

## Reading Space in *Cracker*



The television moment, as Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock describe it, operates either as part of a series' texture, unobtrusive and held within the weave of the overall structure, or exceeds it, sticking out or going against the smoothness of expectation and pattern in its fabric.

There are many television moments that strike us as compelling, extraordinary, haunting or distinctive. All provoke an instantaneous response and linger in the mind, all prompting us to consider what is at stake in the individual moment, and in the individual television fiction. Some of the moments are explicitly designed within and by the TV drama to be appreciated, as high points of an episode or season. Others pass by more quietly or quickly, their expression of meaning – necessarily subtle in the unfolding of that sequence – appreciated through repeat viewing. (2013: 8)

A frequently occurring televisual moment, that would fit with both manifestations that Jacobs and Peacock describe, is that of the investigation of a crime scene. This is an archetypal, even routine, sequence in the crime drama genre, as the process of solving crimes necessitates looking for and reading clues. For the (good) detective, the crime scene is a space to be scrutinised. The detail of its composition, its textures, hold meaning and significance crucial to unraveling events and the manner in which they occurred. Within the crime narrative, examination of the site of a murder, or any equally violent and disturbing act, may become the object of particular focus, a space to begin from and perhaps to return to. These are thus central moments

that display police activity vital to the plot and to character development, and as such offer the opportunity to showcase the skills of writers and performers.

A striking example of this kind of investigational flourish occurs during the investigation of a murder scene in 'To Say I Love You' (1993) the three-part episode story arc that comes in the middle of the first series of *Cracker* (Granada Television, 1993-1996; 2007). Psychologist Edward 'Fitz' Fitzgerald's (Robbie Coltrane) attention to the space in this instance serves to position him emphatically as a good detective, the moment designed to articulate the professional brilliance of *Cracker's* central character. The scene also reveals and confirms Fitz's less flattering characteristics: his addiction to gambling, his arrogance and pride. I am interested in how this moment from *Cracker* operates structurally, how it is placed within the series' texture, taken more broadly as an expression of nature and constitution, and how the textures within it – details of space built through *mise-en-scène*, framing – contribute to its construction, and to our experience of it. The moment I have chosen from *Cracker* is at once prominent and compelling, while also procedural and generic, and therefore to some extent representative of the series' interests in balancing the extraordinary with the everyday.

The dead body of loan shark Kevin Cormack (Gavin Muir) has been found in a back alley, victim of a brutal murder carried out by lovers Sean (Andrew Tiernan) and Tina (Susan Lynch), which we have witnessed just moments before. Fitz has been called to the scene by DCI Bilborough (Christopher Eccleston) to offer his professional opinion. Also present are DS Jane Penhaligon (Geraldine

Sommerville), DS Jimmy Beck (Lorcan Cranitch), DS George Giggs (Ian Mercer) and Nikki Price (Sarah Keyzer), a researcher for 'Lenny Lion', a fictional late-night talk show. There are three sections of investigative activity during Fitz's appraisal of the alley, captured in single shots along the same axis, with the camera placed centrally at one end of the alley, and the body in the background of the frame.



The first shot begins after Fitz and Penhaligon have arrived at the scene. Bilborough, accompanied by Fitz, crosses under the police tape that extends across the alley, to identify the body for the others, crouching and lifting up the sheet covering Cormack. As he covers the body he assigns tasks to Penhaligon and Beck, who leave. Bilborough then stands and directs information about timings (when it started raining, when the body was found) to Fitz who faces him for a beat and then turns away to start walking down the alley. When Fitz reaches the bin in the foreground of the frame, he looks down and starts to kick and scuff the floor with his feet. He calls back to Bilborough 'What did he use?'. Bilborough turns momentarily from his conversation with Giggs and Nikki to call back, 'Brick'. Fitz nods, 'It came from here', at which point Bilborough turns around and walks over.



The second shot begins with a cut to a close-up of a pair of gloved hands and crime scene-suited arms matching the brick (wrapped in a plastic bag) to a water-logged gap in the road. Witnessing the brick fit the hole, Bilborough stands from a crouching position to turn and watch as Fitz peers over his glasses at the brick wall running along one side of the alley, scrutinising it closely as he moves down the wall. Giggs and Nikki look at Bilborough, who looks back at

them and then they all look to Fitz who is now squinting at a telegraph pole.

