a far less purist view of television drama. They have adjusted to what appears to be inevitable task flexibility within RTÉ. They do not see any room in RTÉ for 'loveys', people who may see that some programmes are below them because they are 'drama producers'. The schedule, location of a programme, and good Nielsen ratings, are automatic considerations for today's producers. Where soap would have been considered an anathema by purists, as the backbone of RTÉ drama today, it is now seen to be a perfectly valid dramatic form. Co-productions are recognised as a necessary part of making quality drama; 'it is a good way of doing business'. Some traces of theatrical culture survive: contemporary producers, like those in theatre, still compete for individual recognition rather than seeking to be recognised as good team players. Despite this, the purist approach to drama is gone.

## Power, career paths and institutional memory

Theories of 'self censorship' assume that past sanctions imposed for programmes deemed inappropriate, by management or government, are embedded in an organisation's informal institutional memory (see Kelly and Rolston, 1995: 580). Such events enter the culture and practices of an organisation and so deter staff from similar transgressions. Organisational culture is a living history, where events in the past, consciously or unconsciously, continue to affect perceptions and practices in the present. Within RTÉ's organisational memory, it appears that what is remembered and how it is remembered depends on the career path a producer has taken through RTÉ. *The Spike* provides an infamous case of censorship in RTÉ. The programme was critical of educational policy, religious orders and Irish nationalism. It provoked considerable public controversy. It is to be expected, following theories of self-censorship, that *The Spike* has entered into RTÉ's organisational memory deterring producers from revisiting this type of production. *The Spike* was discussed by a number of producers but its significance varies greatly among producers depending on their career paths.

Producer B mentioned *The Spike* as a famous production that had run into a lot of trouble. He thought it had been good because it had attempted to criticise the educational system within a drama series. There were, he admitted, some deficiencies in the writing of the programme. As far as he was concerned, pressure from teachers, the clergy and the government led to the programme being pulled. Producer A shared this view. According to him, *The Spike* received hate mail and massive, extremely negative press coverage. Producer C described his memory of the programme:

> *The Spike* was a very gritty slice of life shot in Ringsend school using the real pupils. Again that caused trouble and was taken off the air. So basically RTÉ gave in, in the seventies, to religious pressure and political pressure.

Producer E also mentioned *The Spike* briefly but as far as he was concerned the programme had been blocked solely because it had contained a nude scene. Producer D had a very different view of *The Spike*. According to him, there was no problem with delivering uncomfortable or radical messages through drama but it had to be done subtly and skillfully. He made a direct comparison between Roddy Doyle's *Family* and *The Spike*: both had similarly contentious content. *Family* was a commercial and critical success whereas *The Spike* was pulled after three episodes.

> It's the cackhandedness, it's ...just bad drama, the ineptitude of *The Spike* that sank it. If you take Doyle's thing (*Family*). Think of all that he touched, no problems ultimately from the public. No problems at all. That was because Doyle understands that less is more. The thing about some of these things that have gone to ground is just that they are so ... badly done. If you want to be radical you've got to be clever. That's the other side of it. I mean anybody can ... shock. But it's a

> skill to do it and to lay the punch with people going 'what ...was that'? But to come in ...flailing around and maybe land one or two half blows and people say 'ah what's ... he at? It's to hit and be out before people realise what is going on (Producer D).

Many producers placed the fault clearly at the feet of management who were trying to appease the powers of the day. As far as Producer D was concerned, the programme was pulled because it was plainly inept.

Career trajectories, in shaping an individual's organisational experience, have an effect upon organisational memory. There is a politics of memory within an organisation. Positions and interests not only shape perceptions of the present but also the significance of the past. *The Spike* was, for producers rooted in a purist drama culture, a failed piece of social commentary and creativity tampered with by those who did not understand it. For producers adhering to a more general television culture, *The Spike* was either inappropriate or just bad television. Self-censorship then is problematic. Events do not simply enter into a collective memory. Institutional memory itself is representative of, and a site of, power struggles within the organisation.

