Same Address, Different Doors: Post-Heritage Deconstruction of the Heritage Household in *Upstairs Downstairs* of the 1970s and the 2010s

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**Abstract**

This article offers a ‘post-heritage’ reading of both iterations of *Upstairs Downstairs*: the London Weekend Television series (1971-75) and its short-lived BBC revival (2010-12). Identifying elements of subversion and subjectivity allows scholarship on the LWT series to be re-assessed, recognising occasions where it challenges rather than supports the social structures of the depicted Edwardian past. The BBC series also incorporates the post-heritage element of self-consciousness, acknowledging the parallel between its narrative and the production’s attempts to recreate the success of its 1970s predecessor. The article’s first section assesses the critical history of the LWT series, identifying areas that are open to further study or revised readings. The second section analyses the serialised war narrative of series 4 of LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs*, revealing its exploration of female identity across multiple episodes and challenging the notion that the series became more male and ‘upstairs’ dominated as it progressed. The third section considers the BBC series’ revised concept, identifying the shifts in its main characters’ positions in society that allow the series’ narrative to question the past it evokes. This will be briefly contrasted with the heritage stability of *Downton Abbey* (ITV1, 2010-15). The final section considers the household of 165 Eaton Place’s function as a studio space, which the BBC series self-consciously adopts to evoke the aesthetics of prior period dramas. The article concludes by suggesting the barriers to recreating the past established in the BBC series’ narrative also contributed to its failure to match the success of its earlier iteration.

**Keywords**

post-heritage, heritage, period drama, culture, history, subversion, subjectivity, self-consciousness, studio, BBC

Katherine Byrne’s analysis of Edwardian period drama of the twenty-first century identifies the double nostalgia it evokes: ‘these historical fictions are not only nostalgic for this golden era of British history … but also for the “golden age” of period drama on television: the 1970s’ (2015a: 36). Nowhere is this more relevant than in the BBC’s revival of *Upstairs Downstairs* (BBC One, 2010-12), a sequel to the London Weekend Television series of the same name (ITV, 1971-75), which is set between 1903 and 1930.[[1]](#endnote-1) The BBC series resumes the narrative in 1936, when a new family takes over the original series’ Eaton Place household, intending to return it to its Edwardian heyday and strictly delineated social structure. Concurrently, the series itself strives to recapture the tone and popular success of the nostalgically remembered LWT series. Both the narrative attempt to recreate the 1900s and the production’s attempt to recreate the 1970s are doomed to fail, with the respective socio-cultural conditions of the 1930s and institutional conditions of 2010s television making the re-established structures impossible to sustain. While the 1930s narrative facilitates a complex investigation of the past, the institutional context – including the perceived requirement to match the popular success of *Downton Abbey* (ITV1, 2010-15) ultimately led to the BBC series’ cancellation after only nine episodes. Nevertheless, the use of double nostalgia by *Upstairs Downstairs* makes it worthy of scholarly study beyond unfavourable comparisons to *Downton Abbey*. This article therefore offers a revised reading of both the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* and its 1970s predecessor from a post-heritage critical perspective, identifying their overlooked progressive aspects.

The concept of a post-heritage approach to period drama is established by Claire Monk, who categorises ‘an emerging strand of period/literary films with a deep self-consciousness about how the past is represented’ in the 1990s (2001: 7). This responds to the work of Andrew Higson, among others, on heritage films, which display the past as ‘visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively’ (2006: 91). Following Monk’s intervention, Higson has acknowledged that heritage films are ‘ambivalent enough to be read in both ways, perhaps even at the same time’ (2003: 85). I have elsewhere proposed post-heritage as a critical perspective, establishing a framework through which to ‘evaluate a drama’s political and ideological point of view’, ‘acknowledge the diverse possible interpretations of period drama productions’ and ‘identify the elements of period drama that encourage cultural critique, even if they do not constitute the dominant ideology of a given production’ (Abbiss, 2019: 2). I suggest the five guiding elements of the post-heritage framework are interrogation, subversion, subjectivity, self-consciousness and ambiguity, which overlap and hold different levels of emphasis in various period drama productions (ibid.: 4-8). In the following analysis of the two iterations of *Upstairs Downstairs*, particular attention will be paid to aspects of subversion, through which the associations of the central ‘heritage household’ are undermined, opening up its space to marginalised groups (ibid.: 5-6). The BBC series’ use of self-consciousness will also be considered; this element acknowledges *Upstairs Downstairs*’ historiographical function and its connection to the LWT series, establishing it as ‘an interpretation refracted through the attitudes of the period it was made in and thus acknowledging the impossibility of complete authenticity’ (ibid.: 7). It is important to reiterate that these elements may be present in productions with a dominant heritage point of view, such as *Downton Abbey*, and can also be identified in productions prior to Monk’s coining of post-heritage (ibid.: 12), including LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs*. The post-heritage approach will therefore allow the complexities of both series’ narratives to be considered, indicating the interplay of heritage and post-heritage characteristics in the television of the 1970s and 2010s.

Critical history

Colin McArthur’s analysis of LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* does not leave room for a post-heritage perspective, describing the series as the ‘archetype’ of ‘nostalgia for an earlier period’ (1980: 40). McArthur explains how the series ‘cannibalises’ history ‘by taking particular historical events and offering ideological guidance by refracting them through the on-going, well-signified, and well-understood value-system of the series’ (ibid.: 41). The aspects of the LWT series that McArthur identifies do indeed point towards a heritage return to the past, where Richard Bellamy (David Langton) operates as an ‘ideological force’ and ‘everyone (certainly the regular “characters”) knows his/her place, accepts it and is treated with “dignity” and “kindness”’ (ibid.: 41). However, when he turns to a specific analysis of ‘The Nine Days Wonder’, the fifth season episode concerning the 1926 General Strike, the fixity of 165 Eaton Place’s social strata seems less clear. McArthur notes that James Bellamy (Simon Williams) uses the phrase ‘hold the country to ransom’, familiar to 1970s viewers from the recent miners’ strike: ‘the use of this phrase signals to us that the central ideological project of the programme has to do with attitudes … to working class militancy in our society here and now’ (ibid.: 42). When considered under a post-heritage framework, this is a clear example of self-consciousness: the production displays an awareness of its historiographical role, suggesting a negotiation between this function and the structural imperatives of a long-running series drama.