The shot is interrupted by a cut to Penhaligon interviewing Cormack's wife, but following this brief interlude we return to the alley with a similar set-up, now slightly back from where Bilborough stands, still with his back to the camera, and angled towards the wall opposite where Fitz was peering in the previous shot. The third



section begins as Fitz walks towards Bilborough who stands with his hand on hips. They exchange hypothesis and rejection:

Fitz: There's two killers. One male, one female. The female leads him up here for sex. The male is hiding behind there [gestures to bin]. He's strong. He thinks he can kill him with his bare hands. He has second thoughts, pulls the brick out [gestures a hitting motion with his fist].

Bilborough: Absolute bollocks.

Momentarily lost for words, Fitz looks round to Nikki before turning back to Bilborough to initiate a bet:

Fitz: 45 quid.

Bilborough: We're conducting a murder enquiry.

Fitz: Put your money where your mouth is.

There is a pause, as the men look at one another. After a beat Bilborough goes into his pocket to meet the bet while he points out the street lamp that overlooks the section of the wall Fitz has indicated. Fitz hides his annoyance and squirms when Bilborough confirms it isn't broken. Fitz turns – 'Get Panhandle' – and walks away down the lane.

In the scene that follows, Fitz uses Giggs and Penhaligon (Panhandle) to reconstruct the murder, describing the actions of Sean and Tina in precise detail, details we know to be accurate as we've seen the murder in its entirety. He points to clues missed by the police – hair on the wall, a button from a pair of jeans on the floor – which build a narrative not only of their actions, but also their psychology, profiling the couple in a way that enables him to manipulate them both later in the story. It is a moment of virtuosity, one used by Mark Duguid as an example of Fitz's Holmesian eye for detail (2009: 51), a conjuring of action and psychology with acute accuracy.



### Texture in the moment

Although *Cracker* is not a programme that indicates a desire to display geographical location or even offer the viewer orientation within it, Manchester as a place does lend significance to its narratives and characters. The back alley setting of the murder offers a distinctively regional space, being a feature of Victorian town planning specific to the industrial North of England. It is in one sense then an everyday space, a site indicative of social and cultural factors surrounding the case (the class and economic backgrounds of victim and murderers, for example). Pushing this further, the qualities or textures of bricks set out in these particular coordinates will be familiar to some and alien to others, but importantly root the scene in region and class, making its particularities not subject to universal experience. Fitz's ability to understand the space is perhaps then rooted in his own northern and working class heritage. One can imagine a scenario where an expert unfamiliar with the terrain would be unable to recognise the specific qualities of the space and therefore be unequipped to notice the information it displays, or to give such a meticulous interpretation of events. Fitz's familiarity renders him not only capable of spotting where a brick is missing from the floor but also able to grasp that the space itself, and not just the body, is in need of attention, and the staging of the sequence underlines his investment in such a space. While the others congregate in the background, Fitz moves down the alley, looking around as he does so, his gaze flicking over the walls and floor of the space. The camera makes slight adjustments to keep his explorations central in the frame, thus further underlining his responsiveness in contrast to the limits of Bilborough's approach, which clearly begins and ends with the body. The decision to hold Eccleston in the background of the frame, out of focus and with his back to the camera, as Coltrane investigates in the foreground neatly juxtaposes the contrasting attitudes of the characters to the crime scene.



The qualities of the space go some way to explaining events, even before the precise reading that Fitz offers. The alley is a space for illicit dealings to be done, away from more public spaces.<sup>1</sup> In the daylight it seems innocuous enough, if rather rundown, but as the sequence illuminates, in the dark its configuration and surfaces offer the possibility, first, of sex, and then violent death: a heavy brick taken from the road, a bin to hide behind, a coarse brick wall that supports (invites?) an illicit erotic encounter, a thick telegraph pole close by that is broad enough to block vision down the alley. Fitz's own interaction with the space, particularly his rough initial treatment of the ground next to the bin, builds on the textural correlation of space and

action that has occurred in the murder itself. Its hard and abrasive surfaces are in need of a more aggressive approach (a gesture to his familiarity with this kind of environment), the act of kicking up the grit uncovering a vital clue. His actions being in tune with the nighttime possibilities of the alley, Fitz's more tactile approach exposes the surfaces that trap evidence (such as the hair strands), details which forcefully underline the materiality of the space itself. This is a setting in which bodies have made tangible impact on coarse brick and wood.



