This paper draws on the letters and messages and newspaper clipping held by the BBC Written Archives Centre in relation to the 1954 adaptation of Nineteen Eighty-Four as a case study for considering how we understand the historical reception of programming. This production is particularly useful in this regard because it achieved a certain notoriety in relation to its reception, with questions being raised in Parliament about the duties of broadcasters apparently as a result of its broadcast, and claims that the repeat performance only went ahead when the word spread that it had been enjoyed by the royal family. The paper will examine some of these stories and the truth behind them, as well as the way that a number of responses associated the production with ‘horror comics’ and what that suggests about the associations being made and the significance of this term in its context. These examinations will serve to support consideration of the challenges of interpreting past audience reception, and thinking about how we narrate the history of television and its audiences.

Years ago, while researching in the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham, I was going through the files relating to the 1954 adaptation of Nineteen Eighty-Four, in particular one of the files of correspondence. The production had received a large public response, with Lea noting that the BBC received a record 2,375 letters relating to the production, of which [SLIDE] “1,586 were protests while 789 were appreciations, many received in response to the critical comments in the news”.¹ This suggests that much of the correspondence directed towards the BBC was in response not to the programme itself but to the newspaper coverage of the programme, and you can see some of the headlines here from the BBC’s press clippings archive. Much of this coverage was intended to stir up discontent by playing on issues of taste and culture, engaging in the sort of behaviour that newspapers do engage in in order to gain and retain readers. We’ll come to some of the wider causes of this through this paper.

Amongst those letters was one from one D.Hunt [SLIDE], which particularly caught my attention because of this phrase [SLIDE] “the persons responsible for putting on the play are Sadists + readers of Horror Comics”. This paper takes as its focus the development of my research that span out from that phrase and that discovery, using it as a way to think about how we interpret historical reception. While I doubt that anything I say will be new, I hope that some of you will find, as I did, some use in pausing to think about these processes of historical interpretation, and how we develop our understanding of historical material, and so narrate the history of television and its audiences.

So let’s start with that note. [SLIDE] There are things that can be read from its material form, particularly when taken as part of the wider mass of correspondence, which speak to a culture where letter-writing is common, but where care is taken over waste. But that’s an aspect I’ve not really explored properly, and which would require further research. Let’s keep the focus on the content and how it’s expressed.

The main phrase that I'll look at is [SLIDE] “readers of Horror Comics”, which is an area that some of you may already have some knowledge about. You may also have noted the phrase “Horror Comic” used in relation to Nineteen Eighty-Four in one of the headlines with which I illustrated the slide with the quotation from Lea. It’s a striking phrase because it seems unusual as a point of comparison for an adaptation of a literary novel, albeit one that can also be read as science fiction. Yet there is nothing comic about it, and it is certainly not something for children, who are frequently, still, considered to be the main target audience for comics, and who certainly were the main target audience in the UK in the 1950s. Yet unravelling some of those assumptions will be important here, and that is the first key point that I learned in this research: when an assumption makes something seem “weird”, challenge the assumption!

Martin Barker [SLIDE] has covered in very useful detail the campaign against horror comics in Britain in the 1950s. The campaign was largely driven by activists associated with British Communism, who drew on concerns around childhood and children's media and connected them to wider concerns about British identity. As Barker notes, by 1954 the term “horror comic” was being deployed to indicate something that is [SLIDE]:

beneath contempt, and the “ordinary, average” decent British person won’t touch it, knowing instinctively that it is no good for them. “Horror comic” had become the emblem which could be conjured at will, a label which groups could try to attach to things about which there “could be no argument”.2

In other words, the term had largely become detached from specifics of the comics themselves, and detached from the specifics of the debates around them, such as the Kefauver hearings in the US or the Parliamentary debates about the importation of horror comics.

But what was it about the horror comics, in either the specifics or in the general use of the term, that made them a relevant comparison to Nineteen Eighty-Four? There is the matter of the horror comics being imported from the US, and so bringing US culture and values to the UK, but that hardly relates to this British novel and its adaptation for the British Broadcasting Corporation. We can see in Barker’s summary some relevant attitudes about decency, and particularly appealing to the “ordinary” and “average”. This seems particularly relevant when we look back at Hunt’s letter [SLIDE] and note some of the other expressions of taste here: [SLIDE] “For weeks on Sundays we have to watch dismal, criminal, + sadistically Highbrow (or are they) plays” and [SLIDE] “Thank God for Wilfrid Pickles + the Grove Family”. But, to return to this paper’s focus on the process of interpreting this letter, we once again have to unpick those references in order to properly understand what might be being communicated here in more specific terms than general anger.