Carl Freedman also identifies the General Strike episode as indicative of *Upstairs, Downstairs*’ heritage values, recognising that the LWT series ‘gratified an intense English nostalgia during the uninspiring years of Heath and Wilson [Prime Ministers from 1964-76]’ (1990: 81). Nevertheless, Freedman acknowledges that the series holds a ‘self-awareness that the liberal England which it idealizes is certainly doomed’ (ibid.: 83-4). Although I disagree that it is a ‘liberal England’ that is idealised, instead viewing the liberal-humanist characteristics as existing within a conservative framework, the inevitability of this downfall is certainly an important factor in assessing the series. Freedman asserts that ‘The Nine Days Wonder’ exemplifies the strategy of ‘admitting a certain degree of criticism’ in order to ‘protect’ the series’ central ideology (ibid.: 84), while retaining a ‘soothing’ tone ‘by virtue of the viewer’s certain knowledge (inscribed in the very title) that the General Strike will quickly fail’ (ibid.: 90). Freedman’s analysis reveals how *Upstairs, Downstairs* operates within a heritage ideology to create a ‘reification of history’: ‘the brilliantly finished positivistic naturalism both enables and camouflages the elision, minimization, or domestication – in sum, the *containment* – of those real historical forces’ (ibid.: 93, emphasis in original). In other words, despite the strong elements of heritage idealisation, a return to the past is not considered possible; the viewer ‘is sadly reminded that the traditional order is dead’ (ibid.: 101) by the series’ post-heritage elements.

Edith P. Thornton’s intervention helps to expand upon the tensions between heritage and post-heritage elements in the LWT series, identifying the ideological shifts across its five year run. Thornton considers the series through its response in the US media, following its broadcast on WGBH’s *Masterpiece Theatre* strand (which would later co-produce the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs*). Thornton uses the US media to posit a shift in narrative focus ‘from a female-centred, comedic, ensemble piece to a male-centred character study’ (1993: 27), from ‘downstairs’ to ‘upstairs’ (ibid.: 28), and implicitly from post-heritage to heritage. Thornton suggests that the overlap between the series’ US broadcast and UK production ‘reveals a space in which American corporate pressure, American popularity, and the limitations of 1970s American public television combined to alter the course of the text in midstream’ (ibid.: 39-40). This assertion, hindered by early television scholars’ inability to re-watch the productions under consideration, does not hold much credence. Firstly, recording for the fourth and penultimate series of *Upstairs, Downstairs* began only a few months after its US debut,[[2]](#endnote-2) leaving only a very slight window through which US reception could possibly impact its production. Furthermore, Thornton’s analysis places significant emphasis on James’s increased narrative dominance to support the perceived American influence (ibid.: 37-8), not recalling that he features most prominently in series 3. While Thornton’s identification of the literariness of *Upstairs, Downstairs*’ war series (ibid.: 37) is useful, her assessment neglects to recall the dominant female-focused narrative arcs that will be analysed later in this article. Helen Wheatley indicates the series’ greater complexities, identifying the ‘quotidian visual pleasure’ (ibid.: 147) of domesticised heritage imagery before offering a ‘spatial’ reading of Marjorie Bellamy that reveals her entrapment in the domestic milieu (ibid.: 153-5). However, Wheatley’s selections all come from series 1 and 2, preventing her analysis from amending Thornton’s trajectory of the entire programme. The following analysis will re-align the LWT series’ pivotal point to the First World War, recognising the textual nuances that Thornton’s analysis glosses over.

The BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* has received minimal scholarly engagement; when referred to at all, it tends to be in the context of its failure to match *Downton Abbey*’s popular success (Leggott and Taddeo, 2015: xviii). Giselle Bastin begins to suggest a more rewarding critical approach, establishing *Upstairs Downstairs* as a ‘fascinating departure’ from the LWT series due to ‘the ways it engages in contemporary debates about historiography’ (2015: 165). According to Bastin, history in the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* ‘moves away from being a backdrop to the story and becomes instead a structuring principle of the main plot’ (ibid.: 168), displaying ‘an awareness that the social and ideological structures embedded within the narrative structure of the 1970s 165 Eaton Place are no longer viable’ (ibid.: 167). This indicates the BBC series’ self-consciousness, setting the stage for a post-heritage reading of the revived series. While Bastin’s reading is selective, particularly eliding the more traditional heritage narrative elements of the series 2, it nevertheless identifies the important role post-heritage aspects play in the revived series, suggesting that a nostalgic return to the televisual past is not its only aim.

