Vanity Fair (1967) and the contradictions of colour

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In December 1967, in five Saturday evening episodes on the BBC2 channel, the first colour drama serial in the UK was broadcast. It was an adaptation of William Makepeace Thackeray's 1847 novel *Vanity Fair*, and this chapter evaluates the colour in *Vanity Fair* using analysis of the programme, archival documentation and public discourses at the time. The significance of colour in this serial relates to the aesthetic frameworks through which literary adaptations, and especially classic novel adaptations, were conceptualised, and to what colour meant in the television culture of 1967. The chapter argues that an appreciation of the achievement of *Vanity Fair* depends not only on how it looks today but also how it could have been viewed at the time it was made. The BBC had been preparing for colour for years, and as Britain's first and oldest television institution it might seem simple and obvious that the BBC would take the next technical step in broadcasting (McLean, 1967: 3). It might also seem simple and obvious that colour would offer greater realism and visual pleasure to viewers. These ways of understanding simplicity depend on an assumption of incremental development, adaptation and extension, where colour is the next step in a linear progression. The BBC also had a long history of broadcasting the classics of English literature, on radio and then on television, so choosing a nineteenth-century novel to showcase the colour service might also look like a simple step onward in an established direction. It married tradition with technical innovation. Earlier in the same year, BBC had garnered critical praise and huge audiences for its black and white adaptation of another literary source, *The Forsyte Saga*, and *Vanity Fair* used the same director, designer and female star. As the chapter will explore, simplicity for *Vanity Fair* means being an extension, development or progression, leading on purposefully from what went before.

But conversely, the engineering challenges of making colour pictures and the production challenges of staging a multi-episode serial in colour were immense. It was costly and complex, as BBC itself explained in detail to potential viewers. For cultural commentators and BBC executives, there were also concerns about the tastefulness of colour, which was tainted both by an association with Hollywood and the uneven technical quality of US colour television. The new BBC colour offering risked appearing overly spectacular, even tawdry (Panos, 2015). Moreover, only a small minority of the UK audience had colour television sets, so the BBC, as a national public service broadcaster, had to avoid alienating a large section of its audience by making and promoting a serial that those viewers could not properly enjoy. Colour's compatibility with existing black and white television sets had been decided as BBC policy as early as 1953 (Bishop 1961) so *Vanity Fair*'s broadcasts had to work well in black and white (BBC, 1962), while also trumpeting colour as the next big thing. The BBC was encouraging households to acquire an expensive colour receiver (most likely by renting one) for which they would have to pay double their former £5 annual television licence fee (Wheatley, 2014: 148-9), but by March 1968 there were only about 20,000 households with colour licences (Winton, 1969, 65). Introducing colour was fraught with difficulty and risk, and meant finding a way through complexities of technology, institutional policy and cultural politics. It also demanded creative responses to new artistic challenges, making the most of colour while maintaining conformity with established aesthetic norms.

This chapter will look closely at the colour in *Vanity Fair*, to see how aesthetic choices might express or supress tensions between the conflicting meanings of colour. The colour is not a simple property of the text but existed in complex relationships with colour elsewhere on television, in continuity with and distinction from black and white images, and was informed by colour in other media and by paratextual materials that spoke about what

colour meant. The *Radio Times*, the BBC's listings magazine, was the best-selling periodical in the UK, so many people would have seen its series of feature articles (printed in colour, unlike the listings pages themselves) about *Vanity Fair*. The articles focus far more on the complex demands and achievements of its colour than any other aspect of the serial. The chapter will show how, in *Vanity Fair*, colour was both a straightforward improvement in verisimilitude yet also self-consciously foregrounded and defended. Colour was a potentially tawdry transatlantic import but was presented through specifically British programme forms and production methods that assimilated colour into existing ways of making and enjoying television.

Simplicity, then, can mean what might seem obvious, taken for granted, easy to achieve and straightforward to understand and enjoy. But paradoxically, simplicity often has to be worked for through complex interacting processes, and complexity is felt to succeed when it ends up appearing simple. The expectation of a need to implement complex knowledge and technique in order to achieve a result that looks simple underlies the realist aesthetic of television as a medium, whose drama output inherited its aesthetic principles from the arts of its formative period in the early twentieth century. From the start, television combined Naturalist mimesis with Modernist harnessing of new technologies and new forms. The chapter argues that the colour of *Vanity Fair* was presented mainly through a strategy of aesthetic restraint, incrementalism and continuity with what had gone before, making colour appear a simple progression. However, the chapter shows how simplicity and complexity depend on each other, by referring to some of the complex, innovative technical processes and ways of producing drama behind and in front of the camera that shaped how colour in the serial came about. The role of colour within the image had to be carefully considered, taking account of its degree of saturation, for example, and the complementary or clashing relationship of one colour with another in the frame. Colour brought new opportunities and

constraints in image composition and the arrangement of the people, objects and spaces in front of the camera. In production, colour in interior, studio environments, shot with electronic cameras and recorded on videotape, had to be coordinated with colour filmed on celluloid in outdoor locations. These different production spaces required different cameras, lighting and editing techniques. The chapter includes work on the spatiality of colour, in the three-dimensional spaces where the serial was staged and recorded as well as in the two-dimensional television images that were achieved.