The reference to the “sadistically Highbrow” can certainly be seen as positioning the letter’s writer as “ordinary” and “average” and “decent”. They are not “highbrow”, not intellectual. The idea that plays that have been shown on Sundays may have been “sadistically Highbrow” suggests that presenting “highbrow” content is in itself an act of torturing the audience, causing them unnecessary suffering for the dark pleasures of the programmers. This suggests a feeling of class tension in relation to the sorts of drama offered up by BBC television at this point, a tension that can be seen repeatedly throughout the history of the broadcaster. The point is made more interesting by Hunt’s parenthetical comment “(or are they)”, which suggests that the plays may only appear to be “highbrow”, requiring education to appreciate, but that they are in fact no such thing. This may be a way of resolving the apparent tension between describing the production as a “horror comic”, suggesting something lacking in value intended for the young and uneducated, with also calling it “sadistically Highbrow”, suggesting that this is nothing more than a simplistic horror story dressed up to appear significant and having intellectual weight when it is not significant and is not intellectual. The sadism may be at least partly in presenting material in a manner which it does not require, of making it more

difficult than it needs to be, and in not considering an audience that might engage with any ideas that it might contain it if presented differently. The sadism is in demonstrating power via cultural and educational capital. Considering that television ownership in the UK boomed in the 1950s, particularly up to and following the Coronation in 1953, and that television was becoming an affordable status symbol for many, this tension between presentation, content and audience can be seen as part of the tension of the BBC Television Service working out how to relate to this expanding audience from a range of class, educational and regional backgrounds.

Where a modern reader may find a disconnect is in this idea of Sunday night dramas as “highbrow”, when they are more often these days accused of being cosy and nostalgic. This is despite their actual content, as these labels are often applied to productions such as *Call the Midwife*. There’s a long history to this; Joe Moran [SLIDE] has pointed out that:

The Sunday night period drama, from *The Forsyte Saga* to *Downton Abbey*, which the historian Simon Schama would later accuse of "servicing the instincts of cultural necrophilia", came to acquire that same sense of valediction, a raking over of the dying embers of the weekend, as Evensong. Sunday evening, as a Sabbatarian hangover from churchgoing and pub opening hours, was the night when people were most likely to stay in, and they wanted to watch something calming and cheering before work and school in the morning. In a column in the Church Times, Ronald Blythe blamed the demise of Evensong on "the best television of the week, plus, I used to suspect, some connivance by the clergy to rid themselves of this service".3

There are also complaints in the press about the types of plays being shown on a Sunday not being suitable that date back at least to 1949. But Sunday was a major day for new plays on the BBC Television Service, not least because it was a day when theatre actors would be available to appear in the productions. This means that, whatever the plays were that were being put on by the BBC, they would tend to appear on a Sunday.

Modern readers may also be less able to immediately place the references to [SLIDE] Wilfred Pickles and *The Grove Family*, and particularly to understand their specific relevance. Wilfred Pickles was a BBC presenter who retained his Northern accent even as a newscaster, before he became something more of a general presenter as host of radio game show *Have a Go* from 1946 to 1967, and television show *Ask Pickles* which ran from 1954 to 1956, both of which were focused on “ordinary” people as contestants and participants. Pickles was thus seen as a part of the BBC with the “common touch”, who could relate to and engage those “ordinary, average” British people that Barker mentioned. Pickles, in other words, was not even seemingly highbrow, let alone sadistically highbrow, and the same could be said for early soap opera *The Grove Family*. As with Pickles, the Grove Family presented accents that were not RP, and which could be taken as presenting a lower middle-class existence (Mr Grove did own his own business, and note his cravat use!). All of this would have been common knowledge in 1954, and in 2021 the basics can be picked up from a quick Wikipedia search. But this is still a piecing together of understanding, and the specifics of what something like “lower middle-class” meant in 1954 are not so easy to interpret. Indeed, it would be easy to simplistically place the Groves as a working-class representation, missing the nuances and shifts in class in England. So we are again faced with the requirement of developing specific knowledge and understanding, just to understand this one letter and how its presentation of a particular taste construction incorporates issues of class and status.