The decline of the heritage household

LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* depicts the First World War’s disruption to the Edwardian social order through the serialised narratives of its fourth series, the wartime setting displaying an ‘added power to the series’ narrative drive’ (Hanna, 2009: 129) and emphasising its post-heritage elements. The war series functions as the pivotal point of *Upstairs, Downstairs*’ negotiation between heritage and post-heritage points of view, showing the social structures of the Edwardian era irrevocably break down. The series initially aspired to a literary prestige; this is demonstrated by its US *Masterpiece Theatre* presentation, which was consciously associated with a literary tradition (Thornton, 1993: 29-30). Nevertheless, its early episodes adopt the episodic series format favoured by long-form television narratives of the time. This format is associated with diluted suspense, a lack of memory of past events and a perennially unresolved central premise (Kozloff, 1992: 91). In *Upstairs, Downstairs*, an individual episode usually focuses on between one and three members of the ensemble cast, with other regular characters appearing in a supporting capacity or absent altogether. This approach is conducive to the production context of 1970s television, allowing an episode to be recorded each week and cast members (both regulars and guests) to be contracted as required (Del Valle, 2008: 149-53). Where multi-episode story arcs exist, they progress in distinct episodic instalments: for example, the arc involving Lady Marjorie’s (Rachel Gurney) death and James’s courtship of Hazel (Meg Wynn Owen) takes place over the first four episodes of series 3, each of which pursues a self-contained narrative that contributes to the arc’s trajectory. The series structure, where episodic narratives are prioritised over story arcs, has the dual advantage of maintaining both continuity and accessibility at a time when it was not possible to catch up on a missed episode. It also allows the series’ heritage household to facilitate the ‘frequent return to habitual locations and situations’ of ‘segmentalised’ commercial television (Ellis, 1992: 120). Series 4 disrupts this routine by favouring extensive story arcs, displaying an early example of the blended form that emerged fully in the subsequent decades (Dunleavy, 2009: 50). This shift in form allowed the LWT series to employ more sophisticated storytelling, allowing a post-heritage point of view to become apparent.

Series 4’s serial form also facilitates a subversion of series 3’s male dominance, opening up the narrative to Eaton Place’s female occupants and drawing parallels between their experiences. Thornton maintains that *Upstairs, Downstairs*’ First World War narrative is focused on James as a hegemonic masculine figure, associated with the great war poets of literature (1993: 37-8). However, the series never follows James to the front line, allowing the series’ domestic focus to be maintained. Although this focus is necessitated by the practical constraints of television drama in the 1970s (Marson, 2011: 262), series 4 nevertheless includes LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs*’ most extensive location filming, including scenes set in France and even a model shot (Marson, 2011: 294). These expensive elements display the possibilities afforded by the series’ established commercial success, but they are deployed to depict the personal impact of the war on the established characters rather than in a limited attempt to realise the spectacle of the battlefield. As the most predominantly serialised episodes of the series commence, it is therefore the stories of Rose and Daisy downstairs, and Georgina and Hazel upstairs, that dominate, building the theme of female identity across multiple episodes. ‘Women Shall Not Weep’ is the first *Upstairs, Downstairs* episode to eschew the usual episodic form, introducing this theme in conjunction the most extensive location filming in the LWT series’ history: almost the entire second act (around fourteen minutes in length) is dedicated to a sequence set at Charing Cross station, filmed at Marylebone and directed by Chris Hodson (Marson, 2011: 281-3). As well as being visually distinctive, this sequence functions to shift the episode’s focus from Daisy (Jacqueline Tong) to Georgina (Lesley-Anne Down). The episode’s first act concerns Daisy’s marriage to Edward (Christopher Beeny) before he departs for the front. In these scenes, Georgina and her upper-class friends appear in a secondary capacity, their frivolous attitude to the war serving as an ironic counterpoint to Edward and Daisy’s anxieties. On the basis of the series’ established format, it is expected that this narrative hierarchy will be maintained throughout the episode. Following the soldiers’ departure, however, the camera fails to return to Daisy amongst the throng: the shot remains with Georgina, who watches as a second train alights, carrying a group of wounded soldiers. After a soldier dies in front of her, Georgina decides to volunteer as a VAD nurse. The final act of this episode combines Georgina’s story with the sudden departure of Ruby (Jenny Tomasin), who finds her own work in a munitions factory. The multiple competing narratives mean a clear resolution is not reached: Georgina is only at the start of her struggles as a nurse in the episode’s final scene, Ruby does not return until much later in series 4, and Daisy’s own pursuit of war work continues in the next episode. The episode therefore finds cohesion in the implicit connection between its stories, as signalled by its title, favouring socio-cultural themes over episodic closure.

The following episodes continue the serialised theme of female identity through their overlapping storylines. In ‘Tug of War’, after Daisy decides to become a bus conductrette, Rose (Jean Marsh) convinces her that her duty remains to the household before, in a highly out-of-character act, she steals the newspaper advert and secures the job for herself. While Daisy’s anger at this betrayal is assuaged by Georgina in the same episode, Rose’s motivations are left unclear. In the following episode, ‘Home Fires’, it is Rose’s conductrette role that allows her to reunite with her former fiancé Gregory Wilmot, whom she now agrees to marry. In retrospect, it is possible to read Rose’s betrayal of Daisy as signifying her development: she is now willing to find a life beyond domestic service, which she was unable to do before the war. Meanwhile, the ‘upstairs’ narrative of ‘Home Fires’ forms a seemingly superfluous subplot, concerning the planning of an officers’ tea party. This event does not occur until the next episode, ‘If You Were the Only Girl in the World’, where Hazel embarks upon her own love affair with Lieutenant Jack Dyson, displaying the routine use of serialisation in series 4. The concurrent female narratives reach a climax in ‘The Glorious Dead’, where Rose and Hazel learn that both Gregory and Jack have been killed. A disillusioned James also returns on leave in this episode, reluctantly comforting Rose by describing Gregory as a war hero. James expounds the heritage values that he no longer believes in to comfort Rose, his paternalistic role allowing Rose to resume her former contentedness with her social status. James’s change in attitude represents a viewpoint that was controversial in 1917 but accepted by 1974: that the war was a futile waste of life. This positions James as a forward-looking hero through his rejection of the dominant ideology of his time. His performance of heritage values to Rose reveals the power of their illusion, curtailing her newfound independence and sustaining her place in the household. Post-heritage self-consciousness is thus combined with the requirements of a long-running series, retaining heritage stability while acknowledging its injustices.