Continuity and innovation

In some respects *Vanity Fair* was a simple extension of what the BBC was already doing. It was an adaptation of a novel and also an adaptation of existing BBC production practices for making black and white drama based on classic literature. While colour was new, other aspects of the programme were highly conventional. At the time, it was an accepted fact that television should screen adaptations of literary works. The concept of Public Service Broadcasting included the assumption that some cultural goods should be disseminated to the broadcast audience (Scannell, 1990), with producers exercising judgements of taste and quality about what and how to do so. There were also economic factors, especially copyright, that affected which works could be licensed for television adaptation, and nineteenth-century works like *Vanity Fair* were available free of charge. On the other hand, there were considerations of cost because of the numbers of performers, sets or locations that a specific script would require, and costume drama was more expensive to mount than a contemporary story. For *Vanity Fair* between eleven and thirteen sets had to be built for each of the five episodes, making the serial more costly than shooting five one-off plays (BBC, 1967d). Nevertheless, the practice of adaptation was assumed to be fundamentally within the remit of television and something that the audience needed or deserved (Giddings and Selby, 2001).

Adapted classic novels satisfied audience expectations for costume dramas with what would later be termed a 'heritage' aesthetic (Higson, 1993). Billy Smart encapsulates these values as 'elegance of language and décor, the opportunity to experience a particularly rich form of character acting; an immersive experience of life in a different era; a sense of charm' (2014: 459). Viewers' feedback showed that adapted classics were enjoyed partly because they were not like other television. They were unlike original, contemporary drama of the time, contrasting strongly with filmed television plays such as *Up the Junction* (1965) about a group of young working-class women living in inner London, and *Cathy Come Home* (1966) about a young mother's descent into homelessness, made by the director/producer team of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, for example. These had formal and thematic similarities with British realist New Wave cinema and the Neo-realist movement in continental Europe, they addressed real and urgent social problems, were often cast with non-professional actors and were shot in real locations. *Vanity Fair*, and the studio videotape production technologies used to make it and other classic serials, partially determined such adaptations' cultural significance by separating them from this recently emergent realist nexus (Cardwell, 2002: 98-9). In some ways, costume adaptations were cosy, and simple to enjoy in comparison to drama that was self-consciously challenging and presented the complexities of contemporary life.

Adaptations drawing on the canon of English literature were part of a history of 'literary' or 'theatrical' television (and previously, radio) drama. The BBC had previously mounted a television adaptation of *Vanity Fair*, dramatised by Constance Cox from her theatrical version and broadcast at Christmas in 1956, for example. Classic novel adaptations were almost always in serial formats, to build viewer loyalty, promote channel identity, amortise set-up costs across a relatively large number of broadcast hours and, as a spin-off benefit, generate opportunities for programme sales abroad. Scheduling classic serials on

Sunday evenings on the new BBC2 had the effect of 'branding' a regular slot for adaptations aimed at family audiences. The huge popularity of BBC1's adaptation of Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* was the summit of black and white serial drama of this kind. However, *The Forsyte Saga* was not only comfortingly Edwardian but also controversial because of its narrative of family strife and sexual violence. It featured an extended sequence showing the marital rape of Irene (Nyree Dawn Porter) by her husband Soames Forsyte (Eric Porter), carried out as his punishment for her suspected infidelity. It is misleading to compartmentalise period adaptation as simplistic; the rape story aligned with emergent discourses of gender equality and female empowerment. As much as any other genre, adaptation was a site for negotiating what television could or should be (Bignell, 2019), and another kind of complexity is the question of what was proper or appropriate in this high-profile serial. While the choice of a classic novel adaptation was a conservative response to the challenge of colour, introducing this new technology via an established and serious genre, the situation was also more complex than that.