The process of reading the space collapses the distance between events, redramatising their clash of textures. Enhanced by decisions to stage action in depth, as Fitz traverses the alley from background to foreground he echoes and counters the actions of Sean and Tina, moving between scrutiny and re-enactment. This movement up and down dramatises the alley as both long enough to support the concealment of a third person, and short enough for them to make their attack quickly. As with the murder, there is a dynamic contrast between the textures of bodies (fleshy, malleable, fluid) and those of the space (hard, rough, rigid). The reminder of the collision between these the day after is Cormack's body lying on the floor under a sheet, but the vulnerabilities displayed during the crime (of Cormack, of Tina who offers her body to him as a lure, and Sean in his uncontrollable violence and rage) are also carried over in Fitz's body. After viewing the corpse Bilborough remarks 'You look worse than he does, Fitz', and his terrible hangover (the coke can he clutches serving as reminder throughout shots one and two) indicates a messy interior, in addition to the excess fleshiness of his physical bulk rather lumpily contained in his suit. Yet, in shots two and three Coltrane moves through the space lightly, traversing evidence without error or upset, his relative gracefulness in counterpoint to the immobility of the bodies framing him. His interior instability is masked by controlled exterior.

The presentation of the alley as a space itself enables a degree of access to it, allowing us to see the relationships between the various sites and planes of action, while keeping us at a distance from the micro details that Fitz uses to shape his profile. There is the potential for cut-ins to close-ups that reveal his point of view, which are refused. The decision to present the sequence in three longish takes (shot one lasts for 54 seconds, shot two for 22 seconds and shot three for 46 seconds) entails a distance between us and his analysis, thus maintaining the brilliance of his own attention to space as special(ised); we see him do it, but aren't privy to the details – we don't see the shoe scuffing the floor, the jeans button, or the hair strands – and so can't draw our own conclusions. Moreover, the result is that the

visual and aural style doesn't dwell on the tactility he perceives. While other crime dramas might seek to emphasise texture and tactility – the first episode of *Y Gwyll / Hinterland* (S4C/BBC One, 2013) being an example of this tendency I saw most recently – in *Cracker*, these details of the moment as a whole are there to be recognised but not drawn attention to, thus adhering to the kind of moments that pass by more quickly or quietly, to use Jacobs and Peacock's definition. The visual style of the sequence frames a character's response to space, his own engagement with detail and texture, rather than inviting our particular responsiveness. This is in contrast to the murder scene itself which uses frequent close-ups and camera movement to capture the violence of the action and thus brings us into closer engagement with the textures of the space: the clatter of running feet on the stone floor and abrasive sound of bodies against the brick wall (Tina and Cormack, Tina and Sean), close-ups of Sean picking up the brick and then wielding it to kill Cormack and of Tina as her head and long dark hair are pressed against the brick wall, the handheld shaky quality of close-ups on Tina and Cormack juxtaposed with the smooth movements of the camera following Sean as he moves from his hiding place behind the bin towards them.



very brief occasions when style becomes more declarative – the focus shift from Fitz to Bilborough when he shouts 'Brick' – they register more strongly, more sharply, providing a sort of emphatic punctuation. The simple framing of the space complements the shaping of the alley, as the relatively central position of the camera in shot one means that the edges of the frame are bordered by the two walls of the alley, the frame capturing the span across as well as its depth. This framing in depth is intensified during the moment in shot two when the lines of sight of the other characters standing in the fore and mid-ground centralise Fitz in the background of the frame. The camera's restrained movement during all three shots shifts between views of one wall and then the other, furthering the sense of confinement within an already restricted space. While the setting itself is a naturalistic, everyday space, the combination of control and containment suggests a certain amount of artifice, the close correspondence between limits of the frame and of the alley creating almost a proscenium arch, and although the scene is staged in depth the lack of a deep focus and layered blocking of the actors serves to flatten the space, thus keeping a stronger sense of planes of action within it. The duration of the shots allows action to play out, the lack of detail of the clues themselves placing focus instead on the body responding to them.