Through his war experiences James has come to represent a more liberal ideology, despite his place in the conservative class system; his death by suicide in the LWT series’ penultimate episode therefore represents the demise of the conservative heritage household, his shift in values during the war allowing him to accept the demise of the privileged system he embodies. James’s reluctant role as Rose’s comforter aligns him with heritage values despite his disillusionment, and his struggles (both occupational and romantic) over the next decade represent the impossibility of reconciling these values with postwar society. The inevitability of James’s death, and that of the heritage household, is made clear by the harrowing experience that brings his war service to an end. Initially presumed dead after a shell explosion, a recuperating James describes how a German officer refused to take the opportunity to shoot him. Jeremy Paul, the writer of both this and James’s final episode, describes the significance of this event to the subsequent fifth series: ‘at that moment, James knows he should have died. So, in a sense, he is already a dead man and that war memory haunts the next decade of his life’ (quoted in Marson, 2011: 296).[[3]](#endnote-3) Accordingly, the end of the war almost sees Eaton Place sold, a circumstance only avoided when Richard and his new wife Virginia (Hannah Gordon) agree to move in. This continuation of the heritage household only delays its decline, inexorably linked to James’s fate. Series 5 thus narrates an attempt to return to the pre-war class structures, reflected by the resurgence of self-contained episodic narratives. Nevertheless, the increasing difficulty of keeping subversive elements outside its four walls is clear: series 5 includes the aforementioned General Strike episode, with other storylines including a minor character killing himself during a house party, a friend of Georgina’s leaving the morning room to snort cocaine between scenes, and even stoic butler Hudson’s propriety coming under question when he attempts to seduce a young housemaid. James’s suicide marks the culmination of these subversive postwar narratives, instigating the final dissolution of the household.

Despite the return to mostly self-contained episodes in *Upstairs, Downstairs’* fifth series, the more complex plotting extant during the war is apparent as James’s death approaches. His final episode, ‘All the King’s Horses’, also written by Paul, adopts a more self-referential approach than in any other episode of the LWT series. This is most apparent in James’s final conversation with Richard, which sees James’s various disappointments over the course of *Upstairs, Downstairs* summarised and the deep-set, yet hitherto implicit, tension between father and son exposed. The episode sees James lose his own fortune in the Wall Street Crash, but it is Rose’s place in events that pushes him to suicide: he also invests her inheritance from Gregory, the loss of which means the possibility of a life outside of domestic service is closed permanently. Rose’s involvement in this narrative repositions her servitude as an entrapment: James’s irresponsible act reveals the falsity of the heritage values he used to comfort her upon Gregory’s death, while her class position means she is unable to voice any objection to his actions.[[4]](#endnote-4) Furthermore, it shows that James’s downfall remains inextricably linked to that of the heritage household: he cannot avoid his embodiment of the Edwardian social structure, but in taking his own life he allows the more liberal inclination he adopted during the war to overcome his conservative background. James’s suicide note, read aloud by Richard at the end of the episode, foregrounds the wider significance of his act by referring to both James’s deferred death and the lost heritage values of Marjorie Bellamy: ‘Do you remember me telling you about the German officer, who should have finished me off but declined to? Well I’m doing the job for him … Mother always said to leave when your winning is not ethical, and we both know my losing streak has been going on far too long. Try and see it as a soldier’s way out …’.

A post-heritage household?

In the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs*, the Holland family’s attempt to recapture the Edwardian past is a project that is destined to fail. The heritage values Hallam (Ed Stoppard) and Agnes (Keeley Hawes) seek to re-establish are those that were seen to expire in the LWT series, representing the archetypal heritage period drama. Agnes’s excited first assessment of Eaton Place as a ‘ghastly old mausoleum’ rings true on more than one level: it is a mausoleum of the Edwardian class structure, and simultaneously a mausoleum of the 1970s period drama ‘golden age’. This dual reflection is acknowledged by the revived series’ self-conscious elements, used in its first episode to justify its legitimacy through connections to its televisual past. Rose’s return to Eaton Place provides a particularly strong example of this: the dialogue-free sequence sees Marsh, co-creator of the LWT series and the only actor to appear in both iterations of *Upstairs Downstairs*, simultaneously representing Rose and herself. The distinction between the fictional and non-fictional becomes blurred in her instinctive reactions to the newly recreated studio sets. When Rose/Marsh reaches the iconic staircase, she reprises her habitual gesture of wiping the bannister with her hand from the LWT series.[[5]](#endnote-5) As she leaves her hand on the bannister, sunlight streams through the entrance hall window, and the blemishes of age on Rose’s hand vanish momentarily, briefly mimicking the high-key lighting of LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* and other television dramas of its era. The sequence’s sonic quality also contributes to its nostalgic function: the soundtrack’s ‘Rose Returns to the House’[[6]](#endnote-6) evokes the LWT series’ familiar theme tune (retained for the BBC series),[[7]](#endnote-7) while a sparkling sound effect adds to the sense of heightened reality. However, while providing the aesthetic pleasures of heritage drama the heightening of this moment also exposes its fictionality, and thus its unattainable nature. The self-consciousness reminds us that the presented society is predominantly fictional, with Marsh’s return to Eaton Place seemingly more important than Rose’s.[[8]](#endnote-8) The moment of de-ageing also draws attention to the dissonance between the two iterations of *Upstairs Downstairs*: as the BBC series’ writer and executive producer Heidi Thomas acknowledges, Rose has appeared to age over thirty years between 1930 (recorded in 1975) and 1936 (recorded in 2010), although this can be mitigated by the LWT series’ characters’ lack of ageing over twenty-seven narrative years (quoted in Marson, 2012: 4-5). Rather than showing Rose as returning to her youth, however, this sequence gives the impression that time has caught up with her at last, emphasised by the neglected state of the hallway itself. Wistful nostalgia can only be impermanent, and, inevitably, the sunlight fades, Rose remains visibly aged, and even the music cue withholds resolution into the main theme’s motif. The sequence breaks the suspension of disbelief required to accept Rose’s aged presence in the re-established Eaton Place, emphasising the series as a work of televisual fiction in conjunction with Rose’s subjectivity.