Thackeray's novel adopts some of the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, tracing the life of an individual and his or her progress against a background of social and political change. The form was championed in Marxist literary criticism (Lukács, 1978), because it could dramatise a life at the confluence of ideological forces, and *Vanity Fair* has a corresponding sense of breadth and scale. It encompasses the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century and characters from a range of social strata, from struggling governesses clinging on to the middle class to the excesses of the upper reaches of the aristocracy. The novel satirises social conventions through stylised exaggeration of behaviour and incident which also alludes to theatrical melodramas of the mid-nineteenth century that addressed problems of social class, gender and morality (Brookes, 1985). The social climbing of the protagonist Becky Sharp rests on her ability to manipulate emotional and moral conventions

and acquire class privilege by using her sexual attractiveness alongside a performance of meek, acquiescent femininity. Rex Tucker's script finds ways of transposing these complex literary and cultural codes for the television medium, but without being simplistic. Visually, colour could have been used systematically to express morality or immorality, but the serial does not attach colour values to moral values. Instead, it plays with artifice, appearance and pretence. Colour can veil or conceal as much as express, and thus it can be complexly related to characterisation and moral tenor. The novel's period setting meant that directorial choices could foreground colour in locations, set design, costume, hair and makeup. But what is striking about this colour version is how relatively restrained the visual style is, as can be seen in the opening minutes of the first episode.

Fig. 1 'The Famous Little Becky Puppet'

The first episode begins with a relatively lengthy sequence listing the names of the leading actors and the episode title, 'The Famous Little Becky Puppet'. The captions appear over a single long take in which a static camera shows a close shot of the deep purple velvet curtains of a small puppet theatre. Throughout the sequence a series of costumed stick-puppets, with large papier-maché heads and expressive faces, enter, pirouette and clash with each other, something like a Punch and Judy show. The puppets represent Becky Sharp, her wealthy friend Amelia Sedley, and the uniformed figures of Becky's potential suitors, the British Army soldiers Captains Dobbin and Rawdon Crawley. Although the puppets rush into shot, spin around and crash into each other, the restraint of the sequence's accompanying classical music, the lush texture of the velvet and the elaborate costumes of the puppets produce a conflicted tone overall, combining violence and disorder with a sense of playfulness and constrained politeness. The proscenium of the puppet theatre exactly matches

the frame of the television screen, which would have been in a box-shaped cabinet in the 1960s, reinforcing the suggestion that this television serial, and perhaps all of television, is an artificial contraption in which representations of human figures cavort for its viewers' entertainment. The toy theatre also gestures back to the history of devices for visualisation and storytelling, from the illusions of the diorama, panorama and magic lantern in the nineteenth century to the staging of novels and plays by a single static camera in the first films. From the start, *Vanity Fair* is presented as artifice, adaptation and self-conscious spectacle, and the simple knockabout entertainment of puppetry is a complex homage to preceding dramatic traditions and representational conventions.

The sequence is based on the novel's preface, titled 'Before the curtain'. The authorial voice, attributed to Thackeray himself and referring to himself as the 'Manager' (the producer-director) of the show, invites the reader to imagine being at a fair, in which a puppetry performance is to take place amid the noisy and pleasurable disorder of the various attractions. The preface is equivalent to an introductory speech in front of a stage curtain before a show begins. We are told that it will contain 'combats', 'scenes of high life', 'lovemaking' and 'light comic business', performed by the 'little Becky Puppet', the 'Amelia Doll', the 'Dobbin Figure' and 'the richly dressed figure of the Wicked Nobleman' (Thackeray, 1954: 20). Thackeray primes his reader to expect types and roles as much as psychologically realised characters, and for the story to enact a simple moral fable, like the sensational melodramas of the period. Television borrows some of the many connotations of the preface. It expresses a sense of self-conscious theatricality, as the serial's key relationships between Becky and Amelia, and between each of them and the men they might pair off with, are encapsulated in the dumb-show cavorting of the stick-puppets. Colour itself is a key part of the show, in the lustrous shine of the richly textured purple curtains and the contrasting white graphics behind which the puppets dart about the frame, with long coloured

dresses for the women and bright red tunics for the men. The Titian red hair of the Becky puppet is especially striking, its prominence exaggerated by the puppet's movements and its contrast with her pale paper skin. Her activity suggests her character's agency, but she is nevertheless a frenetic puppet manipulated by an unseen hand. The simplicity of basing the opening titles on the novel's preface and finding visual correlatives for some of Thackeray's language and tone, expresses the complexity of those resources and the sophisticated ways they are deployed.

The two short scenes that follow demonstrate this interwoven pattern of exhibitionism with restraint, in the way they utilise the two predominant forms of shooting television drama at the time, namely shooting on film on location or shooting on video in a television studio. In the first scene the setting is the exterior of Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies, where the audience first sees the teenage Becky (Susan Hampshire) and Amelia (Marilyn Taylerson) as they leave the academy at the completion of their schooling. The camera is on the grassy verge of a road in the semi-rural location of Chiswick, looking towards a large, well-proportioned house with flowering creeper growing on its stone walls. It is sunny, and the dozen or so pupils at the academy are gathered with their teachers to wave goodbye to the departing Becky and Amelia. They are lined up in front of the camera, which pays no attention to the surrounding landscape and there is no attempt to indicate place or the detail of the buildings. Although the scene has been staged on location, and shot on film rather than videotape, there is no sense of spectacle, vista or embedding in a real environment as might be expected of this costly and elaborate means of shooting.

