

The consequences of the television closet: It's a Sin (Red Production Company for Channel 4/HBO Max, 2021) as a meditation on the presence and absence of queer lives on British television

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Abstract

This short article teases out some of the ways that *It's a Sin* ((Red Production Company for Channel 4/HBO Max, 2021) engages with television history. It explores how the series figures television viewing and television production in its diegesis, and makes some suggestions about the way that it represents some of the consequences of what we might call the 'television closet'. This term refers to the relative absence of explicitly queer representations on British TV leading up to, and during, the period in which the series is set. The article proposes that *It's a Sin* is acutely aware of the role that television played in the continuing stigmatisation of LGBT people in Britain well into the 1980s and the lack of information and scaremongering that characterised the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, revealing the acute consequences of the television closet which Russell T. Davies' work more widely has sought to counteract.

Keywords

It's a Sin; Russell T. Davies; television history; queer desire; LGBT history

What does it mean to be 'groundbreaking'? The media discourse surrounding the production and broadcast of *It's a Sin* constantly referred to the series as breaking new

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ground in the representation of queer lives and the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s (e.g. Moore, 2021; Opie, 2021; Phillips, 2021; Robledo, 2021; Ryder, 2021). Writing for the entertainment news site, *Digital Spy*, David Opie (2021) characterised the important work done by Russell T. Davies' series as an 'opening up' of TV representation against a backdrop of repression and absence:

For a very long time, gay sex was invisible on screen, further perpetuating the idea that it's wrong. And if it *was* acknowledged, it was only discussed as a learning tool, as a way to warn people off such heathen and potentially life-threatening acts. Generations of queer people still hold on to this shame, including myself to some degree, and there's plenty of research out there to prove how damaging that can be. Two decades after he thrust the realities of gay sex into our lives via *Queer as Folk* (watched by many in secret with the volume way down), *It's a Sin* pushes these boundaries even further, bringing to life so many situations that gay people know intimately but never thought we would see on screen.

As Opie's account above suggests, this discourse of the 'groundbreaking' is not a new thing for Davies' work. This is an adjective which has been particularly frequently applied to his earlier drama *Queer as Folk* (Red Production Company for Channel 4, 1999-2000), as is evidenced on the first page of Glyn Davis's (2007) BFI TV Classics book on the series (p. 1). What Davis (2007) sees as groundbreaking about *Queer as Folk* was that it 'unapologetically' ignored 'debates about "positive images". . . [having] both empathetic and reprehensible queer characters – as well as some who had managed to be both' (p. 3). A breadth and depth of queer representation has continued to be an important aspect of Davies' work leading up to the production of this series.¹ A month after *It's a Sin*'s broadcast, Russell T. Davies was awarded an Outstanding Achievement Award by the Royal Television Society on the basis that his 'work over the last 20 years was described by the judges as taking "television drama to places it's never been before, explored themes never explored before, and – more than anything – told stories never allowed before"' (Phillips, 2021). Davies' career is thus broadly understood as a distinguished one, which has particularly carved out new space in the television canon for the representation of queer kinships, love and desire.

As other contributions to this collection have shown, *It's a Sin* makes a significant impression in its representation of the history of HIV and AIDS in the UK (albeit by telling a particular and partial story): it shows its viewers the scope of the disease and some of the impact that it had on queer communities, and the initially terrible treatment of patients suffering with, and dying from, AIDS. It also provides a sometimes joyful representation of gay sex (just as *Queer as Folk* had done years before), as in the New Year's Eve 'Hooked on Classics' sex montage from episode one. However, the central proposal of this short analysis of *It's a Sin* is not that it broadly extends the television representation of LGBTQ+ lives, but that it also provides an internal commentary on the impact that the initial absence of gay representation on television had on queer people in Britain. As a television historian, I am often interested in the moments that television appears *on* television, sometimes quite tangentially as part of the fabric of the living spaces of characters or to authenticate the representation of a particular moment in time, but often in ways that offer intradiegetic analyses of the medium and its role in society.² I want to