Established through its televisual history, the Eaton Place of the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* is able to subvert the characteristics of heritage drama through the social positions of its characters. The Hollands attempt to re-establish the house as a re-embodiment of Edwardian, heritage security. Their positions and attitudes, however, indicate the series’ post-heritage approach to this endeavour. Like Richard Bellamy, Hallam moves in political circles, but as a civil servant rather than an MP. This allows him to move closer to the turbulent politics of the 1930s, working directly for Anthony Eden and later Lord Halifax, and significantly becoming a vocal opposer of appeasement with Germany in 1939 (Bastin, 2015: 170-1). Hallam is also close friends with the Duke of Kent (Blake Ritson), who appears as a regular character in the BBC series, allowing the 1936 abdication crisis to impact upon the household at a personal level.[[9]](#endnote-9) The background of Agnes and her sister Persie Towyn (Claire Foy), meanwhile, signifies the decline of the aristocracy since the First World War: ‘the Towyns are old money,’ Persie says of her aristocratic status, ‘and that means there’s none’. Persie’s self-perception of poverty, despite her privileged position in Eaton Place, leads her towards fascist politics, becoming a dangerous influence within the walls of the household. Despite the foresight of his anti-appeasement stance, Hallam’s affair with Persie in series 2 sees him susceptible to her simultaneous ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ treacheries (Bastin, 2015: 169). The direct role of political history on their affair is significant, implying the dangers of the close connection between household and nation. Completing the new upstairs family is Lady Maud Holland (Eileen Atkins, who co-created the LWT series with Marsh), Hallam’s mother. In some respects, Maud represents the Edwardian era of the LWT series, through the self-conscious figure of Atkins herself and her character’s resistance to Agnes’s running of the household. However, she is also seen to hold more progressive views, stemming from her extensive travels abroad, allowing her to become ‘something subtler and more complex’ than a generic ‘battle-axe’ mother-in-law (Thomas, quoted in Marson, 2012: 5). Maud directly introduces to the house emblems of a more multicultural outlook, namely an Eastern décor for the LWT series’ iconic morning room set, a Sikh private secretary and a mischievous pet monkey. Maud therefore embodies the duality of looking to both the past and the future, which takes place in the fictional household and through the recreated *Upstairs Downstairs* itself. Following Atkins’s departure from *Upstairs Downstairs* between the first two BBC series, Maud’s place in the narrative is assumed by her half-sister Blanche Mottershead (Alex Kingston). Blanche’s progressive attitudes are shown through her education and sexual freedom, her most prominent storyline concerning her lesbian affair with an MP’s wife.

The new downstairs staff at Eaton Place further establish the Holland household as open to those that would have remained outsiders in the LWT series, with both positive and negative results. Most evidently, Maud’s secretary Mr Amanjit (Art Malik) sees a person of colour enter the household. Although Mr Amanjit’s intermediate place within the binary class system sometimes causes him difficulty, he is able to function in Eaton Place as a practising Sikh, providing an alternative cultural perspective, while simultaneously acting as a physical reminder of ‘the remnants of empire’ (Bastin, 2015: 167). Later, the household is joined by maid Rachel Perlmutter (Helen Bradbury) and her daughter Lotte (Alexia James), who are German Jewish refugees. Rachel’s refugee status brings the European political context directly into the confines of the household, revealing the tensions caused by the ascendance of right-wing ideologies prior to the Second World War. This is achieved by combining Rachel’s arrival with the defection of Persie and chauffeur Spargo (Neil Jackson) to the British Union of Fascists. Rachel dies of an asthma attack after seeing Persie at the Battle of Cable Street, after which Lotte is taken in by Hallam to ‘make amends’. Lotte, Mr Amanjit, and eventually Hallam’s sister Pamela (Sarah Gordy), who has Down’s syndrome, are therefore incorporated into the household, allowing their individual perspectives to remain intact as part of the household’s narrative.

In contrast with the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs*, *Downton Abbey*’s central characters reinforce the series’ heritage concept. While several scholars in the *Exploring* Downton Abbey edited collection have noted the progressive attitudes adopted by many of the series’ characters (Fitzgerald, 2018, Morrow, 2018, Harrison, 2018, Suhren, 2018), in the production context of the twenty-first century the display of modern values allows the class system of the past to appear welcoming and soothing. Although later episodes contain darker moments, these developments are an exception to the dominant focus of the series, which remains grounded in heritage ideologies. Byrne’s initial assessment of *Downton Abbey* recognises the narrative’s inability to fully challenge the gendered social system (2015a: 72), as well as its assimilation of ideologies (ibid.: 75) and use of paternalism ‘to justify the class system’ (ibid.: 74). Alongside this, however, post-heritage aspects of the series are identified through its ‘pastiche of other classic heritage productions’ (ibid.: 71) and its awareness of contemporary society (ibid.: 87). Byrne negotiates these diverse elements by terming *Downton Abbey* ‘post-post-heritage’ (ibid.: 88). Under the post-heritage critical framework, which acknowledges the co-existence of heritage and post-heritage elements in all period drama productions, such a movement is not required; in any case, when assessing developments in television the notion that post-heritage drama had been established to the extent that it could be departed from by 2010 is insupportable. Subsequently, Byrne has analysed how the *Downton* ‘fantasy has become more problematic and less rosy in the third and fourth seasons’ (2015b: 179). She places great significance on the deaths of Lady Sybil and Matthew Crawley, seeing the former as a ‘breakdown in the security offered by the Crawley household’ and the latter as part of the downfall of the patriarchy that sees Lord Grantham also become ‘ineffectual’ (ibid.: 180-1). Both deaths, however, were instigated by the actors’ choices to leave the series rather than a creative decision (Furness, 2012). Matthew’s death is also conspicuously underwritten, occurring in the final moments of a Christmas special before the following series opens several months later, circumventing any reaction to the news of his death. Byrne’s account therefore neglects to acknowledge the infrequency of *Downton Abbey*’s post-heritage elements, or its continual return to heritage security and conservative values.