What is important in the opening scene is the contrast in character between Becky and Amelia, prompted by the haughty primness of Miss Pinkerton (Ailsa Grahame). She is an elderly, soberly dressed woman who gives a bound copy of Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* to Amelia, praising her as a favoured pupil while other students surround them in a twittering

group. Amelia is about to get into her waiting carriage and is dressed in elaborately layered outdoor clothes with bonnet and gloves. Becky, more simply dressed and flouncing away from Miss Pinkerton and the group of young ladies, rejects the polite goodbye ceremony and Dr Johnson's *Dictionary*, throwing the book out of the carriage window. Her independence is attractive, but she is an outsider, non-conforming and disrespectful. Being outside on location in this first scene seems initially like a strong contrast with the constrained space, theatricality and codedness of the foregoing puppet performance. Exterior filming suggests realism, spaciousness and a certain openness to events because of the unseen and potentially infinite space beyond the borders of the frame, matching the setting-up of Becky as an independent opportunist who will now make her own way in the world. Colour supports the sense of the drama's presence in a real space, contrasting with the rich but artificial colour of the puppet show. The colour gestures towards realism, building on the simple, conventional association of filmed exteriors with reality versus the interior staginess of studio shooting. But something more complex is going on, in that it is not the reality of the setting that matters, but instead the complexities of social class and the power relationships between teacher and pupil and between Becky and Amelia.

Figure 2. Tight two-shot in a set representing Amelia's carriage.

Becky climbs into Amelia's carriage, taking advantage not only of free transport but also an invitation to stay at Amelia's house in Russell Square, London, because Becky is a homeless orphan. The serial's second sequence is within the moving carriage, a single long take of a medium closeup of the two women sitting talking inside the wobbling vehicle (Fig. 2). Amelia expresses her shock at Becky's devil-may-care attitude and Becky flatters and dominates her benevolent friend. The simple technique for rendering the carriage journey

contrasts strongly with the realism of the filmed exterior sequence at Miss Pinkerton's academy, but its spatial constraint and exaggerated characterisation also initiate the drama's consistent focus on Becky's manipulative use of codes of politeness and sexual attractiveness to secure social advancement. The notions of restraint and politeness are not simple as regards characterisation, in that they can conceal or enable the exercise of their opposites, namely improper excess and selfish ambition. The lengthy two-shot observing Becky and Amelia's interaction, in an unconvincing representation of a moving carriage that is clearly a mock-up being wobbled about by unseen studio technicians, is more complex than it might seem.

The coming of colour led to new ways of thinking about representing backgrounds, rooms and landscapes, but drama was crucially oriented around the actors' expressiveness because that was what television was mainly expected to show. In that regard, *Vanity Fair* continued practices of framing, shot composition and duration of shot that had been honed over decades and were intended to give space to expressive performance. The materiality of the screen image conditioned viewers' expectations of the visual aesthetics of television (Cardwell 2015) and gave rise to what now seem overly simple, lengthy dialogue scenes like this one, focused on the actors' faces. At that time, the domestic television receiver was not suited, as it is now, to the 16:9 aspect ratio of cinema films, and in 1967, the television image privileged the central framing of the human face because of the 4:3 ratio of its geometry. This supported a medium-essentialist view of television drama as character-based and psychologically focused, and the mise-en-scene of *Vanity Fair* is a refinement of an existing televisual aesthetic in which colour participates, rather than requiring a new visual style.

The performers in *Vanity Fair* were almost entirely trained for the professional theatre, and the actors in *Vanity Fair* work to create television performances that feel similar to the declarative, stylised mode of Victorian theatre and a degree of social satire and

melodrama appropriate to Thackeray's social critique. At the same time, however, they adapt to the televisual conventions of psychologisation and realism available through facial close-ups, detail of physical gesture and a sense of spatial freedom. Complex detail of performance in *Vanity Fair* depends on the integration of 'theatrical' acting style with televisual scenic design and camerawork.