tease out here some of the ways that *It's a Sin* engages with television history, explore how it figures television viewing and television production, and make some suggestions about the way that it implicitly represents some of the consequences of what we might call the 'television closet', referring to the relative absence of explicitly queer representations on British TV leading up to, and during, the period in which the series is set. To a certain extent, then, I'm looking at what Lynne Joyrich (2006) describes as 'the problem of how media texts mourn or maintain the closet' (p. 138), mapping the way that *It's a Sin* explores, plays with, reworks and critiques the archive of British television. The series doesn't just acknowledge a queer absence in that archive, but also dramatises, for example, the presence of unspoken queer desires within mainstream television, the representational damage of HIV/AIDS public 'information' films broadcast on TV, and the bitter ironies of looking back at the lives of queer TV personalities from a position of hindsight

While some characters are understood in relation to the *production* of television in the 1980s (as discussed below), it is Colin (Callum Scott Howells) who we primarily see as a television *viewer*, and Colin's narrative arc which registers the consequences of the television closet so starkly. From the outset of the series, Colin's houses are depicted as houses of television. The first TV set in the series is seen when Colin's mum, Eileen (Andria Doherty), is watching *Juliet Bravo* (BBC1, 1980-85) while she's on the phone to him in his new London digs. This scene largely acts as an introduction to these characters as well as a historical anchor, placing the series in the early 1980s.³ Aside from this anchoring though, the exchange between these characters in front of the TV set also establishes that television plays a central part in their domestic lives; it positions the medium as the 'domestic glue' that binds them together, the constant backdrop to their lives. Although Colin tells his mum that he's having great fun in the city while he's on the phone to her, with plans to go out that evening (all the time surreptitiously eyeing-up his landlady's son who is stripping off at the washing machine in the background), the episode cuts immediately to a shot of him reading a magazine and eating crisps in his room, accompanied by the sound of the theme tune to *This is Your Life* (BBC1, 1955-64; ITV, 1969-94; BBC1, 1994-2003; ITV, 2007). The sandwiching of Colin's claims to be going to 'a million pubs and things' (which he clearly is not), and his obvious desire for his housemate (with whom he develops a covert, semi-abusive relationship), between two scenes of quotidian television viewing/listening is telling.⁴

The very mainstream, primetime broadcasting that soundtracks Colin's London life is then a subtle way to indicate the continuing absence of queer role models for this closeted, young, working class man from Wales. His main cultural conduit – the television set – is marked by the absence of the very life that he secretly longs for, and Colin is subsequently shown to be lacking the cultural capital necessary to navigate queer London (at least without being 'adopted' and subsequently 'educated' by several other characters he will soon meet in the series). In the same episode, Colin's reaction to his colleague Henry outing him on his first visit to a Soho pub is a measure of how unaccustomed he is to the presence of out gay men. We might see this slight horror as a *consequence of the television closet*, and his naive questions to Henry about his life as an out gay man partly a result of his inability to see other gay men's everyday lives (particularly via television). When Colin visits Henry's house and asks about the neighbours' reaction to Henry and

Juan Pablo's (Tatsu Carvalho) cohabitation, Henry replies: 'They know. They've always known. It's like the official history of the world says that men like us have always been hidden away in secret, but then there's the real world where we've been living. Together. For all this time'. Henry's articulation here of the 'official' cultural absence of gay men is poignant, and it implicitly speaks of the erasure of gay lives on television for Colin. Later in the series, this absence is also directly related to the spread of information about HIV/AIDS, when Jill (Lydia West) asks Colin in episode two to search for information about the virus during a work trip to New York, again acknowledging that 'there's nothing in the library, nothing on TV'. In *It's a Sin* then, we are repeatedly shown the process (and physical and emotional costs) of an erasure and absence which is at least partly to be understood as a televisual absence. For Colin, that cost is his sexual and emotional repression and, as a result, the development of his sole semi-abusive, closeted sexual relationship with his landlady's son, revealed to us at the end of his story arc just before he dies, and seen as the source of his contraction of the HIV virus.