Fitz's control is underlined by the camera's predominant stillness, and the fact that its movement is almost entirely related to his own. While the camera does move on occasion to find Bilborough, panning up as he crouches over the brick-matching activity and then again as he stands, the camera's adjustments in shots one and two indicate a more consistent commitment to keeping Fitz central during his investigations of the alley. His mastery of the space thereby translates to a stylistic mastery. Audio-visual style is restrained on the whole, in order to showcase action. On the

The stylistic decisions weave together so that the sequence centres our attention to performance *in* space. This is how we register the importance of what Fitz sees: Coltrane's movements on and off-screen (the foot scuffing) and the intensity of his gaze, in comparison to the dismissive and impatient gestures made by Eccleston, his off-hand delivery of 'Brick' and static stance with hands on hips as he looks from Coltrane to Mercer and Keyzer. The presentational artificiality of the space itself alerts us to the characters' performativity. In the second shot Fitz plays into what might be expected of crime scene investigation, and effectively performs a 'reading' of the space: he peers over his glasses (which we've never seen him wear before or since) and stands in the centre of a frame with the other characters providing an in-frame audience. His earlier revelation of the brick's origin was played out much more casually, the shift of expression and staging between these two actions suggesting a progression in the self-conscious display of his professionalism, and that by the second shot he is arranging the investigation for his audience; he has grabbed their attention, and now must deliver. By the third shot his self-awareness is even more marked. As his hypothesis is knocked back by Bilborough, Fitz's looks to Nikki indicate the importance of the responses of his onlookers. The initiation of the bet is calculated to extend his confidence, maintain face.



### Texture of the moment

Beyond the details of the scene itself, how does this moment fit into the structure of the narrative, and of the series more generally? How does a detailed understanding of it weave into the composition as a whole? The placement of this scene within the episode is crucial, since our privileged knowledge of the killing confirms Fitz's mastery. This means that his performance, and even the self-conscious performativity we can observe in it, is supported and framed as justifiable, up to a point. At the same time, the scene is at no pains to mask Fitz's shortcomings, and so contributes to the complexity of the character. The bet with Bilborough is delivered with a cocky swagger; rummaging in his trouser pocket he sticks his tongue out in concentration and then takes his hand out of his pocket with a flourish, clutching a wad of money. He refuses the possibility that he is wrong with a brashness that typifies Fitz more generally. The underlining of such qualities builds on previous incidents, both in work and at home, that serve to remind us of how objectionable Fitz can be, whatever his investigative acuity.



Within this self-contained narrative, the moment builds on our previous knowledge and will go on to inform evaluations of the characters of Sean and Tina by Fitz and, in consequence, by us too. It sits with a series of other scenes in the episode when he offers devastatingly accurate readings of the crime and the psychology of the perpetrators, moments which punctuate and mark the development of the crime narrative and its rhythmic and dramatic flow across the episode. These operate within the mix of brilliance and arrogance combined in Fitz's personality leading from his display in the alley, managing the balance to a lesser or greater degree, and include his appearance on 'Lenny Lion', when he meets Tina in a pub and his interrogation of her at the station. The timing of the scene also promptly counters Bilborough's cynicism, which is rooted in his own inability to respond to the space. Despite the DCI's knowledge of the street lamp, his evaluation demonstrates none of the sensitivity to the possibilities of the space, or its finer details.<sup>2</sup> The scene confirms a longer narrative about the differences between Bilborough and Fitz, the former's resistance to the latter's involvement in investigations and his ultimate recognition of Fitz's usefulness. There are various other strands of the narrative that sit within this story arc and contribute to the development of series as a whole, including both the procedural (his superiority to and ensuing conflict with other detectives on the squad, his brilliance ultimately making him a target both within this episode and in 'True

Romance' [1995]) and personal (Fitz's involvement with Penhaligon and his rocky marriage).