Becky and Amelia arrive at the house in Russell Square, which is represented by a large drawing room. The wide space is bounded by a window on the left and a doorway on the right, with a fireplace in the centre. Elegant Regency furniture leaves room for characters to move around and group together in specific areas. The space is relatively shallow, and movements of the cameras and performers are generally on a left-right axis across the set between window and door, rather than towards or away from the back wall. Cameras are positioned so that they always look into one side of the set, never reversing to show the opposite (fourth) wall. The space is like a theatre stage, and *Vanity Fair* is almost entirely shot in the studio in sets representing different kinds of domestic room. From the 1960s onwards, the television studio was increasingly and pejoratively associated with the verbal emphasis of scripted drama, rather than with physical dynamism, action and movement (Macmurraugh-Kavanagh and Lacey, 1999). Studio aesthetics came to be seen as artificial, unrealistic and over-complex compared to the apparently simple showing of the world outside the studio. In *Vanity Fair*, large sets are used for interiors at Russell Square, the run-down estate of Queen's Crawley where Becky gets her first job as a governess, and, strikingly, for a colourful outdoor flower market in Brussels, for example. There the studio represents a street scene of market stalls and bustling crowds, into which the sumptuously dressed Becky, now married to the army officer Rawdon Crawley, rides in a real horse and carriage and charms the British high command. Against the tide of history, *Vanity Fair* takes advantage of artifice, using the studio to exploit the primacy of acted performance and

showcase the sophistication of scenic design into which performance is embedded.

Propriety and taste

The artifice of studio shooting acquired another kind of simplicity, in that it was argued to flow from the specificities of the television medium. The champion of the script-focused, studio shooting technique in Britain was the director Don Taylor, who characterised it as the essence of drama for television, whereas shooting on film on location seemed to him like making low-budget cinema, an inevitably inferior achievement. Television drama offered the chance to showcase language spoken by highly trained performers, acting in specially designed settings built in the studio, thus creating an imaginative fictional world in which all elements of the drama could be aesthetically harmonious and controlled. The result would be 'long, developing scenes, where the actors can work without interference from the director's camera', and television drama would be 'a writers' and actors' medium' (Taylor, 1998: 38). Speech, not action, is a key component of this and he argued for the affective charge of skilled performance, emerging as 'passion that comes from deep wells of feeling plumbed by good words'. In this view, television drama should privilege relationships, emotion and intimacy. It is broadcast into the viewer's private space, makes much use of close up and interpersonal interactions between characters. The expression of emotion and revelation of motivation are facilitated by the alternation of conversation and derive from reaction to events as much as on characters' initiation of action. Such drama revels in the complexities of affect to which the viewer is given privileged access by the control of the technical and aesthetic means that the studio makes possible.

In the first year of colour, BBC TV Centre in London had only two large studios that were equipped with the stronger lights and heavy cameras, mounted on hydraulic pedestals, that were needed for colour shooting (Panos, 2015: 103-4). Each studio camera had to be set

up to match the colour balance of the others, which was a time-consuming process (BBC, 1969). These new cameras did not register highly saturated colours well, which meant avoiding large areas of strong colour in backgrounds or costumes. Bright whites caused flaring that not only disrupted the picture but also caused nearby darker areas to lose their contrast (BBC, 1972), so the set decorators had to paint white surfaces a pale grey to compensate. Preserving definition and contrast for viewers watching in black and white, while also pursuing fidelity of colour, meant Chapman's design had to serve two imagined audience constituencies, as *Radio Times* explained to potential viewers: 'Colour works in shades, monochrome in tones, and the chances are that shades that go together very successfully in colour, are tonally the same, and so in monochrome will come out the same shade of grey.' (Anon. 1967c). Paradoxically, fidelity meant toning down natural colour for some studio props: 'The green of some leaves on colour TV looks too green to be true!' (Anon. 1967c). Each costume in *Vanity Fair* was specially made, either by BBC Wardrobe technicians or commissioned from theatrical costumiers, because their colours were a confluence of several interacting pressures: fidelity to period, tonal match with the sets, the mood of the scenes, the portrayal of character, and the skin and hair colouring of the actor (Anon. 1967d). Colour had to be worked on in complex ways in order to take its place in apparently simple, organic relationships with other expressive means.

Vanity Fair's director, David Giles, benefitted from having the large floor area of studios 6 and 8 in BBC Television Centre in which to mount the drama. On the other hand, the large sets, hot overhead lights and a cast of 60 speaking parts would have made complex camera movement or unusual staging difficult. Indeed, the majority of studio scenes in *Vanity Fair* have restrained camerawork and cover the action in long takes rather than by expressive use of editing. When Amelia, George Osbourne (Roy Marsden), Joss Sedley (John Moffat) and Becky visit a pavilion at Vauxhall Gardens, examples of what Wheatley (2014: 157-8)