Indoors, outdoors

The BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* encourages the viewer’s experience of the double nostalgia inherent in twenty-first century period drama, evoking the ‘golden age’ of the earlier LWT series through its use of the studio space. Recognising that LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey* ‘actually ‘feel’ nothing alike’, Tom Bragg interprets the studio-bound aesthetics of 1970s period dramas as a liberating feature (2015: 23). Studio-based dramas are, according to Bragg, ‘free to engage historical *chronotopi* [‘time-place’], processes, and meanings more considerately via patently artificial spaces’ (ibid.: 24, emphasis in original). The distinction between narrative space and historical place, as identified by Higson (1996), is apparent in the settings of *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey*. While *Downton Abbey* presents its titular location as a visitable place through the use of Highclere Castle as its principal filming location (Samuel and Stoddart, 2018: 25-6), Eaton Place (in both the LWT and BBC series), despite being situated in a real London street, is depicted primarily as a dramatic space through its construction in the television studio. The studios of 1970s period drama function as a space for post-heritage investigation, inviting self-consciousness by ‘emphasizing their unrealistic qualities’ and ‘engag[ing] viewer interaction with the camera’s exploration’ (Bragg, 2015: 24). Elke Weissmann further analyses LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs*’ allusions to the theatre through its multi-camera set-up:

Rather than establishing an eyeline between the actors, the establishing shot here returns us to the ‘front of stage’ line, and thus places the audiences in a space that is similarly inflexible as that of the theatre. Moreover, the actors are often awkwardly placed so that they can remain at least partially visible even from this ‘front of stage’ line.

(2012: 72)

The BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* does not encounter the same technical limitations as in the LWT series, using a single camera set-up that offers increased flexibility. Nevertheless, it positions itself between the 1970s ‘golden age’ and twenty-first century drama, evoking the past through its self-conscious aesthetics while also adapting to contemporary expectations.

Eaton Place is re-established as a self-conscious space in the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs*, acknowledging its televisual construction and function as a socio-historical microcosm. This is apparent from the initial return to its entrance hall, which alludes to the final sequence of its predecessor series. LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* ends with Rose surveying the empty household, while archival audio recalls its various occupants over the years. As it forms the final moments of the LWT series, this sequence was freed from some of the usual production restrictions: allocated an additional studio day (Marson, 2011: 356), it features rarely seen rooms and passages, with atypical camera angles captured by a single camera. Culminating in the entrance hall, the single camera also allows the hitherto unseen ‘fourth wall’ – adjacent to the main doorway and opposite the staircase – to be visible; in regular recording sessions, the multiple studio cameras occupied this space. While there is perhaps disappointingly little floorspace on this side of the hallway, the viewpoint from the top of the stairway makes for a striking final image of Eaton Place due to its unusual position. The scene is effective due to Rose’s subjectivity, rather than the spaces she explores which is rendered unfamiliar due to the unusual filming techniques. This sequence is mirrored twice in the BBC series’ first episode: in Rose’s return to the house, as analysed above, and also in Hallam and Agnes’s earlier re-opening of Eaton Place. As Hallam and Agnes enter the main doors for the first time, the entrance hall is seen from the same angle as at Rose’s departure, its use as an establishing shot implying that it is a viewpoint we will now be able to enjoy regularly. The widescreen aspect ratio and advances in production quality over the decades also allow the hallway to overcome its underwhelming 1970s character. The heritage household, having literally gathered dust over years of neglect, is revived through reference to its past aesthetics.

According to Wheatley, *Upstairs, Downstairs*’ studio functions as both ‘an expressive and coherent dramatic space’ and ‘a space of visual pleasure’ (2005: 146). In the BBC series, the latter is found through self-conscious allusions to ‘golden age’ heritage drama, while the former is enacted through the incorporation of contemporary filming techniques. The series’ spatial duality realises Thomas’ aim to create ‘a balance between the old and new’ (quoted in Marson, 2012: 3). In addition to the technical style of scenes within the household, Thomas reveals the structure through which the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* balances its televisual heritage with new possibilities: ‘a great deal of the power of the original [series] stemmed from the fact that so much of the drama was sparked by, and played out within, the walls of 165. We set strict limits on the amount of time we spent outside the house, and made sure that any exterior scenes … were justified’ (ibid.: 3). In other words, the style borne from technological and budgetary restrictions in the LWT series was now a creative choice, made to evoke televisual nostalgia and sustain the series’ domestic focus. Preference for the interior space results in frequent off-screen events, the focus placed on their impact upon the residents at Eaton Place. This technique is demonstrated by a sequence of events in second episode ‘The Ladybird’: the opening rehearsal for the Londonderry ball, shown taking place outside the household, is cut short when Agnes becomes unwell, allowing the subsequent debacle over a missing tiara and eventual discovery of her pregnancy to develop within Eaton Place, and the ball itself (attended by Maud in Agnes’s place) to remain off-screen.

