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**Arthur Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes*, DVD Box set, 4 discs,
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Reviewed by

John Keefe

(London Metropolitan University, UK)

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The recent BBC TV Timeshift documentary *How To Be Sherlock Holmes—The Many Faces of a Master Detective* (2015) traced the history of these faces from Sidney Paget's original illustrations and William Gillette's stage adaptation (1899), the first screen version (1900), through the various cinema and television Holmes (including Eille Norwood 1921, Basil Rathbone 1939, Peter Cushing 1959, Jeremy Brett 1985) to the most recent (Robert Downey Jnr 2009, Benedict Cumberbatch 2010). Across these adaptations and characterisations, we see a figure who remains rooted in his Victorian origins, is regarded as both a genesis and a template of what has become the fictional detective, and is a reflection of the social-cultural preoccupations that inform each adaptation.

In this last, we see a theme true of all such adaptations and translations, with each mirroring the period of making as well as that of the setting. Thus this release of the surviving thirteen episodes of the Douglas Wilmer-Nigel Stock series from the mid-1960s reverts to the Victorian settings of the original (in contrast to the modernising of Holmes in the Universal Studios series or *Sherlock* of 2010) but adds a knowing humour taken further by Billy Wilder's film of 1970. Similarly, the imagery of Holmes familiar to us from the Paget illustrations and now our received idea of Holmes with his pipes, deerstalker hat and caped coat are here but at the same time are played with as mannerisms that seem 'out-of-joint' against a background of contemporary pop music, fashions and social satire. Perhaps the mannerisms are given a particular twist with the playful, teasing relationship between Holmes (Wilmer) and Watson (Stock) as they play their own version of the double act we can trace back to Quixote and Panza, through Laurel and Hardy, and now see in Morse and Lewis or Lewis and Hathaway. However, given the concerns of this journal, I propose

looking at the 'London' aspects of this series in relation to the use of London—streets, places, locations—in the placing of Holmes as an urban figure.

If we regard Holmes as a form of (non-phantasmagoric) London *flâneur*, then he becomes a precursor of the psycho-geographies we may associate with the writing of Peter Ackroyd (2000) or Ian Sinclair (2003), or my own discussion of the 'London plays' of Steven Berkoff in this journal (Keefe 2009). That is a playing with the frisson of the demi-monde, the glamour of the aristocracy and the fear of crime set within both the familiar and unfamiliar that thrilled Conan Doyle's original readers as it does us today.

We are used to the ways in which drama and other forms of fiction use London: the spectrum from stock plot device through atmosphere and narrative location to the metaphoric, extending to the city and its environs becoming 'character-like' in themselves. Where do we place Holmes and the stories of this particular set of adaptations within this range? In many ways they follow the conventions of period drama; are a forerunner of the London police procedural; reinforce our received idea of London with its social structure, criminals found at each social level but with a particular emphasis placed on the aristocratic or middle-class; concern money, manners and respectability that drive criminal acts; and show the heights and depths of London (and, as we shall see, suburban-rural) life by day and night.

The received ideas are evident in the opening titles-credit sequence with images of omnibuses, hansom cabs, police constables and the closing credit sequences often set outside 221B with again hansom cab, hot chestnut seller, gas lamps and perhaps unexpectedly, a prostitute leaving with a customer. This last is an echo of some of the narrative themes in certain episodes with the male as predator in 'The Illustrious Client' and the visits to the music hall-cum-brothel in the same story.

But given this association between Holmes and London, this set of adaptations is surprising in a number of ways. The London(s) shown are unexpectedly partial: we are taken to a music hall, as already noted; we are taken to one of the notorious opium dens (see *The Man With The Twisted Lip*); we are taken down the rude streets, alleys, warehouses and wharves of the East End and riverside. But overwhelmingly we are placed in the respectable homes of the middle class, the grand houses of aristocrats and statesmen, the estates, suburbs and villages outside London. The precise, evocative Londons of Dickens here become generic urban/suburban settings given in intra-dialogic form—we are told we are in Pope's Court or Kennington Road, that we are in Stoke Moran (Surrey) or Hampstead or Lee. The only specific seen signifier is the Aldgate underground station nameplate in *The Bruce-Partington Papers*. Otherwise we depend on being told we are at or near such and such a place which is not recognisable visually as such.