has called a 'decorative aesthetic' are set within a larger context of restraint. The party watch fireworks overhead, shown by repeated long shots of the fireworks' coloured flare trails, but they are brief stock shots from the BBC effects library cut into studio recreations of exteriors (BBC 1967e). Red soldiers' uniforms and Joss Sedley's bright jackets (reflecting his time in colonial India) come out strongly in the sequence, but against backgrounds that often look dull and greenish, with everything above head level in shadow. When viewed on a domestic television set the more colour saturation the set produced, the less detail of shape and outline was available (BBC, 1990). In *Vanity Fair* this is evident when bright candle flames overwhelm the camera tube and decompose into red, green and blue flares. There are many lengthy close shots and tight framing of the action, with no vistas of Vauxhall Gardens' wonderland of visual and sensual pleasures. So, although colour scenes were designed with the strong colours of the fireworks or the red uniforms in mind, Giles was clearly aware that the stronger their saturation the less detail the picture could convey, and this can even be seen in the relatively blurry stills captured from the video sequences and used as Figures 1 and 2 in this chapter. The colour choices made for *Vanity Fair* and other colour dramas of the period (Panos, 2015: 105-6) were as much to do with mood, creating a feeling of immersion in a fictional world, as with either historical accuracy or spectacle for its own sake.

In the planning stage for *Vanity Fair*, after Tucker had been commissioned to script the adaptation, Giles had a nine-week run-up period to plan how to realise it (BBC, 1967a). Tucker and producer David Conroy held script conferences to map out the structure of the serial, identifying problems that colour might pose, in the studio and on location and in the matching of the two. An agreement between the BBC and the actors' union Equity limited the use of filmed inserts in programmes because Equity wanted to protect actors' professional and economic interests in continuous performance (McNaughton, 2014), so most of the drama had to be shot in the studio. There were just three days of filming (11-13 October

1967) in which all exteriors were shot, and such scenes were very difficult to match with the colours in scenes shot, weeks later, in a studio with electronic cameras (BBC, 1966). The film crew had to set up each shot separately, planning the movement, lighting, sound, costume, props and other elements in advance, and after completing that shot moving onto another, perhaps from a different part of the story. Costumes filmed outdoors would look different when shot indoors, so Tucker needed to avoid adjoining film and studio sequences involving the same costume (Anon. 1967a). Giles and the designer Spencer Chapman identified exteriors in Bath's Regency crescents for street scenes, but had to avoid not only modern street furniture but also any houses painted in colours other than white (Anon. 1967b). While black and white film cameras could make pastel coloured stucco barely distinguishable from the white plaster of the early nineteenth century period, for colour filming all coloured walls had to be out of shot. Working practices had to be developed to adapt technologies to the creative practice of colour and, conversely, people had to accommodate themselves to these new problems and opportunities (Hall and Ellis, 2019).

Fig. 3. The filmed set-piece of the Duchess of Richmond's ball.

The Duchess of Richmond's ball before the battle of Waterloo was a major set-piece, and demonstrates the compromises made between the contradictions of colour. Historians are unsure whether the actual ball had been held in a sumptuous ballroom or in a large, converted coach-house, and Chapman combines the two. Like an underlit, hastily redressed coach-house, the room has wooden pillars at intervals and partitions dividing parts of the space. There are visible candles and oil lamps that suggest they are the light sources, producing strongly differentiated light and dark areas (Fig. 3). In contrast with a large well-lit formal ballroom, this produces pools of strong light into which the eight principal characters can

move singly or in groups, and surrounding shadow in which background action with the 70 dancers and extras can be staged. Becky's ball gown and the soldiers' uniforms are especially striking when the action brings them into the light and close to the cameras, which are positioned along a lateral plane. The cameras never move far into the space or reverse their angle of view. The effect is of a wide panorama that can be segmented, with parts selectively highlighted somewhat like a chorus scene in an opera. The scene was shot on 35 mm film cameras at BBC's Ealing studios, in a single day. The complexity of the sequence, which comprised 55 different shots (BBC 1967e) and the large cast and elaborate use of strong colour and deep shadow, meant using film for an interior rather than the more conventional use of celluloid for realistic exteriors. Television directors being trained on the BBC's Colour Familiarisation Course were encouraged to experiment with colour in complex ways, using surreal, psychedelic or painterly effects to convey affective states or dramatic tones, for example (Panos, 2015: 107-8). But the requirement to produce *Vanity Fair* with the more restrained aesthetic of BBC's attitude to colour adaptations meant assimilating it in the complex ways discussed in this chapter, as an apparently simple extension of visual fidelity.

British colour

Vanity Fair had an important role in asserting the BBC's distinctive approach to colour, in contrast to US broadcasters' and the British ITV commercial channel. The National Television Systems Committee (NTSC) technical specification for colour television, developed in the USA (Murray, 2015), would have been the simplest one to adopt in Britain because it had been in operation for 13 years before BBC2 launched colour. The three major US networks moved to colour for most new programmes in the mid-1960s while British television lagged somewhat behind. American NTSC also had the advantage that monochrome pictures could be carried by the same broadcast signals as the colour

transmission, so audiences could watch on either existing back and white or new colour sets. However, NTSC operated to close technical tolerances and was prone to colour distortions (it was carpingly called 'Never Twice the Same Color') and engineers in Britain, France, Germany and the USSR worked on competing alternatives (Fickers, 2010). The BBC was keen to maintain its reputation for engineering innovation and had been developing colour for decades, making test transmissions in 1955 (Anon., 1961: 214) and keeping watch on the progress of colour in the USA (BBC, 1963: 17-19). ITV wanted colour to enhance the appeal of the advertisements that funded its programmes and had also invested in colour production facilities (ABC, 1966). But the association of colour with commerce, Americanisation and entertainment made the decision to allow colour in Britain complex politically and culturally.

