SIMULTANEOUSLY ‘QUALITY’ AND ‘POPULAR’?: LAYERED POLYSEMY AND NOSTALGIC DISCOURSES IN DOCTOR WHO (BBC 2005- )

ROSS P. GARNER

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES
CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
‘QUALITY POPULAR’ TELEVISION AND STRUCTURED POLYSEMY

• Nelson (2007: 174-9) on ‘quality popular’ television drama:
  • Drawn from industrial discourses circulating in British television – ITV.
  • Extends to include ‘mainstream’ broadcasters – e.g. BBC One.
  • ‘Quality’ signifiers:
    • Production values.
    • Generic hybridity.
    • Construction of author-function.
  • ‘Popular’ signifiers:
    • “the relative predictability of TV genres” (175)
    • Structured polysemy - “all meanings do not exist ‘equally’ in the message: it has been structured in dominance, despite the impossibility of a ‘total closure’ of meaning ...the ‘preferred reading’ is itself part of the message, can be identified within its linguistic and communicative structure.” (Morley 1995: 301)
‘QUALITY POPULAR’: INHERENTLY CONTRADICTORY?

• Case study: Jenny’s death scene from ‘The Doctor’s Daughter’ (2008).
• RTD era *Who* and discourses of nostalgia:
  • Post-2005 *Doctor Who* is “about time travel imprinted by loss” (Hills 2010a: 210)
  • Burling (2006: 8) – the “temporal contrast” time travel narrative.
  • ‘Personal nostalgia’ – arises from the combination of ‘time travel’ and ‘soap drama’ (Creeber 2004) elements (see also Hills 2010b).
'QUALITY POPULAR': INHERENTLY CONTRADICTORY?
‘QUALITY POPULAR’: INHERENTLY CONTRADICTORY?

‘Popular’ Conventions

• Accentuation and foregrounding of emotional content.
• Deployment of ‘soap opera’ aesthetics – e.g. movement to the close-up.
• Melodramatic performance codes.
• “blaring music” (Feuer 1995: 116).

‘Quality’ Conventions

• Smith (2006: 89) – “good television distinguishes itself not by rejecting the practices of ordinary television but by using elegantly efficient instances of standard techniques.”
• Pearson (1992: 55) – “verisimilar codes”
• Music – Murray Gold’s ‘Gallifrey’ theme:
  • “a sense of stylistic integrity, in which themes and style are intertwined in an expressive and impressive way” (Cardwell 2007: 26).
DISCUSSION

• Singular ‘quality popular’ reading position unattainable.

• ‘Layered polysemy’:
  • Arises from necessities of the production context.
  • Offering incongruous, yet co-existing, preferred reading positions.

• Agreeing with Morley (1995) – need to retain textualist focus.

• Layered polysemy sits alongside, but differs from, existing TV Studies positions:
  • Ross (2008: 20-6) – ‘aesthetics of multiplicity’.
  • Post-structuralist avoidances of ‘the text’ as producer of meaning – e.g. McKee (2003), Sandvoss (2005).
CONTACT DETAILS

• Email: GarnerRP1@Cardiff.ac.uk

• Twitter: @DefConG

• JOMEC Blog: http://www.jomec.co.uk/blog/