Conan Doyle's and Holmes's London becomes a place of generic location. We may think of Conan Doyle's London is a form of sleight of hand; it is as much imagined as known from street atlases and the Post Office Directory (Werner 2014). Similarly he draws on the paintings and photographs being produced of London to confirm the mood of fogs, mists and gaslight already familiar to his readers (Hardy 2014). We might see Holmes's knowledge of London as a fiction in itself; as Watson points out 'London is a city of remarkable contrasts' but these 'Londons' are given in

general terms only—the stories rest on and reinforce what is already known, similar to the way previous portrayals will colour our response to these BBC adaptations.

The London-centric settings are also not as we tend to assume. Of the thirteen episodes, only four are set wholly in London, with three set wholly in the country (e.g. Cornwall), but six move between London and the suburbs, villages in Surrey or Kent, or in the case of *The Disappearance of Lady Francis Carfax*, Watson and Holmes travel to Lausanne and Montpellier. In all these, place and geographic detail remains sketchy—it is we, as readers or viewers, who fill in the gaps drawing on what we know, what we think we know or the received, coloured perceptions of Holmes's cases. But he remains fixed to London. Thus the forays to country houses, the suburbs, rural pastoral or wilderness and the provinces are necessary excursions with a return to London to be made as soon as possible. In this, Conan Doyle continues to use the dialectic and tension between town and country seen in the plays and novels of Shakespeare, Restoration drama and Austen; in these episodes, the use of locations emphasise both difference and contrast, but also the social mores and infrastructure of rail and post, and tie London to its environs.

At the centre of Holmes's life is the apartment at 221B Baker Street; in these adaptations, this is limited to the sitting room with its occasional use as experimental or forensic laboratory. The image we are given of Holmes in this box set is not as ascetic, as lean or drawn as we usually imagine him, but he is nevertheless a figure of the mind and logic rather than action—he comes off worse in the only real fight shown (in *The Illustrious Client*)—most comfortable in the familiar surroundings of his flat in the company of Watson.

This movement of departure and return to London does however confirm the modernity of Conan Doyle's fictions with their dependency on the extensiveness and schedules of the rail network, the frequency and reliability of the postal and telegraph service and the forensic skills of Holmes himself. Holmes is aware of what is under the surface of the apparent rural idyll:

...the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside... But look at these lonely houses... Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.
(*The Copper Beeches*)

Yet he is a creation and creature of the Victorian city and its services. In these attitudes to town and country, Holmes—the new urban detective—reflects the continuing and prevalent views of sin and crime whilst playing to the frisson and safe thrill desired by us as readers and viewers of his adventures. Despite the perceptions and reality of Victorian London, it should be noted that his clients come readily to Baker Street protected by their presumption of respectability until this is pierced by their own or others' actions.

As viewers of this and other adaptations, or as readers of the stories, we remain complicit in and continue to perpetuate the idea of Holmes and Watson. The voracious readers of each instalment have perhaps been replaced by the queues at the Sherlock Holmes Museum at 239 Baker Street but bearing the number 221B by local authority permission—a fiction laid on a fiction. Or we may note the project from the Museum of London as part of their Sherlock Holmes exhibition; *A Hollow Body* is an interactive mobile phone app that enables a walk through the City of London in the footsteps of Holmes.

These adaptations from 1964–1965 give us a Holmes less austere than that of Rathbone or Brett, but who remains in the image we have of the urban detective playing his given role in the world of Victorian London and its echoes today.

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Note on Contributor

John Keefe (PhD) has been a theatre director, performance dramaturge, researcher and lecturer in theatre-performance-film since 1979. He is currently a Senior Lecturer at London Metropolitan University, CASS Undergraduate-Postgraduate Hub. His research and publication interests include the dramaturgy and ethics of spectatorship, the physical in theatres, and the relationship of body-mind to theatre as the 'embodied mind'. He is working (with Simon Murray) on a second edition of *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* for Routledge, to be published in late-2015.

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