The shaping of the moment in relation to how knowledge works (who has it, and how it is presented) fits with the series' generic context. In his study of the police series, Jonathan Bignell identifies what is at stake in the genre: 'police drama is always about what can be seen and evaluated, and how conclusions are drawn from evidence.' ([2009] 2014: 279). While this sequence precisely meets the nexus of activity that Bignell identifies as crucial to police series, 'issues of looking, identifying and knowing' ([2009] 2014: 235), the concrete relationship between seeing and knowing marks out its difference. Through examination of examples including *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-1990) and *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005), Bignell tracks the range of relationships between seeing and knowledge, his conclusions indicating that the surety I have highlighted in this episode of *Cracker*, is in contrast with the varying degrees of disconnection between investigation and understanding. This marks it out as unusual, a break with conventions that dramatise the difficulties of policework. At the same time, the hierarchy of knowledge and the level of certainty is not systematised within the series as a whole, as the formulation of relations between knowledge, clues and investigation do not take a set shape or configuration. In some episodes we know less or more about the crimes, and although we often have privileged access to events that Fitz and the rest of the police officers do not, there are occasions when we know less than them. The series is also careful to remind us of the limits regarding Fitz's brilliance and as Duguid points out, the next story arc, 'One Day a Lemming Will Fly' (1993), features a considerable mis-step by him, leading to wrongful imprisonment (2009).

We might finally note that the scene is relatively unusual in *Cracker* as a series. Fitz is sometimes present at a crime scene, but more often than not it is the pathologist or crime scene technician that provides the detail of how a person is killed.<sup>3</sup> As Duguid observes, there are other types of action that dramatise the work of detection and the character's brilliance: 'The interrogation scenes, not the pursuit, the capture or even the crime itself, were *Cracker's* dramatic epicentre' (2009: 19). In this respect, the moment's place within larger structures, of seriality and of genre, is irregular; it operates as a bump, sticking out of the weave, preventing the formation of a regular dramatic pattern.

In film, a moment might, as Tom Brown and James Walters suggest, 'reveal the level of complexity at which a film is shaping its themes, patterns and dramatic relationships' (2010: 2). This is equally true in television, as Peacock and Jacobs observe: 'Television is as capable as film of creating expressive richness in moments that are at once fleeting, demonstrative and dramatically declamatory, climactic, or seemingly inconsequential.' (2013: 6). However, the expansion of time in serial drama entails that the density of meaning in any one moment offers a further critical challenge, the complexity of the shaping of theme, pattern and dramatic relationships extending potentially over many years, offering the viewer an accumulation of reference points, opportunities to recognise dramatic significance and so on. Amy Holdsworth's writing on nostalgia and memory positions the television moment as both fleeting and momentous, where the experience of watching is subject to the process of shape- and pattern-making: 'Central to [the relationship between television and memory] is the idea of the television viewing experience as one of accumulation, where viewing

experiences and references are built up over time, and the memory of “afterimages” and “moments” is accumulated over a life lived across television’ (2011: 34). With this in mind, this moment from *Cracker* is a valuable scene in the series, simultaneously declamatory and accumulative. It stands out, attracting attention as an indication of Fitz’s brilliance, which also makes it part of a pattern of other such moments when Fitz is startlingly right. It is consistent with the programme’s emphasis on its northerness, and with a visual style that supports and showcases performance, though the restraint with which it does so is perhaps more unusual, as interrogation sequences, in particular, tend to be staged in a way that reflects the intensity and anxiety of their content. The ways in which this one moment contributes to the texture of the series indicate its richness as part of a broader structure, as well as the possibilities of utilising texture as a critical tool.

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<sup>1</sup> The back streets of Manchester are utilised by the series again, when Albie Kinsella (Robert Carlyle), a working class man who, devastated by the death of his father and the memories of Hillsborough, has started a killing spree, leads DCI Bilborough to his home in order to kill him. The back alleys here serve to disorient Bilborough, leaving him bleeding to death and unable to identify where Albie’s house is.

<sup>2</sup> Although Bilborough is also a northerner, so his oversight in this area doesn’t necessarily indicate a lack of familiarity with such a space.

<sup>3</sup> In ‘Brotherly Love’ (1995) he is asked to the site of a murder, and his assessment is delivered in a low angle close-up of Coltrane – in this instance we don’t see him interact with the space.