As I have argued elsewhere (Wheatley 2016), television is frequently a location for desires which remain covert and largely unspoken, particularly for LGBT+ viewers. This is also confirmed by Jaap Kooijman's (2008) work and Andy Medhurst's (2008) discussion of the 'snatched glances' of television viewing for LGBT+ viewers who navigated the absences of the television closet via a 'hunt' for signs of queer life: 'Perhaps [television] was where we learned to cruise, scavenging through the schedules, scouring and decoding the *Radio Times* for the slight but telling clue' (p. 81). As Medhurst (2008) goes on to note, 'television's potential as an erotic resource was invaluable (for the queer viewer) because it could be consumed, with due and daring surreptitiousness, in the unsuspecting midst of family life'.⁵ Russell T. Davies dramatised this covert desiring gaze on what I have called 'accidental erotic spectacle' in his earlier drama, *Cucumber*, in which Henry's (Vincent Franklin) desire for Kevin Banks (David Moran) in *Crossroads* (ITV, 1964-88; 2001-03) is exposed by his sister (Julie Hesmondhalgh) reminding him that he would go 'so quiet, and I mean silent, like he was terrified' at the sight of Banks with his shirt off. Similarly, in Colin's final episode of *It's a Sin* (episode three), he returns home to his mum's house and we again find them watching television together. In front of an episode of *Eastenders* (BBC, 1985-), Colin's mum reaches out to her son who has not yet been honest with her about his sexuality, inviting him to appreciate the sight of Simon Wickes (Nick Berry) with her: 'He's nice, innit? Wicksy? A handsome boy?'. Here Eileen tries to use a shared object of desire on that most quotidian of television genres, the soap opera, to open up a conversation with Colin about his sexuality (this leads in to her asking about the queerness of his flatmates, as if to provide space for Colin to talk to her about his own sexuality). This tender moment of shared, ritual television viewing therefore eloquently expresses a great deal about Colin's repression: he fails to seize this moment to open up to his mum, looking between her and the television uncomfortably, even when she says of his friends 'They're a queer little lot. . . I think that's nice'. The scene uses diegetic television viewing to signal that Eileen will continue to be a quietly fierce ally, even beyond Colin's death.

Beyond the depiction of television viewing, the series also features moments that represent the history of TV production, repeatedly acknowledging the pervasiveness of the television closet in both the diegetic world of *It's a Sin* and the real world of 1980s

television production. For example Ritchie's (Olly Alexander) boyfriend, Donald Bassett (Nathaniel Hall), appears in a historical TV studio drama in episode three (which is also a moment that reminds us of the pervasiveness of television, with characters watching the broadcast across multiple screens, in multiple households), playing an uncharacteristically butch northerner. Later on, Ritchie's appearance as an actor in *Doctor Who* (BBC1, 1963-) is an important moment marking the first sign that he is unwell, when the Director of Photography comments (checking the lighting for a close up) that 'There's something wrong with your skin'. Ritchie and Donald's narrative arcs present the pervasiveness of the television closet, given that they are both forced to conceal their sexuality for the sake of their careers. When Ritchie initially fails to turn up for the protest in episode four, Jill defends him by saying 'Be fair. If he's seen as gay in public, he might never work again'. The discourse about the television closet also crosses from the diegetic world to the real world of 1980s TV through references to famously closeted TV stars. For example, when Ritchie and Donald are chatting in his flat, Donald says snidely 'Tell you who else – Philip Schofield!' to which Ritchie replies 'Oh, if only!'. Donald then reveals 'I had a friend who worked in the Broom Cupboard – said he's at it like Billy-O!'. These references to closeted television stars feel particularly poignant in a programme that has become famous for its 'queer casting' policy, employing only LGBT+ actors to play its LGBT+ characters (Kanter, 2021).

