





Joao Barbosa/Unsplash



# WE WANT WHAT YOU HAVE

State-of-the-nation TV dramas have a lot to cover, particularly when they only get 4 episodes and the nation is in a right state. Andrew McCallum looks at one such drama, *Capital* and asks how its creators tried to capture a time and place.

The drama, *Capital* (BBC 2015), is based on a 'state-of-the-nation' novel of the same name by John Lanchester. Such novels try to represent an entire country at a particular moment in time. As such, they involve multiple storylines and a large cast.

It's tricky for a television adaptation to have such lofty ambitions, given limitations imposed by production costs and schedules. Nonetheless, noteworthy attempts have been made in the past. My own favourite was *Our Friends in the North* (1996), which tracked the lives of four



R-L Daniel Craig, Mark Strong, Gina McKee and Christopher Eccleston in *Our Friends in the North* in 1996

friends from Newcastle in the 1960s through to the 1990s, covering aspects of politics, crime and policing, journalism and finance. *Capital* follows in its footsteps. Despite being restricted to four episodes, it has a large ensemble cast and features multiple storylines pertinent to its 2007/8 setting.

As its title suggests, the action takes place in the melting pot of the UK's capital, London. Specifically, it focuses on characters with links to Pepys Road (Samuel Pepys, of course, being a great 17th century state-of-the nation London diarist). With a population of almost 9 million people, speaking about 250 languages, clearly no single text is going to encapsulate the reality of London, let alone the nation. That's what makes the selections made in terms of characters and storylines so interesting to explore further. If this is a snapshot of a nation, a construction of reality rather than reality itself, then how have these selections been made? Who and what has been included? Who and what has been left out? And how are people and events being represented?

What follows is an attempt to cast a critical eye on the choices made in the first episode around setting, representation and identity, narrative focus and genre.

Its opening sequence draws on the crime genre. The shadowy hooded figure, is shot in grainy, handheld footage. Their presence sets up an enigma, with a series of questions to be resolved.

## Setting

Setting the drama entirely in the capital city might enrage those who see the UK as being too London-centric, but it makes sense in the context of a multi-stranded production. London sucks in people from around the country and around the globe. It is vast, complex and endlessly fascinating. Centring the action on a single street then helps bring some focus to the narrative. This is demonstrated in establishing shots at various points in episode one. Aerial shots of large chunks of the city zoom in to smaller segments, before zooming in on Pepys Road in particular, and then a single house or character.

## Themes and Narrative Focus

Focusing the action on a single street brings some cohesion to the narrative. The street contains characters from all walks of life with different levels of economic security and income. However, only top earners can afford to buy houses by the time the drama is set. This thematic exploration of housing and house prices is established early on by the street's oldest resident, Petunia. Speaking to corner shop owner, Ahmed, she says 'We're all millionaires ... our houses. You wouldn't have found a doctor down here before. Or a banker. Albert was a solicitor's clerk.'

Given the houses are unaffordable to large numbers of Londoners, some of the themes are tackled through people with links to the street. Immigration is explored through the character of Zimbabwean-born traffic warden, Quintana. We also have Polish builders and foreign-born nannies.

Petunia represents community and continuity. An opening sequence shows key stages in her life, all in the street: marriage, parenthood, growing old, losing her husband. We then see her in the corner shop being helped by Ahmed.

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# CAPITAL

SOMEONE WANTS WHAT THEY HAVE



"A DAZZLING, ABLE CAST... BEFORE YOU KNOW IT,  
THE STORY HAS GOT YOU GRIPPED..."

JULIA RAESIDE - THE SUNDAY TIMES

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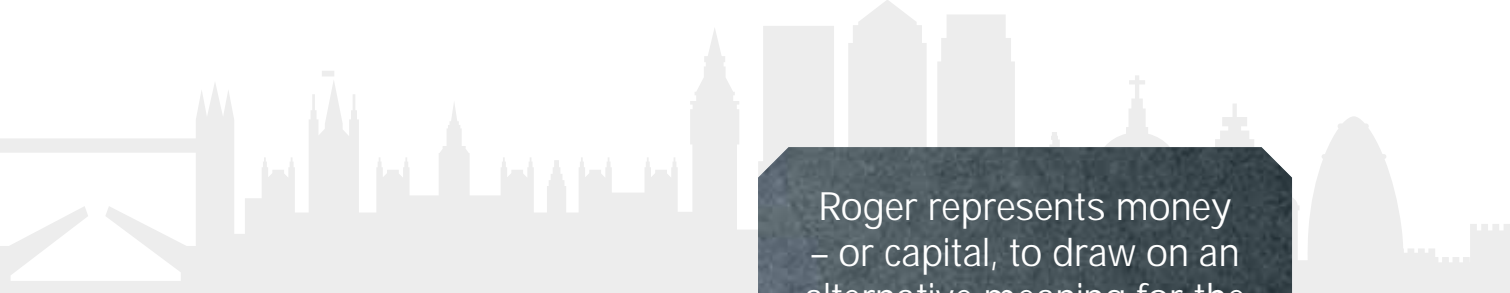
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The community is not all harmonious though. New residents – the most significant being banker, Roger, and his family – don't use the corner shop, rely on services from outsiders (building, childcare) and send their children to private school outside the area. Roger represents money – or capital, to draw on an alternative meaning for the title. Thematically, it seems that money is breaking up the community and, by extension, breaking up social bonds up and down the country. The opening sequence foregrounds this sense of disharmony. A hooded figure stalks Pepys Road at night, taking photos of front doors and bedroom windows. Later, the photos are pushed through residents' letterboxes on postcards in a seeming campaign of terror. Alongside them are the words WE WANT WHAT YOU HAVE.