The moment of *Vanity Fair* was one when British television and its potential comparators jostled and shifted in relation to each other. It is significant that *Vanity Fair* was part of the canon of English literature and could represent national cultural heritage at the same time as British television's technical achievement. Ideas about Britain's role in the forefront of a technological revolution, and the BBC's leadership in that revolution, were part of a complex kind of techno-nationalism that looked forwards, but also looked back. Colour had moral and nationalistic aspects, as well as sensory, haptic ones. For BBC2's Controller, David Attenborough (1967), it was a 'valuable discipline' to avoid being 'drunk with the thrills' of colour, distancing the BBC from the US producers who 'swamped their dramas with gaudy period costumes' when they began colour transmission. The aesthetic of *Vanity Fair* was a complex negotiation between fidelity to the novel, BBC's Public Service responsibilities, a desire to compete with its commercial rival and with overseas competitors, and scientific, technical and cultural notions of colour accuracy, reliability and good taste.

It seemed simple to assume, as had happened when colour broadcasting was permitted in the USA in 1953, that 'color [sic] viewing as an experience is more immersive, expansive,

and both more realistic and more sensational than viewing monochrome' (Murray, 2018: 9). But these very assumptions underlay British resistance to colour television, which was thought to be potentially gaudy and seductive. Government legislation permitted BBC to transmit colour on BBC2 on the UHF (ultra-high frequency) waveband while the older BBC1 and ITV continued to broadcast in monochrome on VHF (very high frequency), and BBC2 programmes could also be seen on VHF in black and white. Viewers who wanted to receive the colour UHF signals had to buy a new TV set, so into the early 1970s the majority of viewers watched in black and white. BBC2 was, in any case, as ITV's commercial companies pointed out with some annoyance, hardly a popular channel. In the London region where it was viewed the most, BBC2's audience peaked at about 150,000 versus ITV's London ratings of up to 1.5 million (ABC, 1966, 18). For *Vanity Fair*'s makers, colour had to be both showcased and also represented as supplemental rather than essential.

The opening ceremony of the Wimbledon tennis tournament formally began BBC2's colour schedule in July 1967, and tennis supplied many hours of live colour coverage in the six-month colour Launching Period culminating with *Vanity Fair*. There were few BBC programmes yet available in colour so, regrettably, American imports had to make up some of the schedule. American filmed series (e.g., the Western adventure *The Virginian* (NBC, 1962-71)), were set alongside the BBC's prestige colour documentaries and travelogues such as the post-imperial splendour of *The Glory That Remains* (1967). Some imported entertainment programmes, like *The Andy Williams Show* (NBC, 1962-71), benefitted from NTSC's technical characteristics to offer a warm bath of strong primary colours, especially reds, and BBC imitated this lush tonal balance in *Once More with Felix* (1967-70), for example, featuring performances in the studio by the emigrée US folk singer Julie Felix and her guests. BBC factual series such as the motoring show *Wheelbase* (1964-75), on the other hand, shot on colour film to show road tests of new models in exterior locations, had a cooler

palette. The images of *Vanity Fair* were implicitly set against how colour worked in imported American as well as British drama, and in factual and entertainment genres as well as fiction. Colour was not one thing and certainly not simple, since it was an intersection of many related aesthetic, political and cultural meanings.

The BBC's restrained approach to the colour in *Vanity Fair* repeated Hollywood's careful extension of colour from animation and fantasy into scripted historical drama. When Technicolor introduced its first colour cameras (Higgins, 2007) the company assigned expert advisors during shooting, who were insistent that colour should be used appropriately and with restraint. In lavish costume dramas and period adaptations, colour might indeed be appropriate, and it is no coincidence that the first entirely Technicolor film for cinema distribution was *Becky Sharp* (1935), a version of *Vanity Fair*. The period setting and costumes legitimated colour, and when Graham Greene (1935) reviewed the film, he remarked that 'colour is everything here', and that it was a 'delight to the eye'. Technicolor staff, like the designer of *Vanity Fair* some 30 years later, balanced colour's attractiveness with its potential distraction and were careful to use it in organic rather than spectacular ways (Afra, 2015). Comparisons between media are more complex than simple, and the television *Vanity Fair* reveals and conceals complex processes of experimentation, assimilation and negotiation with cinema. BBC costume television adaptations borrow from other arts at the same time as they establish what is proper to them, and an intersectional, intermedial approach is needed for work on their aesthetics (Cardwell, 2014).