Perhaps the most important moment of intradiegetic television viewing comes when episode 4 begins on a close up of a TV set in Ritchie and Jill's flat showing the first of the 'AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance' adverts. This advertising campaign, linking sex and death in the most terrifying way, and described by Adam Burgess (2017) as 'unprecedented in scale and budget' (p. 230), reflecting an 'apocalyptic' mood in Tory Britain (p. 231), produced two TV adverts which were shown on all channels, including on the BBC. As Jill shouts to draw Ritchie's attention to the first broadcast of one of these ads, he steps into the room sheepishly asking 'Is that the BBC?' and then adding more fearfully 'My mother's watching this!'. Ritchie's fear here is about the presence of these fearmongering 'facts' about this 'homosexual' disease entering his mother's home via television, and when we cut to Ritchie's parents watching TV simultaneously, his mum (Keeley Hawes) looks away (representing her absolute denial of Ritchie's sexuality as well as her displeasure at the tone and content of the ad), while his dad (Shaun Dooley) turns the TV over to *Strike It Lucky* on ITV (1986-1999). As Michael Barrymore comes on screen, another famously closeted British television personality, Ritchie's mum exclaims 'Oh, I love him!'. Here then we see the televisual history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic being played out on screen, as well as the ironies of hindsight when it comes to the exposure of those who dwelt for so many years in the television closet. Just as Colin's relationship with his mother, and her quietly determined support of him, is expressed through moments of shared television viewing, here the damage of denial and repression is also expressed in front of, and in relation to, the television set.

In the sister show to *It's a Sin*, *It's a Sin: After Hours* (All4, 2021), guests were frequently invited to give their opinions about the importance of television representation, as well as to reflect on the history of their own television viewing. In episode one, Neil Patrick Harris argued that the opening up of cross-platform media representation of queer lives has been significant, arguing that 'It's good to have examples of representation in various ways, of all different types of ways of existing'. Later, in episode 3, the

film producer David Furnish reflects that when he was a young man in the 1980s, ‘one of the biggest problems (was that) there were so few role models (on TV)’. As this short article has shown then, *It’s a Sin* is acutely aware of the role that television played in the continuing stigmatisation of LGBT people in Britain well into the 1980s and the lack of information and scaremongering that characterised the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, revealing the acute consequences of the television closet which Davies’ work has sought to counteract. Here television histories are woven into this serial drama to tell the stories of this absence, characters’ lives situated against a backdrop of television production and television viewing.

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Notes

1. See particularly his focus on the lives of middle aged gay men in Manchester in *Cucumber* (Red Production Company for Channel 4, 2015), the accompanying anthology drama series about LGBT + youth, *Banana* (Red Production Company for E4, 2015) and *Tofu* (Red Production Company for All4, 2015), the sister documentary series that focused on a range of sex attitudes in the 21st century from the viewpoint of everyday people.
2. I’ve recently noticed this, for example, in several episodes of the seminal BBC anthology drama series *The Wednesday Play* (BBC1, 1964-70) and *Play for Today* (BBC1, 1970-81) including ‘Fable’ (*The Wednesday Play*, BBC1, tx. 20/1/65), ‘Kisses at Fifty’ (*Play for Today*, BBC1, tx. 22/1/73), ‘London is Drowning’ (*Play for Today*, tx. 27/10/81).
3. Those with a particularly encyclopaedic knowledge of television history will be able to identify that the original casting of Stephanie Turner as the series’ central character, Jean Darblay, places this correctly in the 1981 setting of the narrative.
4. Later, when we see Colin trying to contact his friend Henry (Neil Patrick Harris) by phone, we hear football coverage on TV in the background. We therefore repeatedly see Colin’s world as framed by television.
5. Jaap Kooliman similarly draws an analogy between channel surfing/‘zapping’ and the act of cruising in the same collection.

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