Although the Battle of Cable Street is depicted through exterior location filming, the importance of its cultural moment becomes apparent in an earlier scene within the household, adhering to Thomas’s intentions for the series. In the scene, the representative function of *Upstairs Downstairs*’ characters within the microcosm of Eaton Place becomes clear as the Jewish Rachel is confronted by Spargo in full British Union of Fascists uniform. The ‘golden age’ aesthetics adopted by this scene are identified by Lez Cooke’s analysis of the LWT series’ first dinner table scene in ‘On Trial’ (2013: 64-78), directed by Raymond Menmuir. The newly arrived Sarah (Pauline Collins) in ‘On Trial’ is met with similar suspicion to Spargo’s Fascism in ‘The Ladybird’, though the charged political context allows the latter scene to pursue a more critical function; ‘The Ladybird’ shows Spargo’s presence subverting the familiar period drama scene, while ‘On Trial’ establishes this form despite Sarah’s disruptive presence.

The scene in ‘The Ladybird’ lasts 100 seconds exactly, comprising 23 shots: its average shot length is therefore 4.35 seconds. The much longer scene in ‘On Trial’ has an average shot length of 5.8 seconds, significantly shorter than the single plays Cooke analyses in the same study (2013: 77). By the time of *Middlemarch* (BBC2, 1994), however, Cooke notes a trend towards average shot lengths nearer 4 seconds (ibid.: 103). This contemporary trend influences *Downton Abbey*, where the first servants’ dinner also contains 23 shots but in just 65 seconds, resulting in an average shot length of 2.83 seconds. This is despite the scene containing only expositional dialogue, unlike the pivotal moment of ‘The Ladybird’. The BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* therefore negotiates a style between ‘golden age’ period drama and contemporary television, featuring shorter scenes and a greater emphasis on action over dialogue, while sustaining a slower pace than other contemporary dramas through lengthier shots that evoke the television of the 1970s. This hybrid style also facilitates subjectivity, with the longer scenes allowing Rachel’s perspective to be understood.

As mentioned above, LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* makes use of limited location filming, increasingly using its commercial success to push the technical boundaries of 1970s series television. Typical of the time, use of expensive 16mm filmed inserts among studio tape recordings results in an aesthetic dissonance, with the two recording techniques producing noticeably different visual results (Mills, 2013: 60). More cumbersome outside broadcast video cameras were sometimes used in *Upstairs, Downstairs*, reducing the aesthetic dissonance (Marson, 2011: 99-100) but also proving inflexible (ibid.: 139-40). The production constraints of LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* therefore result in a clear distinction between indoors and outdoors, operating alongside the class divide of the series’ narrative concept. Consequently, the Southwold estate belonging to Marjorie’s aristocratic family is never shown, better left to the imagination than undermined on-screen. The BBC series simultaneously evokes and subverts this circumstance, replacing Southwold with the dilapidated Welsh castle belonging to Agnes’s family, an unseen spectre of the decline of the upper class. Technological developments over the intervening years means the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* could be made entirely on film, removing any aesthetic dissonance between interior and exterior scenes, while retaining the carefully negotiated balance required by the narrative concept.

As series 2 of *Upstairs Downstairs* reaches its climax, the breaking point of the class structure can once again be recognised spatially as well as narratively. This is particularly apparent in its fourth and fifth episodes, both directed by Brendan Maher. The first of these episodes, ‘All the Things You Are’, displays 165 Eaton Place as a liveable and lived-in space; it may not be a visitable historical place like Downton Abbey/Highclere Castle, but its careful construction allows it to feel at risk from the narrative and historical tensions exposed within. Accordingly, the episode situates many sequences in and through the house’s liminal spaces, with dialogue taking place between rooms, on the main staircase and across corridors throughout. The fluidity between rooms implies that the narrative is moving beyond the point where delineated spaces can contain the multiple storylines, including Hallam helping Persie during her secret abortion and the growing tensions in the Hollands’ marriage. On two occasions, the camera pans between the entrance hall and the first floor corridor that overlooks it, revealing Persie overhearing information that allows her to come between Agnes and Hallam. As well as displaying the connectedness of the household, this foreshadows the overheard political information that Persie later relates to the German intelligence services, and her fatal fall from the same passageway at the end of the series.

The episode’s final scene, where Hallam and Persie begin an affair, encourages a spatial reading of events, beginning as a frustrated Hallam sees Blanche walk past both open drawing room doors. Stepping out onto the first floor corridor to intercept her, Hallam confronts Blanche over her perceived influence on Agnes, demanding that she move out of the house. This argument takes Blanche down the staircase and out through the main entrance, the camera picking up her momentary discomposure at Hallam’s demand, while the latter remains above. As Blanche exits, Persie appears in the passage with Hallam, the two looking at each other in incriminating silence before Blanche is safely out of earshot. Persie enters the left-side door to the drawing room, and, while the camera completes a rotation around her, Hallam enters through the other doorway. As they begin to kiss passionately, Hallam kicks the door shut and the camera retreats, ending the episode with a gradual zoom out across the empty entrance hall. The danger presented by Hallam and Persie’s affair is thus understood spatially, concealed at the heart of the household and stripping Eaton Place of any sense of security. Accordingly, Blanche and Agnes are mostly absent in the following episode, ‘The Last Waltz’, and mutual respect between master and servants is eroded.