While generating colour pictures was complex, so were the factors affecting the reception of colour in those few homes equipped to see it. British viewers mainly watched television pictures made using the PAL (phased alternate line) format to produce an image comprising 405 lines, but 625-line sets were needed for the new BBC2 channel. Television sets' cathode ray tubes created images by drawing a beam of electrons across the screen from

the top left to the bottom right at a rate of 50 scans per second. The screen displayed an image woven imperceptibly together from these repeated scans. A monochrome brightness (luminance) signal was emitted, creating the outlines of the picture's shapes, and tiny triads of red, blue and green phosphor dots across the screen's surface were selectively stimulated by another scanning beam, the chrominance signal, which added the colour. While the luminance signal had comparatively good image definition, the colour was relatively ill-defined, like a wash of watercolour paint over a sharp pencil outline. Television sets had user-adjustable controls for brightness and contrast, and one was added for colour saturation, to account for different types and intensities of home lighting, because these could drastically affect the way the picture looked (BBC, 1953). Viewers might adjust the colours and swamp visual detail or miss colour effects by turning colour down, and broadcasters had little control over how their painstakingly created images would be seen.

Among the complexities of *Vanity Fair* are the ways that simplistic cultural hierarchies affected the programme in different television ecosystems. Although prestige adaptations are now often made with export in mind, or with co-production funding, this was not so in 1967. *Vanity Fair*, being a mainly videotape production, had an aesthetic that was familiar to British viewers but not to viewers in the mainly film-based production culture of the USA. American television production used film cameras and discontinuous post-production editing of performance, because of the ties between the Hollywood film studios and the television networks. Moreover, US television transmission was in the NTSC format with images of 525 lines and a different colour technology. Productions recorded on videotape like *Vanity Fair* had to be either rerecorded onto film or processed through a standards converter to make them compatible for broadcast in the USA, contributing to the techno-nationalism (Hickethier, 2007) that had led to different countries adopting rival technical standards for television within their own and affiliated territories. Conroy requested

offering the serial for possible export early in his planning (BBC, 1967c) but this was rejected because of the cost of converting the video format and because at that time US commercial channels did not normally buy costume drama serials (BBC, 1967b). The effect of these national differences was that *Vanity Fair* looked materially different to American viewers from their domestic fare, and characteristically, the serial was eventually shown in the USA as part of the public service channel PBS's *Masterpiece Theatre* strand in October 1972 rather than being broadcast on one of the three national commercial television networks. Its British origin and format were attractions for Anglophile, mainly upmarket audiences at whom PBS aimed its imported BBC classic serials (Knox, 2011), but also kept the programme out of the schedules of the dominant entertainment-focused broadcasters. While in Britain the challenge of colour's Americanness meant channelling it through classic novel adaptation, in the USA this restraint limited the audiences for *Vanity Fair* to an upmarket niche.

Vanity Fair was an extension of what British television had been doing for decades, adapting classics of national literary heritage and using expert performers and technical staff to make long-form serial dramas that audiences generally enjoyed and that they expected their broadcasters (especially the BBC) to undertake. The success of *Vanity Fair* led to a string of adaptations that used colour to advantage, especially in settings and costume. The serial was repeated on BBC1 in January 1970, a few months after colour broadcasting began on BBC2's sister channel (and also on the rival ITV network), and subsequent adaptations abandoned restraint to showcase what colour could do. The most ambitious was the twenty-episode *War and Peace* (BBC, 1972-3) which, with the benefit of US investment from PBS, was shot partly on location in Yugoslavia with hundreds of uniformed extras from the Yugoslav army. Long shots panned over green fields on which huge formations of soldiers in French blue or British red uniforms re-enacted the battle scenes amid drifting smoke from

real canons. Such scenes are completely lacking in *Vanity Fair* but became part of the language of colour in television historical drama as much as in cinema of the period (like the excellent *Waterloo* (1970)). Complex, big-budget productions with significant amounts of location filming became the norm for subsequent period drama, but *Vanity Fair* exhibits a different kind of complexity that requires historical contextualisation to understand. The aesthetic principle of assimilation rather than exceptionalism led the BBC to work hard at both showcasing colour and constraining it at the same time through discourses of fidelity, restraint and taste. This chapter has associated these ideas with simplicity in that the serial was not particularly innovative generically or politically and was in a long and distinguished performance tradition. But the chapter has also shown how technically complex it was for BBC2 to launch colour, and how intellectually complex it became as programme makers questioned their assumptions about what British television should be like.

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