## Representation and Identity

State-of-the-nation dramas generally set out to offer a social or political commentary. *Capital's* main focus is alluded to in its title. It is set in the build up to the banking crash of 2008 and in some ways acts as a satire on the impact of capital – money – on everyday lives. The production leaves us in little doubt that the banks are the bad guys. Banker Roger is a weak, feckless character, in thrall to wealth and capable of uttering phrases like 'What use is £30,000 to anyone?' His wife Arabella, obsessed with interior design and foreign holidays, is only with him for his money.

It's easy to see why a banker would play a central role in a state-of-the-nation drama set at this time, given the massive impact of the financial crash in 2008. (If you weren't aware of it, you're still living with its consequences today!). Almost all of the other characters are set against Roger and Arabella as 'good' people. We have community-minded (if borderline racist in an old-person way) Petunia, similarly community-minded Ahmed, the hard-working Eastern European builders and the spirited Quintana (even if she is a traffic warden).

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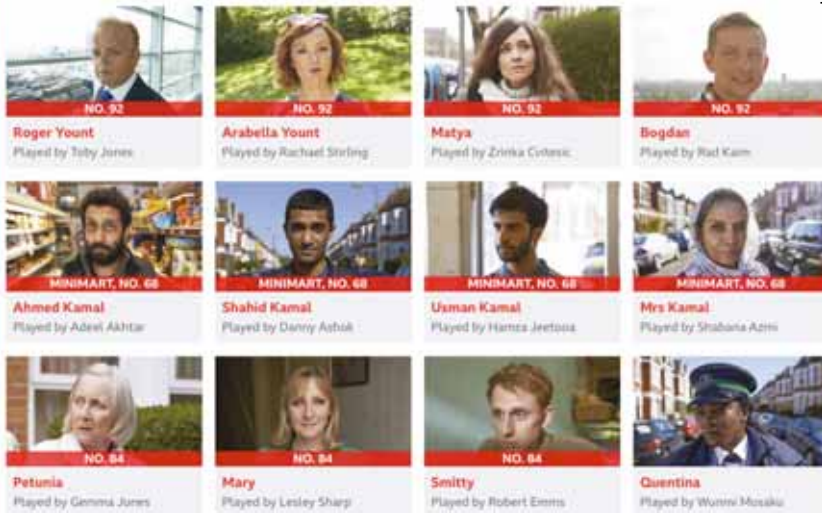


The representations of good versus bad, rich versus poor and industrious versus feckless make for straightforward drama. There are still questions to be asked, though. The *Daily Mail* was outraged by what it saw as yet another attack on the banks and an uncritical portrayal of immigrants as unfailingly good and hard-working. To many viewers, such a perspective would itself be a recommendation of the drama's value. However, it is worth asking whether or not it would be preferable to have more range and ambiguity in the storylines given to minority groups. This becomes more pertinent when thinking about another storyline linked to shop owner Ahmed's family. While Ahmed is portrayed as friendly and helpful, his family's narrative still involves Islamic fundamentalism and clearly fails the 'Riz test'. One of his brothers makes anti-Western comments, and his other is visited by a man called Iqbal, who is shown furtively using a laptop, presumably linked to terrorist activities.



## Cast and Characters

Learn more about the residents of Pepys Road, South London who are plagued by mystery postcards.



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The residents and regulars of Pepys Rd

## Genre

I've talked about *Capital* as a state-of-the-nation drama, but its opening sequence draws on the crime genre. The shadowy hooded figure, mentioned above, is shot in grainy, handheld footage. Their presence sets up an enigma, with a series of questions to be resolved: who is this menacing individual? Why are they taking photos? Why are they posting them through letterboxes? Does the first-person plural, 'WE' (in 'WE WANT WHAT YOU HAVE'), mean they are part of a group? If so, what group? And what exactly do they WANT?

Framing a state-of-the-nation drama with this crime element helps to hold the viewer's attention. But it also has an artistic purpose. All of our lives are framed by a hidden, sinister force, one that the drama clearly identifies as capital (in the money sense).

Money, mind-bogglingly large amounts of it, moves around the world unseen. Free marketeers will tell you that this is okay because 'the invisible hand of the market' keeps everything in balance without the need for human intervention. Its invisibility is a positive.

But in 2008 its invisibility brought the world to its knees and the entire globe's economy collapsed. The reasons are way beyond my powers of explanation, but essentially it involved bankers moving trillions of dollars' worth of financial assets around the world without anyone really knowing what was going on. When that all went wrong (the assets became worthless almost overnight) banks around the world collapsed and governments had to bail them out.

*Capital* positions the actions of the banks as criminal. So hidden are their activities, so complex and difficult to track down, that a straightforward state-of-the-nation drama could not possibly hope to cover them adequately. But it can try and expose them in other ways. The shadowy figure in episode one comes across not so much as a criminal as a Banksy-style urban artist. This is particularly apparent in the closing shot. The camera zooms out to show the street in its entirety. The words 'WE WANT WHAT YOU HAVE' have been written in red along the entire length of the road. If the state-of-the-nation is in some ways unseen, perhaps the job of the artist is to make it clear. Perhaps that is just what *Capital* is trying to do.

Andrew McCallum is the Director of the English and Media Centre.

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