In ‘The Last Waltz’, the collapse of the divide between upstairs and downstairs takes place outside Eaton Place, in the auspicious setting of the Royal Albert Hall. It is here that a mass servants’ ball takes place and the Duke of Kent displays the easy condescension of the privileged classes: ‘there’s something deliciously low about a servants’ ball. You know, I vote we get absolutely steaming drunk and go native.’ It is this naive intervention that encourages Mrs Thackeray to indulge in cocktails at the ball, starting a chain of events that sees butler Pritchard (Adrian Scarborough) relapse into alcoholism by the end of the evening. The deference the servants show the Duke is belied by his immaturity, shown by the exaggerated dance moves he performs even as Mrs Thackeray valorises his ‘dignity’. We follow the Duke outside where he encounters Hallam, who is anxious over the imminent war and his suspicions over Persie, which the Duke misreads as missing Agnes. Completing the transition between the comic sequence and dramatic climax, Hallam leaves the Duke and walks around the Albert Hall exterior, where he is intercepted by Spargo, the confrontation between the two representing the moment that the class system crumbles. Spargo now wishes to emigrate to America with housemaid Beryl, which Hallam earlier refused in light of the coming war. Spargo, however, is aware of the affair between Hallam and Persie and uses this to blackmail Hallam into funding his emigration. Positioned in front of sandbags against the entrance to the Albert Hall, this scene is shot from low angles behind Hallam and high angles from behind Spargo, emphasising the latter’s height and physical dominance over his master. Spargo’s threats at a personal level are therefore connected to the political situation and Hallam’s own inadequacy, as an employer, a diplomat and a man. The household itself and its various occupants are thus compromised, removing all certainty around the heritage household and the familiarity of its delineated spaces. These developments cannot be resolved by the elements of closure at the end of the series: while Persie dies and the remaining characters return to the house, the Hollands’ marriage continues in name only and the Second World War presents an ominous future. The first air raid siren rings out as the series ends, causing Agnes and Blanche to seek shelter via the servants’ entrance. While the planned developments in a third series are unknown, the implication that ‘the old world order has altered irrevocably’ (Bastin, 2015: 174) is unmistakeable.

Both iterations of *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Downton Abbey* consider the end of the 1920s as a turning point in British social history, their various ideological points of view demonstrated by their handling of this pivotal time. LWT’s *Upstairs, Downstairs* meets the future head-on, accelerating its final season to advance through the entirety of the 1920s; the post-war attempts to sustain the heritage household finally fail against the context of the 1929 Wall Street Crash. *Downton Abbey* moves in the opposite direction, only reaching the end of 1925 over four post-war seasons. In its latter stages, *Downton Abbey* operates as nostalgia for the first season of *Downton Abbey* more than its historical period (Schmidt, 2015: 223), its cyclical narrative structure never permitting the future to arrive and sustaining the dominance of unchallenged heritage nostalgia. Its final series accordingly deploys a melodramatic strand of self-consciousness, emphasising the focus on individual worth by directly rewarding characters for their goodness of character.[[10]](#endnote-10) Set after the fall of the heritage household, the BBC’s *Upstairs Downstairs* uses self-consciousness to recognise that the ordered world it evokes is little more than a fantasy. This is despite its own appeals to televisual nostalgia through its allusions to the LWT series and use of the studio space. Its mode of nostalgia therefore challenges the structures of heritage drama it invokes, the lack of safety in its heritage household perhaps explaining its lack of popular success in comparison to *Downton Abbey*. By *Upstairs Downstairs*’ premature end, the start of the Second World War in conjunction with Hallam and Agnes’s *de facto* separation and Hallam’s professional failure has revealed that the heritage aspirations of both the narrative and production are unsustainable in the 1930s and 2010s respectively. The narrative developments therefore mirror the BBC series’ place within television drama history, ultimately reflecting its failure to succeed in the institutional context of British television of the 2010s.

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1. **Notes**

   Following the typography commonly used by production and promotional materials, this article refers to the LWT series as ‘*Upstairs, Downstairs*’ and the BBC series as ‘*Upstairs Downstairs*’, with the latter used when referring to both series. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The series began its US *Masterpiece Theatre* broadcast on 6 January 1974 (Marson, 2011: 259), and the first studio day for season 4 took place on 2 April of the same year (ibid.: 271). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James’ deferred death is further intertwined with the fate of the series by the fact that *Upstairs, Downstairs* was expected to end with its fourth season until close to production (Marson, 2011: 267-7). The war is therefore able to remain the climax of the series, with its 1920s stories deferring the dissolution of the Edwardian lifestyle in both narrative and production terms. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This circumstance could also be read as undermining Rose’s return to Eaton Place in the BBC series, for which she gives up a more independent role running a domestic service agency. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This gesture originates in the LWT series’ ‘The Path of Duty’, where it represents Rose’s affection for Elizabeth Bellamy, and is reprised during her survey of the house in the final episode. As the audio montage that accompanies the latter sequence does not include Elizabeth, it is entirely possible that this reference – and perhaps even that in the BBC series – was instigated by Marsh herself, further conflating the identities of character and actor/co-creator. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In *Upstairs Downstairs: Original Soundtrack from the BBC Series* (1812 Recordings/BBC, 2010), composed by Daniel Pemberton. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Composed by Alexander Faris. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. As Rose never directly addresses her history in Eaton Place, self-conscious moments such as this are only fully comprehendible through prior knowledge of the LWT series. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Had the series continued, Hallam’s new role as the Duke of Kent’s equerry promised to bring the role of royalty in the Second World War to the fore, as well as depicting the Duke’s 1942 death. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The film iteration of *Downton Abbey* (2019) extends the drama’s tendency to evade interrogation, set in 1927 and thus circumventing the possibilities of the May 1926 General Strike (Moulton, 2015) in favour of heritage nostalgia. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)