A purist drama perspective was strongest among those producers who entered RTÉ in the sixties and did not rise above the level of Head of the Drama Department. A more generalist view of drama was prominent among those who entered the organisation after the 1970s. Their careers spanned general production and in some cases included high management positions in television. It appears that higher managerial positions correspond with a less purist and more depoliticised view of drama. A purist drama culture has been replaced by a more heteronomous culture, which is adjusted to the demands of an increasingly harsh broadcasting environment.

## Occupational culture and environmental change

This rapid cultural change is by no means confined to RTÉ. Siune and Hultén have identified similar changes across Europe.

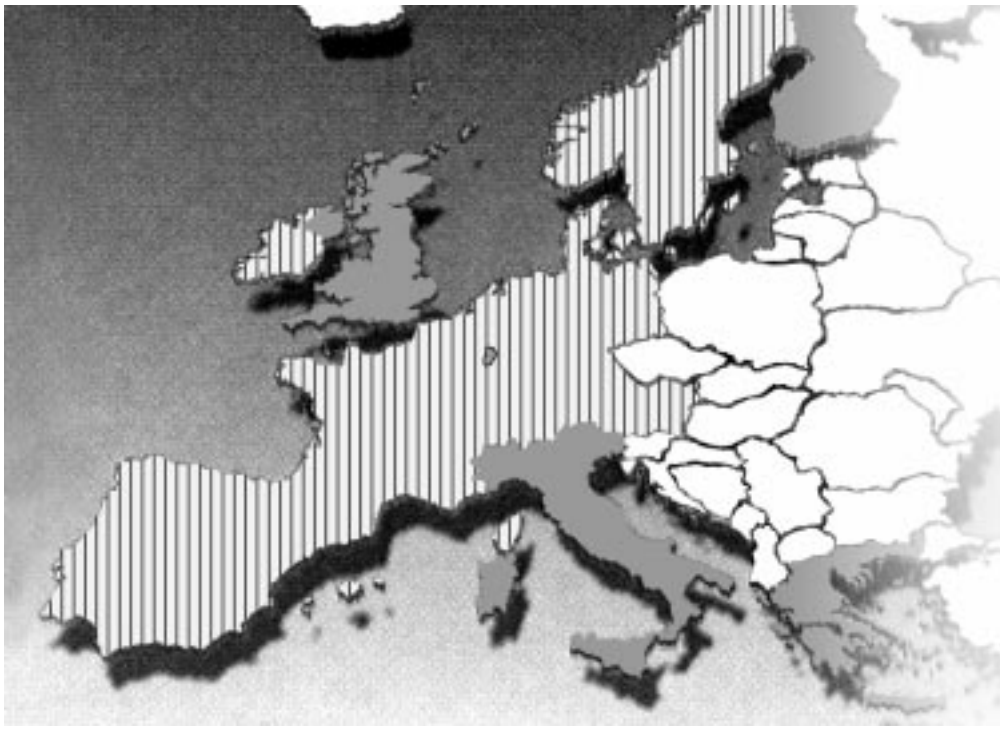
> Drama and fiction, flagships for public service broadcasters, are still as important, but today single productions of the classics, opera and ballet are rarely found. There is more contemporary fiction, as a rule offered in serial productions (Siune and Hultén, 1998: 29).

The primary reason for this change lies outside RTÉ in a recent pan-European wave of change in technology, politics and commerce. Constraints of space do not allow a detailed discussion of the precise transformations that have taken place. Something, which is symptomatic of this transformation on the whole, however, is the explosion in commercial channels received by European audiences. This is visible in figures two and three.

The recent transformation in the occupational culture of RTÉ drama producers mirrors this broader shift in the broadcasting environment. There is a common tendency to address such a movement by applying Gresham's law to culture, where bad television, i.e., commercial television, simply drives out the good, public service broadcasting. This can not be accepted at face-value and poses a number of important questions. Is the proliferation of commercial television eradicating the elements of producer culture, which in the past have promoted the representation of society's marginalised? Is the creative role of television producers being eroded to the point where they are simply manufacturers of generic 'content'?