So let’s return to the horror comics, having developed a bit more of an understanding of the specific cultural context drawn out from Hunt’s letter. In particular, we can return to Barker’s point [SLIDE] about the phrase “horror comics” being used to represent anything that “the

‘ordinary, average’ decent British person” would not touch, and think a bit about how important happenstance is to research. While I knew about the 1950s British anti-horror comics campaign from Barker’s work, I happened to watch a documentary on Tarzan, which mentioned that the Tarzan comics had been caught up in an anti-comics campaign in France in the post-War period. Further research revealed that it was not just Britain and France, but much of Europe had seen campaigns against comics, often specifically against American comics, in this period. Overall, these were concerned with challenges to national identity and power, as a seemingly unscathed US brought military, economic and cultural power to bear on the postwar world, and the Old World of Europe had to find its place in a new and changing world. This included the UK, which not only had to deal with post-War recovery, but which was also seeing the end of Empire and the loss of the colonies which had provided for and supported the UK during the War. In other words, the fight over comics is a fight over culture and place in the world, and particularly it is a fight for the future place of each nation in the world, with comics having a primarily young readership and being seen as a way of transmitting cultural values.

So what does all this have to do with Nineteen Eighty-Four? The novel and the play showed an exhausted London, the UK reduced to the status of Airstrip One, which can be interpreted as placing it as nothing more than a staging post in the war against Eurasia. Consider how American military bases during the War had operated under American law, with their own supplies, regulations and behaviours. For some, representing, even in fictional form, this depleted UK could be unpatriotic, a reminder of the loss of power and the potential future, diminished position of the UK on the world stage. Even nine years on, in a country making a strong recovery, the reminder of the losses of the War and the handing over of power to others was unacceptable. Indeed, we can see that there are people around today, who were not even around during the War, who would find this representation unacceptable.

Understanding these different elements of this letter [SLIDE] help us to understand the taste position being put forward by the writer. It can be cross-referenced with other letters, and there were a number of other correspondents to the BBC or articles in newspapers which made the connection with the horror comics. Also, understanding this usage in relation to Nineteen Eighty-Four adds to our broader understanding of how mid-1950s Britain engaged with the idea of horror comics. But it also shows us that the concerns with preserving cultural identity that are part of the British horror comics campaign were also wider European concerns in the face of a world where power was shifting from Europe to the US, and where the UK was being presented with the question of aligning themselves either with continental Europe, or with the US. And the fact that these viewers and campaigners connected these concepts to the adaptation of Nineteen Eighty-Four actually shows us that both Orwell and Kneale, the adaptor, were successful in using the narrative to engage with concerns about British identity and power in the post-war era. This would not be the first or last time that people’s complaints about a cultural product showed that it was successfully doing its work.

But my interest in this runs beyond this desire for understanding, although that is certainly where I started from. More recently, I have been wrestling with the ways that students respond to historical texts and paratexts, including historical responses to productions. In other words, this is not just about how I use the material but about how I can consciously consider the methods and steps in understanding. So understanding the importance of happenstance alongside more planned research becomes important, and understanding where my own knowledge and understanding might come from becomes important in thinking about what I can realistically expect from students who are significantly younger than I am, and who may be from very different backgrounds. It raises questions about how we understand references and particularly how we interpret the everyday and the unspoken assumptions and common knowledge and references from what is really not that long ago.

This is not a new observation, of course. But as I think about how quickly the media and the culture are changing, I wonder about how I can use these historical examples in the classroom, to help students understand about research techniques as well as about the media.

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and culture. After all, when I ask students to analyse current material, isn’t part of what I am
doing getting them to explain something to me that I wouldn’t necessarily understand because I
am not up on all the contemporary references? Aren’t similar techniques of research and
documentation required, and piecing together of disparate bits of information to draw out the
significance of references and allusions, and how they relate to wider references?

So that’s my next task: turning this into teaching and learning. And I hope you’ve found
some of my reflecting here interesting! Thank you.