The liberal/centre left perspective of RTÉ drama producers is derided by Marxist commentators as being piecemeal, and so compatible with a capitalist hegemony. Following Garnham, if we are more practical, and less utopian, the resistance of a dominated fraction of the dominant class is preferable to the emergence of a cultural

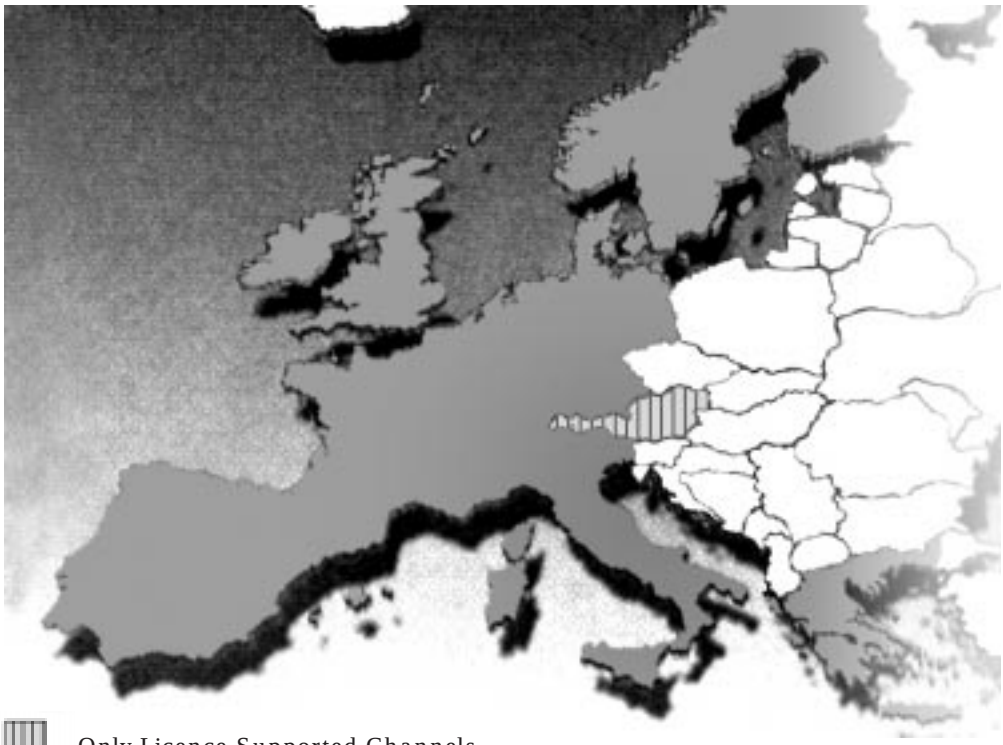
## FIGURE 2
## WESTERN EUROPEAN BROADCASTING 1983



Only Licence Supported Channels

Mixed Commercial

## FIGURE 3
## WESTERN EUROPEAN BROADCASTING 1993



Only Licence Supported Channels

Mixed Commercial

(Source: Humphreys 1996: 200-1)

proletariat (Garnham, 1993: 187-9). There is a need to investigate whether recent changes in dramatic form and content, and producer culture signal a move towards apolitical, commercially driven 'content' manufacture. There is also a need to know if new formats and production practices remove the informal 'action channels' (Ettema, 1982: 94) previously available to RTÉ drama producers. Marcuse described late capitalism as a one-dimensional society (Marcuse, 1964). Are we nearing such a society where opposition is made impossible by the internalisation of apparently inevitable economic realities? Will we end up with television that has commercial dividends as its only yardstick of quality, to the detriment of public welfare? Is commercial logic the new common sense of RTÉ drama? These issues will be addressed in forthcoming research.

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